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# The Hidden Costs of Injured Dignity: An exploration of one effect of Workfare policies

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**Abstract:** This paper explores one effect of Workfare policies that were designed and operationalised under the Howard Government. We conducted a qualitative, empirical study in two regions of New South Wales in the second part of 2007 which investigated how WorkChoices and the Welfare to Work reforms affected residents. Our analysis revealed a common theme was that of *injured dignity*. Here we examine how this sense of injured dignity is produced and how it manifests amongst our participants. The findings validate Dean's (2004) view that Workfare policies focus upon a perceived failure of welfare recipients to be independent, whilst ignoring that humans are mutually interdependent beings. These policies recreate and reinforce the old division between the deserving and the undeserving. Injured dignity is then experienced as internalised shame and, as a psychic wound, it is largely hidden. We argue that the disrespect experienced by our participants in the Workfare process is a transgression of their inherent dignity from which human rights flow. Because these injuries are invisible, both their immediate costs and the long term consequences are incalculable. We conclude by recommending that existing policy be changed in ways that will acknowledge dependency without dishonour.

**Key Words:** injured dignity, Workfare, deserving/undeserving

... human beings are not merely means of production, but also the end of the exercise (Sen 1999, p. 296).

## Introduction

This paper explores one effect of Workfare policies that were designed and operationalised under the Howard Government. We conducted a qualitative, empirical study across two regions of New South Wales which aimed to explore the nexus between WorkChoices and the Welfare-to-Work reforms and their impact. Our analysis revealed that amongst those affected by the welfare changes, also known in the literature as Workfare, a very common theme was that of injured dignity. Here we examine how this sense of dignity is produced and how it manifests amongst our participants. We begin by examining the relationship between dignity and human rights, before going on to a consideration of Workfare policies in general and the Australian version in particular. We argue, following Dean (2004), that these policies centralise work as the only legitimate means to dignity and focus upon the failure of welfare recipients to be independent, whilst ignoring that humans are mutually *inter*-dependent. Our

transcripts revealed that the denial of autonomy and respect are fundamental transgressions to the dignity from which human rights flow. We conclude by recommending that existing policy be amended in ways that will acknowledge dependency without dishonour.

## Dignity and Human Rights

The whole edifice of human rights discourse rests upon the notion of human dignity. Kant understood autonomy as the foundation of dignity (Brenner 2006, p. 478) and this is also recognised by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Dean 2004, p. 14). Additionally, in common parlance, dignity is defined as being worthy of respect, whilst respect is understood as acknowledgement of a person's equal worth. This assertion of equality is called into question by the indisputable existence of social inequality, hence the need for a charter of human rights.

Therefore, human rights are a social construction and an historical achievement not a 'naturally' occurring phenomenon. Rights are constructed in keeping with the prevailing discourses and practices of the socio-economic, political and cultural milieu, and are reconstructed when there is an historic shift in the way society is organised and social life experienced (Glucksmann 2006, p. 71). Rights emerge from the dialectic relationship between an *a priori* set of doctrinal rights and the exercise of agency. Doctrinal rights are based on secular and religious principles that inform moral norms and customs from 'the top down'. The exercise of agency 'from the ground up' shapes claim-based rights through challenges to hegemonic moral norms (Dean 2004, p. 197). The concept of rights is fluid; rights emerge, expand or are sidelined, and as we will go on to argue, but as Glucksmann (2006, p. 71) points out, any change occurs only as the result of intensive human action.

By Dean and colleagues' (2005, p.12) account, there have been three waves of such action which has shaped our contemporary concept of human rights. The first was shaped by the French and American Revolutions and the Declaration of the Rights of Man – 1789 and the Declaration of Independence, respectively. Both declarations emphasised that men are created equal and have 'a set of inalienable rights' (Yale University 2008; University of Nebraska 2008). The second wave emerged after the disasters of the Second World War in the form of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) and involved acknowledgement of *dignity* as a fundamental dimension of human rights (United Nations 2008). The preamble calls for the 'recognition of the inherent dignity...of all members of the human family' and for a reaffirmation of faith 'in the dignity and worth of the human person'. Dignity is explicitly acknowledged in three of the 30 Articles of the UNDHR, beginning with Article 1 which states 'all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights...'. In the other Articles, dignity is directly tied to the right to work and welfare. Article 22 articulates the social and cultural right to social security as 'indispensable for his [sic] dignity and the free development of his personality'. Article 23 sets out protection against unemployment and the right to work for a rate of pay sufficient to facilitate 'an existence worthy of human dignity' (United Nations 2008).

The third wave of conceptualising human rights is associated with the social, economic, cultural, political and technical processes of globalisation that have impacted upon contemporary forms of social organization and relations (Dean et al 2005, p. 12). In this rendition, the concept of social rights is restricted by third-way welfare discourse that emphasises human development. Since the shift to the global economy, capitalist welfare states have stressed work as a social good from which no one should be excluded (Andrews

2005) and problematised welfare rights as creating an underclass of dependents (Dean 2004, Morris 2006).

Dean et al. (2005) argue that there are varying ideological interpretations of rights. A solidaristic view of rights stresses their inalienable aspect as something that is conferred upon all by virtue of membership of the human race. Therefore, in this conception, rights are unconditional, a birthright – something you do not have to do anything to possess. In contrast, the liberal interpretation stresses contractualism whereby particular freedoms must be traded, thereby introducing the notion of conditionality. There are three objections to this approach. Firstly, responsibilities tend to trump rights and contest the notion of entitlement. Applied to social rights, it can be argued from the solidaristic perspective that this does not accord humans their dignity if we take into account Article 22 of the UNDHR.

Secondly, Morris (2006) argues that Workfare reforms that centre upon contractual policies are accompanied by status issues because of differing conditions imposed upon varying claimant groups, according to their merits or demerits. According to her, vulnerable groups like sole parents and the long-term unemployed are negatively stereotyped by policies which stress responsibilities over rights. If one cannot meet one's designated responsibilities, the label of undeserving claimant will ensue.

Finally, the liberal view of rights centralises the autonomous individual whose dignity flows from the ability to be self-sufficient. To be dependent is to be like a child and therefore robs the adult of their self-determination. What this view ignores, however, is any recognition of *inter-dependency* and the embeddedness of human subjects within communities. Scheff and Retzinger (2000) agree, stating that the focus on individualism disguises 'the web of personal and social relationships that sustain all human beings'. They go on to assert that the myth of the self-sustaining individual generates shame which is suppressed or hidden. As Dean (2004) reminds us, we are all both recipients and givers of care at various stages in our life trajectories. Therefore, to insist upon independence when it is not possible is to insinuate failure, which is further reinforced by the plethora of rules and regulations attendant upon the receipt of income support payments.

The contractarian view has been the most influential in developed nations over the last two decades. It underpinned welfare reforms in these states and Australia is no exception. We now turn our attention to how this has manifested in welfare policy in Australia.

## **Workfare Reforms**

The underlying rationale of post World War II welfare policy was the prevention of exploitation of the weakest members of an unequal society (Goodin et al. 1999), coupled with an attempt to redress gross inequality through full employment (Burgess and Campbell 1998). The processes of globalisation and the concomitant rise of neoliberalism during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the provision of welfare come to be governed by a new rationality, that of obligation and the active subject, as noted above. Recipients were no longer to be treated as passive dependents but encouraged to become active participants in ending their reliance on the state. Thus in 1999, the Howard Government commissioned the Reference Group on Welfare Reform (2000a, 2000b) to review the welfare system. The resulting report outlined a set of reforms consistent with the new discourses of dependency, participation and mutual obligation. This gave rise to a new policy package, *Australians Working Together*, which, according to its own publicity, offered a "balanced package of incentives, obligations and assistance to help Australians take charge of their own future, while still supporting those in

greatest need” (FACS 2003). This is now known as welfare reform and was implemented in stages since the package was announced in 2001.

The latest round of reform was the most far-reaching. It contained five elements of reform: payments, obligations, compliance, services and helping employers. Briefly, this involved the extension of the mutual obligation principle to sole parents whose youngest child is seven years of age and those with disabilities who applied after 1 July 2006, and their reclassification as Newstart claimants (unemployment benefit); changes to the compliance regime which introduced payment suspensions for periods of up to eight weeks; and increases in services designed to assist people into work – for example, extra training and child care places (Darab & Hartman 2007).

From 1 July 2007, parents and people with disabilities who receive income support payments are now required to undertake 15 hours paid work per week and register with a Job Network provider or undertake approved activities (Centrelink 2007). In terms of their activity requirements (mutual obligation), many aspects are left to administrative discretion and parents or partially incapacitated job seekers could be required to seek as many as ten jobs a fortnight, accept a ‘suitable’ job involving up to 180 minutes travel time per day and queue at Centrelink offices each fortnight to report income (ACOSS 2006). Thus these policies centralise work as the only legitimate social contribution.

The end result is an income support system which is characterised by complexity and harsh penalties. Payments have differing eligibility rules, rates of payment and activity requirements according to the age, health and parenting status of the recipient. Moreover, failure to comply with requirements can leave a person without any income whatsoever for a period of months at a time. This appears to depart significantly from the spirit of the social rights conferred by the UNDHR. It was within this context that we commenced our investigation of the effects of work and welfare policies introduced by the Howard Government

## **Methodology**

In this empirical study, participants were recruited across two regional areas of NSW. Regions were defined in relation to the areas designated by the ABS (2006a; 2006b) National Regional Profile series and shared in common the theme of ‘rural crisis’ (McManus & Pritchard 2000). Each region has higher rates of unemployment than the state average and incomes that are 16 per cent lower than the average income in capital cities (ABS 2007).

Recruitment targeted people who had been affected by the latest work and welfare reforms instituted by the Howard Government. In total, 33 individuals participated in semi-structured, taped interviews of an average duration of 40 minutes. Interviews were conducted between July and December 2007. Questions related to any changes experienced because of the reforms and how they felt about these changes. Pseudonyms were used and identifying details changed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

We used a triangulation of methods which included in-depth interviews, documentary research and participant observations (Burgess 1984). Interviews were transcribed, team coded, and in accordance with grounded theory methods, relationships between categories and dominant themes were identified (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Injured dignity was a concern for 19 of the 33 interviewees and was most frequent among income recipients.

## **Discussion**

Our analysis revealed the experience of injured dignity to arise from processes which are either related to a denial of autonomy and/or respect. It must be noted that these categories often intersect and overlap. For example, the denial of autonomy is in itself, a matter of disrespect. We are making an artificial separation here for the purposes of presentation, however it is not always possible to disentangle these threads, so that some of the data presented here are applicable to either category.

### ***Denial of Autonomy***

Kant argues the relationship between autonomy and dignity is as follows: autonomy is the capacity of human beings to establish universal law by means of their will and its orientation to reason. This capacity 'transforms them into ends in themselves and lifts them above every price befitting to a mere means' (Brenner 2006, p.479). Thus for Kant, 'autonomy is the basis of dignity' (1974 in Brenner 2006 p. 479 ). In our study, we found much evidence of the denial of autonomy which, if we follow Kantian reasoning, is an injury to dignity. The transcripts reveal that the denial of autonomy is achieved through the exercise of disciplinary power in two main ways: overt coercion and the subjection of participants to a regime of accountability and requirements that participants themselves labelled as 'jumping through hoops'. We now examine these two themes.

### **Coercion**

Coercion reflects the unequal power relations through which responsibilities and mutual obligations are forged. Centrelink has the legitimate authority to force their clients to comply with their requirements by means of threats to their material security. For example, Neville is a small businessman in receipt of parenting payment who clearly recognises this:

They (C'link) really gave us a hard time and if you question them or say anything, they just say well we'll cut you off. That's all they say...it's demeaning how they have treated us since these changes, that's how I feel.

Note how Neville describes the denial of dignity by stating that being threatened with non-payment is demeaning. The threats are very explicit at times. Bob, a 63 year old in very poor health on Newstart, relates how his new Job Network provider dealt with his chronic incapacity:

They said I had to get a doctor's note and have it down there by the close of business on the following Monday or I would be penalised. They would put the note back to Centrelink to penalise me.

Mustang Sally is an 18 year old homeless jobseeker. She expresses the overt coercion very succinctly:

If you stuff up, Centrelink comes down on you like a ton of bricks but if they stuff up, nothing happens, you just lose out.

Income support recipients actually possess certain rights, such as the right to challenge Centrelink decisions, but they are often unaware of these. This illustrates the way in which disciplinary regimes make participants feel powerless to obtain redress.

## **Jumping Through Hoops**

The participants described the embodied experience of disciplinary power as 'jumping through hoops'. This refers to a range of activities and compliance exercises demanded by Centrelink and the threat of loss of payments. Just accessing the system itself presents a series of obstacles, for example in terms of registering and applying for jobs. Rhonda is a sole parent, student and part-time worker who said that she could not approach the farmer directly for a seasonal job but had to go through Centrelink. She says:

When I did [approach Centrelink], I was told no, I couldn't go for those jobs unless I chose an employment agency to recommend me and before I could do that, I had to have an appointment where they would make up a CV for me and various other things, so I actually didn't go for any of those jobs because it was just too many hoops.

Russell, an unemployed married father in his mid 30s, had a series of obligations to fulfil. He was attempting to apply for an apprenticeship and was completing an approved pre-trades course. However, at the same he was also studying to enter university, which was not an approved activity.

...so you are doing it on your own. I have had to ask for time off to attend my exams. I could have been studying for my exams but I couldn't, because I had to attend these job training sessions and then spend four hours a day looking for jobs that don't exist.

Both Rhonda and Russell demonstrate attempts to be self-reliant, but they are frustrated by the hoops through which they must jump, which actually reinforces their dependency. Russell expresses this as 'getting you to toe their line and do a dance for the man'.

Similarly Bill, a mature age student and job seeker, understands both the coercive nature of the requirements which rob him of his autonomy, and the unproductive character of the exercise of hoop-jumping:

I am not happy with the process that is required of an unemployed person that as I said is very patronising. The system whereby people are required to look for work is very draconian and we are treated like children in so much as, this is what we have to do, this when we have to do it. As I say, I could be spending my time more effectively and more efficiently if they left me alone.

So not only is the experience of income support characterised by a series of complicated procedures to be rigorously adhered to for fear of loss of income, it is also indicative of a loss of autonomy reminiscent of the state of childhood, as Bill's quote illustrates. This is an injury to dignity that even the liberal view of rights would have to acknowledge.

## ***Denial of Respect***

If we return to the notion of dignity as the bestowal of respect which acknowledges each person's worth as a human being, it follows that the denial of respect is an injury to dignity. Brenner (2006) discusses shame as providing a signal of injured dignity. Scheff & Retzinger (2000, p. 96) define shame as 'the feeling that results from seeing one's self negatively in the eyes of the other, such as feeling self-conscious, rejected, unworthy or inadequate.' They distinguish between 'disgrace shame' which is the type of shame associated with public embarrassment or humiliation, and 'discretion shame' which is more subtle and experienced in routine social encounters, for example modesty or shyness. They theorise that shame is the

master social emotion because it constitutes a threat to the social bond. This is why it is suppressed by the individual. It is a marker of stigma.

### **Visibility**

In her study of jobless families in regional New South Wales, Hartman (2005) showed that income support recipients retreat from the intrusive gaze of the world, usually by limiting their social interactions in order to manage a sense of stigma. This is consistent with Goffman's (1963) notion that the stigmatised individual tries to deal with the tension attendant upon his or her status by hiding the offending attribute.

Therefore, when the stigmatised person is made visible, this constitutes the injury to dignity. As Jill, a middle-aged sole parent and part-time worker, explains, 'lots of people can't use a computer. Lots of people can't read properly. And they make anybody with those failings, seem like it is a lack of ability. It's just so humiliating'. Erin went to Centrelink and Job Network between jobs and found it 'a horrible experience'. She related how she went to a new Job Network provider, whose practice it was to ring a bell in the office 'every time someone got a job...oh, I thought, how embarrassing, and they were horrible'. The ringing of a bell draws attention to the jobseeker. The attention is to celebrate the supposed correction of a deficit – the state of joblessness. But what the bell does is to expose the person's alleged deficiency, which the provider has successfully addressed. The above are instances of 'disgrace shame'.

Another way in which income support recipients are rendered visible is through the mechanism of the public queue. Denise and Mary both disliked having to queue. Denise retired from her full-time job in her early 60s thinking that she would qualify for the aged pension, and be able to be with her 72 year old retired husband. Instead she became a jobseeker, and spent eight months looking for voluntary work to satisfy her requirements. "I just ended up a real depressed mess", she says. She describes her first encounter with Centrelink thus:

The first time I had to go in for an interview and had to go back to Centrelink and line up, it's very degrading when you've worked all your life and done volunteer work as well. Like, to go through all this for a few crumbs.

Mary says:

...Put a form in every fortnight, which is the biggest pain, rather than having to ring up every fortnight, which was really good. You've got to go and stand in line and wait for ages...yep and you've got to go and stand in line. They took off ringing up over the phone.

The fact that Mary mentions the public queuing twice within the space of two pages of transcript indicates she is uncomfortable with this practice. Both Denise's and Mary's comments call to mind the disciplinary gaze made famous by Foucault (1979). Mary is an older sole parent who works and does much voluntary work. She sees herself as 'okay'; her situation is manageable and she considers herself a respectable person. This is why she does not like having to stand in line, because to do so is a reminder of dependency, of mendicancy, in a very public way. The previous method of fortnightly phone calls did not expose her to public scrutiny or threaten her sense of respectability.

Yet another method of exposure is the requirement to divulge large amounts of very personal information in order to secure benefits. By declaring the details of one's private life on a



form – who one sleeps with, how much money one has and so on – the applicant is submitting to government surveillance via an apparatus that makes them feel uneasy. For example, Russell says:

Yes, I found it quite depressing and degrading and plus they give you all these questions. Like proving that you are looking for work and asking you every detail about your assets and that sort of thing. Some things I thought they shouldn't know.

Lara says 'I don't feel very comfortable with the questions they ask', whilst Neville, describing his daughter's application for Youth Allowance says, 'the form was incredible...here's the form here, this is the guide where they ask you where you go on holidays. Everything like, anything personal, real in-depth to try and find out if you are hiding money'.

These excerpts make clear that the exposure of a perceived deficiency or inadequacy by whatever means is a deep wound to a person's worth. Denise and Russell both spoke of feeling depressed and degraded, which suggests that the shame has been internalised. Respect is therefore denied through this process.

### **Contempt**

Something that came through in the transcripts very clearly is that many participants articulate a sense of having a low social status. Their dignity is injured when others demonstrate a sense of superiority. Time and again, the phrase 'people look down on you' appeared. For example, Sarah, an older sole parent with seven children says:

People tend to look down at you and treat you like you are nobody if you live in Department of Housing or you receive Centrelink payments...once again, probably because I receive Centrelink, live in Department of Housing, they treat you as a second-rate citizen.

Matt, a young man of 22 years, tells the interviewer that he believes Centrelink and the Job Network have stereotyped his Work for the Dole crew. According to them, '...we are just coasting through being dole bludgers and getting everything done for us basically. That word is just really, really off-putting and we get looked down on'.

Bob, referred to above, felt his new Job Network provider was contemptuous of him and his circumstances when he went to register:

INT: What was her attitude toward you?

BOB: I agree with what this other lady said, Diane, that she didn't set up a relationship or a rapport.

BOB'S WIFE: Just looked down at you, yeah.

BOB: Just, this is my job, and she looked down. I was appalled and I came home and told you (to his wife).

Jill says:

At Centrelink you are being treated like you are rorting the system... I have been treated incredibly rudely by people who tell me you should just get more work where you are working.

From the above examples it would appear that injured dignity is experienced as disgrace shame, which is then internalised. Further proof of this is that the sentiments articulated to the interviewer were conveyed on the understanding of a guarantee of anonymity. These thoughts and feelings would not usually be available for public consumption. Goffman's (1971) notion of 'front stage' and 'back stage' presentations of self helps to explain this. He uses the metaphor of drama to propose that we present our selves as we would like to be seen, as if on a stage, whilst our real selves are protected, or kept 'back stage'. In this study we have accessed the participants' 'back stage' selves but normally these psychic injuries are invisible. Therefore it is impossible to foresee both their immediate and long-term costs.

## Conclusion

The findings validate Dean's (2004) view that Workfare policies focus upon a perceived failure of welfare recipients to be independent, whilst ignoring that humans are mutually inter-dependent beings. Policy changes which foster autonomy, respect and dignity are imperative if persons are to be dependent without dishonour. Such changes might include the removal of payment suspensions and arduous requirements that serve no useful purpose. Finally, a proper recognition of the caring role should be accepted, to reflect the validity of social contributions other than paid employment.

The policies as they now stand are reinforcing the old division between the deserving and the undeserving. We have argued that the disrespect experienced by our participants in the Workfare process is a transgression of their inherent dignity and provides an impoverished version of social rights. Income support recipients are largely hidden from public view and they bear their injuries in silence. However, even from the point of view of the human development approach favoured by a contractarian interpretation of rights, the application of welfare reform to its supposed beneficiaries may not be building human capital after all. Rather, the denial of dignity inflicts wounds, the consequences of which are incalculable.

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