

‘An acceptance that it’s just your lot, I suppose’: reflections on turbulent transitions between work and welfare

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Abstract

Employment policies have conventionally focused on the transition from welfare to work. However many of those who leave out of work benefits for employment return to them again relatively quickly, meaning that some people perpetually cycle between work and welfare for much of their working lives. This article focuses on the individuals making these precarious labour market transitions and on the narratives that they use when reflecting on them. A broad agency-structure analytical framework is used to demonstrate the role of individual and more ‘involuntary’ structural factors in the production and reproduction of economic marginalisation. These findings have implications for the extent to which ‘bad jobs’ and ‘bad workers’ are viewed as determinants of labour market disadvantage and for how policies to combat work-welfare cycling are formulated and critiqued.

Keywords: labour market transitions, sustainable employment, work-welfare cycling.

Sustainable employment and work-welfare cycling

The issue being investigated in this article is that many individuals experience long-term labour market disadvantage not because of extended spells of worklessness or even in-work poverty, but as a consequence of perpetual cycling into and out of employment. This article aims to add to the knowledge base on this issue by focusing on how those who cycle into and out of work experience and respond to their precarious labour market transitions. These narratives are used to address broader conceptual questions regarding the interaction between agency and structure as determinants of labour market disadvantage. Existing evidence in relation to work-welfare cycling is reviewed below and analysis presented as to how this issue is situated within the literature surrounding the nature of contemporary labour markets and the welfare state.

The concept of *sustainable* employment has been becoming increasingly common parlance in contemporary welfare discourses. In essence, this term can be regarded as ‘the maintenance of a stable or upward employment trajectory in the longer term’

(Kellard *et al.*, 2001: 20). This understanding incorporates the implicit assumption that individuals who are employed or entering employment will, over their life course, remain employed and may even advance within the labour market. However many individuals do not experience sustainable employment and instead make frequent and persistent transitions into and out of work for much of their working lives. Half of those leaving benefits return to them again within six months (Ben-Galim *et al.*, 2011), suggesting that considerable numbers of people can attain but not sustain employment. Consequently, the majority of new claims for Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) are repeat claims (McKnight, 2009), meaning that the person making the claim has already had at least one other previous unemployment spell. Due to repeated failures to sustain employment it is estimated that between five and ten per cent of the workforce spend their working lives perpetually cycling between work and benefits (Robinson, 2005).

Cycling between work and welfare has been identified as having immediate psychological (Malenfant *et al.*, 2007) and financial ramifications (Smith and Middleton, 2007) as well as acting as a conduit for long-term recurrent poverty (Shildrick *et al.*, 2010). High levels of child poverty are associated with households with frequent transitions into and out of work (Magadi and Middleton, 2005) and the costs to employers of individuals not sustaining employment can be substantial (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2009). Employment instability also represents a significant financial burden for the state as it incurs the costs associated with putting the same individuals through a continual 'revolving door' of benefits, sporadic training schemes and transient jobs. Cost-benefit analyses carried out by the National Audit Office (2007) indicate that most employment programmes only generate a net financial gain to the state if they place claimants into employment which is sustained for at least twenty-two months.

Individual level characteristics that are associated with rapid transitions into and out of work include being young, in part-time employment, in poor health and having limited experience or qualifications and an already fragmented employment history (Kellard, 2002). Repeated exits from employment may be at least partly due to individuals voluntarily choosing to leave employment and return to benefits. However, the limited available evidence points to work-welfare cycling being down to an inability to find sustainable employment rather than a choice to avoid it on the part of the individuals who experience it. For example Carpenter's (2006) analysis of repeat JSA claimants cites temporary work as a significant cause of employment instability while Furlong and Cartmel's (2004) account of how marginalised young men can become trapped in cycles of insecure and casual work concludes that: 'although they had spent long and frequent periods without work, their main problem was not finding work but keeping it. This employment insecurity tended not to reflect negative attitudes on the part of the young men or necessarily a lack of skills; it was almost entirely a consequence of the 'flexible' nature of low-skilled employment in modern Britain' (2004: 27).

These points relate to wider issues regarding the extent to which economic restructuring has reconfigured the labour market prospects and experiences of those often referred to as the traditional (male) working-class. MacDonald (2009) for example contends that whilst the extent to which working life is becoming universally more precarious is debatable, poor quality work is geographically and socially concentrated, with young people and those lacking educational qualifications most vulnerable to temporary, low-paid and low-skilled forms of employment. Contrary to the perception of poor work being a transitory 'stepping stone' or 'springboard' to more rewarding and sustainable employment, MacDonald makes a convincing case for a conception of precarious work as a widespread and lasting feature of the working lives

of those occupying jobs at bottom end of the labour market. Thus for Shildrick and MacDonald (2007) the careers of many economically marginalised people are characterised by recurrent unemployment and rapid movements into and out of poor quality jobs.

These significant shifts in the labour market trajectories of working-class (especially young) people have been attributed to economic restructuring creating an increasingly segmented labour market that is characterised by two distinct low/no skill labour markets: the traditional but declining blue collar, largely male and unionised workforce and the growing modern workforce of service sector workers in relatively low paying jobs (Atkinson and Williams, 2003). Labour market structures that have been implicated in work-welfare cycling include: an increase in flexible working patterns, shorter job tenures, a decrease in the sustainability of entry-level jobs and expanding opportunities in high turnover occupations (Kellard *et al.*, 2001). Additionally the shift towards a services-based economy and the associated premium placed on so-called 'soft skills' means that those lacking appropriate levels of employability face substantial challenges to attain, sustain and progress in employment (McQuaid *et al.*, 2005), especially in the face of increased competition for jobs from other jobseekers as a result of the recession and other groups associated with entry-level occupations such as migrant workers and students.

Despite these significant developments, it would be simplistic to perceive or portray work-welfare cyclers as passive victims of an unstable labour market. How the attributes, actions and attitudes of the working class 'fit' with the labour market structures described above has important implications for policy efforts to get and keep people in work. Ethnographic work from the 1970s illustrates how characteristics such as strength, masculinity and toughness dominated the workplace culture of males in manual jobs, even as mechanised factories and so-called light industries replaced the heavy work that initially nurtured these values (Willis, 1977). Likewise McDowell (2003: 59), writing about the attitudes towards work held by young working-class males in Cambridge and Sheffield, catalogues how these 'laddish' cultures are at odds with the hard and soft skills needed to succeed in even entry-level jobs in a contemporary economy dominated by service sector employment.

Both of the pieces of work cited above can be applauded for drawing attention to the degree of agency which young working class men are able to, and do, exercise; noting that they were able to jump between jobs owing to the relative ease of getting low-skilled work in the 1970s and early 2000s for example. This research hopes to shed light on whether, as jobs become much harder to find and increasingly concentrated amongst the service sector, the attitudes of the working class individuals interviewed reflect those feared as being at odds with succeeding in the unfavourable and precarious labour market 'opportunities' that are available to them. This relates to a less empirical and more value laden question regarding the extent to which workers should be expected (or coerced through the threat of benefit sanctioning) to stay in jobs which they find unrewarding or demeaning. Again, such assessments involve normative judgements regarding the level to which work-welfare cycling (amongst other forms of labour market disadvantage) can be attributed to 'voluntary' (bad workers) and 'involuntary' (bad jobs) causes.

Explanations of labour market disadvantage often portray it as caused almost exclusively by either individual or structural factors (Williams and Popay, 1999). Significantly state efforts to increase employment and reform the welfare system have operated on the assumption that labour market disadvantage is a supply-side phenomenon: 'if in the old days the problem was unemployment, in the new world it is employability...if in the old days a lack of jobs demanded priority action, in the new world it is a lack of skills' (Gordon Brown speech to the CBI, 2007, in DWP, 2008: 8). As

such most contemporary employment and welfare policies, even with the onset of recession, have focused on barriers to employment rather than on lack of jobs (Sissons, 2009).

Welfare reforms also mean that claimants of 'active' and 'inactive' benefits are increasingly expected to actively engage with the labour market and respond to the opportunities available to them. In return the role of the state in this 'welfare contract' (Harker, 2005: 274) has been portrayed as providing economic opportunities for all who are fit and of working age through tackling supply-side barriers to growth, macro-economic management and the creation of a 'competitive' business environment (see Annesley and Gamble, 2004; Peck, 2001). However, spatial variations in labour market conditions mean that welfare programmes 'run the risk of having the least impact where they are most needed: in those labour markets with insufficient employment opportunities due to a lack of local demand for labour' (Sunley *et al.*, 2006: 57). The onset of recession and the resultant decline in demand for labour across the UK has further discredited the assumption inherent in welfare policies that unfavourable individual actions, attributes and attitudes are the principal cause of labour market disadvantage (see Lindsay and Houston, 2011; Beatty *et al.*, 2011).

Mainstream welfare-to-work policies, with their emphasis on short-term job entry targets, may even unintentionally be exacerbating the problem of work-welfare cycling. The performance framework for personal advisors at Jobcentre Plus has conventionally focused on job outcomes, regardless of how long they last (Finn, 2009). The 'work-first' nature of this approach means that claimants are often hastily directed towards the low-paid jobs that are most readily accessible to them, at the expense of their long-term skills and personal development and ultimately their chances of sustainable transitions into work and of career progression (Lindsay *et al.*, 2007). However some new measures, such as the Work Programme, seem to be acknowledging the importance of sustained job outcomes. Under this scheme service providers have financial incentives to sustain their clients in employment, as they will receive the bulk of their payment only once an individual has been in work for 26 weeks (Foster and Casebourne, 2011). This approach follows on from the sustainability targets built into Employment Zone and New Deal contracts, which also incentivised service providers to keep clients in employment for a given time period.

This brief review of the literature has attempted to set out what is already known about work-welfare cycling: (a) that it is common for some individuals to perpetually churn between recurrent unemployment and poor quality jobs, (b) that this has negative ramifications at a range of levels from the individual to the state, (c) that explanations for labour market disadvantage are typically polarised between 'blame the victim' and 'blame the system' perspectives and that policies have tended to emphasise the former. This article seeks to inform the points reviewed above but seeks to go beyond them by giving consideration to how frequent and persistent transitions into and out of work are viewed by the people who make them. In particular the research will explore the degree of resignation or resistance that work-welfare cyclers 'put up' to their precarious labour market transitions and the extent to which these responses can become implicated in the complex processes that continue and accentuate their economic marginalisation. These factors are examined within a broad agency-structure conceptual framework: too often policymakers and researchers have tended to privilege *either* individual *or* structural explanations of labour market disadvantage. This analysis seeks to add to these debates by emphasising how both 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' factors can contribute to the phenomenon of work-welfare cycling specifically and labour market disadvantage more generally.

Methodology

A local area case study approach was developed in order to investigate the complex processes that are responsible for shaping individuals' experiences of transitions between work and welfare. The research described in this paper was part of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded PhD which explored the characteristics and causes of, and countermeasures to, work-welfare cycling. Glasgow and Dundee were selected as case study sites because both cities have experienced dramatic industrial decline, have higher than average rates of unemployment and working-age economic inactivity and are the focus of specific programmes designed to tackle spatial concentrations of worklessness. This makes them well suited for research that investigates understandings and experiences of work and welfare in the context of places and populations that are at the 'sharp-end' of the processes of economic restructuring and welfare reform.

The research involved semi-structured interviews with 68 individuals who have experienced work-welfare cycling ('cyclers') and was carried out between June 2007 and December 2008. The sample of work-welfare cyclers interviewed was influenced by the findings of an analysis of the characteristics of those making frequent and persistent transitions into and out of work carried out by the author using British Household Panel Survey data. Most 'cycler' interviewees were in their twenties (37 per cent) or thirties (34 per cent) and were male (62 per cent) and had experienced a range of labour market transitions. The longitudinal data analysis found that around four percent of the working-age population cycles into and out of work annually, that young people and the low paid are most vulnerable to work-welfare cycling, and that it is associated with buoyant labour market conditions and insecure forms of employment (circumstances that are conducive to transitions into but also out of work).

Interviewees were recruited through service providers in Glasgow and Dundee. Local service provider directories and internet searches were initially used to identify organisations that provided employment support services. These gatekeepers were used to facilitate access to clients of theirs who had experienced frequent and persistent transitions into and out of employment. Interviewees were questioned on their work and welfare experiences and transitions, their views on the processes that were responsible for them frequently not sustaining employment and their experiences of, and views towards, support for getting into and sustaining employment. The economy entered recession over the course of the fieldwork, meaning that the early impact of the economic downturn on employment sustainability issues was captured by the research.

Reflections on turbulent transitions between work and welfare

Almost all of the work-welfare cyclers interviewed expressed a preference for being in work as opposed to being on benefits and described their experiences of cycling into and out of work in negative terms.

"I hate being unemployed and I just hope I can get a job that I like so that I can hold onto it because so far it has just been this constant cycle and it is bad...I don't want to stay in this rut and then look at my CV years from now and think: 'oh God there is so many gaps in it!'". (Shannon, 22, Dundee)

One of the most commonly cited negative aspects of experiencing employment instability was its detrimental impact on confidence levels.

"There have been so many cut backs and short-term contracts before and when you go out of work it gives your confidence a big knock as well so now every time I get a job I'm like: 'oh God when is this one going to end?'" (Caroline, 28, Glasgow)

Interestingly most of the interviewees expressed concern that premature exits from employment not only had immediate psychological and financial consequences but also had more long-term damaging outcomes in terms of future prospects of sustaining employment. Fears were raised that 'good' employers preferred those with stable employment histories and that they shun those who have had a series of short-term spells in work, thus restricting them further to unsustainable jobs.

"A lot of employers have been asking me why I've had so many short-term jobs and thinking that I've not been committing to the jobs but it is not like that... I have tried explaining that a temporary position is only a temporary position but they just see the list with all the employers and think: 'he's not staying in jobs long so there's no point in taking him on because he'll only be here for a couple of months so we'll lose the money we spent in hiring and training him' and to be honest I don't really blame them for thinking like that". (Barney, 43, Dundee)

An interesting aspect of the way in which work-welfare cyclers reflected on their experiences was that, despite expressing frustration at the factors that had prevented them from sustaining employment (such as employer practices and/or their own actions), most appeared to view employment instability as unending, inevitable and largely beyond their control.

"[Cycling between work and benefits] did not bother me in the slightest, I mean I wasn't happy about it but it is more of an acceptance that that's just your lot I suppose." (Carl, 51, Dundee)

There is a significant element of agency involved in moving into and out of work yet interviewees rationalised their attitudes towards these transitions in complex ways. As is illustrated in the above quotation, many work-welfare cyclers regarded themselves as resigned passive agents in processes that were happening to them as opposed to individuals with the ability to change or significantly influence their destiny. On the other hand a minority of interviewees took a much more empowered stance, by contending that they would resist poor quality work.

"It is easy enough to get a call centre job or a job that you don't really want but are capable of doing: anybody can sweep a street or serve a burger and chips but do you want to? No so you might take something like that as a temporary solution to get out of debt but you wouldn't stay there would you? It is virtually impossible to stay in a job like that that you don't want to do. I mean if you enjoy doing it then you will stay there but if you don't then it is just going to drive you out". (Geoff, 34, Glasgow)

Contrary to the notion of claimants being content or financially comfortable on welfare, the majority of interviewees expressed a strong preference for employment over worklessness and held negative views regarding their experiences of being on benefits. Most cyclers stated that the extra income to cover living costs, facilitate more leisure activities and provide general financial security was one of the key advantages of being in work. However it was rare for interviewees to allude only to additional income when comparing the advantages of moving into work with their experiences of returning to benefits. For many the psychological benefits of working in terms of self-esteem and confidence were of at least equal value to the financial gains it generates. The main benefits of being in work were the sociability aspect of interacting with a greater range of people and of having 'something to get up for in the mornings' through

having a structured and active day. Thus it was common for interviewees to enthuse about the range of benefits that come with the transition into work.

"The benefits of working as opposed to being unemployed are huge they really are: you get to interact with people at work and in your social life too because you have got that extra bit of cash at the end of the week... so psychologically and financially and in every single way it is far better being in work than not being in it". (Stan, 33, Glasgow)

The positive perceptions of moving into and being in work were reflected in the general negative experiences associated with the transition out of employment. For most interviewees it was the psychological consequences of returning to worklessness that were the most challenging.

"When you have got a job you have got something to get up for in the morning but you don't when you become unemployed... it is a nightmare because it is the same day in, day out: because there is nothing to do the boredom is really depressing and stressful so you get in a rut that you can't get out of". (Sally, 23, Dundee)

The financial implications of job loss were an issue of concern, with many interviewees reporting difficulties coping financially with the drop in income associated with the transition from employment to benefits. The drop in income not only for sustenance but also leisure was compounded by the glut of free time that interviewees suddenly had on their hands. Therefore many cited the monotony of being unemployed as being the most difficult aspect to cope with after the transition out of work, with 'every day being the same' and a lack of routine and structure being reported as particularly problematic. A small number of younger interviewees claimed that they did not find the move out of work problematic as it gave them 'a break' from having to get up early for work and the stresses and hassle of being in work. However most of this group eventually experienced boredom with being out of work.

"The first couple of months of not working are good because you're just relaxing and doing whatever you want but you end up doing the same things everyday so you want to get a job so that you can meet new people but it gets boring in work after a while too... so you can't really win because you get bored when you're not in work but you get bored when you are in work as well!" (Jake, 21, Dundee)

Critically in terms of labour market disadvantage most work-welfare cyclers felt that it was harder to stay in jobs than it was to actually get them in the first place, frequently due to a combination of mostly involuntary reasons such as staff cutbacks/redundancies and temporary contracts ending but also more voluntary factors like not enjoying particular jobs and boredom.

"I find it a lot easier to get a job than it is to stay in it because I get bored so easily that it makes me lose my motivation and I end up just giving up on it". (Ellie, 18, Dundee)

Generally speaking it tended to be the interviewees that had spent a significant period out of work (typically two or more years) who felt that getting a job was more difficult than sustaining one. Interestingly some of the interviewees felt that staying in work used to be their greatest challenge but that the recession meant that getting jobs was now becoming much more difficult. As a result many of those who had frequently lost jobs for 'voluntary' reasons (such as a poor attitude to work) stated that they would make sustaining their next job a priority since they are now finding it so difficult to get work. This was especially the case in Dundee, where the labour market was seen by interviewees as particularly slack and in a state of deterioration.

"Lately it has been much harder to get than stay in a job... keeping a job if you get one is a big priority nowadays like so even if I went back to a job like the last one where the boss went power mad I would just stick it out and ride the waves basically because I don't want to go through the budgeting and boredom and depression of being unemployed again because it is just a total nightmare". (Sarah, 23, Dundee)

Critically the majority of the interviewees reasoned that sustaining employment was dependent on how well they were suited to the job, with many saying they would have no problems sustaining a job that they enjoyed. Numerous interviewees stated that they felt it would be easy to get a job that they did not like and would thus not sustain but that it was difficult to get a job that they would enjoy and thus would sustain. This is because 'good' jobs in terms of pay, conditions, job security and working environment were regarded as difficult to attain but easy to sustain whereas poorly paid, dead-end, insecure and monotonous jobs were viewed as relatively easy to attain but difficult to sustain.

"It is a Catch 22 situation in a way because I could easily get a job in the next half an hour that I'm not really interested in and that I wouldn't be able to stick at but if I got a job that I wanted I know for a fact that I would keep it, but then getting a job I want is very hard!". (Daniel, 30, Glasgow)

Discussion and conclusions

The findings presented in this article corroborate some well established understandings regarding experiences of transitions into and out of employment and the nature of labour market opportunities at the bottom end of the labour market. In particular the research has reemphasised the commitment that many jobseekers have to engaging with the labour market and their determination to strive towards sustainable and rewarding forms of employment. Also underlined has been the fact (often overlooked by policy) that sustaining employment can be just as difficult, if not more so, than getting it in the first place.

An area where the research has potentially offered fresh conceptual insights has been the consideration given to how work-welfare cyclers themselves conceive of and rationalise their experiences of precarious employment. Interviewee reflections ranged from resigned acceptance that recurrent unemployment was 'their lot' (Carl) to a more empowered and oppositional stance towards poor quality work (Geoff). Mutually constituting and self-perpetuating interactions between agency and structure can be identified in these coping strategies. In the former case, those who saw frequent transitions into and out of work as inevitable often seemed to 'give up' on the concept of attaining sustained or rewarding employment. This in turn meant that they admitted not putting as much effort as they could into attempting to find good jobs or staying in the jobs that they do get. This impacts on the structures that constrain their prospects; good employers will be reluctant to recruit them on account of their chequered employment history and will be unlikely to invest in training or progressing them if they do not have a 'good' attitude towards their job. Personal advisors at Jobcentre Plus and service provider case workers will not prioritise helping those who they do not feel are enthusiastic about finding or keeping work. Similarly those who resist the poor quality jobs that are often most readily available to them are more likely to miss out on the (albeit slim) prospect that poor quality work can lead to better forms of employment. By resisting poor quality work, many jobseekers are arguably more likely to consign themselves to longer term spells of worklessness than they are of attaining a 'good' job.

The classification of explanations for work-welfare cycling into individual/voluntary or structural/involuntary categories is inevitably somewhat simplistic since, for example many individuals will have a 'bad' attitude to work *and* be restricted to 'bad' jobs. However the value of this perspective is that it highlights the fallacy of overtly micro or macro based explanations for labour market disadvantage made on the part of 'socially excluded' individuals and institutions such as employers, welfare organisations and policymakers/the state. Exposing this false dichotomy allows for more multifaceted conceptualisations of the causes of labour market disadvantage to emerge: for example individuals may not put much effort into sustaining employment if they do not see their job as rewarding, secure or leading to career progression. Similarly, employers will be unlikely to invest in trying to up-skill or retain their workforce if they regard them as uncommitted and staff turnover as natural and inevitable. In these instances agency and structure interact in complex ways over time to produce and reproduce labour market disadvantage.

Measures aimed at tackling poverty have conventionally focused on individuals and their barriers to attaining and, to a lesser extent, sustaining employment. However the recession has shifted greater attention towards the demand-side and thus structural causes of labour market disadvantage. An implication of this research is that it hints at the need for policymakers to address the difficult task of striking an appropriate balance between 'helping and hassling' claimants into employment (and supporting them in it) and tackling structural barriers to sustainable employment, such as the low-paid, dead-end, unfulfilling and insecure nature of many of the jobs that characterise the bottom end of the labour market.

Another policy implication of these findings is that they encourage greater care being taken to promote appropriate 'matches' between the aspirations and needs of jobseekers and jobs that they go into. People are more likely to sustain jobs that they like and are well suited for and that are not inherently insecure. However policies have often directed claimants towards the poor quality jobs that are most readily available to them rather than focus on matching them with more appropriate jobs. A further concern is that poor quality work has often been presented as a transitory 'stepping stone' on the path to more sustainable forms of employment. This research and the work of others such as MacDonald (2009) and Shildrick and MacDonald (2007) has shown that this is frequently not the case, yet policymakers have been and continue to be more vociferous in their focus on individuals and their barriers to attaining employment than on tackling structural barriers to sustainable employment. The reticence on the part of policymakers to address conditions of employment as part of the general debate on sustainability may in part be due to a calculation that in political and practical policy terms confronting supply-side causes of labour market disadvantage is less insurmountable and more of a 'vote winner' than fundamentally altering the nature of Britain's 'flexible' labour market.

However practical policy moves could involve the reconfiguration of the performance evaluation framework at Jobcentre Plus towards emphasis on the sustainability of transitions into work as opposed to job outcomes *per se*. Much of the provision that has been contracted out already creates financial incentives for service providers to sustain their clients in work. However these can focus on keeping people in work in the short-term (usually 13 or 26 weeks) rather than helping them advance in the labour market over the longer term. A strong case could therefore be made for providers being incentivised to focus on their clients' occupational mobility over time as opposed to merely keeping them in work for a short period. However to be effective in stemming the churn of people between work and welfare such measures need to be developed in tandem with moves to improve the poor quality of jobs at the bottom end of the labour market: enhanced post-employment support provision will not

significantly boost the sustainability of transitions into employment if the jobs that people move into are frequently insecure, low-paid and dead-end and offer little prospect of escape from the no-pay, low-pay cycle.

The research identified four elements of poor quality jobs that are implicated in employment instability: low pay, temporary employment, unfulfilling work and dead-end jobs. The ability and likelihood of the state intervening in the unfulfilling nature of many jobs is limited and many of those who go into entry-level roles are content to remain in them in spite of the monotony that they may entail. Not everyone aspires to move up the career ladder and many workers are at ease with fitting a routine job around other responsibilities. Also from a policy perspective it is preferable to have workers in mundane but secure jobs than it is to have them permanently out of work or regularly cycling into and out of it. However it is important that, for those who desire to, opportunities exist to progress out of poor quality jobs and advance in the labour market to jobs that are more rewarding and that they are thus more likely to sustain. Entry-level jobs could better act as 'stepping stones' to sustainable employment through training and personal development opportunities being targeted at employees in jobs that are associated with high return to benefit rates. Service providers being incentivised to promote the longer term occupational mobility of their clients could also help individuals advance up the occupational hierarchy.

Low pay alone was rarely a direct cause of returns to benefits due to Tax Credits boosting low incomes. However a substantial increase in the National Minimum Wage would help to reduce the costs to the state of subsidising low-paid jobs and would transfer some of these costs to employers. There is a good case to be made for interventions to reduce the concentration of temporary jobs at the bottom end of the labour market since they are a major cause of employment instability. However the previous and now the Coalition Government's resistance to the EU Temporary and Agency Workers Directive (which gives greater employment rights to temporary and agency workers) serves as a reminder of ongoing unresolved tensions between policies to promote sustainable employment and the pursuit of a 'flexible' labour market.

The research as also generated findings which can shed light on conceptualisations of labour market disadvantage. Social theorists have long struggled to adequately address the 'agency-structure question' of how individual 'agents' and wider 'structures' interact to influence societal form and change (Chouinard, 1997: 363). Accordingly explanations of labour market disadvantage frequently take the form of those outlined above by either 'blaming the victim' for their own plight by contending that their characteristics and choices are mainly responsible for their disadvantage or 'blaming the system' by portraying disadvantage as being produced and reproduced by structural forces in society. Researchers can play an important role in contributing to debates surrounding the conventional dichotomy between these micro and macro level perspectives by being sensitive to the ideologies and understandings that lie behind bad worker and bad jobs discourses and considering their implications in terms of how labour market disadvantage is experienced and responded to by individuals, institutions and the state. Future research could be undertaken which compares how experiences and attitudes towards work and welfare differ according to factors such as age, distance from the labour market, type of benefit received and local labour market conditions. Such perspectives could help develop understandings of attitudes towards work and welfare that move away from the simplistic version of the 'dependent' passive claimant towards more nuanced conceptualisations of how those who experience labour market disadvantage perceive and engage with work and the welfare state.

p. 159. 'An acceptance that it's just your lot I suppose': reflections on turbulent transitions between work and welfare

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p. 160. 'An acceptance that it's just your lot I suppose': reflections on turbulent transitions between work and welfare

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