'Striking out': Shifting labour markets, welfare to work policy and the renegotiation of gender performances

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Abstract

Since 1997, the English government has committed itself to the twin (and inter-linked) policy aims of reducing health inequalities and tackling social exclusion. Welfare to work interventions have formed a key part of the policy response to both of these problems. So far, this approach has been largely supply-side focussed and 'gender-blind', treating both men and women who are not in employment as discrete entities who, with the right combination of training and support, can be engaged within the formal economy. Drawing on data from qualitative case studies of two such interventions in the North-East of England (one of which offered unemployed parents childcare training and the other which provided vocational and advisory support to young parents), this paper contributes to a growing literature exploring the gender dimensions of social policy interventions. The findings emphasise the centrality of gender to participants and demonstrates the necessity of gender sensitivity in projects designed to tackle worklessness.

154 words

Introduction

New Labour has made the movement from welfare to work a central tenet of its approach to tackling social exclusion. There have been a number of evaluations of welfare to work interventions, and one of the key critiques to emerge is absence of gender related concerns in this strategy. These criticisms have virtually all focused on the impact of this gap on women and to date, there has been very little consideration given to the impacts of a gender-blind social policy approach on men. Drawing on the results of two qualitative case study evaluations of welfare to work interventions in the North-East of England, this article begins to address this gap.

Welfare to work policy

The election of New Labour in 1997 signalled a new approach to tackling poverty and social exclusion in the UK. Drawing heavily from policy approaches in the USA, Blair called for a shift away from what he termed 'passive Welfare', which he critiqued for 'leaving people doing nothing, rather than helping them become active' (Blair in a speech to the Party of European Socialists' Congress in June 1997, quoted in Theodore & Peck, 1999: 486). In its place, the government made it clear that the emphasis was to be firmly on ensuring that as many people as possible were employed in the formal economy. Where people were unable to secure jobs, they would be encouraged to undertake training to improve their 'employability':

> 'The best way to tackle poverty is to help people into jobs – real jobs. The unemployed have a responsibility to take up the opportunity of training places or work, but these must be real opportunities.' Labour Party *1997 General Election Manifesto* (Dale, 2000: 360)

Welfare to work policies have remained popular with the government: Shortly before Blair resigned as Prime Minister, he gave a speech in which he re-stated his belief that work is 'the best form of welfare' (Blair, 2007) and, since taking over as Prime Minister Brown has underlined the continuing popularity of the welfare to work strategy:

> '[T]he biggest barrier to full employment is now not the shortage of jobs but the shortage of skills among the unemployed and inactive. The biggest barrier to Britain's success in the jobs of the future: a skills deficit particularly amongst the low paid. […] Our first priority is to move welfare claimants from passive recipients of benefit to active job and skill seekers and to match the talents of those on the dole to the needs of local employers.' (Brown, 2008)

Ongoing commitment to the welfare to work agenda has been further demonstrated in the 2008 Welfare Reform Act in which 'passive' Incapacity Benefit was replaced with 'active' Employment Support Allowance (Bambra, 2008).

Evaluations of welfare to work interventions suggest that the general policy approach has been relatively successful at the national level (Evans, Eyre, Millar, & Sarre, 2003; Finn, 2003; Loumidis et al., 2001; Sunley, Martin, & Nativel, 2001). However, an analysis of the impact of the *New Deal for Young People*, one of the most developed of the welfare to work schemes, claims that positive evaluations at the national level mask important regional variations; disparities which suggest that the policy has had far less success in high need inner city and depressed industrial areas (Sunley et al., 2001). Echoing this, Finn's (2003) evaluation also finds that local labour markets play an important role in the success of the *New Deal for Young People* and that different social groups may be differentially affected. Similarly, a systematic review of welfare to work policies for Incapacity Benefit claimants (such as the *New Deal for Disabled People*) concludes that it is not possible to say which interventions are effective or for whom (Bambra, Whitehead, & Hamilton, 2005). Existing evaluations of some of the major welfare to work policy approaches do not, therefore, imply that they provide a panacea to resolving the 'policy problem' of worklessness.

What is more, welfare to work policy has been criticised for making a number of questionable assumptions. Firstly, in emphasising the need to improve people's skills, the government's conception of the problem focuses almost entirely on the 'supply-side', with very little space being given to considering potential interventions on the 'demand-side' (Cressey, 1999). In relation to this, the policy approach has been criticised for failing to consider the spatial concentration of worklessness in some areas, such as parts of Northern England or South Wales (e.g. Turok & Webster, 1998). Secondly, official statements often appear to suggest that by securing employment, individuals will automatically become 'socially included' and able to break free of the experience of poverty (see Levitas, 1998). Yet, although poverty, employment and social exclusion are related, they are also different (Atkinson, 1998; Lister, 2000) and, consequently, policy interventions which aim to tackle one of these issues will not necessarily help with the others. Thirdly, the approach tends to assume that employment is *always* better than worklessness (e.g. Black, 2008), even though there is little robust evidence to support this assumption in regard to the low quality and low paying jobs that most people exiting benefit obtain (Broom et al., 2006). Fourthly, these statements frequently imply that only employment within the formal economy is considered real 'work'. Other kinds of work, particularly the caring work of looking after children, ill and elderly relations, are

implicitly demoted (Lister, 2000). Finally, gender identities are rendered invisible through statements which promote employment in the formal economy as an 'opportunity' that all individuals ought to embrace equally and for which 'gender-blind' interventions are apposite (see Lewis, 2007; and Rake, 2000). Whilst touching upon a number of these concerns, it is this final issue with which this article is most concerned.

To date, there have been a number of critiques of the absence of gender related concerns in the government's welfare to work approach but these have virtually all focused on the impact of this gap on women. For example, Lewis (2007) argues that, by assuming all men and women can be equally active in the labour market and ignoring the continuing gendered division of paid and unpaid work, such policies are likely to exacerbate gender inequalities. Similarly, MacLeavy (2007) argues that, because gender remains central to the political and economic organisation of society, welfare to work policies which ignore gender divisions only serve to further entrench them (see also Burns, 2000; Hague, Thomas, & Williams, 2001; Lister, 2000, 2006; Rake, 2000). So far, very little consideration has been given to the impacts of a gender-blind policy approach on men. This is despite an increasing acknowledgement of the importance of interrogating men as gendered beings within policy orientated research (see, for example, McIlwaine & Datta, 2003), which is at least partially informed by nearly two decades of work exploring the heterogeneity and fluidity of masculine identities, particularly in the context of changing socio-economic environments (e.g. Connell, 1995; Hearn & Pringle, 2006; Jackson, 1991; Lupton, 2000; McDowell, 2003a, 2003b).

This article begins to address this gap, although it is important to stress at the outset that it is in no way intended to challenge the work of those who have drawn attention to the ways in which supposedly 'gender-neutral' policies serve to further entrench gender inequalities between men and women. Rather, the argument presented here merely suggests that, in order to effectively challenge the gender divisions that are embedded within society, it is important to also explore the impact of such policy interventions on some groups of men. In making this case, the article draws on data from a qualitative evaluation of two welfare to work projects in the North-East of England, as the following section describes.

Case Study Context and Methods

Like other formally industrialised areas, much of the north of England continues to be affected by the legacy of the decline in heavy industries and this trend is particularly apparent in County Durham, with its industrial heritage of coal and iron mining and construction. Economic inactivity in parts of the county are well above the national average and job density levels in many localities are amongst the lowest in the country (Hastings, 2006). The area is also known to suffer a disproportionate burden of poor health, with deaths from smoking and early deaths from cancer, heart disease and stroke rating all significantly higher than the national average (Association of Public Health Observatories & Department of Health, 2008).

As described above, since Labour came to power in 1997, a range of area-based initiatives have been implemented with the intention of tackling embedded deprivation, long term poverty and associated inequalities in health. One such example is the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, which was designed to increase funding available in the most deprived 88 wards across the country to encourage economic re-growth and improve the prospects of disadvantaged communities in terms of health, education, housing and employment (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008). It is in this context that Neighbourhood Renewal Funding was used to finance a range of projects designed to tackle worklessness in County Durham between 2006 and 2008. Acknowledging the complexity of worklessness, and the inter-linked nature of many of the problems facing communities in County Durham, local policymakers decided to implement a multifaceted programme involving thirteen different types of intervention, each of which was intended to tackle a slightly different aspect of worklessness. The programme included projects focusing on health-related worklessness, schemes intended to improve and develop participants' work-relevant skills, and projects which tried to increase individuals' chances of engaging in paid work by improving their confidence and self-esteem. Some of the interventions, particularly those designed to support specific social groups, combined more than one of these approaches. In keeping with the emphasis within national policy, all thirteen projects focused on the supply side of the labour market (rather than the demand side), were area-based and funded by short-term (finite) resources.

In order to examine how effective this approach was, local policymakers commissioned researchers at Durham University to examine participants' experiences of the initiatives. A comprehensive account of the findings has been published elsewhere (Joyce, Smith, & Bambra, 2008). This paper focuses on the data relating to two of the initiatives included within this broader programme, each of which provides pertinent insights into the role that gender issues can play in welfare to work style

interventions. The first, which we refer to in this paper as Case Study One, was a project intended to provide support to 'young parents', with the aim of both supporting their transition into parenthood (babies were with either unborn or less than one year old) and increasing their future employment prospects. It was intended to develop and extend existing Sure Start initiatives focusing on young parents in order to improve health, education and social outcomes during pregnancy and beyond. Funding was to be used in reshaping services to meet the needs of young parents and to encourage young fathers' involvement in the upbringing of their children. Project work included: tailoring ante natal/post natal services to support healthcare, parenting skills, access to education, training and work, childcare, sexual health and family planning. By incorporating both group-work and one-to-one sessions, the project aimed to encourage participation in the local management of children's centres and extended services. With regard to worklessness, the project aimed to encourage young people to engage in volunteering as a pathway to employment and training. A final objective was to raise awareness about, and support, young parents who were experiencing domestic violence.

Although the overall research approach largely employed focus groups, it was deemed, by both the researchers and the project coordinators, that face-to-face interviews would be a more appropriate means of exploring participants' experiences of Case Study One, due to the sensitive and stigmatised nature of some issues relating to teenage parenthood. Hence, a series of in-depth, face-to-face interviews were undertaken with participants in this project, which ranged in length from 20 to 45 minutes. Fifteen participants, who ranged in age between 16 and 23 years, were interviewed in total, twelve of whom opted to be interviewed as a couple (i.e. six interviews with couples) and three of whom were interviewed alone. Of the three mothers interviewed alone, only one identified herself as a single mother (reflecting national trends, which suggest only about a quarter of teenage mothers now become 'single mothers' (Duncan, 2007: 311)).

The second intervention focused on in this paper, Case Study Two, was designed to improve the numeracy and literacy skills of unemployed individuals, before facilitating their participation in childcare NVQs or other 'Skills for Life' courses. A range of diverse courses were offered within this project including '*Chill Out and Change*' (a course, generic in nature, which provided the opportunity for learners to experience a range of vocational tasters such as family learning, crafts and supporting children with mathematics and English), '*Healthy Eating*' (a course which sought to introduce healthy eating through learning whilst also assessing numeracy and literacy needs), and 'Initial Assessment of Literacy' (a course which concentrated on assessing literacy through specific vocational topics, such as information technology, money matters, woodwork, craft etc. The intention was that these

new skills would open up new employment prospects for participants, within their local areas. This project therefore focused largely on the provision of education and training for participants and was delivered in local community settings. For this intervention, a focus group, which lasted approximately one hour, was used to explore the experiences of seven participants (four men and three women), who had all participated in the childcare NVQ. All of the participants in the focus group knew each other as a result of this training and the group appeared friendly and supportive of one another.

A semi-structured approach was taken to both case studies. The research was approved by Durham University's School for Health's Ethics Committee. In line with ethical guidance, participants' identities remain anonymous. All of the recordings of the interviews and focus groups were transcribed in full by an independently contracted firm, with whom a confidentiality agreement was in place. The transcripts were then thematically coded by two experienced qualitative researchers using the qualitative data analysis software programme, *Atlas.ti*. The coding framework employed was developed abductively. A full methodological account of the study is available elsewhere (Joyce Smith, & Bambra, 2008).

Results and Discussion

Case study 1 - Young Parents Project

Young parents' attempts to adopt traditional gender roles

In contrast to official policy portrayals of teenage parenthood as a 'pernicious social problem' (Duncan, 2007: 307), all of the interviewees expressed positive attitudes towards becoming young parents with parenthood considered 'more an opportunity than a catastrophe' (Duncan, 2007: 308). All of the participants suggested that expecting/having a child had triggered a desire to plan ahead particularly financially (a finding evident in a great deal of research on teenage parents, e.g. Giullari & Shaw, 2005; Graham & McDermott, 2005; and Hanna, 2001). It was the young fathers who felt under most immediate pressure to financially support the new family unit, which reflects research highlighting the importance many young fathers attach to being able to act as an economic provider for their children (Bunting & McAuley, 2004). Amongst the couples, it was universally clear that the main pressure to provide an income for the family especially in the first year of the baby's life rested with the fathers. In other words, where possible, the young parents we interviewed were attempting to adopt traditional gender roles with regards to the split between formal employment and caring work.

Echoing a great deal of the research into experiences of teenage parenthood, all participants reported experiencing financial difficulties and all expressed feeling frustrated by the difficulties in

earning enough money to support their family (e.g. Giullari & Shaw, 2005; Hanna, 2001). Even those who had experienced recent employment reported that it was extremely difficult to cover the cost of day-to-day living on the wages they earned. This underlines the fact that paid work does not necessarily provide a route out of poverty and social exclusion (see Lister, 2000; MacLeavy, 2007). Nevertheless, in stark contradiction to some policy portrayals of young fathers as 'feckless' (see Giullari & Shaw, 2005), all of the young fathers expressed a strong desire (often verging on desperation) to work and be able to provide for their family. Indeed, for the young men we interviewed, fatherhood was frequently described in ways which suggested it was almost synonymous with an ability to provide an income for the family. For example:

> *'I'll find work in a job that I don't want to do just to get work to be able to support my family. […] I'm not going to get [my partner] pregnant and run away, that's not me. I stay, you know. That's what dads are for. That's what dads should be. They shouldn't get someone pregnant and run away.'*

All of the young fathers appeared to believe that a central part of their new role as fathers involved providing adequately for their family and yet they felt it was unlikely they would be able to enact this (gendered) role. All but one of the young fathers had experienced recent unemployment and none appeared positive about their future employment prospects, mainly due to a lack of qualifications experience, and/or skills, combined with poor employment opportunities in the local area and the high cost and poor reliability of public transport. Coupled with the fact that, as new (or expectant) fathers, these interviewees were all undertaking one of the most significant transitions in the life-course, it is perhaps unsurprising that several seemed to be experiencing feelings of despondency and low self-esteem:

> *'I've never really been confident in many things so. But I don't know, I just worry about things, I get paranoid about stuff'.*

> *'I tick the boxes of a bum, basically – they [potential employers] are not interested in me'.*

Gendered assumptions underlying the intervention

Paradoxically, whilst the young fathers seemed to constitute a group that would particularly benefit from welfare to work interventions, being both keen to take up employment and at a point in their lives where they were consciously planning for the future, they appeared to have benefited less from this

intervention than the young mothers. Nearly all of the young mothers were overwhelmingly positive about the intervention and its contribution to their awareness of available training and employment opportunities, but none of the young fathers reported that the intervention had helped them in this respect. A central problem with the intervention's approach to young fathers seems to have been the way in which participants were recruited; all of the young fathers reported that they had only heard about the project through their partners:

Young father: '*They just told her [referring to partner]'.*

Young father: *'I never heard about it until …'*
Young mother: *'Until I told you about four weeks after'.*

Further, many of the young fathers interviewed described feeling unsupported on a range of fronts, particularly by local employment agencies:

'There's no support there for me'.

'They don't do enough help for you really. I mean I'm registered now with four or five agencies and to me they don't bother looking for you, you know. They just fob you off with a whole lot of junk'.

The comments stand in marked contrast to those made by the young mothers, who nearly all reported feeling that they had received a great deal of support, both in relation to pregnancy and childcare and in relation to planning their future careers. Although we acknowledge that young mothers are not always well-supported by interventions (e.g. Clarke, 2006; Duncan, 2007; Giullari & Shaw, 2005; Kidger, 2004), in the case of this particular intervention it was the lack of support and guidance offered to young fathers that was most noticeable. This reflects broader research highlighting the absence of support offered to young fathers (Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Speake, Cameron, & Gilroy, 1997). As the following quotation illustrates, this gap can impact on mothers and their babies as well as on the young fathers themselves:

Young mother: *'At first he [the father] wouldn't hold the bairn when he was first born because he was frightened. He didn't know what to do, and it was like teaching him kind of thing. I know*

this is going to sound horrible too but if someone had shown him before, it would have saved me being tired'.

Taken together, the extracts discussed in this theme demonstrate that despite the expressed intention of this project to focus on 'young parents', it appeared to have, in practical terms, shifted to a focus on 'young mothers'. This is mirrored in some national policy statements (see, for example, Giullari & Shaw, 2005; Kidger, 2004) and reflects broader research highlighting the lack of support offered to young fathers. Overall, the data from Case Study 1 reflect Bunting & McAuley's (2004) review, which suggests young fathers constitute a group who, whilst very much in need of support, remain relatively untouched by the raft of recent policy interventions designed to tackle social exclusion and worklessness.

<u>Case study 2: Childcare training for the unemployed</u>
Negotiating non-traditional gender roles in a gender-blind initiative
In direct contrast to Case Study 1, Case Study 2 involved an intervention which actively (albeit implicitly) encouraged unemployed fathers to adopt non-traditional gender roles. This is not an issue which has yet been explored in any detail by researchers, who have tended to focus only on the experiences of women who have chosen to work in traditionally male environments (e.g. Andrew, 2005) or on men who have themselves chosen (rather than been actively encouraged) to enter traditionally female work environments (e.g. Lupton, 2000; Williams, 1995). In this case, none of the male participants had actively sought to gain entry to a childcare training scheme and, indeed, as the following quotations reflect, many had clear reservations about the project based on their own perceptions of the gendered division of labour. Yet their participation had been actively encouraged by various staff with whom they had some contact (most were staff at a local Sure Start centre, where many of the fathers regularly took their children):

'When I first heard of the dads' groups [I thought], 'I'm not going to sit with a bunch of dads talking about kids,' sort of thing. So you do have that stigmata [sic] sort of thing, so… but once you do get down there, it's like, 'Wow this is great…''

'Just when I brought my boy here […] [Blank – staff member at the Sure Start centre] said, 'Oh look they're doing a childcare course on a Tuesday - why don't you go along?' and again it's, 'I'm not doing that, it's for women,' sort of thing and she said, 'No, no it's just dads,' and I came in and I'm still here and now I'm looking to make a career out of it because, again,

there's nothing really out there worth going for any more, not for what I've done in the past anyway.'

Both of the above accounts show that, although initially wary of participating in what they believed to be a predominantly women's activity, the fathers claimed that they had quickly become extremely enthusiastic about the prospect of becoming involved in paid childcare work. Importantly, though, their initial decisions to participate were also influenced by the fact that all of the other participants were (at first) also male, as well as their awareness that structural changes in the local labour market meant employment opportunities in sectors that they might have ordinarily focused on were extremely limited.

Furthermore, for most of the focus group participants, engaging with a course on childcare training was not the first time in which their views of their traditional gender roles had been challenged. For example, as the following extracts illustrate, most were already the main carers of their own children:

'Well my wife works long shifts and that's why he [my son] is with me a lot and so he's all mine now. Not by choice."

'My wife will turn round and joke to me and she'll say, if I was to go tomorrow, she'd be stuck because she wouldn't know what to do, you know, and she says, "I can't believe that you know more about bringing that child up than what I do and I'm his mother, it should be me who knows what to do," sort of thing but like you say the roles are reversing now.'

Whilst the first of the two extracts above demonstrates that the speaker was keen to ensure others were aware that his role as the main carer of his son was not a role that he had chosen freely, the other two male participants presented their role more similarly to the second speaker, by emphasising the importance that both they and others placed on their role in caring for their children. At the same time, however, these conversations tended to present a scenario in which the changes in traditional gender roles were happening 'out there', beyond anyone's immediate control. In the last quotation, for example, the speaker explains that 'the roles are reversing now', something which he presents as a fact, rather than something that anyone is actively trying to achieve. He also reflects that his wife still feels that she, rather than him, *should* be 'bringing the child up', which suggests that their approach to division of labour within their family would have been more traditional if circumstances had allowed.

Studies of men who are in employed roles that are traditionally occupied by women have found they employ a variety of different strategies to negotiate their gender identity within these roles, often in ways which allow them to embrace traditional masculinities (Williams, 1995). For example, Lupton (2000) categorises these strategies into three broad approaches: (i) emphasising the positive career opportunities provided by the new role; (ii) identifying with other, more powerful, male groups who are associated with the role; (iii) representing the work as more masculine than others might perceive. However, only the first of these three strategies was clearly visible in our data:

> 'Well to be honest with you I think, speaking from a dad's point of view, I think a dad would have a good chance of getting into a childcare setting because I think they are wanting that, they're wanting more males involved in that setting. So I'm hoping that my prospects are really good.'

This strategy was linked to another: rather than representing the work as more masculine than it might traditionally be perceived (the third strategy identified by Lupton, 2000), the participants constructed the lack of male involvement in childcare as a societal problem that they were helping to address. In particular, they suggested that the lack of male interaction likely to be available to some children (such as those of single mothers) was a difficulty that they had the potential to help resolve:

> 'I would have said, you know, like especially if they're single parents, or single mothers they want some, it's nice to have some input from men, do you know what I mean? So if you've got a man carer well then…'

> 'If you see that there's a male in your childcare setting and you are on your own as a mother, you know, you think, 'Oh well at least he's going to have some interaction with a male,' which is good…'
> 'It's that male bonding thing yeah.'
> '… and not be brought up by total female, you know, in a totally female environment. So it is good to have a mixture, a mix of…'

Unlike the men involved in Lupton's (2000) study, there is no evidence in the data to indicate that the men tried to denigrate or criticise women's approaches to childcare. Rather, they merely argued that men had something qualitatively different to offer. By taking on a responsibility for addressing the

problem they had articulated – the lack of male interaction likely to be available to the children of single mothers – some of the fathers were then able to present their move into paid childcare in an almost sacrificial way, as something they were doing to help others, rather than an option they had taken because of the limited alternatives available:

> *'At the end of the day, we're not doing it for the money, are we? Because it's not exactly the best paid job in the world - I could walk out now and get a better paid job if I went to Asda, so it's not being done for the sake that I'm doing it financial. So I mean, you know, it is a good thing that the dads are doing it and there's more males getting into it...'*

Yet, at the same time, as explained above, they were also acutely aware that changes in the local labour market and the wider economy meant that the employment routes they might have traditionally pursued (and, in some cases, had previously pursued) were increasingly limited:

> *'I mean the thing is there's no heavy industry, there's no industry or anything around here now. So whereas you've had the secretary jobs etc. them jobs have now changed they haven't left the area but you're finding now like the mines are gone, you know the steel industry's out the window now, the automotive trade's on the way out…'*
> *'Some of the factories have gone.'*
> *'So yes, you know, the partners are becoming the breadwinners really. So it's us striking out… it's us hopping onto that ladder now and becoming the secretaries, becoming the child carers and…'*
> *'There's a lot more house-husbands nowadays than what there was.'*

Overall, then, the focus group data provides the impression that the men involved had not independently chosen to become involved in a non-traditional career trajectory (the paid and unpaid care of children) but were rather responding to the changing opportunities in the revised labour market context, a move which was facilitated by the direct encouragement of some local project organisers. Nevertheless, they appeared to have responded positively to the potential new career opportunities they perceived to be offered within childcare and had managed to negotiate their gender identity in a way which appeared neither to compromise their gender (as studies of women in non-traditional careers suggests they often do, e.g. Andrew, 2005), nor depend on the denigration of women in the occupation (a tactic Lupton (2000) and others (e.g. Williams, 1995) have found

evidence of). However, the data also make it clear that negotiating their gender identity was far from an easy task for the men, a point the following sub-section explores further.

Performing gender in a gender-blind intervention

Although it was clear to the male participants in Case Study 2 that they were being required to renegotiate their gender identity, the intervention's gender-blind approach afforded them no support in this. This became particularly apparent when the men discussed how they felt the dynamics of the classes had changed when women were introduced to the same sessions:

'… to be honest we could joke about things and what was said in here was said in here, you know, but we felt when we went with the women, I don't know if the women overpowered us, you know, and we weren't used to them, you know?'

'Uh huh, I know what you mean, it's more like cosy just us and the teacher and yeah.'

'And I suppose you can speak your mind a bit better. You feel as if you're not like, [gasps] on show kind of thing or, yeah you can say what you want to say then can't you?'

'Well… you can't be as rugged as what you would do with, you know, there are times now when I'm in there and you go to say something and you think, 'Oops no hang on I shouldn't say that.''

'It's strange though, that, because the day we only had women we were more rugged or whatever than when Mark and Paul's there. We said things that we thought, 'Oooh,' and maybe we wouldn't have said if the lads were here, you know what I mean? So…'

The first quotation suggests that part of the men's discomfort at women joining the group was merely that it disrupted the rapport they had developed, both with each other and with the facilitator/teacher. However, the way in which the final speaker in this extract describes feeling that he was 'on show' when women were present reflects some of the extensive literature which theorises gender as a performative act, which men and women engage with differently in different contexts with the purpose of communicating their gendered identities (Butler, 1990; Thorne, 1993). This is further supported by the way in which both this speaker and those in the second extract described feeling under pressure to constrain their conversation in order to ensure it was 'acceptable' in a mixed environment, in a way which they had not felt necessary in a male only environment. The first speaker articulates this experience by employing a very traditional perspective of gender, implying that there are some elements of men's conversations which it is not 'polite' to engage with in the presence of women. This is particularly apparent in the use of the adjective 'rugged' to describe how it is possible to be in

a male only environment. Yet, interestingly, the second speaker in this quotation reflects that he actually felt the need to perform this kind of masculinity more overtly in the company of women than he had when engaging only with other men.

The pressure to be able to perform in certain ways in front of women was further apparent when one of the participants reflected on the embarrassment he felt about his learning difficulty in a mixed group compared to a male only setting:

> *'I think if you're male and you've got a learning difficulty, if you're in a surrounding with males you don't feel as bad but I think, again, if you're in a mixed setting you'll feel even more aware because… and again I'm sure it would be the same for the girls as well. If you had a difficulty you'd feel the same as well.'*

It was also clear that part of the perceived problem with a mixed group was a fear that, as a result of the traditional gender division of labour, women would automatically feel more comfortable and knowledgeable in a childcare setting and might, therefore, down-play what the men had learnt:

> *'Some of the dads thought, 'You know what women are like,' pardon the expression, you know, 'we know better,' sort of thing, not realising that some of the dads had already done level… entry level and level one and we could most probably help them more than they could have helped us.'*

The introduction of women to the class without (according to the male focus group participants) any negotiation or forewarning, left men who were actively involved in negotiating their gendered identities feeling vulnerable and uncomfortable. For some of them, the difficulties caused by this were so great that they decided to leave the training scheme as a result. Hence, the failure to provide space or support to help the male participants deal with re-negotiating their gendered identities appears to have been a fundamental flaw in the intervention.

Attempting to locate new identities in traditional landscapes
This final sub-section explores how the male participants in Case Study 2 described trying to fit their new identities into the landscapes in which they lived, landscapes which were not necessarily hospitable to the new roles they were attempting to carve for themselves. Once again, this analysis

demonstrates the necessity of acknowledging, and providing support for, the re-negotiation of gendered identities.

As explained above, the male participants in this intervention were keen to emphasise the positive aspects of their involvement in childcare. This extended to recounting the reaction of the children involved:

> *'I just did my placement this morning and she actually asked the parents. She said, "Look we're going to have a male student coming in and doing the childcare," and she said and everybody were great. […] Now the only thing they thought about was obviously how the children would react but I mean they got a shock this morning because I was swamped straightaway.'*

This extract serves to further demonstrate the men's positive attitudes to their role in childcare work but, at the same time, the fact that the female child carer described in the above story felt it necessary to explain to parents that a man would be getting involved with the childcare underlines the second key problem with the intervention in this case study. This was that, despite the enthusiasm of most of the male participants, they described having experienced significant resistance to enacting their new roles, both from other parents in the local community and from potential employers. Several of the participants claimed this meant they had been unable to secure work placements or jobs in childcare settings, despite their qualifications. Consequently, some of the participants had undertaken a survey of parents in the local community to explore this issue:

> *'And there again we went through, what was it, assembly here, didn't we at [Blank] Street on childcare and dads and they did a survey there… on how many women or mothers would trust their kids with a male and you'd be quite surprised at how low it was.'*

> *'Most people that they interviewed came from all cultures and different nurseries and all saying, 'What do you think about men in childcare,' and there was a few people said, 'I wouldn't have a man, not for my kid.''*

In other words, the intervention had encouraged men to participate in an employment-orientated childcare training scheme which required them to re-negotiate their own gendered identities but which did not consider the potential difficulties that they might subsequently experience in securing placements and jobs. By focusing solely on the 'supply' side of the economy and not at all on the

'demand' side (Cressey, 1999), the intervention left several of the participants struggling to find employment experience in a childcare setting. The positive comments about the intervention made by many of the fathers suggest that the broad aim of the project was entirely appropriate. However, to be successful, the male participants suggested that the intervention's architects needed to reflect more carefully on the gendered nature of childcare and, consequently, on the additional support that they, as men, might require. Hence, whilst most of the existing work critiquing 'gender-blind' policies highlights the negative consequences of such approaches for women (e.g. MacLeavy, 2007; Rake, 2000), in this particular case, men were also harmed by the approach.

Concluding comments

Although the two case studies presented in this paper are quite distinct, each places a spotlight on the centrality of gender to interventions which aim to tackle worklessness. In Case Study 1, the gender-neutrality of an intervention to support 'young parents' resulted in a failure to directly target and support young fathers. Hence, as Caracciolo di Torella (2007: 319) argues in relation to the government, whilst there is some acknowledgement within recent policies that the involvement of fathers is crucial to re-conceptualising relations between parents and children, 'actual legislative developments have been structured with a view to facilitating women's double role of mothers and employees' and have, consequently, failed to challenge the traditional gendered division of labour (see also Lister, 2006).

In the case of teenage parents, part of the problem may be that so little is known about fathers of the children of teenage mothers. There has been very little research into the role that they play in their children's upbringing and, where studies do reveal a lack of involvement by fathers, it is unclear whether this is intentional, 'or simply because they do not know what role to play.' (Hanna, 2001: 462). As Coleman and Dennison (1998: 311) highlight, 'It is striking how little consideration is paid to the place of the partner in the consideration of teenage parenthood. Most writers on this subject contribute to the overall impression that young fathers are either invisible or absent.' This is despite the fact that recent research not only suggests that large numbers of teenage fathers do play a role on the upbringing of their children, but also that the positive involvement of fathers can contribute to children's well-being (e.g. Bunting & McAuley, 2004; and Coleman & Dennison, 1998). It is, of course, crucial to recognise that not all teenage mothers are in a position to experience positive support from partners; some may enter parenthood as single mothers and others may experience unwanted interference, even violence, from their partners. Policies which aim to support young parents and their children therefore need to offer a range of different kinds of support to a variety of

potential family situations. What Case Study 1 suggests is that, as part of this flexibility, interventions which aim to support young parents ought to consider the potential benefits that offering targeted support to young fathers, in addition to that offered to young mothers, may bring.

In the second case study, the active encouragement for unemployed fathers to undertake childcare training with a view to pursuing careers in childcare was not the result of a policy designed to challenge traditional gender roles. Rather, the aim of the intervention was to help workless members of the community to move from welfare into work. Unfortunately, the gender-blind way in which the intervention was rolled out meant that, despite the apparent ability of the men involved to negotiate their gender identities positively in relation to childcare, there was an absence of any attempt to support the men in this or to tackle the gendered perceptions of childcare that the participants encountered in the broader community. This is an important gap because, whilst not necessarily setting out to purposefully recruit men into non-traditional gender roles, in the context of the labour market landscape of this region of the UK, it is unsurprising both that working age men were one of the target groups and that the demand for jobs was in a sector traditionally associated with women. Given that others areas of the UK share some of the characteristics of the labour market in the North-East of England (Turok & Webster, 1998), it is likely that other interventions designed to tackle worklessness may also encourage men to consider undertaking work that has been traditionally associated with women.

The potential damage caused by 'gender-blind' policies has already been noted by a number of researchers. However, there has been a tendency within some of this work to equate 'gender-blind' with 'male-centred'. Not only does this imply that men automatically benefit from gender-blindness, it also suggests that the category of 'men', or 'male', represents one, homogenous group. Yet, as the wealth of work on masculinities highlights (Clare, 2001; Connell, 1995; Hearn & Pringle, 2006; Jackson, 1991; McDowell, 2003a, 2003b), masculine identities are multiple and fluid. Hence, it is important not to assume that policy biases which favour some men in some situations will necessarily favour all men in all situations. What we are therefore arguing in favour of is not merely the need for policies to pay more attention to the specific difficulties facing some socially excluded men but for policymakers to consciously and consistently reflect on the potential impact of all social policies on gender relations. This is likely to be important for more women than men (Lister, 2006; MacLeavy, 2007) but, nevertheless, men cannot be ignored, both because the possibility of truly challenging unequal gender relations requires their participation and because the life-experiences of men are frequently intertwined with those of their families (McIlwaine & Datta, 2003).

The Labour government is far from unaware of the importance of gender to employment and social policy. Indeed, a publication by the Social Exclusion Unit (1999) directly suggest that policy responses to some social problems need to be more sensitive to gender issues and the recent Equality Bill (2008) demonstrates a continuing awareness of the need for gender parity. Unfortunately, however, the case studies presented here, combined with the work of others (e.g. Hague et al., 2001; Lister, 2006; MacLeavy, 2007), suggest that such an approach remains aspirational. All this lends support both to Watson's (1999: 2) argument that there is an 'urgent need to firmly reintroduce and re-emphasise the importance of gender to the social policy debate' and to Rake's (2000: 107) claim that policy mechanisms 'would be greatly enhanced by the inclusion of a thorough audit of policy for its impact on gender.'

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