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Article:

Hunter, S. (2003) A critical analysis of approaches to the concept of social identity in social policy. *Critical Social Policy*, 23 (3). pp. 322-344. ISSN 1461-703X

<https://doi.org/10.1177/02610183030233002>

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Published paper

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A Critical Analysis of Approaches to the Concept of Social Identity in Social Policy

Abstract

This article seeks both to highlight a current imbalance in approaches to social identity in social policy, and to make suggestions as to how this might be redressed in future work employing the concept.

The concept of identity and specifically social identity is increasingly employed in the discipline of social policy as a theoretical device with which to bridge the individual/social divide. The argument presented here suggests that the concept is however, unevenly deployed in policy analysis and, therefore lacks the force of impact it might otherwise have had. The predominant focus of current analysis lies in policy change precipitated by groups of 'new,' active welfare constituents organised around differentiated and fragmented social identities, whereas the

identities of welfare professionals also involved in policy making process have disappeared from analytical view. The current emphasis on the discursive context for policy formulation, perpetuates an unacknowledged misconception concerning the asociality of those involved in policy making, where their principal role is perceived as the maintenance of the status quo in terms of social policy responses to welfare constituents needs. Redressing this false dichotomy between those developing and those using welfare services might be avoided by further exploring the concept of relational identity.

Key Words: Difference; Sameness; Welfare professional; Welfare subject

Word Count: 7,611 words

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Introduction

The concept of identity has had a checkered history in social science analysis, falling in and out of disciplinary favour according to predominant trends in analysis. Furthermore when discussing identity there remains a considerable lack of clarity as to the focus of debate (for a full discussion see Gleason, 1983). The latest phase in this history is characterised by the ‘remarkable centrality’ of questions of identity across the human and social sciences. Whilst there is generally interdisciplinary agreement with regards to the ontological fallacy of subjects as ‘“free agents” directed by a sovereign and integral consciousness’, this is matched by considerable disagreement over the conceptualisation of identity in relation to anti-foundationalist critiques of the subject (du Gay *et al*, 2000:1-2). It is precisely at this historical moment that social policy has begun to add its own particular concerns surrounding the welfare subject, to the ongoing debate.

This historical moment, to which I refer, finds its antecedents in the emergence of new social movements in the 1960s and 1970s. These movements were organised around forms of identity other than class (traditionally the terrain of social policy analysis) and precipitated new forms of social critique. One aspect of this critique was to highlight the principal flaw in [critical] social policy analysis at that juncture:

a failure to critique the model citizen – the ‘white, British, male, able-bodied, worker/father/husband’ (Clarke *et al*, 1998:385, see also Taylor, 1996). As social movement critiques have developed this flaw has been located in a focus on structural accounts of the fixed rather than fluid relations between social collectivities (see Croft and Beresford, 1996). As a result of these cogent and increasingly widespread critiques of traditional social policy analysis (see Williams, 1989 for example), there is now a discernible strand of research committed to incorporating an understanding of ‘new’ welfare subjects as historically constructed through a complex web of social relations (see Clarke *et al*, 1998:384-86).

Exploring identity is an important element of understanding welfare subjectivities (see Lewis, 2000a). Those social policy analysts who have most successfully taken this on board, suggest that approached from a social relations perspective, the role of identity is important in ‘marking the relationship between the individual and the social’ (Williams and Popay, 1999:167). The ‘old’ welfare paradigm is criticised precisely for its inability to understand the complexities of contemporary welfare in that it could not account for inconsistencies and ambivalence created by active welfare subjects who were nevertheless in subordinate social positions. Identity, from this perspective is the site at which these contradictions are played out. It

represents the point at which the structural determinants of welfare and individual agency coincide.

The aims of this article are twofold. Firstly, to show how a social relations approach to identity and welfare subjectivities, having attended to current epistemological and ontological debates within the wider social sciences, has been integral to opening up the discipline of social policy. Using current and ongoing work (Taylor, 1998; Williams, 2000a; 2000b). I outline the ways in which the concept is currently deployed and some of the problems that persist. From a social relations perspective, Taylor (1998:333) suggests that identity is relevant to welfare on a number of levels. General, ideal identity constructions operate as ideological markers of users legitimacy and illegitimacy. Specific identity constructions operate as markers of users entitlement to services. Interests are attributed to welfare users on the basis of abstract universal assumptions about links between identity and behaviour. The physical structures of material and institutional provision assume these same particular identity constructions. The principal concern for analysis has been to deconstruct subordinated identities in order to redress an imbalance in focus on welfare users as problematic, by virtue of their 'abnormal' identities and to explain the occurrence and impact of 'bottom-up' challenges to policy.

Secondly, the article suggests that wide-ranging as this agenda for analysis is, important elements are missing. Current frameworks for understanding identity fail to explore the traditional notions of policy makers which remain implicit in contemporary analysis, but which are integral to understanding the reproduction or challenge of seemingly illusive 'discourses of power' through which categories of [user] identities are purportedly articulated. Deconstructing problematic identity constructions attributed to those in positions of relative disempowerment is vital, but an equally important goal is to examine the identifications of those in positions of relative power in relation to policy making. Building on and exploring the concept of relational identity (Williams, 2000b) may provide an appropriate basis from which to start exploring the subjectivities of welfare professionals as it potentially encompasses destructive and non-rational elements of human behaviour.

Identity and social policy

The convergence of new social movement critique and postmodern social theory has centralised issues of difference, identity, particularity and the subjective variability of historical experiences on the social policy agenda. The result being a 'refusal to treat social differences as pre-social or as essential characteristics of particular groups or individuals' in turn drawing attention to welfare subjects as

‘the outcomes of processes of *subject formation*’ (see Lewis, 2000a: 15 original emphasis). Both critiques challenge the view of ‘rational ‘man’, characterised by ‘his’ mastery over nature,’ (Archer, 2000:18) who’s identity is a singular and complete entity, which both guides behaviour and accounts for social context in its entirety. Postmodern accounts facilitate an understanding of identity as consistently reconstituted and constructed in specific historical and cultural moments, whereas variants of new social movement theory illustrate the potential for identities to constitute a basis for social challenge (see Martin: 2001).

Some of the less desirable implications of postmodern social theory and related conceptualisations of endlessly fractured and purely socially constructed identity have been debated within social policy circles (see Hewitt, 1994; Taylor Goobey, 1994; Thompson and Hogget, 1996; Williams, 1992; 1994). The principal problem highlighted by these debates being, an epistemic and ontological relativism which lacks a basis on which to build mutually acceptable guidelines for symbolic and material redistribution. Although these potential pitfalls remain, there are conceptualisations of identity [and difference] which are not only compatible with the redistributive aims of social policy, but which may also be crucial to moving forward an analysis of emancipatory social change and the changing social relations of welfare.

The role of social identity in social policy

David Taylor's (1998) work incorporates elements of postmodern social theory, highlighting the way in which social identity becomes central to understanding welfare. He explores both how welfare subjects' identities are [negatively] constructed (most commonly but not exclusively by state agencies), and how welfare subjects [positively] identify themselves. Social identity therefore takes on the form of a mediating concept useful to explaining aspects of state structures and subject's agency. He proposes that identity be conceptualised as both *categorical* and *ontological*. *Categorical* identity relates to the social categories of 'race', gender, age etc. – sameness; *ontological* identity relates to a coherent sense of self - uniqueness. Identity operating along this axis becomes relational and enables an understanding of identity as both individual and social. If the sameness (categorical) and difference (ontological) aspects of identity are placed on the same axis the recognition of difference is impossible without sameness, and recognition of sameness impossible without difference. Identity construction therefore becomes interdependent.

According to Taylor (1998), the central tension in the identity problematic in relation to social policy occurs when identity is treated as synonymous with *difference*

within the context of a *myriad* of possible social differences and identities which are not recognised either within policy or by the new social movements which challenge this. In both cases a certain categorical identity is constructed which subsumes ontological identity. Welfare struggles based on political identities conforming to this logic, have tended to re-present difference as positive but nevertheless fixed, preventing an understanding of oppression as interrelated (Williams, 1994). A well documented example of this process operating has been identified in 'second wave' feminism. By according primacy to gender, other aspects of ethnic and sexual identity, which may be experienced as modes of oppression in their own right, but which also impact on how gendered oppression is transmitted, become marginalised (see for example Bhavani and Phoenix, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1994). Equally this process fails to challenge the basis of structural definitions of difference. As Taylor (1998:246) suggests;

The key, then, is the recognition that difference categories do not represent the *totality* of identity and that the formation of identity is both an historical process and an individual project. It is one which takes place, none the less, within relations of power which construct categories of identity as dominant and subordinate.

Both social and individual identities are therefore processual, fluid and constantly in flux dependent on the social, political, economic and ideological aspects of the

situations individuals and collectivities find themselves in (Bhavani and Phoenix, 1994; Hall 1996). Conceptualising identity as relationally produced, as Taylor (1998) suggests, creates space for both commonality and difference within this.

Integrating identity and subjectivity: relational identity

The key questions then are how and in what form does thinking about identity move social policy analysis forward? Taylor's (1998) conceptualisation of social identity as categorical and ontological is primarily geared to exposing the role of social policy in 'setting the ideological and material conditions for the realisation or foreclosure of particular *identities*' (1998:333, original emphasis). As a result exploring the way in which ontological identity enables subjects to enter into political agency is an important, but underemphasised aspect of Taylor's account. Fiona Williams (2000a, 2000b) building on Taylor's' initial work, approaches the issues from the opposite direction. Taking challenge as her starting point, she (Williams, 2000a: 338, original emphasis) seeks to understand:

the ways in which the welfare claims from grassroots campaigns, organizations and movements have contributed to a rethinking of social policy.... In so doing they have highlighted a critical political question of whether it is possible to combine a commitment to *universalism* in policies whilst respecting a *diversity*, or particularism, of identities, practices and beliefs.

When discussing the related work of the ESRC Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA) project ¹, Williams (2000c: 1) extends this to include a focus on the potential contributions these campaigns and organisations make to welfare reforms and any subsequent ‘moral reordering’ of society. It is arguably this moral reordering (to which I will return in further detail) highlighted by Williams and others committed to rethinking welfare (see for example Clarke *et al*, 1998; Lewis, 2000a) which, underpins a refocusing on the concept of identity. However, I will go on to argue that it is also a focus on identity in relation to some aspects and not others of this moral reordering which is potentially problematic for social policy.

According to Williams (2000b: 3), research suitable to unpacking this moral reordering would require the development of an emphasis on creative human agency, more complex understandings of the welfare subject and middle-range concepts connecting agency and structure. In meeting this criteria the CAVA research group is employing concepts which fall into four interrelated ‘fields of analysis.’ These fields consist of ‘the subject, the social topography of enablement

and constraint in the intimate/informal/close/local/context, the wider discursive and institutional contexts and the dynamics of social change' (also see Williams and Popay, 1999 for an earlier account). The field most pertinent to the current discussion is that of the subject, which draws upon the related concepts of subjectivity, identity, subject position and agency (2000b: 3-8). Subjectivity refers to a sense of self constituted and interpreted through conscious and unconscious experience. Identity refers to a sense of belonging(s), the ways in which individuals attach themselves to the social world. Subject position refers to an individual's positioning within the social world and the ordering of these subject positions constitutes their social relations. Finally agency refers to 'people's capacity to act' and is implicated in the production of and constituted through each of the other elements of the subject, subjectivity, identity and subject position. Importantly, all four elements of the subject are identified, to a greater or lesser extent, as being relational. That is to say that none of these elements is *entirely* constituted by an atomistic unconnected self, the development of the subject is always embedded in and constituted through concrete relationships.

Williams' account of identity is useful for a number of reasons. Firstly, she retains the categorical and ontological aspects of identity introduced in Taylor's (1998) version, suggesting that it is *partly* between these two that the *discursive construction*

of *subject positions* are resisted/reproduced/and resignified' (2000b: 5 my emphasis). Therefore maintaining the idea that identity involves a dialectical play between the individual and the social. Her account however, has more analytical utility than Taylor's (1998) in that it further explores the concept of subjectivity which she marks out as different to ontological identity (2000b: 5 my emphasis).

Ontological identity signifies the process of creating coherence from experience whereas the span of subjectivity is much broader: its reach extends beyond conscious experience to *unconscious interiority*.

This distinction in turn enables a further complexity to agency and claims-making on the basis of identity, these practices can be *explicit* and *implicit*. Where implicit claims evolve out of 'the practices in which people engage, and these may not involve conscious reflection but be part of cultural embeddedness – what went before' (2000b: 7). Secondly, Williams begins to draw out the idea of *relational identity* constituted, differently to both categorical and ontological identity, through relationships and biography, not only situation and structure.

There is a growing body of literature on the margins of social policy which suggests that more robust models of agency and identity would draw on the type of analysis Williams (2000b) seems to be developing. With regards to agency this

would involve the recognition that non reflexive action can also constitute agency, that agency is not necessarily linked to choice, but rather to change and that including non-reflexive, repressed or unacknowledged aspects of action can shed light on the potential destructiveness of human actions (see Hoggett, 2001:50-51). Where identity is concerned this must be explored within the broader context of the self, which corresponds to Williams perspective on subjectivity. Craib (1998:170) suggests:

From this perspective perhaps the more sociologically interesting questions are not about social identity at all and especially not about the social construction of identity, but about the nature of the social conditions which encourage individuals to 'close down' their psychic space around one or another social identity and the social conditions which encourage an opening up of psychic space in an attempt to explore oneself and one's relationships.

His criticisms of sociological approaches to a purely social identity are focussed on the connections between these and identity politics, which in his view, perpetuate narcissistic alliances and conflicts between different interest groups. In William's account, the relational element of identity is *psychosocial* (see Hollway, 2000; Mason 2000). The basis of this type of identification is not confined to the recognition of social difference or sameness, rather it is created and revised through 'close relationships with others through which we have a particular "sense of belonging"

(Williams 2000b:10). It represents the point at which potential contradictions between categorical and ontological identity are negotiated. By drawing on psychosocial approaches Williams (2000b) begins to grapple with criticisms directed at sociological approaches. However, the stated focus of the CAVA project does not exploit the full potential of her framework. This is, to some extent at least, based on the predominant emphasis in this account towards claims made on the basis of *social* identities at ‘grass-roots’.

Conceptualising policy making

What has been emphasised thus far is the utility in further exploring the relationship between [welfare subject] agency – identity – [social] structure, for understanding subject[ive] agency. One way of exploring this is to develop understandings of how new forms of social identity are emerging from new social movements and underpinning new forms of individual and collective agency, which potentially influence developments in welfare policy. This is the approach adopted by CAVA towards the ‘grass roots’ ‘moral reordering’ of welfare arrangements and follows a growing trend towards encouraging user involvement in both policy making and academic research (see for example Croft and Beresford, 1996; Barnes and Prior, 2000). Whilst I would not want to detract from these important developments, what is not clear, is how we move on from here.

Welfare users are no longer (if they ever were) passive recipients of state welfare and have made inroads into developing aspects of service provision, nevertheless these inroads are limited (see Beresford, 2001). Another potentially helpful approach to issues of agency – identity – [social] structure, yet to be explored to the same extent is the policy making environment.

Identity, agency and the discursive context

The limitation to theorising identity within Williams' framework is linked to current understandings of her third field of analysis, 'the national/international/subnational discursive, institutional and relational contexts' (2000b:11-12) or, the 'discursive and institutional context of policy formulation and implementation' (Williams and Popay, 1999). This field is geared specifically to understanding the policy making environment. Williams and Popay (1999:181) suggest that:

Here, greater significance is given to the *discursive context* in which policies are made and implemented. The notion of discourses provides a way of understanding the dynamic between dimensions of the individual (their identity and subjectivity) and their capacity for and mode of action on the other hand, and the existence and nature of policy provision on the other.

This emphasis on discourse, coupled with Williams' (2000b:12) recognition that the issue of 'with whom or what do the significant processes of change lie in

relation to [morality]' remains implicit in the work of CAVA, is problematic for two reasons. Firstly in relation to an aspect of Williams' conceptualisation of identity and secondly to a broadly held, but implicit, view of policy making and policy makers potentially perpetuated within this account.

Firstly, with regards to the use of discourse, I would not argue with the proposition that this concept can be useful 'to consider the structural and ideological influences on people's lives in one frame' (Williams and Popay, 1999:173). However, poststructural discursive accounts of identity tend to focus on the cognitive construction of identity 'within discourse'. This then perpetuates an image of 'the social as a machine', reforming and constituting everything it comes into contact with (see Craib, 1998:7-9). Hoggett (2000:142-143) makes similar observations about an emphasis on the discursive construction of subjects, also observing that the tendency towards discourse can serve to exclude affect and emotion in favour of cognition and language. These inadequacies together (which he and others identify as particularly prevalent in Foucauldian accounts) can foreclose, rather than open up space to theorise agency.

Nevertheless there is currently a proliferation of work employing discursive analysis to policy making, many of which draw on the work of Foucault (see

Carabine, 2000; Hillyard and Watson, 1996; Watson, 2000). Whilst presenting a more complex analysis of policy and specifically its implications for the subjects of welfare, these are not unproblematic. Where welfare professionals or the 'modern expert' are concerned explanations as to the [assumed] negative impact of their agency on welfare arrangements are rather unsatisfactory. Leonard (1997:99, my emphasis) suggests that 'where there is welfare, in other words, there is expertise directed to the organisation and control (*in their own interests*) of those who are subjected to its gaze'. He goes on to suggest that a tendency to abuse power by limiting the agency of others is 'an outcome of history and culture' and places the 'first target' of collective resistance as the professional expert. This seems a wholly insufficient basis on which to view professional involvement in welfare, providing an example of an inappropriate emphasis on the discursive rather than subjective. Professionals are viewed as consistently operating to subordinate users, for their own gain [as experts] and this negative agency has been imputed to them through history and culture, reducing them to status of automatons. This type of analysis conforms to what Hoggett (2001:37) labels the 'subject good, society bad' assumption on which left tends to operate.

Williams (2000b: 13) acknowledges these common criticisms directed towards the use of the concept of discourse. Her inclusion of the affective and

psychobiographical elements of the subject, coupled with a critical realist basis for the whole project (see Duncan, 2000a) would suggest that avoiding the excesses of poststructuralist accounts of subjectivity would be possible. What makes this framework potentially problematic however, is the shift from the language of identity and subjectivity in relation to welfare users or the welfare subject to the language of discourse in relation to policy making. In maintaining a focus on identity in relation to 'grass roots' welfare constituencies and a focus on discourse in relation to policy making/makers, identity and subjectivity remain emphasised as the characteristics of the former. The underlying assumption is that *welfare users* discourses by virtue of their identity (where this is categorical, ontological and relational) have the potentiality to conflict with the 'dominant' policy making discourse which seems to 'exist' disembodied and detached in the first instance. Policy makers for the most part however, remain uni-dimensional in that they would *seem* to adhere to the dominant policy discourse by virtue of their interest in maintaining their powerful position within the policy making process. In the case of those involved in policy making this does not seem to take us further than the view of the rational actor operating in his or her own interests. One way to redress this rather perverse view of welfare professionals would be subject their identity to the same interrogation as welfare users.

Shifting the boundaries professional, policy maker and user

There is currently a discernible division in the social policy literature dealing explicitly with identity and as yet; neither deals satisfactorily with the role of identity in policy making. The direction of each strand is explained, to some extent, by the different social and political factors precipitating them. Whereas the study of welfare user identities was precipitated by critique on the left from new social movements, the study of professional identities and related issues (the second discernible strand) arose largely in response to the changing context of service provision. The introduction of managerialism or the 'new public management' (see Newman, 2000) and other measures designed to exert control over and ensure a higher level of accountability from welfare professionals, were instituted by the political right using left critiques of 'expert' and professional knowledge as additional justification (Jones, 2000). Research concerning the roles and identity of those exercising policy decisions has been concerned with [professional] identity within the context of changing notions of professional power, efficiency, competence and accountability to name but a few (see Malin, 2000). Aspects of social identity such as 'race' and gender (if explored at all in this context) are treated as marginal variables affecting research data rather than social relations with the potential to impact on other aspects of identity (for example see Phal, 1994).

There are two obvious gaps in the prevailing approaches to studying professional identities. Primarily, professionals are studied *only* in terms of their status as welfare professionals ignoring their position in other forms of social relations. This first problem exhibits the same tendency towards totalising categorical identity highlighted by Taylor (1998), but in relation to welfare professionals rather than welfare users. Secondly, the role of welfare professionals is perceived as one of delivery and rarely interrogated in relation to policy making. The first omission fails to take account of the fact that ideologies of professionalisms and professional identities developing as a result of these are intertwined with, or even based upon certain notions of gender, ethnicity and class (see Davies, 1995; 2000b). Equally it fails to explore the implications of moves from government to increase the numbers of those coming from marginalised social groups into welfare professions, a current example being the *Positively Diverse* initiative within the NHS (see NHSE, 2000). These types of initiatives are important precisely because they potentially increase the diversity of social identities involved in service provision and also within NHS decision making structures.

The second gap would seem an important omission within the contemporary policy making environment identified by Davies (2000a). Policy, it is suggested, is

increasingly ‘developed neither from the top down nor from the bottom up, but rather from the middle out’ involving a variety of social actors (2000a: 226). In spite of attacks on various groups of health and welfare practitioners’ professional autonomy, they are still heavily (if not increasingly) implicated in formulating policy at the meso level. Taking the example of the health services again, with the introduction of Primary Care Trusts welfare professionals have now been *formally* integrated into NHS decision making structures (see DoH, 2001). Practitioners within this context are potentially key agents in policy development.

Developing perspectives on motivation

When linked to the concepts of subjectivity and agency emphasised with regards to welfare users, the important practical implications of better understanding welfare professionals’ social identifications from a similar perspective become clearer. Current interrogations of subjective identity constructions in relation to welfare subjects are important precisely because these highlight their capacity and also motivation for action precipitating challenges to conventional forms of welfare. There are a range of issues to consider when applying this approach to welfare professionals. Firstly, A failure to understand the different aspects of welfare professionals’ *social* identity ignores any capacity for action on their part, which is precipitated by aspects of positive identification other than their professional or

institutional identity. Policy makers are only perceived as capable in this sense then of being influenced through political, professional and institutional discourses. In a context where these discourses are identified as operating (whether intentionally or not) to subordinate welfare subjects, the potential for critique and change within welfare systems is confined to the 'bottom-up' approach ². However, 'bottom-up' challenges to welfare once acknowledged are not simply incorporated into the policy process. The important point made in Davies' (2000a) discussion of stakeholder welfare is that various [minority] stakeholders may still encounter difficulty in articulating new perspectives based on their experiences which ultimately fail to challenge the underlying values and prior framing of policy issues.

By applying a social relations approach to welfare professionals we can begin to explore how social divisions amongst welfare providers which occur on the basis of common social rather than professional identifications might challenge the underlying value base of welfare provision. Carpenters' (1993) work on nursing suggests that nurses have mobilised around their social identities as women to challenge the gendered position of nursing within the health care system. Lewis (2000b) provides a useful account of how the identity constructions of 'Black' women social workers are used to challenge marginalizing practices within social work. Both accounts explore the complexities of and connections between social

and professional identifications, highlighting the changing social and professional divisions and affiliations of these groups of professionals. However, the most important point made in both cases is that the women professionals identified *cannot* necessarily be assumed to share a common interest on the basis of their gender. In the case of the women social workers in Lewis' account gendered identification is cross cut by racialised social identifications which place Black women social workers as 'at once organizationally subordinate and ambiguously dominant' (2000b:201). Carpenters' work dispels the assumption that common social identifications between women health care professionals and women health care users will develop and subsequently improve service provision for this user group. He suggests that professionalising movements within nursing which seek to challenge traditional white, male, middle class, medical dominance, through redefining the role of 'nurse', tend to benefit an occupational elite mirroring wider social divisions based on classed or raced identities. These movements potentially reform, but do not fundamentally change the 'patient' role (1993: 115-126).

In addition to the failure to examine social divisions within welfare professions there is also a distinct lack of attention to the fact that welfare professionals, as well as being imbued with professional and policy making identities, are also service users. Understanding social identity has been approached differently in relation to

users and providers of welfare services reflecting a false understanding of these two groups as inhabiting different social spaces. One of the most useful aspects of poststructural alternatives to fixed identity constructions is the ability to view service users and providers as one in the same and to acknowledge their interdependence (See Biggs, 2000). Similarly, Edwards *et al* (1999:153) suggest that there is a strong argument for approaching these two groups in a similar way.

Just as people are multiply positioned in relation to structural axes of class, gender and race, for example, so they may occupy, at one and the same time, particular positions such as service user and provider.

Edwards *et al's* research examines the perspectives of women health care providers and women health care users on maternity services, exploring convergence and divergence of perspectives on provision. They conclude that whilst there is a considerable amount of divergence in relation to structural position within the provision/consumption of services, the providers' comments evidence an 'identification as women with the mothers they serve' (1999:151). Denying this type of interdependence is fostered by an inadvertent collusion with what Hoggett (2000a) identifies as 'that wider cultural orientation' cultivated by Thatcherism, where those working in public services are perceived as the 'enemy within'. This is perpetuated by a view of those developing and providing services as 'bearers of

discourses of domination' rather than as caught up in 'the inherently contradictory logics of care and control, equity and rationing and empowerment and exploitation' (Hoggett, 2000a:147). We need to explore the complexity and depth of provider experiences in relation to health and social care services, only one element of which is their continuing relative power in relation to service users. Particularly exploring professional experiences of using services might begin to form a basis for understanding how shared rather than oppositional perspectives on service provision might be developed.

Including relational identity

Overall the arguments for placing social identity within a framework for understanding subjectivity, agency and categorical, ontological and *relational* identity where this extends to unconscious interiority, are particularly strong. We need a thorough exposition of the assumption, often made that policy makers or providers act 'in their own interests'. Levin's (1997) work takes an interesting, if rather mechanistic look, at the process of policy making within central government. He makes use of four principal frameworks for policy analysis, each viewing policy respectively as; the product of a rationale; a selective response to interests; the outcome of a process; and a reflection of the 'power structure' (1997:2). Whilst the focus on central government is potentially misleading, his

definition of 'interests' is important in the context of this discussion. He suggests that the mechanisms identified when policy is viewed as a response to interests are 'to do with *feeling* as opposed to reasoning. The policy maker is implicitly seen as an "emotional actor" rather than a "rational actor" ' (1997:227, original emphasis). Although the discussion of the emotional actor, experience and empathy is rather superficial, the fact that Levin begins to grapple with issues of emotionality rather than assuming an inherent and recognisable rationality to decision making, is significant.

Hoggett (2001:53) suggests that non-rationalist models of agency are able to confront paradox and contradiction more successfully than their rationalist counterparts and that the power to do this lies in the ability to conceive of multiple, but relational selves. Where one self can act whilst the other rebels against that act, we are both responsible and innocent. To recognise that individuals [and groups] can have negative and positive emotional capacities and that they can be destructive towards themselves and others is a much more mature approach to understanding the self than is offered by characterising people and actions as either 'good' or 'bad'. In terms of understanding policy making this is vital.

The social relations of those involved in both the welfare professions and policy making has changed, but policy analysis does not fully acknowledge these changes. It is clear that welfare service users are no longer if they ever were the 'white, male able bodied, worker, father, husband', but neither are those cast as 'policy makers' or service providers those white middle class professionals of a bygone era (if they ever were). Neither of these positions – user or policy maker/welfare professional, is entirely passive and neither affords the opportunity for agency outwith the existing, past and future relations of power and no individual or group operating on either side of this welfare provision/consumption divide is a knowing actor all of the time. There are two sets of issues in relation to identity which spring to mind as a result of these complexities. Firstly this new context throws issues of collective action on the basis of an entirely *social* identity into free fall. Why, when individuals share *social* identities, do they not always act in concert to challenge hierarchical disadvantage on the basis of those social identities? Whilst the concept of ontological identity goes some way to understanding this, on its own the categorical ontological distinction does not go far enough. Equally where the relationship between welfare professional and service user is concerned, there may be no means of categorical identification through sameness either in relation to structural position in the politics of welfare, or in the broader context of social relations. Understanding identity as only categorical and ontological would suggest

that providers and users of welfare services have no potential common ground unless they share one or more social locations. Overall this oversimplifies the basis of social identification.

In order to thoroughly theorise social agency on the basis of social identification this would have to be possible in the most unlikely situations. When two people who apparently have nothing in common – ‘no sense of belonging’- are able to act together for the same ends. Using the ontological categorical distinction enables the recognition of complex and contradictory identifications. For example a ‘white’ woman identifying with a ‘Black’ woman on the basis of being a woman with a common experience of sexism, Lewis’s (2000b) work provided examples of how this might operate within a social work setting. However a solely categorical – ontological approach requires development in order to facilitate an understanding of how social identities are negotiated and why certain identifications became the basis for agency, other than where agency is perceived as a reactive condition of oppression. Discussing potential explanations for the subordinate position of women health care professionals, Wegar (1993:184) suggests that these will only be successful if they consider ‘the processes through which interests are defined and recognised by actors’. For service providers these interests may be based on common professional interests, for example improving the position of nurses in

relation to doctors, but these do not occur in a vacuum. There is no *necessary* connection between 'being' a nurse for example and identifying yourself as a nurse with common interests to other nurses, alternatively 'being' a nurse might be experienced on a number of different levels or it may have internal or external relevance and this may differ from person to person (see Ohlen and Segesten, 1998).

The second set of issues relate to wider discussions of identity and not only social identity versus personal identity. Firstly, in what ways do individuals damage [those cast as] others and therefore themselves? And why/what conditions make it possible for them to accept and take responsibility for this damage and encourage change? This is where the real power of employing the concept of identity to social policy analysis lies, in its potential to explain both the generative and destructive aspects of human behaviour. Celia Davies (2000b) suggests that it is recognition and connection rather than recognition and sameness which produce the possibility of working together. Whereas sameness and difference, as concepts which underpin categorical and ontological identity constructions, tend to suggest the notion of common or different characteristics, connection and differentiation, underpinning relational identity, bring into focus the relationship between individuals [and groups]. Relationships involve interdependence, connection arises

out of the recognition of differentiation and implies the potential for valuing the 'other' as a unique, but connected individual (2000b: 351-353). It is relationships then, that inform social agency as a result of connection to and identification with others in a way that categorical and ontological identifications alone do not. Categorical identifications occur on the basis of common perspectives on a given situation. Relational identifications occur on the basis of the relationships/connections between individuals who might not come from the same perspective, but who can still have a common purpose.

Relational identity emphasises connection and differentiation as the principles of social relationships. Exploring the relational identities of welfare professionals therefore, involves examining the ways in which they construct relationships and erect boundaries between themselves and a variety of others including both colleagues and service users. It focuses on the internal and external conflicts encountered by professionals over time and how the patterns, or ruptures in these guide and inform decisions about service provision. This type of analysis may also potentially flag up firstly strategies for overcoming boundaries and separations between these groups and how connections on the basis of relationship, rather than position might be harnessed to improve welfare provision.

Conclusions

I have argued that the concept of identity is useful to social policy on a number of levels. Whilst some of these levels have been explored in detail, the concept has not been exploited to its full potential. I have argued that it is its value in understanding the connection between ‘grass-roots’ experience of welfare and active forms of social citizenship which have underpinned the deployment of *social* identity in social policy analysis. Whilst this focus is entirely appropriate, that this emphasis has almost entirely driven the theoretical development of the concept of identity within the discipline, is not unproblematic.

To deride the concept of identity on the basis of its links to poststructural social theory is to miss the point. A more robust concept of identity rather than only *social* identity is required in order to both redress the excesses of some poststructural approaches to identity and to conceive of a more rounded human subject in policy analysis. Hoggett (2000b:11) identifies the persistence to develop *understanding* in terms of ‘systems of thought, meaning or representation’, which still leaves us ignorant of ‘our own motives and those of others’. I have suggested that the employing the concept of identity is integral to bringing about such an understanding, but that what we mean by identity, what other concepts we set this within and the ways in which we deploy this concept are integral to harnessing its

power. The work of Fiona Williams and the CAVA project goes some way towards this more robust analysis by including the relational along with categorical and ontological aspects of identity. However, this requires expansion in relation to welfare professionals and their role in policy making in order to gain an understanding of the changing context for service provision.

Notes

I wish to thank Tony Maltby and Lena Robinson for comments on an earlier version of this paper, and also the anonymous referees who commented on the submission.

¹ This work is not published in final form, constituting part of the ongoing Economic and Social Research Council's Research Group for the Study of Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA) Project. Therefore any criticisms made here are necessarily provisional subject to the ongoing development and application of this perspective. Nevertheless, it provides the most current, developed and detailed contribution to integrating the concept of identity in social policy and on this basis justifies detailed critique. This said, there are numerous points in this account, other than those forming the basis of my discussion, which merit further exposition, my focus is constrained by available space. I am grateful to Fiona Williams for her permission to use this work.

² Williams (1994:70-71) in her discussion of discourses of diversity and difference identifies three competing meanings. Two derive from 'diversity from above' precipitated by systematic welfare changes instituted by policy makers. Firstly, through consumer-choice and secondly, through individual needs assessment. Williams identifies the second of these as presenting opportunities for the collective articulation of diverse needs, but suggests that the realisation of these opportunities is dependent on the third discourse of 'diversity from below'. This is identified as 'local, national and international movements operating outside the statutory services' based on politicised user group identities. The involvement of these groups in defining needs assessment is the factor precipitating change in professional definitions of need. Although Williams acknowledges that the space

for user involvement is circumscribed by numerous factors she emphasises ill-defined notions of difference within 'diversity from below' which, it is assumed, will then automatically influence definitions of 'diversity from above'.

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