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Introduction to Themed Issue: Exploring 'Welfare' Attitudes and Experiences

John Hudson, Ruth Patrick & Emma Wincup

Exploring the Machine of Welfare Commonsense

In Britain today there is a commonly held view that the majority of the public regard 'welfare' as inherently and inevitably negative and problematic (Hudson & Lunt, 2016; Jensen & Tyler, 2015; Patrick, 2015; Work and Pensions Select Committee, 2015). Negative characterisations of those who rely on out-of-work benefits are reinforced by a powerful combination of political narrative and popular media rhetoric focused on the deficits of individual behaviours. This discourse, with its emphasis on the presumed need for benefit claimants to become responsible, 'hard working', members of society in turn fuels justification for policy interventions that seek to remedy social problems through changing the behaviour of individuals. Those unwilling or unable to do so risk being judged to be irresponsible and 'undeserving'. Jensen (2014) uses the phrase 'machine of welfare commonsense' to capture the emergence of a pervasive, negative depiction of welfare provision and welfare recipients that crowds out and flattens the scope for alternative narratives and understandings of 'welfare' and its place in Britain.

This special issue of the journal provides a timely exploration of these themes, considering the changing shape of attitudes to 'welfare' (Hudson & Lunt; Baumberg Geiger) alongside an examination of how particular groups of claimants experience and respond to these attitudes and their impact on stigma in particular (Garthwaite; Patrick; and, Wincup & Monaghan). We should note at the outset that a challenge in exploring 'welfare' attitudes and experiences is the growing usage of the Americanisation 'welfare'; a term which has itself become part of the pejorative political discourse in the UK. Lister (2011) argues it usage typically implies social assistance for the poor and is tied to the notion of 'dependency' and, as such, 'This American import has not only besmirched the concept of welfare, but also displaced the term 'social security'.' We share this view but, at the same time, note that 'welfare' has become the popular descriptor for social protection, mainstreamed in its usage by politicians, the media and, increasingly, academics (especially outside the UK). This presents a challenge when exploring public attitudes which inevitably reflect mainstream debates and discourse. That we explore attitudes and experiences that extend beyond cash transfers and include rapidly growing non-state 'welfare' provision such as foodbanks means terms such as 'social security' and 'welfare state' do not adequately capture the terrain of the special issues. We therefore follow the somewhat unwieldly convention of placing 'welfare' in inverted commas in order to reflect that while the term captures popular and political understandings of the policy areas we explore, it is a loaded and contested term.

Yet, while growing use of the phrase 'welfare' by politicians captures a change in elite-level discourse, it less clear whether this is connected to changing public understandings and attitudes. The papers in the special issue illustrate the complexity of public attitudes to questions of deservingness and explore what the public see as the appropriate role of state-funded social security and other forms of support. The papers highlight the extent to which claimants themselves are so often involved in reproducing and recirculating negative attitudes towards 'welfare', particularly through a defensive 'othering' which manages stigma by seeking to deflect it onto a different group judged less deserving of state support. They also draw attention to the ways in which the stigma around accessing particular forms of support can have a far-reaching impact on individual identity and may lead to people 'choosing' not to access vital services. The collection also considers how best to rebuild support for social security in the face of what so many describe as 'myths' about the receipt and take up of social security support (particularly Baumberg Geiger; Hudson & Lunt).

Bringing together papers on attitudes to, and experiences of, 'welfare' may seem, to some, a mix of two separate topics. However, we see the two as inextricably linked because 'welfare' attitudes are in part shaped by and tied to experiences of 'welfare' and, *inter alia*, experiences of 'welfare' are shaped by wider attitudes to 'welfare'. In this introductory article we sketch out some of the key themes in the papers which follow. We also take the opportunity to explore some of the wider questions raised by the papers, highlighting potentially fruitful research agendas on 'welfare' attitudes and experiences and on the politics of social policy more generally. We begin by unpacking key debates around attitudes to 'welfare' before considering how and why experiences of welfare need to be researched, and then finally asking whose attitudes need to be the focal point of social policy research. In so doing, we also place the papers in the special issue, which focuses primarily on the UK, into a broader international context.

Unpacking Attitudes to 'Welfare'

Jensen has powerfully argued that a pervasive pejorative discourse around the welfare state 'functions to embed new forms of 'commonsense' about welfare and worklessness' (Jensen, 2014: para 1.2). She highlights the exponential growth in 'Poverty Porn' in particular – television shows that claim to reveal the 'reality' of 'life on benefits – suggesting there is a 'highly editorialized 'debate' between fast media and fast policy [which] recycles skiver/striver rhetoric in a mutually constitutive feedback loop' (Jensen, 2014: para 3.3). There is clearly something new here; reality TV, often combined with social media (Brooker et al, 2015), are new platforms via which representations of the welfare state are produced and consumed.

Yet, while the rise of 'Poverty Porn' has prompted renewed debate about the pervasiveness of pejorative depictions of welfare, whether the rise of programmes such as 'Benefits Street' reflects an increasingly hostile public mood is a moot point. Golding and Middleton's (1982) classic study *Images of Welfare* is cited in four papers in our collection (Baumberg Geiger; Garthwaite; Hudson & Lunt, Wincup and Monaghan). Their book highlighted similar processes at play during the 1970s when tabloid driven 'scroungerphobia' began to feature heavily in political discourse (Deacon, 1978). Hudson & Lunt's paper reflects on continuities in attitudes to welfare. Drawing on historical attitudes to welfare data from the 1940s onwards, they note that pejorative attitudes to welfare existed during the putative 'golden age' of the welfare state too and that aspects of the UK's 'machine of welfare commonsense' have longer historical roots than often imagined.

This echoes arguments made in much of the comparative welfare states literature about 'path dependency' (Pierson, 2004), whereby cross national differences in social policies are said to reflect long term, historically rooted, differences. So, to take the most prominent example in the comparative literature, Esping-Andersen's (1990) claim that the welfare systems of rich countries

fall into three distinct types (the social democratic, liberal and conservative/corporatist regimes) was underpinned by the argument that membership of the different regimes was in large part historically determined. So, for instance, Sweden being an example of his social democratic regime with strong social rights and low inequality and the USA being an example of his liberal regime with weak social rights and high inequality should not be seen as the outcome of current political choices in each country but a reflection of long-term differences in the politics of social policy stretching back many decades and beyond. Long-run cross national differences in social preferences, societal values or culture are seen as key factor in shaping different welfare state paths in many contributions to this field (see Hudson, Jo and Keung, 2015).

Key arguments from the comparative historical institutionalist literature such as these imply that at least some of the pejorative attitudes to welfare found in the UK today are likely to reflect deeply embedded societal values that have persisted over time; strong readings might even argue they in-part reflect deeply embedded cultural norms. If this is so, then not only does this mean that a historical perspective might push us beyond simply pointing the finger at contemporary political actors as the 'cause' of stigma or shame, it also implies some aspects of public attitudes are 'sticky' and may be difficult to shift. A central tactic of many think tanks and campaigning organisations in recent years has been to use 'mythbusting' approaches which attempt to shift public attitudes to welfare through evidence based challenges to flawed but commonly held beliefs about the benefits system. Baumberg Geiger shows that, while it is true that the public have low levels of knowledge of the social security system, myth busting is unlikely to significantly alter attitudes towards the welfare state; as he puts it, a problem underpinning the myth busting approach is 'its assumption that there is a causal link between people's beliefs about the benefits system and their deservingness judgements' (Baumberg Geiger, this volume, p.TBC). Indeed, our values may orientate our view of the evidence more often than evidence will affect our values.

This might seem like, as Baumberg Geiger (this volume, p.TBC) puts it 'a counsel for despair', but he and Hudson & Lunt argue otherwise, for acknowledging the complex, contested, culturally rooted and sometimes confused or contradictory nature of public attitudes to 'welfare' opens alternative ways to approach current debates. Both papers emphasise that 'ambivalence' captures the overall nature of public attitudes to 'welfare' well and stress not only that the current mood features a mix of positive and negative attitudes, but that comparisons of the present day with idealised stereotypes of the past (the 'golden age of the welfare state' in the UK) or of other countries (the more 'solidaristic' Scandinavian countries) simplifies both the degree to which public attitudes in the UK today are negative *and* the degree to which they are or were positive in other times or places. Hudson & Lunt go so far as to suggest that 'nostalgia narratives' have infected some of our contemporary debates about the welfare state, leading to a flawed orthodoxy which approaches social policy questions from the assumption that public attitudes have fundamentally moved against the welfare state in recent decades. Baumberg Geiger demonstrates, similarly, that many hold negative attitudes in Scandinavian countries.

One key observation that flows from this is that is that those looking to interpret attitudes data must account for the nuances and complexities underneath the headline data. Given social policy often deals with complex normative debates about fairness, desert and social justice (van Oorschot, 2000), we should not expect to find simple and uniform patterns of public opinion. Context matters when interpreting such data. But a second key observation is that, at the macro-level, the link between public attitudes and social policy design is often weaker than imagined. In part this is because policy makers too face the difficult challenge of interpreting fuzzy information about public attitudes, but it is also because the policy making process itself is, of course, only partially driven by public demands and societal values, which are important but rarely decisive in shaping policy decisions (cf. Pfau-Effinger, 2005). Indeed, over the period since

the mid-1980s, shifts in the attitudes of MPs towards the welfare state and those of the public are at best very loosely correlated (Defty and Bochel, 2016).

This is not to say that politics, policy and public attitudes are unrelated, but that they are linked in complex ways. Here, another concern at the heart of comparative historical institutionalist debates is pertinent: policy feedback loops. This concerns not so much the role of the media and political discourse in shaping public attitudes but the ways in which the design of social policies themselves might shape our values, perceptions and even interests. As Skocpol and Amenta (1986: 149) famously put it: 'not only does politics create social policies; social policies also create politics. That is, once policies are enacted and implemented, they change the public agendas and patterns of group conflict through which subsequent policy changes occur'. In this vein, Larsen's (2006: 143) detailed analysis of quantitative survey data led him to conclude that 'cross-national differences in the perception of the poor and unemployed are not only a matter of conditions given prior to the building of the modern welfare state [… such as] egalitarian values etc. They are also a matter of the pursued welfare policy'. Echoing classic social policy studies, he suggests, in particular, that the extent to which welfare state institutions divide people into 'them' and 'us' plays a key role in shaping public attitudes to welfare, selective systems being more likely to foster negative attitudes and less likely to foster positive attitudes (cf. van Oorschot, 2006). Drawing on this work Baumberg Geiger notes that a key dividing line between the Scandinavian nations and the rest of Europe is not the extent to which *negative* attitudes to welfare exist, but the degree to which *positive* attitudes do.

Probing Lived Experiences and Institutional Design

It may be, therefore, that it is the manner in which welfare state institutions themselves are designed that is key to understanding how complex and multi-faceted public attitudes to welfare are generated and reproduced. Indeed, while the orthodox narrative is that public support for the welfare state has dissipated, the government's 2015 U-turn over the cuts to tax credit following a clear public backlash offered a timely and public challenge to this view. Significantly, attitudes data underscored that only a minority viewed the proposed cuts as fair, Dahlgreen (2015) polling finding just 28% doing so (with 46% saying unfair and 25% don't know). Papers by Garthwaite, and Patrick both, in different ways, address the issue of how institutional design matters; in order to do so, their papers use qualitative methods, complementing the quantitative survey data presented in the papers by Baumberg Geiger and Hudson & Lunt.

Survey data provides the vital foundation for big picture explorations of welfare state attitudes and is key in terms of allowing us to track broad changes over time and/or to compare differences across countries. However, the major attitudes surveys can struggle to shed light on the complex ways in which institutional design might affect stigma, shame and othering. This suggests the need for additional methodological approaches which can capture the complexity of attitudes and elucidate the influential factors in shaping them. Qualitative research methods, for example, interviews and focus groups, allow us to probe beyond these headline findings, adding depth to the debate through attempting to understand 'the complex and at times contradictory bundle of attitudes that make up 'public opinion'' (Hudson & Lunt, this volume, pTBC). They allow us to appreciate what shapes public attitudes; for example, political attitudes, personal experiences of claiming benefits or other forms of support, or media 'diet'.

Qualitative research can also allow us to explore the lived experiences of 'welfare'. This might include the use of a qualitative longitudinal approach (Patrick) or ethnographic techniques (Garthwaite). The former offers 'welfare' recipients the opportunity to discuss their experiences of, and response to, stigma over time. Patrick's article emphasises the strength of qualitative longitudinal research 'to enable a dynamic picture to emerge of anticipations, experiences and reflections on the ongoing impact(s) of welfare reform' (Patrick, this volume, p.TBC; see also:

Corden and Millar, 2007; Neale et al, 2012). Garthwaite looks at 'welfare' in action, permitting micro-level analysis of how individuals interact with 'welfare' institutions such as foodbanks. Both studies provide an opportunity for 'welfare' recipients' voices to be heard but we should be mindful of other voices which are typically excluded; for example, the voice of those who have been excluded from the system (for example, through sanctioning or due to eligibility criteria) or who have chosen not to access benefits or services (perhaps through fear of being stigmatised for example).

Developing a richer evidence base is not only important for future generations of researchers wishing to explore attitudes to 'welfare' but offers the potential to make a difference to policy and practice. If the nature of support for the welfare state in the UK does not differ radically from that found in countries with more generous systems and if institutional design can affect support through policy feedback loops then one route towards bolstering greater social solidarity here may be to focus, as Baumberg Geiger argues, on making incremental changes allied to a longer-term vision. In searching for ways institutional design affects policy feedback loops, the findings of research on lived experiences of 'welfare' claimants can offer clear ideas for reform. For example, Patrick's study suggests the need to reform the processes associated with benefit receipt which affect how claimants see themselves, imagine they are seen by others, and experience the process of making a claim. Similarly, Garthwaite's research identifies the importance of offering a welcoming physical environment with a non-judgemental and relaxed atmosphere to encourage to food bank users to return if needed.

A further reason research on lived experiences is particularly key in understanding how the design of social policy institutions interacts with attitudes and values is, as Baumberg Geiger notes, public attitudes to 'welfare' as a whole are best characterised by ambivalence which, in turn, is in part a function of the limited knowledge of policy detail most people have. This, itself, is likely in part to be an outcome of the selective nature of much of the UK's welfare state. Van Oorschot's (1997; 2002) detailed study of public attitudes in the Netherlands found that almost half of those surveyed strongly expressed a solidaristic 'affective motive' for making social security contributions, which he in part attributed to the fact that around 9 in 10 in respondents had either recently claimed benefits, were doing so, expected to do so soon, or were living with a family member in receipt of benefits (van Oorschot, 1997). The wide reach of the Dutch system – with the vast majority of people having some personal or family experience of claiming – was important in underpinning solidaristic values.

The increasingly targeted nature of the UK's social security system weakens this feedback loop between personal experience and social values. It also means knowledge of how stigma and shame are embedded in many welfare state institutions may be limited amongst much of the public, this lack of knowledge in turn contributing to public ambivalence around these issues. This provides an added reason for detailed research on lived experiences of 'welfare'; to capture and communicate the scale and impact of stigma and shame. There are strong arguments for, and great potential in, drawing on participatory research approaches here, supporting and enabling 'welfare' recipients to take responsibility for designing the study, collecting and analysing data, disseminating the findings and reflecting upon their implications for policy and practice (Bennet and Roberts, 2004; Banks et al, 2013). Well-designed and innovatively communicated studies of lived experiences can offer an evidence-based challenge to the 'machine of welfare commonsense'. Moreover, social media offer new opportunities to disseminate such outputs; Brooker et al's (2015) analysis of 124,008 tweets tagged #benefitsstreet – all posted over the course of three weeks of the first series of the TV programme of the same name - found a large proportion used links to 'mediatized evidence' to counter the narratives being presented in the programme. Indeed, they suggested some 25% of tweets carried weblinks to an external data source during the peak viewing period, rising to 50% of tweets in the 'off-peak' period between the main showing of each weekly episode.

Though social media opens new avenues for debate, observation of often heated and polarised social media exchanges such as those around #benefitsstreet can provide a misleading view of wider public opinion. As Baumberg Geiger notes, survey data suggest public knowledge of the benefits system is often rather modest and that public attitudes to 'welfare' are often best characterised as ambivalent. This low degree of awareness and large degree of ambivalence can help to explain why successive governments have been able to implement far-reaching social policy reforms. Whilst it would be misleading to downplay the controversial nature of some of the changes, for example, the introduction of the 'bedroom tax' for housing benefit claimants living in social housing judged to be under-occupied, other reforms, for example, a shift away from universal child benefit have attracted relatively little public attention. To elaborate further, the focus of criticism to changes to child benefit tended to be on the mechanism deployed for means-testing (i.e. focusing on the highest earner in a household rather than household income) rather than the general principle of moving away from a universal system. Interestingly in the case of the 'bedroom tax', polling data suggests initially sympathetic public attitudes towards the policy became more hostile once the policy was implemented and awareness of its consequences became more widespread; YouGov polling in the month before implementation (March 2013) found 49% in support and 38% in opposition, but subsequent polls found the balance of public opinion was against the policy, with an 8 percentage point gap against the policy by July 2014 (Jordan, 2014).

The theme of ambivalence is also identified by Wincup and Monaghan when focusing specifically on drug-using social security claimants. Like other articles in the special issue they draw attention to the stigmatising aspect of public attitudes but also highlight more empathetic attitudes. But, as they note, ambivalence provides an opportunity to promote change: it is not the same as opposition. Moreover, when ambivalence is a consequence of limited knowledge or a narrow public debate, research may be able to play a role in helping (re)frame arguments.

Whose attitudes should be the object of research and research findings?

In policy, political and academic debates about attitudes to 'welfare', the focus has predominantly fixed on public attitudes: what the 'public' is said to think and feel about social security receipt, and the appropriate place and nature of 'welfare' in a successful, 'fair' society. As Baumberg Geiger and Hudson & Lunt highlight, however, these debates – particularly where they are premised upon an assumed hardening of public attitudes – sometimes neglect to fully consider the complexity and nuances within public attitudes to welfare, as well as the extent to which attitudes have perhaps always been ambivalent at best towards the provision of relatively generous social security. Further, as noted above, a focus on myth-busting aimed at the public is perhaps misplaced and misguided, and unlikely to significantly shift public attitudes towards favouring a more redistributive social security system.

Arguably, what is so often missing – and where more research is required on the efficacy of such approaches – is to direct attention upstream to look closer at the attitudes and perspectives of 'elites' in the media, in politics and in positions of power, and to think through how these can then influence and frame (and be reframed in) both policy making and the dominant narrative and discourses around 'welfare'. Of course, it is elites who are driving forward the 'machine of welfare commonsense' and there are unanswered questions concerning how far this direction of travel is itself motivated by underlying public opinion or is itself contributing to and framing the shape and nature of public opinion in this domain.

If we are to retain an interest in mythbusting, might there not be more of a role for mythbusting directed upstream, at policy makers, journalists, and even practitioners, who so often articulate ideas about welfare receipt and 'dependency' that fail to coincide with findings from empirical research into the lived experiences of those on out-of-work benefits? Here efforts could initially

be focused on particular groups who play a pivotal role in shaping public attitudes, targeting advice, evidence and key messages to them; journalists are an obvious example but other groups might include MPs and local politicians. There is scope for academics, but also voluntary sector agencies and campaigning organisations, to make use of social media to bring their research findings and evidence into direct conversation with policy makers, in refuting and challenging the fit between policy proposals and evidence gathered from the bottom-up.

Though figures on almost all sides of the political spectrum have claimed credit for the Conservative government's 2015 U-turn on tax credits cuts, a broad coalition of parties lobbied against the changes, including a substantial number of Conservative MPs. In the case of the latter, whether they were motivated by concerns over the safety of their seats or the wider implications of tax credits cuts is a moot point; what is key for our purposes is that much of the lobbying effort was underpinned by detailed analysis of the impacts of the proposed changes undertaken by the Resolution Foundation and Institute for Fiscal Studies which demonstrated the scale and reach of the changes for 'ordinary' families and so helped fuel support for resistance to the changes. Moreover, the minds of at least some Conservative MPs were no doubt sharpened by Labour Party analysis of the data which showed that for some 71 Conservative MPs in marginal seats the number of households losing out because of the changes exceeded the size of their majority at the 2015 General Election (Helm and Boffey, 2015).

The extension of work-related conditionality to in-work populations as part of the roll-out of Universal Credit, and measures to be introduced to limit support payable to only two children in a household, will likely present similar opportunities for evidence based policy advocacy in the near future. These measures will disrupt strict divisions between the 'hard working' majority and 'welfare dependency', and further entrench the rupturing of the relationship between 'need' and 'entitlement' to support in our social security system. They arguably present opportunities to challenge dominant narratives on 'welfare', principally by providing evidence on how these policies are felt and affect those individuals directly affected and, in turn, how and where the effects of the policies contradict the values, norms and promises made by policy makers.

The tax credits example may also suggest there is further potential to challenge, even 'shame' policy makers, particularly where their putative values and promises are being undermined by the policies they pursue and advance. That the proposed tax credit cuts were also a clear break with promises David Cameron made during the General Election campaign, not only to protect 'hard working families' but a direct guarantee they would not be cut, was a key factor in the U-turn on this issue too. One particularly notable intervention to the debate as pressure was building on the government came on BBC *Question Time* when Michelle Dorrell, who had voted Conservative because she believed promises they would back 'hard working families' like hers, attacked the government for removing the tax credits which she relied on to make ends meet. *The Observer* reported at the time that she did so 'with such raw fury that her few seconds of fame will have done more to raise doubts in ministerial minds about the austerity agenda than anything that their Labour opposite numbers could hope to achieve' (Helm, 2015). As Dorrell ended her intervention with the words 'shame on you' the cameras panned to a visibly shocked Amber Rudd, the Conservative Party representative on the *Question Time* panel.

Debates about shame and social policy rarely consider the upstream potential of shame and shaming, but in some fields of policy studies the role that the shaming of elites or powerful transgressors of social norms can play in fostering policy change has been explored. Jacquet (2016), for instance, highlights an initiative in California to publish the names of the Top 500 businesses and individuals owing taxes in excess of $100,000, but she underlines in particular the potential for shaming in environmental policy, where effective policy change requires collective responses that can be undermined by individual transgression, noting examples of shaming initiatives concerned with air quality and sustainable fishing. Upstream shaming can lead us into

uneasy territory and must be used with caution and care; Jacquet [2016: 23], notes 'if shaming is abused, we might all end up as victims'. But it seems the potential for shaming transgressive elites has some acceptance in Parliament; the joint *Work and Pensions* and *Business, Innovation & Skills* Select Committees (2016) report into the collapse of the British Home Stores placed clear moral responsibility its former owner, Sir Philip Green, to rectify the deficit in its pension scheme or face losing his knighthood. Under review at the time of writing, the public removal of his public honour would be a very clear example of shaming a high profile individual for failing to protect the welfare of his employees.

In terms of areas fruitful for further research and action, there is also a need to look more closely and critically at the role of the media, and the ways in which it can recirculate and extend but also on occasions unsettle the dominant narrative on 'welfare'. While recent years have seen an explosion in what some term 'Poverty Porn' and the continuing adoption of stigmatising caricatures of passive, even feckless benefit claimants, there have also been examples of consequences of 'austerity' being examined critically – even in the popular media – for example, through tabloid media coverage of issues linked to food bank usage, the Bedroom Tax and even the punitive application of benefits sanctions. To take the example of food banks, Garthwaite's work has received coverage critical of the government's agenda in both broadsheet and tabloid newspapers (see Butler, 2016 and Blaze, 2016 respectively), while the Trussell Trust's annual reports on food bank usage have received widespread coverage and critical commentary including in non-political mainstream magazines such as Closer (Fallowfield, 2015). There is a need for a more critical interrogation of the influence of the media on public attitudes to 'welfare', an exploration that also needs to think through the role now played by social media, which can also prove an effective site of resistance and challenge towards stigmatising portrayals of 'welfare' and benefit claimants. Rather than conceptualising the media as being simply a cipher for a negative and stereotyping message on 'welfare', there is scope to look more closely at the varied, sometimes contradictory messages that it sends out, with particular potential here to contrast the different possibilities and problems posed by both new and old media forms, and social media in particular.

All of those with an interest in 'welfare' also need to consider the ways in which how we frame these issues can perhaps impact upon how they are felt and received by elites and wider society. Recent years have seen a growing interest in framing, with campaign organisations in particular interested to see how best to 'frame' their campaigns in order to have the best reach and impact. As academics, we are perhaps less well versed in the business of framing than campaigning organisations, but arguably have a duty to do more to think through how differences in presentation and focus can impact upon and even change the nature of public debate on social policy issues (on issues of framing and public opinion see: Lakoff, 2014; Knight, 2015). On this point it is interesting to note that, at the time of writing, the framing of 'welfare' appeared to be moving onto the political agenda, the Scottish government considering whether to abandon the term 'welfare' because of its pejorative connotations (Brooks, 2016) and, as part of his Labour Party leadership campaign, Owen Smith pledging to scrap the Department for Work and Pensions and bring back a Department for Social Security (Waugh, 2016).

Closing Comments

We noted at the outset that bringing together papers on attitudes to, and experiences of, 'welfare' is an unusual approach, but we have shown here how and why we see the two as inextricably linked, in particular our view that 'welfare' attitudes are in part shaped by and tied to experiences of 'welfare'; and experiences of 'welfare' are in part shaped by wider attitudes to 'welfare'. The politics of social policy in the UK is entering largely uncharted territory, a global financial crisis having precipitated the rise of a long and deep programme of austerity that not only threatens to

take UK public spending below US levels but, in turn, seems likely to have contributed to, *inter alia*: Brexit; the rise of UKIP and collapse of the Lib Dems in England; the rise of the SNP and growing calls for independence in Scotland; and, intense conflict within the Labour Party as different wings of the party battle for control over policy agendas and party machinery. In the midst of a growing sense of political crisis, renewed debate over the extent to which elite political agendas overlap with the public mood has been generated. At the same time, however, these events have often served to underline the complex and often conflicting nature of attitudes across different parts of the UK. Moreover, as debate rages on, social and economic reforms are widening existing inequalities and reinforcing social disadvantage, often under the radar of mainstream political debate. Set against this context, careful analysis of 'welfare' attitudes and experiences is needed now more than perhaps any other time since the 1980s. The aim of this special issue is to make a contribution to such an analysis, and – by so doing – promote further debate and discussion about the future place of 'welfare' in contemporary Britain.

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