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Abstract:

There is widespread evidence that those claiming out-of-work benefits experience different types of 'benefit stigma' in the UK, with the focus largely falling on conventionally disadvantaged welfare users. In contrast, graduates experiences of 'benefits stigma' go unnoticed because of their relative advantage within the labour market. Yet, an increase in precarity across the labour market has unsettled graduate transitions and is re-shaping their relationships with out-of-work benefits. Against this backdrop, this article explores how graduates respond to different aspects of 'benefit stigma'. It posits that challenging stigmatizing narratives associated with out-of-benefits – is integral to support graduates furthest away from knowledge-based economy jobs.

Introduction

Recent years have seen many young people affected by new forms of job insecurity (Gregg and Gardiner, 2015). This has impacted all groups of young people (Bell and Benchflower, 2011), including graduates, where there has been increases in precarious types of transition to the labour market following the 2008-9 financial crisis (MacDonald, 2011). These include increased experiences of 'temping' (Cartwright, 2015), growing normalisation of unpaid and insecure internships (Percival and Hesmondhalgh, 2014), and the proliferation of 'zero-hour' contracts (Pennycook et al, 2013). Furthermore, the subsequent years after the 2008-9 financial crises also saw increases together in graduate unemployment and underemployment (ONS, 2011: 1; ONS, 2013: 13), consequently undermining traditional 'smooth' pathways to the graduate labour market. Now, there has been further change – graduate unemployment has improved but there is continuing decline in high skilled jobs for graduates to take (DBIS, 2015). More broadly, youth underemployment continues to be a social problem that youth policy has not yet formulated a response for (Hadjivassiliou et al, 2015). The fragmentation in the nature of graduate transitions warrants closer examination, as many are shaped by experiences of labour market insecurity (MacDonald, 2011) and some by benefit stigma – particularly those strongly impacted by unemployment and underemployment (Formby, 2014). Also, due to their assumed integration with the knowledge-based economy (KBE) (Tomlinson, 2008; Brooks and Everett, 2009), we lack knowledge about the nature of precarious, graduate 'missing middle' transitions – these are more 'ordinary' pathways to the labour market that have been less studied in recent years (Roberts, 2011; MacDonald, 2011). Nor do we know how subjective experiences of labour market insecurity tally with aspirations of graduate level employment over prolonged periods of time – and how such differences are reconciled.

This can be done through examining the role of 'stigma' in precarious graduate transitions – narrowing on experiences of labour market insecurity, and the claiming of out-of-work benefits. The narrative of 'scroungers' has become increasingly powerful in the UK (Pemberton et al, 2016). It explicitly decrees social positioning that is weighted towards labour market participation – categorising those not in paid employment as 'shirkers' and those that are, as 'strivers' – reorienting the traditional 'deserving/underserving' debate towards problematising those in receipt of 'welfare' (Patrick, 2016). As such, different variants of 'stigma' hold considerable authority for out-of-work claimants (Baumberg et al, 2012; Baumberg, 2016). Research suggests that this is maintained through both defensive forms of citizenship via 'othering' and the internalisation of personal 'scrounger' based narratives (Patrick, 2016).

The article will add a new dimension to traditional debates about benefits stigma and the consequences of precarity through focussing on a group that is often overlooked in contemporary social policy debate, due to their assumed success as 'graduates' (Antonucci, 2016: 169). Indeed, theoretical and empirical work on benefits stigma has largely focussed on how this is experienced by and targeted at already marginalised groups within the labour market/welfare system. Far less attention has been given to graduates who, historically associated with smooth transitions, are assumed to have minimal need for out-of-work benefits or to access JobCentre Plus services – a service that administers working age benefits and provides employment support in the UK (HoC, 2014: 5). This article seeks to contribute to this gap, examining the role of 'stigma' in graduate transitions – focussing primarily on 'missing middle', precarious transitions of graduates (MacDonald, 2011). Drawing on a recent qualitative study of graduate transitions and policy responses post-financial crisis, it examines the degree to which 'benefit stigma' holds parity with out-of-work graduate benefit claimants in their choices to approach or not approach Jobcentre Plus (JCP). It shows that graduates exhibit a range of responses to different aspects of 'benefit stigma' – often framed through a discourse of employability that shapes overall choice in graduate transitions.

A 'Missing Middle' in the Knowledge-based Economy?

Substantial increases in the number of graduates entering the labour market have continued in the United Kingdom (DBIS, 2013: 1), despite both increases rising insecurity in graduate transitions as well as increases in tuition fees (Bolton, 2015). Much of this impetus is due to the continued dominance of the KBE rationale that underpinned various governments in the 1990s and 2000s. Harris (2002: 21) defines the KBE as the "dominant post-industrial economic development paradigm that emerged in the 1980s, with an emphasis on the role of knowledge creation and distribution as the primary driver in the process of economic growth". It is a concept that has become acutely important for youth transitions – shifting both policy emphasis towards integration with forms of employment associated with the post-industrial economy (Tomlinson, 2012), and the subjective expectations of young people to achieve further and

higher qualifications wherever possible (Brooks and Everett, 2009; Tomlinson, 2008). Furthermore, the higher education sector expanded rapidly due to the 1992 Higher Education Act, which placed former polytechnics and traditional universities together in the same sector (Deem, 2004). As a result, the "development of mass higher education has intersected with the shift towards a so-called knowledge-driven or post-industrial economy" (Tomlinson, 2007: 285). Even so, graduate transitions to the labour market have mostly remained positive – graduates continued to find good employment quickly until the mid-2000s (Purcell and Elias, 2004). However, critics suggest an over-supply of graduates in the UK labour market has been created (Brown and Hesketh, 2004), and that there is greater demand for low skilled jobs from employers than there are from the 'high skill' employers in the overall UK economy (Keep and Mayhew, 2010).

This has resulted in an acceleration of 'precarity' in graduate transitions. Arguably, this represents a different type of transition from more 'successful' pathways associated with high levels of graduate employment pre-financial crash (Purcell et al, 2012), yet – in truth – precarity preceded the current youth crisis (Allen, 2016), as transitions began to change due to the growing supply of graduates entering the labour market (Purcell and Elias, 2004: 15). In the modern graduate labour market it remains "achieving success, in the form of a graduate job, can be elusive" (MacDonald, 2011: 433). More broadly, this is further complicated through the re-positioning of youth transitions. 'Slow-tracked' transitions through education and then onto work – traditionally coupled with middle-class trajectory – may not entirely be representative of successful transitions when combined with prolonged experiences of precarity. Thus, some precarious graduate transitions may be actually be closer to 'fast-tracked' trajectories often associated with working-class youth (MacDonald, 2011). Regardless, marginalisation from the benefits of the knowledge-based economy has been long established in youth transitions research as problematic for divergent groups of young people (MacDowell, 2012; Shildrick et al, 2012; Formby, 2014). Arguably, in the transition to a knowledge-based economy, a growing 'missing middle' of youth is emerging – and in the case of precarious graduate transitions, these are masked by the assumption that all graduates should – and do – achieve social and economic returns in accordance with their attendance in higher education (Harris, 2001).

The Presence of 'Stigma' in Graduate Transitions

It may seem strange to associate transitions to the knowledge-based economy of graduates with discussions of 'stigma'. Graduates – historically – have had positive returns from their undergraduate degrees (Purcell and Elias, 2004), whereas the focus on 'stigma' relates to the 'spoiling' of identity through 'discredited attributes' (Goffman, 1963: 3). Studies of 'stigma' in recent years have included its impacts on involuntary unemployment (Guintoli et al, 2013: 26), and the processes by which policy mechanisms (as well as the media) 'shame' those claiming out-of-work benefits (Walker, 2014; Tyler, 2013). For graduates who have internalised discourses of employability in the knowledge-based

economy (Formby, 2014; Antonucci, 2016: 169), encountering 'precarity' spoils identity because of the "undesired differentness" (Goffman, 1963: 14) that result from experiencing "deeply discredited" attributes (Goffman, 1963: 3) – such as extended periods of worklessness and insecure employment, or the claiming of out-of-work benefits. These experiences of stigma add further demarcation from successful transitions to the graduate labour market that graduates aspire towards.

There is an established literature that can be used to develop frameworks to explore the roles of stigma(s) in precarious, graduate transitions. Baumberg et al (2012; 2016) identify several aspects of stigma in relation to claiming benefits – these include: the notion of 'personal' stigma – when there is an internal devaluation of identity whilst claiming benefits (Baumberg, 2016), 'social' stigma where there is an external devaluation of identity from others as a result of claiming benefits as this confers "lower social status" (Baumberg et al, 2012: 5), and lastly, 'claims stigma', arising through the processes that occurs when claimants apply for benefits (Baumberg, 2016). These are all important for graduate transitions to different degrees (this will be explored in-depth with the qualitative data of this article), however, it must be taken into account that there is difficulty in separating different aspects of benefit stigma due to the tendency of these factors to overlap as well as their internal and external dimensions (Patrick, 2016: 3). Furthermore, other concepts such as 'shame' provide a further complexity in that individual's may feel shame in reference to their own position, whilst also being shamed externally (Chase and Walker, 2013: 739). This may be of relevance in the case of graduate, precarious transitions – as they are responding to positions they did not expect to find themselves in – intensifying different aspects of their benefit stigma.

The Graduate Transitions Study

Extant literature on graduate transitions tends to fall into two main camps: first, focus on qualitative analysis of student's expectations of the graduate labour market and how they seek to increase their employability whilst studying – for example, through engaging in cv-boosting activities such as internships (Bathmaker et al, 2013; Allen, 2016). Secondly, there are large-scale surveys of graduate transitions, generating a quantitative picture of graduate destinations (Purcell et al, 2012). In contrast, there is a paucity of qualitative enquiries that examine graduates subjective experiences of the labour market after graduation (see Antonucci 2016 for a recent comparative analysis). For this reason, this study employs a qualitative methodology that draws on 26 interviews with recent graduates from universities of varying 'market' positions obtained in 2011-13. This allows for the capturing of emergent themes (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) in relation to graduate transitions such as experiences of work, labour market insecurity and Jobcentre Plus engagement. The sample includes some graduates that did not engage with Jobcentre Plus and therefore provides opportunities to examine how 'benefit' stigma affects graduates' propensity to engage with such provision. The research design allows for an examination of concepts in graduate transitions that have been difficult to explore previously, such as

underemployment (Morley, 2001: 133). Overall, a qualitative approach helps frame how young people are "negotiating new social conditions" (Brooks and Everett, 2009: 336), which is salient when investigating 'missing middle' youth transitions.

A polarised sampling strategy was used to capture data from one Russell Group and two post-92 higher education institutions selected in reference to the Complete University Guide 2014, with one Russell Group University in the upper 20, and two post-92 universities positioned between 80 and 110 (CUG, 2014). Most of the interviewees had graduated between the years after 2008 – 2012, and the age range of the study varied from 21 – 29 (although almost all research participants were at the age of 21/22 on graduation). Access was obtained through the placement of adverts on university forum groups maintained by University career services on the 'Linkedin' website – a web resource for professionals that seek to network and obtain employment (Linkedin, 2017). A purposeful sampling strategy was put forward to obtain participants that had experiences of employment (including graduate employment), worklessness, underemployment and experience (and inexperience) of Jobcentre Plus. Participants received a £10 amazon gift voucher to express thanks for taking part. Although there is evident variance in the characteristics of this sample, it was necessary as the nature of graduate transitions has broadened (Purcell and Elias, 2004). Furthermore, participants needed to have 'relevant' experience of graduate transitions to take part – recent graduates were those that had been in the labour market for 5 years or less. All interviews were undertaken on telephone using recording equipment, with most interviews lasting between 40 minutes to an hour.

Graduate Transitions: Avoiding 'Stigma'

This section explores graduates perception of 'benefit stigma' in the labour market in how Jobcentre Plus was approached. Roughly half of the sample had some experience with engaging with Jobcentre Plus provision – and these were all missing middle, precarious transitions (these experiences are explored in the next section). The other half of the sample did not engage as they had either found work in other ways, or explicitly delegitimated Jobcentre Plus engagement by graduates through the application of 'social' and 'personal' notions of stigma. This section focuses on effect of these, demonstrating how stigma contributes to deterring Jobcentre Plus engagement by prospective graduates. These participants often suggested that Jobcentre Plus should not include graduates within its purview of social provision:

> R4: …If you ask any of my friends if they had been to the Jobcentre who had graduated. They'd be like…'no, why would I go there? That is for low-paid, low skilled workers'. Graduates, we should be on specialist recruitment sites where they are looking for a higher calibre of people. (R4, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2009).

Furthermore, Jobcentre Plus was perceived as demeaning. Requiring the service did not correspond with the labour market expectations associated with obtaining an undergraduate degree. Indeed, the

extent to which others are perceived to judge such behaviour as shameful or conferring to a lower social status (Baumburg et al, 2012: 5) formed the basis of their social comparisons:

> R11: I don't think I would, no. I'd find it quite embarrassing to go. Especially if I saw someone from my year in my school. And I went in there and they obviously saw me. You know, that I've gone to university and got a degree and all of a sudden I'm in a job centre. I think that they'd think, 'oh I'm not doing too bad'. So I'd find it quite embarrassing (R11, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2011).

Arguably, these graduates are echoing societal perceptions of 'othering' attached to welfare-to-work policy (Shildrick et al, 2012). As noted, these value judgements on welfare-to-work provision are linked to historical notions that the people that engage such provision form part of the 'undeserving poor' (Lister, 2004: 103). Thus Jobcentre Plus becomes associated with 'benefit stigma'. Yet, in reference to graduate transitions, there may be an intensification of these societal beliefs due to graduates focus on establishing success within a knowledge-based economy:

> R26: Because of course, you sort of look at some of the people that go to Jobcentres and think, 'I'm not like that. I've got an academic degree I've worked hard for'. I don't want to be classed in the same...as these people. I think there is a bit of an embarrassing factor and I think there's a lot of pride there, because you feel you've worked hard to get where you are, also you're almost taking a step back by accepting the help and accepting the Jobseeker's (R26, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2012).

The graduates that did not engage with Jobcentre Plus also identified with more 'personal' notions of stigma in regards to internal notions of 'self-worth'. This is somewhat different from other empirical research that find personal stigma attached to acts of 'signing on' to be less prevalent (Baumburg et al, 2012: 16). This may be because graduates frame out-of-work benefits in terms of their subjective transitions to the graduate labour market and the forms of employment that they are encouraged to expect upon graduation having 'worked hard' for this   Subjective accounts of 'pride' were key:

> R11: For me it's more of a pride thing. I wouldn't – I know I could always get a job in a bar. I know I could go to and get a job. I know I could do that. 'If I could stoop lower than what I'm worth', I would go to those type of jobs rather than sign up to the dole (R11, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2011).

This articulation of pride is indicative of how the perception of job-search behaviour alters as a result of obtaining a degree. Young people are increasingly encouraged to feel a sense of personal responsibility for their employability, and thus are likely to individualise experiences of failure in their transition to employment (Hardgrove et al, 2015: 1060). Further, some graduates draw on notions of 'self-worth' within their career decision-making, essentially making a value judgement about the types of employment they are willing to do (this is despite the limitations of the 'knowledge-based economy' orthodoxy which means that opportunities in the labour market are limited). Jobcentre Plus – which relies on punitive forms of conditionality to reach policy goals (Shildrick et al, 2012), and can be

restrictive in terms of employment outcomes – is not perceived as conducive in assisting graduates in reaching these particular aims.

The 'Institutional Stigma' of Jobcentre Plus in Graduate Transitions

In terms of 'institutional stigma' associated with the process of claiming benefits, there is extensive evidence that is this prevalent in the UK (Pemberton et al, 2016; Shildrick et al, 2012). This can result in the exclusion of Jobcentre Plus as a prospective job-search method (Gush et al., 2015: 13). Yet, conceptions of stigma(s) are complex. Garthwaite (2014: 9) notes that long-term incapacity benefit recipients develop positive notions of identity linked to familial responsibilities and through the recasting of illness and disability in a positive way, and yet simultaneously acknowledge 'stigmatic' experiences of the benefits system.

For graduates in this study that did engage with Jobcentre Plus, 'institutionalised stigma' was similarly dominant. Yet, these perspectives were often contextualised in terms of the specific limitations of Jobcentre Plus in meeting specific needs. As many young people's initial experiences of the labour market involve various forms of flexible working arrangements – such as temping, internships, unemployment and underemployment (Gregg and Gardiner, 2015) – graduates prefer employment support that helps find more sustainable and long-term work (Formby, 2014). Against this backdrop, 'work-first' policy – when "access to benefits becomes conditional on tougher work and work search requirements" (Etherington and Daguerre, 2015: 5) – is problematic for graduates, as it provides a holistic framework on which all support and interactions with frontline staff is then based:

> R33: Yeah. In between temping – I had like four major temping jobs – and in between I was signed on for two or three weeks. The Jobcentre was useless. They asked if I was looking for work, to 'prove it'…and if you are not going to take this rubbish job then the benefits stop. I remember thinking 'hang on...I'm not just going to go into a job and then still be looking for a different one constantly' (R33, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

These perceived constraints in Jobcentre Plus provision go some way towards explaining why graduates may experience a form of 'institutionalised stigma'. Arguably, 'stigma' is also heightened for graduates because they often have a particular need to compete successfully in a competitive labour market. Graduates now perceive their degrees as a "basic minimum", the initial steps of a lifetime "obligation to learn and maintain one's marketability" (Brooks and Everett, 2009: 347). For example, enhancing their cv through undertaking internships, training and other activities that can demonstrate their skills and enhance their professional networks, or moving strategically into new jobs to sustain a coherent narrative of career development within a chosen field aligned with their degree (Bathmaker et al, 2013). And yet, graduates perceived Jobcentre Plus as unable to provide them with the opportunities to meet such expectations – both in terms of direct support from frontline staff and the types of employment opportunities provided. The lack of graduate-focussed employment was further problematic as graduate service users tended to avoid employment that did not support career progression:

> R34: It was 3 years ago so I can't remember specific jobs but it was very much administration jobs, secretarial jobs and that sort of thing. There was a couple of assistant manager at supermarket type jobs. I would have probably been prepared to look at those jobs if they had a path of progression. But they were very bottom rung jobs where there was not much chance of advancement and they had quite low salaries (R34, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

Limitations in the 'work-first' approach is also apparent in other forms of 'institutional stigma', especially regarding interactions with Jobcentre Plus front-line staff. Graduates identify these often amount to a sense of being in a 'process' with overly simplified and generic provision. Graduates specify that the surveillance of 'benefits' has now taken precedence in Jobcentre Plus provision, rather than the desired employment support that graduates indicate would be helpful:

> R34: Questions like...'Are you applying for jobs? Have you been to this? What interviews have you had this week?' And for people who need that money...I signed on purely because I thought there could be some worthwhile support and not for the financial gain […] It wasn't that much quality time or engagement spent with people or myself to really try and help them (R34, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

Inherently, many of these concerns occur due to the underlying principle at play in the 'work-first' policy approach – to facilitate employment into flexible labour markets efficiently (Shildrick et al, 2012: 200). The focus on 'precarious' work is specifically problematic for graduates as their experiences of 'institutional stigma' becomes amplified, as they are forced to engage in a transaction whereby obtaining what may well be undesired work (that is not perceived as conducive in their labour market trajectories towards the KBE) becomes necessary to claim out-of-work benefits.

Challenging the 'Benefit Stigma' of Jobcentre Plus?

There are alternative approaches that challenge 'stigmatic' associations that the public hold about claiming benefits – specifically in relation to how people subjectively frame perceptions of 'need' and subsequently legitimise the usage of welfare-to-work services – such as Jobcentre Plus. Throughout the sample, it became clear that those that engaged with Jobcentre Plus had identifiable 'missing middle' transitions that involved substantial labour market insecurity. For many of these graduates, personal and social notions of stigma still applied, but their decision to engage Jobcentre Plus was often dictated by their own needs in the labour market – to attain out-of-work benefits, and find some form of employment advice and support:

> R35: I went to [my local city centre] Jobcentre. I've sort of…been on the machines there. I didn't find it hugely helpful for someone with my qualifications. I only went in there once. I had thought about signing on. I got to a point where I thought 'I'm fed up with this'...You do see those things in the news about benefits. I just thought 'everyone else is doing it – why shouldn't I?' (R35, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2011).

Graduates that had experienced labour insecurity often indicated higher propensity towards the benefits of engaging with Jobcentre Plus. Its acceptability as a viable job search strategy depended on subjective accounts of 'reciprocity' in the claiming of out-of-work benefits. This resulted in graduates engaging

in a trade-off between their own 'needs' – specifically in how adverse labour market insecurity was avoided – and the social penalty associated with benefit stigma (Baumberg, 2016). Furthermore, those that claimed out-of-work benefits through Jobcentre Plus also framed such interactions through notions of 'fairness' and 'deservedness'. In doing so, they explicitly challenged the dominant societal notions of stigma attached to this provision:

> R7: For me, I knew I had already paid tax when I had worked before so I felt entitled to it. So I felt like I deserved it. I think some graduates might not need that £60 per week – I certainly did. I definitely needed it. I didn't come from a family that could afford to put me up whilst I searched for a job […] It is really hard to say, people just can't get over the fact that they see people on benefits as 'chavs', for example. Or they use negative terms like 'bums' or 'people on the dole'... (R7, Russell Group graduate, graduated in 2010).

Benefit stigma was also challenged through the acknowledgement of temporal, individual future trajectory – specifically, the likely transience of their usage of JCP due to their status as graduates and as future workers that would 'pay in' to the system. Essentially, their need for temporary support in the labour market outweighed stigmatic associations (and the social penalty) that some tie to Jobcentre Plus:

> R34: And the point is, this is the brief opportunity for you to get something back, especially considering for the rest of your life, you'll be paying into the system. Obviously, there are many other benefits to paying tax. But you may as well get something back from the system for the short period of time that you need it. But maybe there is a stigma attached to it. It's funny, my cousin who has never been to university and worked in manual labour for most of his career – he could not believe I had signed on – 'you've been to university, what do you need to sign on for?' (R34, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

Lastly, parental influence was noted a key factor when graduates returned to the family home. West et al (2016) suggest that familial cultural norms play a significant part in how parents facilitate support for returning graduates (although their focus is exclusively on more middle class graduates). A similar process occurred in this study whereby 'missing middle' graduates were sometimes caught between different sets of values regarding their job-search strategy and financial support. On the one hand, there was an intention to chase high-quality graduate employment outcomes – in order to stay on course with knowledge-based economy expectations (Brooks and Everett, 2009) – and on the other hand, they were also faced with the values and expectations associated with their upbringing. This, in turn, allowed some graduates to legitimise Jobcentre Plus engagement:

> R34: I remember feeling that I was too proud to use the Jobcentre as well. But I think it was my mum who said, *'you've got nothing to lose and you don't have to tell everyone about it'* (R34, post-92 graduate, graduated in 2010).

These findings stress that negotiating decisions to engage with social welfare is difficult for 'missing middle' graduates. In a similar regards to West et al (2016), changing circumstances framed processes of decision making in regards to need (and finance). Yet, in most cases, perceptions of 'benefit stigma'

impacted graduates' propensity to engage (as did assumptions of KBE trajectory) to the extent that graduates were more likely to reject 'take-up' of such provision – positing that some graduates may well go without available support that could enhance their transitions to work. This highlights the importance of challenging stigmatic associations (Patrick, 2016: 13) and could be enabled through highlighting the importance of such services to different groups of people and by reducing claims stigma as much as possible (Lister, 2015). In the case graduates in this study, it is telling that none were aware of specific policies that had been made available for graduates through Jobcentre Plus in recent years, such as the 'Graduate Talent Pool' (Bourne and Day, 2011) and 'Graduate Success' (Graduate Success, 2017).

Conclusion

Overall, this article suggests that desires to avoid stigma(s) – particularly in regards what can be termed 'benefit stigma' – can significantly shape modern graduate transitions, and hints that there may well be a weak spot in contemporary social policy that impacts graduates with the weakest connection to 'knowledge-based economy' jobs heavily. Such graduates will experience longer trajectories towards the graduate labour market (MacDonald, 2011), and there is potential for Jobcentre Plus to play a more prominent role in supporting graduate transitions. Yet, to do so, narratives of 'benefit stigma' need to be challenged (Patrick, 2016) due to their propensity to shape prospective engagement with social welfare services (Gush et al, 2015).

In the case of graduate transitions, this occurs through notions of 'personal' stigma whereby the result of obtaining undergraduate qualifications become equated to consequent expectations of success in the graduate labour market. In turn, actions such as using Jobcentre Plus, coupled with 'failed' trajectories become stigmatic. Similarly, perceived judgement from other people in the form of 'social stigma' also contributes to the disengagement of JCP services, with some graduates explicitly making social comparisons between their own positions and those they associate with 'benefit stigma' – a process of 'othering' and demarcation occurs. These two stigma(s) stress the extent that graduates internalise discourses around employability (Antonucci, 2016). This article has demonstrated however that there are possibilities for challenging these forms of 'benefit stigma' through alternative approaches – especially in terms of contributions that offset social penalties associated with the take-up of social welfare. These include future tax-based contributions once a job has been obtained (as well as taxes paid previously), and the influence of family and social background. An important aspect to note is the extent to which these forms of 'contribution' are linked to ideas of labour market attachment through paid employment. Thus reflecting a wider "citizenship narrative that privileges paid employment as the primary responsibility of citizenship and neglects other forms of socially valuable contribution" (Patrick, 2016: 13). Furthermore, JCP engagement was often reluctant and complicated by notions of stigma regardless. This is perhaps not surprising when considering the extent of entrenched stigmatic,

societal narratives of welfare (Pemberton et al, 2016) in conjunction with internalised discourses of employability.

Those participants in the study that used Jobcentre Plus found its 'work-first' focus limiting in terms of their transitions to the graduate labour market, often resulting in aspects of 'institutional stigma'. Graduates specifically centred on the need of JCP provision to provide further support to avoid 'precarious' work where possible. This was because prolonged periods of insecure work demoted career trajectories away from the graduate labour market. Thus, for graduates there may be some link between the management of 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963) and the management of profiles for the graduate labour market (Brooks and Everett, 2009). As 'idealised' graduate employment becomes increasingly difficult to ascertain, it is likely that tensions arise when experiences of labour market insecurity are combined with a policy framework that defers to 'work-first' based policy as the dominant solution (Shildrick et al, 2012). This mirrors other empirical work that finds graduates have a poor view on the efficacy of JCP services (McLister, 2012: 24-5). Furthermore, experience of 'benefit stigma' through JCP is also linked to socio-economic positioning and background. Those most likely using it conversely are those that need it the most. This is because there are wider inequalities at play here such as entry to elite universities (Greenbank, 2007), the progress of socially disadvantaged students within higher education (Furlong and Cartmel, 2005), and in regards to accessing the graduate labour market itself (Bathmaker et al, 2013; Gordon, 2013). We need to be critical about applying to expectations of 'success' and 'aspiration' to all graduate transitions as this does not take into account differentiations in types of transition. Failure to do so risks ignoring not only the "demand crisis in the labour market and the struggles faced by the latest cohort over indebted English students" (Antonucci, 2016: 169), but how this likely burdens socially disadvantaged graduates the most.

To conclude, considering the growth in the extent of labour market insecurity of young people (Gregg and Gardiner, 2015) – documented in this article through the experiences of recent graduates that have engaged with JCP since the 2008-9 crisis – further support could yield more positive economic and social outcomes, especially as the current policy reality is more at risk of undermining graduates, rather than supporting them. Yet, to do so, notions of 'benefit stigma' need challenging. The welfare state must find ways of appealing to young people to a greater extent, as a progressive and protective institution – not defined by stigmatic association (Lister, 2004), but by its ability to support those undergoing labour market risk, especially when stable transitions to sustainable employment become harder to obtain. Failure to do so, risks a perception that welfare services are a burdensome extra – to be ignored even by those that are most in need of them.

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