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The Poor ‘Sociological Imagination’ of the Rich: Explaining Attitudinal Divergence towards Welfare, Inequality and Redistribution

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Abstract

Quantitative research has tended to explain attitudinal divergence towards welfare and redistribution through self-interested rationalities. However, such an approach risks abstracting individuals from the structural determinants of resource allocation and biographical experience. With that in mind, this paper draws on a qualitative study of fifty individuals experiencing relative deprivation and affluence in the UK and New Zealand to examine how lived experiences of inequality affect attitude formation towards welfare and redistribution. Scenario-driven vignettes were used to stimulate an applied discussion of abstract principles pertaining to welfare and inequality. Use of this methodological device proffered novel insight into the phenomenological effects of material position on public attitudes and policy preferences in a comparative context. The findings suggest that affluent individuals are less likely to acknowledge systemic features shaping socio-economic life. As a result, they exhibit a poor sociological imagination that is deployed in distinct and patterned ways to make sense of, and at times justify, economic restructuring. By contrast, those living in relative deprivation are more likely to advance accounts of intergroup relations and social location that emphasise the structuration of (dis-) advantage. Based on the findings, policy and political implications are considered for welfare and redistribution amidst rising structural inequality.

Keywords: *affluence; attitudes; deprivation; lived experience; welfare politics*

Introduction

Differences in welfare attitudes have been variously explained according to: structural and institutional regimes, individual and group characteristics and ideological and value systems (Wlezien and Soroka 2012, Kulin and Seymer 2014, Wu and Chou 2015). Across these axes of explanation, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that there are clear material underpinnings to political and policy preferences (Svallfors 2004, Evans and de Graaf 2013). In spite of this and its significance for welfare politics, there has been a propensity to empirically underspecify the relationship between material position, self-interest and welfare attitudes. To offer a nuanced account of attitudinal divergence, it is necessary to examine the dynamic and inter-subjective mechanisms underlying materialist explanations of welfare attitudes.

Within the context of rising structural inequality (OECD. 2016), there is growing recognition of the need to define, identify and qualitatively examine ‘the rich’ as a social and economic category (Khan 2015). This paper contributes towards this research agenda by exploring how ‘the rich’ and ‘the poor’ⁱ differ in terms of how they make sense of structural inequality and their own material position. Critical examination of the everyday views of those experiencing relative deprivation and affluence, proffers insight into the subjectivities that both feed and flow from rising structural inequality.

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Whilst the general public tend to recognise that inequality is caused by a range of factors, they are also more likely to cite individual, rather than structural bases of socio-economic outcome in liberal welfare regimes (Linos and West 2003). In light of this, this paper draws on a qualitative study of welfare attitudes and experiences undertaken in New Zealand and the UK. Over the last 30 years, the rise of economic individualism has been variegated and geographically distinct across both countries (Humpage 2016). Nonetheless, income inequality has increased significantly in both countries since the 1980s (OECD, 2016). This is largely due to increases in the income share of those at the top end of the income distribution, but also a weakening of (p-) redistribution mechanisms (Obst, 2013, Carey, 2015). According to the latest available data, the gini coefficient and relative poverty rate is 0.333 and 9.9 per cent in New Zealand and 0.358 and 10.4 per cent in the UK (OECD, 2016). Despite this and the dynamic contextual phases of embedded neoliberalism, there has been a steady hardening of public attitudes towards (low-income) social security and notable ambivalence towards redistribution amidst rising structural inequality across both countries (Humpage 2016).

Political administrations in both countries have advanced a policy paradigm that problematizes the behaviours and orientations of those experiencing deprivation, whilst lauding the character of the relatively affluent (Edmiston, 2017). Whilst cuts to public spending have been less pronounced in New Zealand,

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tax-benefit changes have resulted in significant real-term cuts to working-age social security across both countries in recent years (De Agostini *et al.*, 2015; NZT, 2016). The ‘responsibilisation’ of social (dis-) advantage has not only consolidated individualised explanations of inequality in liberal welfare regimes (Wu and Chou 2015, Humpage 2016). It has also further ‘foreclosed discussion of broader structural processes’ that factor in explanations of inequality and how it might be addressed (Pantazis 2016: 5). Even in New Zealand, where an ostensible national legacy of egalitarianism pervades collective identity and consciousnessⁱⁱ, descriptive individualism is increasingly drawn upon to explain social stratification (Humpage, 2016).

In such contexts, Kearns *et al.* (2014) hypothesise that hardening welfare attitudes could be related to patterns of social polarisation and segregation. As ‘the rich’ and ‘the poor’ pull apart from one another, their exposure to and thus awareness of the factors contributing towards socio-economic outcome becomes increasingly idiosyncratic. In this regard, Kearns *et al.* (2014: 456) suggest that ‘living experiences which help to overcome constrained knowledge about inequality may therefore alter attitudes’ in ways that cultivate greater empathy and social cohesion. Existing attitudinal research suggests that, despite the pervasiveness of individualised explanations of inequality, those experiencing relative deprivation and socio-economic vulnerability are very much able to explain the structural determinants of disadvantage and ‘reflect on the contextual

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factors... that influenced their actions' (Wu and Chou 2015, Pemberton et al. 2016: 26).

Although implicitly assumed, quantitative attitudinal research often fails to account for how one's socio-material position affects an individual's (sense of) agency and control over their circumstance. As a result, there is a tendency within attitudinal research to overlook or presume how lived experiences, stratified according to material position, might feature in explanations of attitudinal divergence (cf. Sumino, 2013). Studies that do qualitatively examine the phenomenological effects of material position on public attitudes tend to focus on either one end of the income distribution (usually those at the bottom), or one institutional setting. This limits the inferences possible about the material underpinnings to policy preferences and the institutional determinants of attitude formation within the context of rising structural inequality.

With that in mind, this paper examines what bearing lived experiences of deprivation and affluence have on attitudinal divergence through an examination of the divergent material subjectivity of poor and rich citizens across two liberal welfare regimes. Specifically, this paper explores how the knowledge accumulated through material position mediates attitude (trans-) formation in relation to welfare, inequality and redistribution. To do so, this paper draws on fifty qualitative interviews, that employed scenario-driven vignettes to explore the experiences and attitudes of 'the rich' and 'the poor' in New Zealand and the UK.

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This paper presents evidence that suggests lived experiences of relative deprivation and affluence engender distinct understandings, and explanations, of social stratification. In the case of those living in relative deprivation, a sociological imagination is more readily conceived and employed in order to make sense of intergroup relations and social location. By contrast, the rich are less likely to acknowledge ‘the interplay of individuals and society’ in the structuration of outcome, agency and opportunity (Mills 1959: 3). In this regard, the relatively poor sociological imagination of the rich is deployed in distinct and patterned ways to make sense of, and at times justify, economic (re-) structuring. To use one’s sociological imagination requires the capacity to see the relations between the ‘most impersonal and remote transformations’ and the ‘most intimate features of the human self’ (Mills 1959: 7). Mills (1959) suggests this enhances understanding of *individual troubles*. More importantly though, it also informs the identification of, as well as the strategies deemed necessary or appropriate to address, *social issues*. In light of the findings then, a number of conclusions are also drawn about the future prospects for welfare and redistribution amidst rising structural inequality.

Welfare Attitudes and Inequality: Moving beyond *Homo Economicus*

When it comes to welfare attitudes and policy preferences, sociological and political science research has tended to suggest that ‘rational, informed individuals

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behave in a way that maximises their utility functions' (Sumino 2013: 111). This is perhaps unsurprising given the substantial evidence that 'richer people are more averse to redistribution' and that lower income individuals are much more likely to problematize inequality and support welfare provision (Hasenfeld and Rafferty 1989, Park et al. 2007, Alesina and Giuliano 2009: 3). These attitudinal differences might be described as self-interested given the material position of citizens (e.g. Evans and de Graaf 2013, Naumann et al. 2015). However, this is not necessarily the underlying cause of attitudinal difference and conflating material position with self-interest is potentially attributing causative explanation to the characteristic of an attitude. Whilst many acknowledge how 'class relations generate a matrix of differential life chances and possession of economic assets', there is a tendency to overlook or presume how this might feature in explanations of attitudinal divergence (Brooks and Svallfors 2010: 208). As acknowledged by much of the empirical literature in social psychology, such an approach runs the risk of abstracting individual preferences and behaviours from the structural determinants of resource allocation, biographical experience and social cognition (cf. Kraus and Keltner, 2013).

An individual's relation to and experience of the social structure will invariably inform how they conceive of the relationship between structure and agency. It is therefore reasonable to expect that attitudinal differences related to welfare, that are stratified according to material position, are 'also shaped by

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subjective beliefs about the nature of society' (Linos and West 2003: 405). When individuals are presented with accurate information concerning economic inequality, a dramatic shift occurs in their attitudes (Bamfield and Horton 2009). This is particularly important given the extent to which an individual's awareness of and exposure to social structure is tightly 'bounded by the private orbits in which they live' (Mills 1959: 3). In light of this, the quotidian experiences and engagements of an individual, and the knowledge accumulated along the way, is likely to profoundly affect their sociological imagination.

Bearing this in mind, research has shown that support for welfare spending and redistribution are informed by whether the general public view poverty and inequality as primarily caused by individual or structural factors (Linos and West 2003). Those more inclined to recognise the structural determinants of poverty and affluence are also more likely to support progressive and inclusive welfare policies (Bullock et al. 2003). However, a great deal of the existing research that explores attitudes towards the causes of poverty and inequality rests on a rather crude distinction between structural, individual and fatalistic explanations of inequality. In reality, these determinants of inequality are not easily or entirely separable. Studies that draw an exclusive distinction between structural and individual explanations run the risk of mischaracterising the phenomenon of inequality and attitudes towards it. This paper therefore draws on scenario-based qualitative interviews that capture the complex interplay between structural, fatalistic and

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agentive determinants of inequality and how material position affects attitudes towards this.

The existing evidence suggests that genuine and prolonged exposure to or experience of structural inequality increases systemic explanations of its occurrence (e.g. Bullock 2004, Shirazi and Biel 2005). In this respect, lower support for welfare and redistribution amongst ‘the rich’ is not necessarily rooted in economic or class self-interest. It may well be a reflection of the knowledge accumulated through biographical experience. By virtue of their position, affluent individuals have a relatively limited exposure to the structural constraints and barriers that detrimentally affect their own material well-being or agency. If ‘the raw stuff processed by sociological imagination is human experience’ (Bauman 2005: 123), then affluent individuals may lack knowledge and understanding of the determinants of structural inequality. As such, their attitudes towards inequality, welfare and redistribution may fall in line according to their idiosyncratic understanding of the way in which the world works (Khan 2015).

Methods

This paper draws on fifty qualitative interviews undertaken between 2013 and 2014 in New Zealand and the UK: 28 interviews with materially deprived individuals (15 UK and 13 NZ) and 22 interviews with affluent individuals (13 UK and 9 NZ). A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify people

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occupying these diverse material positions. Affluent individuals were identified as those individuals that were engaged in full-time employment, living in prosperous neighbourhoods on an income that was in the top quintile of the income distribution. Participants experiencing material deprivation were identified as those that were unemployed, living in the most deprived areas on an income that was below the relative poverty line. In light of the racial and gendered inequalities that emerge from and underpin economic stratification, it is perhaps unsurprising that women and minority ethnic groups were disproportionately represented in the sample group recruited as experiencing material deprivation across both countriesⁱⁱⁱ.

In the first instance, participants were recruited by leafleting small geographical administrative areas that were classified as some of the most affluent and deprived (top 30 per cent) according to official statistics. A smaller number of participants (less than 10 per cent) were also recruited via referrals from organisation gatekeepers and personal networks. Whilst this might suggest differential degrees and understandings of socio-economic inequality amongst these small number of participants, this has been factored into the analysis undertaken and the inferences drawn from the data.

‘Scenario-driven’ qualitative interviews with participants focused on individual experiences, behaviours and attitudes. Having encouraged participants to reflect upon their material well-being and position, they were then presented

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with a number of vignettes or ‘case studies’ to facilitate an applied discussion about structural inequality, individual agency and welfare. This facilitated a structured ‘conversation’ to explore lay accounts of inequality and welfare by those that are often absent from or mischaracterised within mainstream political and policy discourse.

Built into each of the vignettes, were a series of structural constraints and enablers that informed the opportunities, outcomes and agency of individuals depicted. Crucially, each vignette demonstrated some interplay between the structural and agentic determinants of socio-economic outcome and culminated in a ‘problem’ or ‘challenge’. Participants were then asked ‘how responsible is [X] for her/his situation?’ and were left to interpret notions of responsibility as they saw fit. The open-ended and ambiguous nature of this question was used as a methodological innovation to stimulate critical reflection and explore patterned differences in the way participants understand and advance conceptions of individual responsibility. Equally, the ambiguity of the vignettes in this study made it possible to explore how individuals tend to ‘fill in the gaps’ and construct their beliefs in relation to their own lived experience and knowledge. In this respect, short-staged written vignettes were used to identify and establish the significance of differences in the interpretation of open-ended or ambiguous questions and scenarios (cf. Sheppard and Ryan 2003, Hughes and Huby 2004).

Results

The following section considers three vignettes (Becky, James and Robert) in turn to explore intuitions about how ‘responsible’ individuals were seen to be for their situation given their environment, decisions and behaviour.

Becky

Becky lives alone with her two children. At 18, Becky got good grades and wanted to go to University but was worried about the cost and debt that she might face. Instead, Becky got a secretarial job in a small company hoping to work her way up. After one year, Becky was made redundant and fell pregnant shortly after. Since then, Becky has been unable to find a job. Becky split up from her boyfriend five years ago and has relied on benefits and occasional help from her parents ever since. She lives in social housing and has done for four years. Becky would like to work but has been unable to find a job that is flexible enough for her to gain career prospects and also care for her children. Becky volunteers three times a week whilst her children are at school. Becky has recently been told that she needs to get a job as some of her entitlement to social security will soon finish.

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As illustrated in table 1, over three quarters of deprived participants felt that Becky's situation was primarily caused by fatalistic or structural factors beyond her control. The majority of these participants cited structural determinants of her situation. Whilst many felt that life events absolved her of blame for her situation, the vast majority of deprived participants still felt that she was assuming responsibility for her situation and was responding in a constructive and positive manner. Only three deprived participants cited individual reasons for Becky's situation and only one participant felt that it was entirely her fault.

It's obviously not her fault that she's fallen pregnant and stuff. It's not her fault she's been made redundant either so she's not responsible. (Brooke, Deprived, UK)

She's made an effort. She's done her best. She's really tried.
(Lawrence, Deprived, NZ)

For participants in a position of relative affluence, there was greater ambivalence surrounding Becky. Forty per cent of affluent participants thought that Becky was not responsible for her situation and cited exogenous factors contributing towards her behaviour and circumstance. Around half thought Becky was at least partially responsible for her situation with many citing her 'poor choices' such as deciding to have more than one child and not going to university.

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Interestingly, affluent participants were more likely to moralise or caricature her biography. Despite evidence presented to the contrary, some affluent participants suggested Becky had multiple children from different fathers, had chosen to fall pregnant and that she was a teenage mother:

You know, pregnancy is not something that is pushed on you. It happens because you do something ... I'm not one of these moralistic types at all. But, erm, I think you see on television a lot now young girls who are interviewed and they have like four children to three separate fathers. And they say that they see no link between benefits from somebody else and money being given to them to subsidize what is a pretty racketsy lifestyle and I think we need to get back to a little bit of personal responsibility. (Peter, Affluent, UK)

Overall, descriptive individualism tended to govern how affluent participants made sense of Becky's circumstance. However, differing degrees of neoliberal paternalism appear to reflect and give rise to distinctive justifications of socio-economic difference in New Zealand and the UK. Across both countries, policy measures have principally focused on revising the choice architecture of low-income social security claimants through welfare conditionality and withdrawal. In addition to this however, welfare reforms in New Zealand have introduced heightened degrees of control into social security administration through instruments such as income management. Underpinning this elevated welfare

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paternalism is an enduring concern that certain individuals are unable to act in ways that serve their own interests. Such a discourse serves to legitimise and reproduce essentialist lay theories of social difference and structural inequality. In New Zealand, this appears to have bolstered individual explanations of disadvantage that pathologise the behaviours and attitudes of low-income social security claimants and affected policy measures deemed appropriate:

I'm a believer in the hand up rather than the hand out, I mean I think... if the government is providing x hundred dollars a week to a family, I think how that money is spent should have some control on it... so that it can't be exchanged for booze, cigarettes and betting.

(Jeremy, Affluent, NZ)

For participants that did suggest Becky was responsible for her situation, the vast majority did not believe that she should (permanently) suffer the consequences of her actions. Affluent participants appeared much less inclined to recognise the fatalistic or structural factors contributing towards of Becky's situation. Interestingly though, when these sorts of factors did feature in discussions of Becky, many affluent participants felt that, irrespective of her life circumstance, Becky had the capacity to pursue and realise her career and life objectives.

Overall, the majority of participants did not see Becky as principally responsible for her situation. However, affluent participants were significantly

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more likely to advance individual explanations of Becky's circumstance. The extent to which participants saw Becky as responsible for her situation seemed to affect what public assistance they thought she should receive. Those experiencing deprivation were more likely to recognise the concessionary factors that precluded Becky from engaging in full-time work and commended her non-fiscal contribution to society^{iv}. Accordingly, they were more inclined to believe Becky should receive financial support from the government. By contrast, affluent participants tended to believe Becky should receive non-financial support or benefits-in-kind to support her transition back into paid employment.

James

James left school with one O-level and has always felt that he is better at practical 'hands-on jobs' than being in an 'office job'. At 46, James lives with his wife and 4 children. He works for a large supermarket and does a lot of shift work, working nights and evenings. He works very hard and has recently taken on an extra part-time cleaning job. As a result, he is not always able to help his children with schoolwork. James's family receive Child Tax Credits and Working Tax Credits which help a lot but they are often short at the end of the month. The rising cost of food and energy means James is in debt as he cannot always afford to pay the bills. He wants more hours at work to pay this off but cannot get any more at the

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moment. James's wife does not work as she feels the cost of childcare would be too much to make it worthwhile.

The vast majority of participants experiencing deprivation felt that James was acting responsibly and 'trying to do the best he can'. As demonstrated in table 2, over two thirds felt that James's situation was not his fault. Many of these individuals recognised wider structural challenges facing James's family such as the rising cost of food and energy and a low minimum wage. Some of these individuals attributed responsibility for James's situation to the government, whilst others blamed employers for not providing a 'living wage'. Many empathised with James's situation and felt that they had experienced similar financial challenges themselves:

With the rising cost of food and everything else it's a struggle. I know that myself. Struggling day in, day out, basically. In this day and age, like I say, it's trying to get the work and get the extra hours and everything else... (Fiona, Deprived, NZ)

He needs that extra support for food and petrol and clothes he might need to buy for the kids. It all helps. They only give you so much you know. (Judith, Deprived, NZ)

These participants discussed falling behind with bills and how easily this can happen as a result of unexpected costs associated with children's schooling,

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broken household goods and rising energy prices. A number of these participants felt that it would be a 'false economy' for James's wife to seek paid employment due to the significant costs associated with travel and childcare. Compared to those experiencing relative deprivation in New Zealand, participants in a similar pecuniary position in the UK more frequently highlighted structural and fatalistic factors affecting James and his family. This is perhaps unsurprising given the higher rates of relative poverty and income inequality observed in the UK (OECD, 2016), and lends tentative evidence to the social construction of attitudes that is mediated through lived experiences of inequality. Across both countries, the majority of those experiencing deprivation felt that James and his family should receive some form of financial assistance from the government. Participants justified this by emphasising the significant efforts James was making to support his family.

By contrast, affluent participants were much more likely to blame James for his situation. Around two thirds of these participants thought James was at least partially responsible for his financial difficulties. Whilst almost all participants recognised that James was working hard to provide for his family, some questioned his lifestyle choices. These individuals suggested that James should not have had so many children given the low-wage work that he 'chose to go into':

The fact that he's short of money... yeah... four children. Yeah I mean he is responsible because I don't have children. And you could

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say well, why should people with one child just pay him. No I think... I would say he's got to cut his coat according to his cloth.
(Joe, Affluent, UK)

I also think that it's easy to have babies and having four children is a very costly exercise and so again you're responsible for the situation that you're in. That's why he can't afford to spend time with his kids...
It comes down to personal choice - what lifestyle we want and whether we can afford it. (Andrea, Affluent, NZ)

Some were keen to clarify the sort of spending and consumption habits of James and his family. These individuals questioned whether James was making sound financial decisions. For example, whether he was smoking or spending money on 'unnecessary' household goods. Whilst many attributed responsibility to James as a result of this, some were still keen to emphasise that his family were 'worthy' and 'deserving' recipients of social assistance:

... they say the cost of food is rising and electricity but what else is he spending on beer and alcohol and so on and so forth. (Thomas, Affluent, NZ)

You'd like to know, what does his house look like, when you go into it? What is he spending?... Has he got a huge TV in there? Or is he just living within his means, in terms of he's working really hard...

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Do you know what I mean? Why is he working two part-time jobs, and why are things still not meeting? [*Interviewer: Because he's on minimum wage*] Yeah. This is what I said to you on the phone – I'm not sure that I'll know enough about how much that means, in practical terms. (Sophie, Affluent, UK)

Limited exposure to, and awareness of, financial management in a low-income household appeared to inform the judgments of affluent participants with many moralising the presumed behaviours and decisions of characters such as James. When asked about whether James's family should receive in-work social security from the government, affluent participants were more ambivalent. Just over half believed James's family should receive social assistance, with the rest more inclined to suggest alternative revenue streams. Many affluent participants suggested that James' financial circumstance was principally his own doing. These individuals tended to suggest that the individual agency (i.e. the decisions and behaviours) of someone like James was impervious to outside factors or influences. As a result, they tended to draw upon meritocratic explanations of socioeconomic circumstance and difference:

I believe people are, generally speaking, responsible for their situation. I think people in all walks of life... you get out, what you put into it... people are generally responsible for how good their life is... you can go to a good school or you can go to a bad school but

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you can always make the best of it. (Richard, Affluent, NZ)

Overall, participants experiencing deprivation were much more inclined to focus on the exigent financial pressures and challenges faced by James and his family. Their own experience of unemployment and low-waged labour appeared to inform how they thought this might affect the outcomes of someone like James. They tended to identify the structural determinants of financial hardship and proffered structural solutions accordingly. In seeking to resolve the apparent contradiction between a meritocratic explanation of socioeconomic difference and James' individual effort, many affluent participants problematized his previous decisions and behaviours. As a result, affluent participants were more inclined to individualise poverty and inequality, and in a way that aligned with their own biographical experience and worldview.

Robert

So far, the first two vignettes have explored intuitions about those factors that inhibit individual agency and negatively affect socio-material positioning. The final vignette describes the life opportunities and actions of Robert. Robert was presented to participants to explore how people make sense of and position themselves in relation to the conditions that (unevenly) *increase* individual agency and *positively* affect socio-economic opportunities:

Robert is very clever and did very well at school. He received a great deal of support and help from his parents with schoolwork. Robert

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went to University and received financial support from his parents when moving for his first job. Since starting his first job, Robert has always worked hard, often staying late in the office and taking work home at the weekends. He earns a lot from his job and has private health insurance. He has decided to buy a second property and rent this out to tenants. He is concerned about how much tax he will have to pay when he eventually sells this second property. He is worried that he could be made to pay for the hard work he has put into building a good life for himself.

Overall, participants felt that a confluence of factors had shaped Robert's situation. Participants were mindful of the financial assistance and non-financial support that Robert received from his parents, but also emphasised the individual effort he had put into his own education and career. As detailed in table 3, only three participants experiencing deprivation across both countries felt that Robert was entirely responsible for his situation with the vast majority more inclined to recognise the opportunities he had been afforded. These participants suggested that such opportunities had not only had a significant impact on his material position, but also his opportunity to exercise agency in determining his income and work-life balance. Whilst they thought that Robert may have made the most of his opportunities, they nonetheless felt he was given many opportunities that others were not and as result he was seen as less responsible:

Obviously he was privileged, many people don't get help like that...

It's always an advantage when you come from a very good social setting or a privileged social environment. (Liam, Deprived, UK)

He came from a nice background. His parents looked after him. Well

I suppose he is a responsible person. He got a lot of help though... I think maybe it's not really his own doing... (Brad, Deprived, NZ)

Reflecting on the disparity in opportunities available to different people, a substantial number of deprived participants drew on fatalistic explanations of Robert's situation suggesting he was lucky to 'be born clever' and 'have parents like that'. Some went further to suggest life outcomes and opportunities were, in some respects, preordained. These participants felt that one's ability to take control over their life circumstances, opportunities and material environment was already determined by birth – affected by factors that extended well beyond their agentive capacities:

Yeah, I think it's luck. It's just a struggle and it's chance...

[Interviewer: Do you think it's fair then?] No, because that's what's planned out for him and everybody's got their own destination.

[Interviewer: Do you think it's possible to change that destination?]

Not really. (Jackie, Deprived, UK)

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A small minority of affluent participants recognised the inequality of opportunity presented across the vignettes, and therefore felt that Robert was less responsible for his situation. However, on the whole, affluent participants were much more inclined to ascribe personal responsibility to Robert for his ‘good grades’ and ‘professional achievements’. Whilst some acknowledged fatalistic and structural factors affecting Robert’s opportunities and agency, around two thirds emphasised his entitlement to and ownership of ‘his success’:

Oh he seems to be very responsible. You know he seems to have his head screwed on the right way. (Owen, Affluent, UK)

From this, it is clear that deprived and affluent participants differed dramatically in their intuitions about the structural determinants of Robert’s life opportunities, actions and subsequent socio-economic position. In this instance, attitudinal divergence between affluent and deprived participants was notably more pronounced in New Zealand than it was in the UK. This is perhaps best explained by the popular self-image of the former as an egalitarian social settlement, which appears to percolate through public consciousness. As a settler society, a liberal meritocratic ideal centred on equality of opportunity has tended to dominate welfare politics in New Zealand where material inequality and difference in social location are principally explained according to individual effort (Sharpe 1997). Contrary to tempering descriptive individualism, this particular interpretation and purported legacy of (liberal) egalitarianism was drawn

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upon by affluent participants to justify inequalities of resource and outcome by affirming that *all* citizens are afforded the same opportunities. Conversely, the disjuncture between New Zealand's ostensive egalitarianism and the lived realities of deprivation for low-income participants, appeared to sensitise them to the structural determinants of socio-economic stratification:

I recognise there are social rights, especially compared to some countries but I don't think they're sufficient to kind of ensure equality... they're not sufficient to avoid poverty and hardship and there's not enough opportunity to succeed and to take a situation of deprivation... to take one's own situation and escape out of it. (Tim, Deprived, NZ)

Participants were asked whether it was fair that Robert earned more than James and were told that both individuals worked hard and for the same number of hours per week. Those experiencing deprivation were more likely to interpret the question as a suggestion that the gap between their incomes was too great or that James was not paid enough. Over half of participants experiencing deprivation felt it was fair whilst the other half did not. By comparison, all but two affluent participants felt that it was fair that Robert earned more than James. Affluent participants were much more likely to interpret the question as a suggestion that Robert and James should receive the same pay for the work that they do. These participants were strongly opposed to such an idea and felt that there were many

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problems associated with such a ‘socialist idea’ or ‘communist situation’. Such a prospect appeared to threaten the meritocratic ideals and economic individualism advanced to varying degrees in New Zealand and the UK. Despite not having information about his profession, a substantial number of participants believed that Robert’s employment contributed more to society and involved more ‘sophisticated knowledge, understanding or work’. Affluent participants tended to say Robert’s work was categorically valuable, whereas deprived participants tended to suggest that it was potentially more socially, and therefore economically, valued. This distinction in understanding ‘value’, points to a differential appreciation of the structural determinants of one’s socio-economic position and consequent actions.

Yes I think it’s fair. I don’t think we can live in a society where everyone gets paid the same. Erm. Sometimes it’s down to people’s... erm... ambitions and drive but there’s also the issue of people’s abilities... So you could say that well... erm... James is less capable so why should he be penalised for that? But I think we can’t go back... we can’t have a communist state where everyone gets paid the same. (Rachel, Affluent, UK)

Many affluent participants oscillated between pointing to Robert’s good fortune and emphasising his hard work to justify the capital(s) he had accumulated. Intelligence was proposed by some as a legitimate determinant of

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pay differentials. Some felt that any system that tried to countervail this was running against the 'natural order'. In this instance, it appears affluent individuals were less inclined to suggest there was a somewhat arbitrary distribution of natural abilities and talents. As a result, they were also less willing to approve of mechanisms that attempted to counteract this. These individuals were less inclined to see closing the gap between the rich and poor as desirable or feasible and were more likely to accept and justify structural inequalities in their current form.

Discussion and Conclusion

Attitudinal research has tended to suggest that welfare attitudes differing according to material circumstance are principally explained by economic individualism and self-interest. However, the results outlined above suggest that lived experiences of inequality substantially affect stated knowledge about the relationship between structure and agency, which in turn, informs attitude formation and potentially the construction of material interests. Importantly though, just as life circumstances are changeable, it appears that attitudes are malleable in conjunction. One affluent participant interviewed for this study noted how his own life experiences had informed his attitudes towards welfare, inequality and individual responsibility:

The possible assumption, is that somebody with a fairly reasonable employment history, hasn't been involved in that situation. I have

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been made redundant three times. I have, in periods of redundancy, stacked supermarket shelves, worked as a market trader type... So I've got a fairly good understanding, both from personal experience, and, as I say, from talking to other people in those situations, of what are the chances of this world... (Mark, Affluent, UK)

Affluent participants that had sustained interaction with or experience of structural constraints were much more likely to recognise the factors that might mitigate an individual's responsibility for their situation or actions. Knowledge accumulation then, appears to mediate awareness of and appreciation of the relationship between structure and agency.

Mills (1999 [1956]: 322) argues that the 'narrow' daily milieu the general public operates within alienates them from 'the whole structure in which they live and their place within it' (Mills 1999 [1956]: 322). Mills (1999 [1956]) claims that all those outside the military, economic and political elite are similarly affected and that this 'narrow' daily milieu obscures individuals from the socio-structural dynamics that shape behaviour and circumstance. However, the findings of this study suggest that those most perniciously affected by social structures, exhibit a more 'vivid awareness of the relationship between experience and the wider society' (Mills 1959: 3). The phenomenology of deprivation appears to engender exposure to and thus awareness of the exogenous factors that impinge on individual agency. As a result, those living in relative deprivation appear to factor

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‘the whole structure in which they live and their place within it’ in their attitudes towards welfare, inequality and redistribution (Mills 1999 [1956]: 322). By contrast, affluent participants were less likely to advance explanations of inequality that account for ‘the interplay of individuals and society, of biography and history of self and world...’ (Mills 1959: 3). Specifically, they were less likely to acknowledge, the structuration of outcome, agency and opportunity that bears on the character and prevalence of social (dis-) advantage. In this regard, affluent participants exhibited a relatively poor sociological imagination and were thus more likely to emphasise the resilience of individual agency in the face of structural constraints.

Despite variation in the institutional contexts and vignettes used to facilitate applied discussion about welfare and inequality, a high degree of consistency was observable in the attitudinal divergence of poor and rich participants interviewed for this study. Affluent individuals were much more likely to individualise the causes of socio-material position compared to those confronted with relative deprivation in both New Zealand and the UK. These findings support evidence to suggest that lower class and upper class individuals tend to exhibit contextualist and solipsistic cognitive patterns respectively (Kraus et al. 2012). Those occupying a lower socioeconomic position are more likely to emphasise the mutual interdependencies and vulnerabilities intrinsic to daily life. Whereas those in a higher socioeconomic position tend to exhibit an elevated sense of control

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over their own situation and others (Kraus et al. 2012: 562). This appears to inform how affluent individuals view the role of individual responsibility within the context of welfare provision and socioeconomic inequality.

As illustrated above, those in a position of relative affluence appear more inclined to consider individual agency and rationality as logically prior to the social structure. As a result, they are also more likely to essentialise both the causes and effects of economic re-structuring and socio-material position. This serves to reduce support for redistributive policies and encourages support for a greater level of welfare paternalism for low-income groups. It would seem, then, that attitudinal differences relating to welfare, inequality and redistribution are shaped by material position but it is not clear that this is entirely structured by material interest. The rich, as much as the poor, will support a socio-economic and welfare system that reflects the way they believe the world works but also one from which they feel they have gained most benefit (Khan 2015). In this regard, the evidence presented in this paper suggests that the respectively received and enacted (dis-) advantages of the general public inculcate their particular social view of the world, including their own position within it.

However, beyond the role of knowledge accumulation in attitude formation, distinctive narratives of self-justification may equally underpin attitudinal divergence towards welfare and inequality. That is, an individual's ostensible lack (or indeed possession) of a social imagination may reflect system legitimisation

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techniques drawn upon to justify their own social location, and in certain instances, inequities of resource and outcome (cf. Jost and Major 2001). For those advantageously positioned within (and by) structural inequality, individualised explanations of social difference will tend to characterise the prevailing relations within and between social groups as functionally just and fairly distributed according to individual effort. In defending the legitimacy of social fragmentation, including their own position and role within such phenomena, upper-class individuals are more likely to say their affluence and achievements are a product of their own doing (Kraus and Keltner, 2013). Conversely, those in a position of relative deprivation tend to advance accounts emphasizing the structural determinants of inequality to avoid and apportion blame for their socio-economic marginality (Kraus and Keltner, 2013).

Interestingly though, even those perniciously affected by the existing socio-economic order are implicated in system legitimation processes that seek to make sense of structural inequality and social difference. Firstly, by deploying discursive devices that justify inequalities of outcome through endorsement of system justification ideologies such as liberal meritocratic ideals (Costa-Lopes et al 2013). And secondly, by disassociating oneself from the particular category of social disadvantage under consideration, and individualizing the circumstance of ‘others’ in order to ‘protect the self from social and psychic blame’ (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013: 301).

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These distinctive methods of self-categorisation and system-justification observable across the income distribution demonstrate the compound cognitive processes comprised in material subjectivity and attitudinal divergence. Lived experiences of relative deprivation and affluence engender distinct understandings, and explanations, of social stratification. In the case of those living in relative deprivation, a sociological imagination is both more readily conceived and keenly employed in order to make sense of intergroup relations and socio-material marginality. By contrast, a less lively sociological imagination is observable amongst those living in relative affluence. It remains unclear whether, and under what circumstances, system-legitimation motivates the relatively poor sociological imagination exhibited by the rich. However, in light of the evidence presented here, these are likely to be self-reinforcing which is particularly pertinent in light of rising poverty, structural inequality and residential segregation across liberal welfare regimes (Fry and Taylor 2012, OECD. 2016).

Increasing social and economic polarisation between the rich and poor is leading to marked disparities in exposure to social risks and environments. As affluent individuals become increasingly divorced from the precarities of daily life, their ability or willingness to identify with the circumstances, experiences and behaviours of others becomes limited. Their relatively poor sociological imagination cultivates a worldview that justifies substantial inequalities of resource, outcome and opportunity.

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The attitudes of affluent individuals are particularly important if we are to fully understand the processes by which economic stratification and anti-welfare populism attains social and thus institutional legitimacy. Without greater knowledge of and exposure to the processes that lead to (dis-) advantage, affluent individuals are more inclined to advance individualistic explanations of, and solutions to, structural inequality. In turn, system-legitimation ideologies motivating how one's sociological imagination is deployed can operate as a 'key mechanism underlying the perpetuation of inequality' (Costa-Lopes et al 2013: 232).

This is particularly problematic given the institutional dominance of economic elites, who are able to exert a disproportionate amount of political power over the existing distribution of resources (Bonica et al. 2013). If political solutions to structural inequality favour the worldviews and system-legitimation ideologies of the rich, we may reasonably anticipate the development of social policies and redistributive mechanisms that fail to effectively address its causes. Having said that, increased socio-material insecurity experienced by median voters in the 'squeezed' middle, may also serve to increase exposure to and thus awareness of structural inequality. An emerging line of enquiry then is to establish how interceding factors underpinning materialist explanations of attitudinal divergence, might feature in a movement to galvanise popular support for welfare and redistribution across the entirety of the income distribution.

Notes

ⁱ As descriptors, these terms refer to the compound selection criteria employed for this study and are not used in a way that seeks to characterise either group as a static or homogenous entity.

ⁱⁱ Of course, the extent to which the popular self-image of New Zealand as an egalitarian nation is an accurate reflection of its past or present is greatly contested (Nolan 2007). Equally, it is not clear that this egalitarian reputation mediates public attitudes as a guiding principle towards explaining inequality or justifying redistributive welfare (Humpage 2016). In reality, a liberal meritocratic principle (as opposed to practice) of ‘equality of opportunity’ has tended to dominate New Zealand’s welfare politics (Sharpe 1997).

ⁱⁱⁱ Due to the number of participants interviewed for this study, it has not been possible to disaggregate and compare how other socio-demographic characteristics affect welfare attitudes and policy preferences. However, there is evidence to suggest that women and minority ethnic groups are more likely to offer a collectivist reading of society and support redistributive policies (Alesina and Giuliano 2009, Kearns et al. 2014). This perhaps demonstrates how intersecting inequalities of resource and social difference are experienced in unique ways that serve to engender stronger structural explanations of (dis-) advantage amongst those most perniciously affected by social fragmentation.

^{iv} It is beyond the remit of this paper to explore lay accounts of work, its multiple value sets, and the gendered inequalities that are reproduced therein. However, it should nonetheless be noted that deviation from private patriarchal citizenship appeared to incur a significant ‘citizenship penalty’ for those interviewed, that was manifest in but also exacerbated by material inequalities.

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Tables

Table 1: Principal Explanation of Socio-Economic Circumstance for Becky

Income Group	Individual	Structural	Fatalistic	Ambivalent
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UK	Deprived (15)	2	7	5	1
	Affluent (13)	8	1	3	1
New Zealand	Deprived (13)	1	7	3	2
	Affluent (9)	5	2	2	-
All	Deprived (28)	3 (10.7%)	14 (50%)	8 (28.6%)	3 (10.7%)
	Affluent (22)	13 (59.1%)	3 (13.6%)	5 (22.7%)	1 (4.5%)

Table 2: Principal Explanation of Socio-Economic Circumstance for James

	Income Group	Individual	Structural	Fatalistic	Ambivalent
UK	Deprived (15)	3	9	2	1
	Affluent (13)	9	2	-	2
New Zealand	Deprived (13)	3	8	1	1
	Affluent (9)	6	3	-	-
All	Deprived (28)	6 (21.4%)	17 (60.7%)	3 (10.7%)	2 (7.1%)
	Affluent (22)	15 (68.2%)	5 (22.7%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (9.1%)

Table 3: Principal Explanation of Socio-Economic Circumstance for Robert

	Income Group	Individual	Structural	Fatalistic	Ambivalent
UK	Deprived (15)	2	6	5	2
	Affluent (13)	7	3	2	1
New Zealand	Deprived (13)	1	7	4	1
	Affluent (9)	7	1	1	-
All	Deprived (28)	3 (10.7%)	13 (46.4%)	9 (32.1%)	3 (10.7%)
	Affluent (22)	14 (63.6%)	4 (18.2%)	3 (13.6%)	1 (4.5%)