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# **Dilemmas of citizenship: young people's conceptions of un/employment rights and responsibilities.**

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Dilemmas of citizenship: Young people's conceptions of un/employment rights  
and responsibilities.

Abstract

This paper draws on the concept of ideological dilemmas in order to explore how a sample of young people constructed potentially contrary themes of liberal citizenship in discussions of un/employment. The study took place in the context of recent policy developments in the UK which have sought to place a renewed emphasis upon notions of responsible citizenship in relation to both welfare and education policy. A total of 58 participants were interviewed in 24 semi-structured group interviews. In response to direct questions on un/employment, participants could resolve dilemmas concerning welfare rights and the responsibility to contribute to society by emphasising a criterion of effortfulness, thereby adopting a primarily individualistic explanation of unemployment. In other contexts however, this could be replaced by an emphasis on social explanations of unemployment. In particular, participants could treat immigration as a cause of unemployment. These findings are interpreted in terms of people's capacity to construct rhetorical strategies based upon different ideological themes in particular contexts. They are discussed in relation to previous research on social policy discourse and recent debates regarding the appropriateness of seeking to identify ideological themes in discourse.

Dilemmas of citizenship: Young people's conceptions of un/employment  
rights and responsibilities.

Existing work in sociology and social policy which has sought to investigate ordinary understandings of citizenship has tended to find that individuals draw upon different, and sometimes contradictory, conceptions of citizenship (e.g. Lister et al, 2003; Dean, 2004; Dwyer, 2002). At present, analysts' responses to such empirical findings tend to be either to attempt to trace a consistency between apparently contradictory statements (e.g. Dwyer, 2002) or simply to observe that 'popular discourse is usually chaotic and often contradictory' (Dean, 2004, p. 68). Such observations may reflect the fact that extant sociological and social policy analyses, however sophisticated their theoretical approaches, may make problematic assumptions regarding human discursive consciousness. Specifically, the assumption that variability in accounts can be taken as evidence of contradiction in underlying thoughts, attitudes or beliefs has been challenged by discursive and rhetorical approaches to social psychology (e.g. Billig, 1987; Potter & Wetherell, 1987), which have been influential in recent social psychological work on citizenship (e.g. Abell et al, 2006; Barnes et al, 2004; Condor, 2006a; Condor & Gibson, 2007; Hopkins et al, 2003).

The present paper draws in particular on the concept of ideological dilemmas (Billig et al, 1988) in order to focus on the way in which the frequently opposing themes of citizenship ideologies may be constructed, argued over and resolved by social actors themselves in relation to un/employment and welfare.

### *Ideological dilemmas*

Billig et al (1988) introduced their analysis of ideological dilemmas as an alternative to approaches which treat ideology as monolithic and deterministic of human thought and action, and instead emphasised the ways in which social actors could draw flexibly on competing ideological themes. For present purposes, two features of Billig et al's argument are particularly pertinent: First, their distinction between intellectual and lived ideology; and second, their conceptualisation of ideology as inherently dilemmatic.

Intellectual and lived ideology: Billig et al (1988) drew upon a longstanding distinction between ideology as formal, systematised philosophy, and ideology as a form of everyday commonsense which can in some respects be said to be almost synonymous with the concept of culture. The former, intellectual ideology, locates the essence of any given ideology in the works of 'great theorists' (1988, p. 28) associated with that tradition. Conversely, the latter, lived ideology, directs our attention towards the commonsense practices of ordinary social actors.

Dilemmas of ideology: Billig et al further argued that rather than necessarily constituting internally coherent systems, ideologies (both lived and intellectual) may instead be more fruitfully conceptualised as characterised by contrary themes and dilemmas. For example, Billig et al noted that the common social scientific assumption that capitalism is marked by an all-encompassing individualism neglects the extent to which contrary themes can be drawn upon as

‘strictures against selfishness and lack of social responsibility’ (1988, p. 35). Similarly, they cite Edelman’s (1977) study of political language which suggests that lived ideology is characterised by both individualistic and social explanations of poverty: ‘On the one hand people share the myth that the poor are to blame for their own plight: themes of drunkenness, laziness and weakness of individual character figure largely in this mythology ... [but t]here is another social myth, which expresses sympathy with the poor as helpless victims of an unjust society’ (Billig et al, 1988, p. 40-41). This is not to suggest that such themes will always be accorded equal weight, and some previous research (e.g. Dean, 2004) has found that contemporary popular discourse concerning welfare tends to prioritise individualism, with only a ‘residual’ place for more ‘solidaristic’ themes. However, Billig et al (1988) point out that even when some themes may appear to dominate over others, we should expect the counter themes to be evident, for the very formulation of an argument presumes that counter-arguments are possible (cf. Billig, 1987).

This necessarily brief outline of Billig et al’s (1988) perspective is of course unable to do justice to the many subtleties and complexities of their arguments and analyses. Nevertheless, this summary does draw our attention to two aspects of the approach that may be susceptible to recent critiques of work which seeks to identify ideological themes in discourse. The first concerns the distinction between intellectual and lived ideology, and the second concerns the very enterprise of identifying ideologies in discourse itself.

From 'intellectual' and 'lived' ideology to 'in theory' and 'in practice' accounts:

The distinction between the realms of the 'intellectual' and the 'everyday' may be problematic insofar as 'intellectual' work can be seen to be based upon routine and mundane 'everyday' practices (e.g. Latour, 1987; Latour & Woolgar, 1986). Similarly, as Billig et al (1988) acknowledge, it would be surprising if the themes of cultural commonsense within the particular socio-historical context in which 'great theorists' were writing did not themselves become embedded within their formal texts. The distinction between intellectual and lived ideology might therefore be usefully re-located at the level of discourse itself. Rather than representing different modes of discourse produced by, on the one hand, 'great theorists', and on the other hand, 'ordinary' folk, we might seek to explore the ways in which any speaker talks about social issues *in theory* and *in practice*.

Of relevance here is Potter and Litton's (1985) critique of social representations research in which they highlighted an important distinction between representations which are *used* in the explanation of some event or phenomenon, and those which are merely *mentioned* (e.g. in order to dismiss them). Amongst explanations that are *used*, Potter and Litton drew a further distinction between *use in theory* and *use in practice*. It is important to note that this distinction need not map directly onto different 'types' of discourse. The identification of utterances as *in theory* or *in practice* thus depends more on the way in which the concept of interest is invoked in whatever interaction is being analysed. Whereas the former involve accounts provided at a more general level of abstraction, which may be used to explain the phenomenon of interest itself (e.g. explanations of the causes of unemployment formulated as generalities), the

latter may involve explanations worked up in order to explain why some other issue or concern is desirable, problematic, irrelevant, or whatever (e.g. invoking unemployment in the course of arguing against immigration). Essentially, the difference can be seen as that between talking directly about a concept or issue (*in theory*), and invoking it in the course of discussing some other concept or issue (*in practice*).

This begins to direct our attention towards the importance of action orientation – a central tenet of discursive work – which refers to the functional aspects of discourse (cf. Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In discussing any given social issue, there are likely to be multiple actions being performed on a moment-by-moment basis. For example, in the context of research interview talk, we would expect the talk of both interviewer and interviewee to be oriented towards bringing off the interview as a particular type of institutional discursive accomplishment (see e.g. Potter & Hepburn, 2005). As part of this process we might find a range of specific interpersonal actions being performed (e.g. questioning, answering, identity management) in the local interactional context. Over and above this, we might also expect to see people's talk being oriented towards more distal ideological functions, such as holding a particular group to account for some social problem or other. Although such formulations might also be oriented toward some piece of discursive business in the immediate interactional context, ideological functions are equally important insofar as they have the potential to reproduce inequalities on a broader scale. For example, the blaming of another group for some state of affairs might serve to manage accountability in the presence of a social science researcher, but equally it could



constitute yet another representation of that particular group as being a ‘problem’, and in this respect contribute in some small way to the maintenance of the group’s disadvantage or stigmatization. Condor (2006b) has pointed to the tendency of social psychologists to assume that this occurs by virtue of something akin to a ‘magical’ process, and indeed the role of each such usage in the maintenance of broader social relations is difficult, if not impossible, to track. However, writ large such constructions bolster inequalities and exclusion in the ways identified by numerous discursive researchers (e.g. Dixon et al., 1994; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). This latter aspect of the functionality of discourse brings us to the second point of engagement with critiques of discursive work which seeks to address issues of ideology.

Interaction, ideology or both?: A focus for debate amongst conversation analysts and discursive and rhetorical psychologists over the last decade or so has concerned the appropriateness of seeking to identify cultural or ideological themes in discourse (e.g. Billig, 1999a, b; Schegloff, 1997, 1998, 1999a, b; Wetherell, 1998; Wooffitt, 2005). Related to these debates are a series of criticisms of the use of interview methods in discourse analytic work (e.g. Edwards & Stokoe, 2004; Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Rather than seeing these debates as dealing with two discrete issues, it is preferable to highlight their inter-relatedness in the way described by Wooffitt (2005, p. 172), who points to ‘a notable tendency in Foucauldian and critical discourse analytic studies of interview data to focus on the respondents’ turns as if they were discrete speech events isolated from the stream of social interaction in which they were produced.’

Several of the criticisms of the derivation of ideological themes from interview data are well made insofar as many analyses of ideology in discourse would indeed benefit from increased attention to local context. However, from the point of view of approaches which have sought to draw links between discourse and ideology the response has been to suggest that granting analytic primacy to the local context of interaction is equally as problematic as its neglect (e.g. Edley, 2005; Wetherell, 1998).

The challenge therefore becomes one of avoiding, as far as possible, the twin perils of interactional and ideological determinism, and it is here that the concept of ideological dilemmas may be of particular use given its emphasis on the *active* nature of the relationship between ideology and discourse. Rather than treating ideological themes as relatively passively infusing people's talk, the concept of ideological dilemmas points the analyst towards an attention to the ways in which people need to actively construct and re-construct ideology anew in any given moment of interaction. Rather than reflecting a monolithic, unitary conception of some ideology or other which simply determines the talk of individual social actors, ideology is conceived of as a range of potentially conflicting tropes which are actively constructed by speakers in the course of performing some piece of discursive business within a specific interactional context.

The particular focus of the present paper will be on the utility of this approach in analysing the social citizenship talk of young people in relation to un/employment. Before presenting the analysis, however, it is necessary to briefly outline why the un/employment discourse of these young people in northern

England may be particularly fertile territory for the analysis of competing ideological themes in citizenship discourse.

*Rights and responsibilities, un/employment, and citizenship education*

Recent UK government approaches to social citizenship in general, and un/employment welfare in particular, have tended to reflect Giddens's (1998, p. 65) 'motto' for Third Way politics of '*no rights without responsibilities*' (italics in original). Welfare provision has thus been made increasingly contingent upon individuals recognising and meeting a range of responsibilities (see e.g. Clarke, 2005; Dwyer, 2000, 2004; Lister, 2002; Lund, 1999). For example, since 2002 the entitlement to Jobseeker's Allowance – and indeed to a range of other benefits – has been contingent upon the individual attending regular meetings with an adviser at Job Centre Plus (Dwyer, 2004). Indeed, the continued use of the term 'Jobseeker's Allowance' in policy discourse, rather than alternatives such as 'unemployment benefit', indicate that the unemployed individual is expected to be actively seeking employment in order to claim. Such policies tend to reinforce the message identified by Lister (2002, p. 127) that paid employment constituted the New Labour government's 'supreme citizenship responsibility' (see also Fairclough, 2000).

In a related policy development, 2002 saw the introduction of Citizenship Education to the National Curriculum in England following the report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship (1998). This report employed a conceptualisation of citizenship which placed renewed emphasis on individual responsibility (see e.g. Osler & Starkey, 2005). These moves towards emphasising responsibility in

both citizenship education and welfare policy raise questions about precisely how young people themselves conceptualise social citizenship rights and responsibilities. However, existing survey research exploring young people's conceptions of citizenship tends not to cover un/employment rights and responsibilities – and indeed social citizenship in general – in any great depth (e.g. Haste & Hogan, 2006; Kennedy, 2007; Kerr et al, 2002; Lopes et al., 2009). The present study therefore aims to address questions concerning young people's conceptions of un/employment rights and responsibilities through an analysis of a sample of 14-16 year-olds' research interview talk, collected in the first stage of a larger study of young people's citizenship discourse in England (see also Gibson & Hamilton, in press).

## Method

### *Participants*

The present study involved 24 semi-structured group interviews with 14-16 year-old children (school years 10 and 11). A total of 58 children from four different schools (three state schools and one private school) in northern England took part in the research. Of these, 16 were in school year 10 (ages 14-15) and 42 were in school year 11 (ages 15-16). Twenty-three participants were male, and 35 were female. All of the participants indicated their ethnicity as white British. The interviews were conducted in March and April 2006 in the participants' schools. All the participants were undertaking Citizenship Education classes, and as such this sample of 14-16 year-olds were part of the wider age cohort which had been in the first two years of secondary education (years 7 and 8) when compulsory

Citizenship Education was introduced. As such, the sample is made up of participants who were part of the first group of pupils to reach their mid-teenage years having had Citizenship Education since the age of 11 and 12.

Access to schools was negotiated by writing to head teachers requesting permission to conduct the research in their school. Following initial agreement from head teachers, further discussions regarding the research were then conducted with the members of staff responsible for the teaching of citizenship. Informed consent was also collected from the participants themselves – given that the interviews took place on school premises, it was important to ensure that students were not led to view participation in the study as a ‘natural’ extension of their taught classes, and as such potentially view their participation as expected of them by their class teacher. Our communications and discussions with head teachers and class teachers sought to specify this, and we tried as far as possible to impress this upon the participants themselves. The research received ethical approval from York St John University’s institutional ethics committee.

### *Interviews*

The interviews were designed to elicit small group discussion amongst young people on a broad array of topics that might be subsumed under the general heading of ‘citizenship’. Group interviews were used in order to enable the collection of data which featured more discussion than might be the case between a single interviewee and interviewer. Participants were interviewed by a single interviewer in groups of 2-4. Seventeen interviews were conducted with pairs of

participants, four interviews involved groups of three participants, and three interviews involved groups of four participants.

The interview schedule was based in part on previous research (e.g. Condor & Gibson, 2007; Lister et al, 2003), as well as including questions specifically generated for this project. Seven main questions covering topics such as the single European currency, military service, social inequality, jobs, immigration and Britishness, political participation and environmental issues were printed on cards and presented one at a time, with the interviewer using follow-up prompts as necessary. In keeping with the general spirit of discursive interviewing (see e.g. Potter & Wetherell, 1987, pp.163-5), as little as possible in the interviews was standardized, other than the presentation of the main question cards. This extended to the use of seven different interviewers (five females and two males, including the author). Participants were free to direct discussion towards their own interests and concerns, though interviewers sought as far as possible to keep discussions from ranging too far from the specific question asked. Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 20 and 45 minutes. Transcriptions were rendered in standard orthography and produced for the entire dataset. The rationale for this was to allow for analysis of any and all of the interview material, rather than just those portions pre-defined as analytically interesting.

#### *Analytic procedure*

The analysis undertaken for the present paper proceeded from within a broadly social constructionist framework (see e.g. Burr, 2003). Rather than

treating the data as representative of underlying ‘thoughts’, ‘opinions’ or ‘feelings’, or as a window on to social ‘reality’, the analysis was concerned with the accounting practices and rhetorical strategies employed.

Initial selection of data proceeded from the repeated reading and re-reading of the transcripts which pointed to the potential contrast between commonsense explanations of unemployment offered in different contexts within the interview setting. Instances of talk around issues concerning un/employment were extracted from the dataset and categorized according to the rhetorical strategies used by participants. The next stage of analysis involved comparing data from different parts of the same interview and across different interviews, and, during the process of identifying rhetorical strategies, comparing instances of each type of strategy with one another, and with alternative strategies. Of particular use at this stage was the technique of deviant case analysis (see e.g. Wiggins & Potter, 2008). This involved deliberately seeking out instances within the dataset which appeared to contradict, or otherwise cause problems for, the emerging analytic narrative.

Microanalysis of individual segments of data drew on the specific techniques of discursive and rhetorical psychology, including a focus on issues of accountability (e.g. Buttny, 1993), fact construction (e.g. Potter, 1996) and the management of stake and interest (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992), as well as, crucially, the identification of instances of the use of rhetorical commonplaces and competing ideological themes. If the earlier stages of the analysis can be characterized as involving an attention to the broad types of rhetorical strategies used, then this stage involved a focus on the specific *constructions* used in the

formulation of these strategies, and the functions of these constructions.

Functions were identified at two broad levels – those performed within the interactional context of the research interview (e.g. blaming, accounting, self-presentation), and the potentially more distal functions of the use of particular rhetorical strategies (e.g. social inclusion/exclusion). As noted above, these are not necessarily mutually exclusive – the same utterance can perform both types of functions – but ultimately the distinction is between those functions which pertain to the immediate local context, and those which legitimate particular ways of organising the world or structuring society. It should be emphasised that this part of the analysis fed back into the previous stage. In this respect, the analysis was not linear, but iterative.

### Analysis

The analysis proceeded with the identification of all instances of talk about un/employment. The majority of these occurred in discussions following from three question cards: *What is the most important job in society?*; *Is social inequality a problem today?*; and *Some people have suggested that people who move to this country should take a test to see how British they are. Do you think that this is a good idea?*<sup>1</sup> Within these discussions, talk about un/employment tended to take one of two broad forms. Whereas the first of these questions tended to lead – usually by way of further follow-up prompts – to explicit discussions of un/employment rights and responsibilities, the latter two questions often resulted in discussions of un/employment in relation to immigration. This distinction can be understood broadly in terms of the distinction between use in



theory and use in practice (cf. Potter & Litton, 1985). Whereas the former discussions involved relatively direct questions concerning participants' 'thoughts' about un/employment rights and responsibilities which led participants to outline general positional statements regarding un/employment welfare, the latter discussions typically featured the use of un/employment *as a practical rhetorical resource*. The following outline of the analysis will deal with these two types of discussion in turn.

#### *Un/employment rights and responsibilities in theory*

Of particular interest is the way in which participants invoked themes of 'effort' and/or 'laziness' in order to resolve dilemmas between, broadly speaking, the right to welfare and the responsibility to contribute to society. As will be apparent from some of the extracts presented below, this dilemma was frequently a function of the interviewer's line of questioning.

#### The responsibility to 'make an effort'

When discussing unemployment welfare, participants oriented to a normative work ethic. Notably, in several interviews (N = 12) participants drew upon a trope of *effortfulness* (Gibson, 2009), in which 'making an effort', 'willingness' to work, or not being 'lazy' were invoked as pre-conditions for the receipt of unemployment benefits. For example:

#### **Extract 1: 'Because they're lazy'**

1 I: Yeah. OK. And do you think that everybody has the

2 right to have a job?

3 Lee: Yeah.

4 Mick: Yeah.

5 I: Yeah.

6 Lee: Uhuh.

7 I: Why's that?

8 Lee: Because everybody, has the same rights as everybody  
9 else so I don't see why, one person should- shouldn't  
10 have a job, so.

11 I: Uhuh, yeah?

12 Lee: Yeah.

13 I: So do you think that everyone should have to work  
14 then?

15 Mick: Well it should be up to them. They should all have the  
16 option of being able to work, but it should be their  
17 choice.

18 I: So if it's their choice, do you think they should be  
19 entitled to support then, if you've just chosen not to  
20 work?

21 Mick: Well if they have a reason that they can't work –

22 Lee: Yeah, if they're – if they're like disabled or got some  
23 other reason then –

24 I: Yeah.

25 Lee: But, people that just choose not to work, then –

26 Mick: Because they're lazy then no.

27 Lee: Yeah, no.

(Mick & Lee, year 11)<sup>2</sup>

The first thing worthy of note about this extract is that it displays a number of features which are fairly typical of semi-structured interviewing. For instance, what Potter and Hepburn (2005) refer to as the 'flooding' of the interaction with the concerns of social science researchers is apparent in the direct questions concerning the 'right' to have a job (ll. 1-2), 'entitle[ment]' to support (l. 19) and so on. Equally we can see how the talk of the interviewer and interviewees is constitutive of the institutional character of the interview-as-an-interview insofar as the interviewer's turns consist of a series of questions concerning what the participants 'think' (e.g. l. 1; l. 13; l. 18) as well as minimal receipt tokens (e.g. l. 5; l. 24: 'yeah') and follow-up prompts (e.g. l. 11: 'Uhuh, yeah?'). The respondents provide a series of answers to the interviewer's questions, without asking any questions of their own. Similarly, the interviewer does not construct any turns as reports of her own 'thoughts' or 'opinions'.

As numerous authors have pointed out (e.g. Roulston, 2006; Wooffitt & Widdicombe, 2006), these, and other features of interview talk mark it out as quite different from other discursive contexts. In this respect, we should therefore be careful about implying that the discussion simply represents some general instance of 'discourse', as if this same interaction could have happened in any context. It is clearly an interview, and, notably, the interviewer's turns are evidently crucial in shaping the interaction insofar as the questions are fairly directive. It is the interviewer who introduces the issue of 'right[s]' which occasions first minimal

agreement (ll. 3-4: 'yeah') from Mick and Lee, and then, following the interviewer's receipt token (l. 5: 'yeah') and prompt (l. 7: 'Why's that?'), Lee's formulation of something approximating a liberal rights-based version of citizenship predicated on a notion of universal entitlement (ll. 8-10: 'everybody, has the same rights as everybody else'). It is the interviewer who then introduces the themes of duty and compulsion (ll. 13-14): 'do you think that everyone should have to work then?'), in response to which Mick formulates an answer based around the principle of 'choice' (ll. 15-17). The interviewer then contrasts the principles of universal rights and freedom of choice by asking a question which implies possible incompatibility between the two. Specifically, the entitlement to 'support' is queried for those who have exercised a 'choice' to remain unemployed. Of potential importance here is the use of 'just' in the construction of a hypothetical group of people who have '*just* chosen not to work' (ll. 19-20), which constructs such persons as having *no good reason* for their choice (see Lee, 1987, on the functions of *just*). This turn therefore positions Mick and Lee's responses on the issue thus far as potentially incompatible, and as therefore requiring a further account.

To suggest that Mick and Lee's subsequent turns on lines 21-27 represent the resolution of an ideological dilemma which was simply present in their talk independently of the interviewer's turns would therefore be inappropriate, and would represent an instance of analysis taking place in what Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995, p. 64) refer to as an 'interactional vacuum'. Nevertheless, following Wetherell (1998, 2003) we might still suggest that even here, the specific interactional nature of the interview context is not sufficient to explain the

turns at lines 21-27. Here, we see the dilemmatic tension introduced by the interviewer resolved through Mick and Lee's joint construction of a contrast between a category of people who 'have a reason that they can't work', with Lee offering the example of disability, and a category of people who are 'lazy'. To point to the ways in which this is worked up in response to a series of direct questions from the interviewer, and is therefore constructed by Mick and Lee in order to perform the very specific business of demonstrating consistency in what they 'think' in the local context of the interview, is not to deny the importance of pointing to the links between this formulation and the themes of cultural commonsense. We may note, for example, how the assumptions embodied in the use of 'lazy' are those noted by Edelman (1977) and Billig et al (1988) as representing a commonsense individualistic explanation of social disadvantage. Such cultural resources therefore potentially function ideologically to sustain an individualistic conception of unemployment which ultimately positions people as responsible for their own employment circumstances.

Of course Billig et al (1988) pointed out that individualistic explanations of poverty, unemployment, and so on are only one pole of an individual-social dilemma, and in the following extract we can see a participant orientating to this opposing explanation. The following extract provides a further contrast with extract 1 insofar as one participant argues that paid employment constitutes a responsibility. However, the basic assumption of the necessity of individual effort remains:

**Extract 2: ‘make proof that they’re making an effort’**

- 1 I: Yeah? Good stuff. What about sort of in general, do  
2 you think people should have to work? Or do you think  
3 it’s all right if people don’t want to have a job?
- 4 Tim: No, I think people should work, even if it’s just like a  
5 part-time job.
- 6 I: Yeah.
- 7 Tim: Because it’s not fair on everyone else if like people  
8 work and – if people work and they’re paying for other  
9 people sitting on their bums doing nothing, I don’t think  
10 that’s very fair.
- 11 Rob: They always say they can’t get a job but there’s plenty  
12 of opportunities out there. I mean all you have to do is  
13 look in like newspapers and that and there’ll be a job  
14 in there.
- 15 Tim: And yeah, you’ve got to work your way up haven’t  
16 you?
- 17 Rob: Yeah.
- 18 Tim: So you’ve got to start somewhere.
- 19 I: Yeah. What about erm, people who, I don’t know, for  
20 whatever reason, they can’t get a job. Do you think  
21 they should be entitled to some support?
- 22 Rob: Yeah.
- 23 Tim: Yeah. I do, because, they could have like bad back-

24 bad backgrounds and like want to pick themselves up.  
25 I think that they should like, if they're willing to do it  
26 then they should, you know, get a chance.  
27 I: Yeah. So when would you – so you'd support people  
28 then who can't get a job but also they've – you know,  
29 people have got to get a job – so where do you sort of  
30 draw the cut-off line? Have they got to do anything to  
31 get this support or?  
32 Tim: I don't know. They've got to ask for it obviously  
33 haven't they, because –  
34 Rob: I think they've got to come to some sort of agreement  
35 that if they're gonna, like, get benefits, they have to  
36 start applying for jobs and make proof that they are  
37 doing it.  
38 Tim: Yeah, make proof that they're making an effort.  
39 Because if they're not making an effort then they  
40 shouldn't get aided should they, because it's not –  
41 I: Sure.

(Tim & Rob, year 11)

The interviewer's initial question directs the participants to provide a 'general' account, and we may again note how the dilemmatic tension between rights and responsibilities is introduced by the interviewer (ll. 1-3), with Tim then arguing that people should undertake some form of paid employment. Tim articulates a position whereby the potentially unfair effects of someone not working outweigh

any right to choose to remain unemployed (l. 7: 'it's not fair on everybody else'). The interviewer's question is also significant insofar as it constructs a category of people who 'don't want to have a job' (l. 3). As in extract 1, the possibility that someone may freely choose not to enter paid employment is explained by Tim in terms of laziness, albeit in this instance with a colloquial reference to 'people sitting on their bums doing nothing' (l. 9). This is reinforced by Rob's suggestion that it is in fact easy to find employment, with the impression being created of a category of people who cannot even make the effort to carry out the simple activity of looking in a newspaper. However, at this point the characterisation of the category of people involved has subtly changed. Whereas the interviewer's initial question referred to the hypothetical case of people who 'don't want to have a job' (l. 3), Rob constructs a group of people who 'say they can't get a job' (l. 11). Thus Rob not only treats not wanting to have a job as accountable, but also constructs the people involved as being aware of this accountability. This allows him to dismiss what he constructs as the typical account offered by such individuals by citing the ready availability of jobs.

Subsequently, the interviewer's question on lines 19-21 changes the focus from people who '*say they* can't get a job' to people who 'can't get a job'. Both Rob and Tim offer token agreements that such individuals should be entitled to 'support', before Tim expands on his answer by constructing a category of people who may have 'bad backgrounds' (ll. 23-24). Here, then, we see the opposing theme of social reasons for unemployment being constructed in response to the interviewer's non-specific reference to people being unable to get a job 'for whatever reason' (ll. 19-20). However, Tim's argument that such individuals



should be entitled to support is limited by the condition that they ‘want to pick themselves up’ and that ‘they’re willing to do it’ (ll. 24-25). In Tim’s formulation, having a ‘bad background’ is not a sufficient condition to be given ‘a chance’ (l. 26) – one first needs to *want* and be *willing* to pick oneself up.

As in extract 1, the interviewer’s subsequent questions on lines 27-31 constructs the positions articulated by the respondents thus far as being potentially inconsistent, and as therefore necessitating further accounting work. In response, Rob and Tim begin to formulate some specific conditions for the receipt of unemployment benefits. Notably, the *effortfulness* trope is emphasised once again (ll. 38-39). However, this is accompanied by a further condition – to ‘make proof’ that one is ‘applying for jobs’ (l. 36), and ultimately that one is ‘making an effort’ (l. 38). Thus not only does one have to be *willing* to escape from the effects of a ‘bad background’, and ‘make an effort’ to find employment, but one has to actively demonstrate that one is doing so. We can see here how, even when a social explanation of unemployment is invoked, the display of individual effort is constructed as a basic criterion for entitlement to welfare.

#### Disability, caring and parenting: Exceptions to the rule?

We have already seen in extract 1 how disability could be cited as a legitimate reason for not being in paid employment. This was mentioned in 12 interviews, and additionally in four interviews participants invoked illness/health problems in a broadly similar fashion. As is the case in extract 1, these reasons for not being in paid employment were frequently contrasted with ‘laziness’.

Other participants argued that some individuals engaged in important unpaid forms of labour and could therefore be legitimately exempted from paid employment. Notably, in some interviews in the present dataset participants argued that parental (N = 4) or care (N = 3) responsibilities constituted valid grounds for exemption from paid employment. For example:

**Extract 3: ‘if they’re caring for someone at home’**

- 1 I: Erm, do you think everyone should have to work?  
2 Jack: Yeah.  
3 Kate: Mm. (3) But if like they’re c- if they’re caring for  
4 someone at home, then that’s kind of their job, even  
5 though th- it isn’t, an actual job. So they don- they  
6 shouldn’t have to work. But I think it’s - I don’t think  
7 it’s right when people just don’t work at all and they  
8 claim benefits all the time. It’s not right. You should  
9 have to work for your money, like everyone else does.

(Jack & Kate, year 10)

In this extract, Kate treats the interviewer’s reference to ‘work’ as referring to paid employment – as evidenced by her gloss on caring as a ‘kind of’, rather than an ‘actual’, job – but nevertheless argues for the exemption of carers from having to ‘work’ (i.e. undertake paid employment). We then see the construction of a category of people who ‘just don’t work at all and ... claim benefits all the time’. Kate uses extreme case formulations (ECF; Pomerantz, 1986) to establish this category of people as particularly undeserving. Not only do they claim benefits

whilst not working, they ‘don’t work *at all*’ and they ‘claim benefits *all the time*.’ Finally, Kate cites a general principle whereby ‘you should have to work for your money, like everyone else does’. Insofar as carers are doing a ‘kind of ... job’ in return for their welfare payments, they are thus not in fact treated as genuine exceptions to the general rule that one must work or otherwise display effort in order to receive an income.

Interestingly, parental responsibilities were alone in the present dataset in constituting a controversial case for exemption. In addition to being cited as legitimate grounds for exemption in four interviews, in three interviews the opposing argument was offered – that parental responsibilities did not exempt one from entering paid employment. For example:

**Extract 4: ‘it’s just laziness’**

- 1 I: Yeah. Do you think people should be allowed to not  
2 work if they don’t want to work?  
3 Dina: I think they should be able to, even if it’s just a part  
4 time job for a couple of hours. Or a few days a week  
5 or something.  
6 I: Okay.  
7 Tracy: Some mothers live on child benefits don’t they, and  
8 they don’t go to work. Even if they’re grown up  
9 they’re still saying ‘oh no, I can’t.’ And I think that’s  
10 unfair to other people, it’s just laziness.

(Tracy & Dina, year 10)

On lines 7-10 Tracy specifically applies Dina's argument that people 'should' work to 'mothers [who] live on child benefits'. Through the use of a tag question (*don't they*), Tracy treats knowledge of the existence of this category as shared and taken for granted. She further specifies the problematic category as consisting of mothers of grown-up children, and it is notable that the use of an extreme case formulation ('*Even if they're grown up*'), hypothetical reported speech ('they're still saying 'on no, I can't''; Myers, 1999), and the word 'still' creates an image of temporal continuity with these 'mothers' continuing to resist engagement in the labour market even when their reason for non-engagement has been removed. The hypothetical speech in particular can be seen as an attempt to enhance the factual status of her claim through the provision of an example which is presented not in her own voice, but through the words of others. This allows her to conclude that the reason why such 'mothers' in fact do not work is 'just laziness'.

#### *The rhetorical mobilization of immigration as a cause of unemployment*

The data presented thus far seem to confirm existing analyses which point to the dominance of individualistic conceptions of un/employment, with disability being treated as the only legitimate exemption from the general rule that income should be contingent upon effort. However, in order to further complicate this picture, the analysis concludes by exploring an extract which illustrates the way in which a social explanation for unemployment could be mobilised in the context of discussions of immigration.

In 16 interviews issues concerning un/employment were raised by participants in discussions of immigration. We can treat these discussions as

involving the use of un/employment ‘in practice’ insofar as un/employment was mobilised *by participants* as a rhetorical resource in the course of discussing immigration. Of particular interest are eight interviews in which participants argued that immigration had the potential to lead to unemployment amongst the rest of the population. For example:

**Extract 5: ‘They could be stealing all our jobs’**

1 Kate: Yeah, but I still think there’s too many people moving

2 over to Britain, from different countries.

3 I: All right that’s an interesting area to get into. Who do

4 you think should be allowed in?

5 Jack: People with a trade, that can help the country.

6 Kate: I disagree with that. I think we’ve got our trade over

7 here, why do we need their trade when we – we’re all

8 right. They could be stealing all our jobs, bringing their

9 trade over here. All our people are out of jobs when

10 they were here first.

(Jack & Kate, year 10)

The interviewer follows up Kate’s initial turn concerning ‘people moving over to Britain, from different countries’, marking this as an ‘interesting’ topic shift. This constructs the topic as one that the interviewer wishes to sanction further discussion of, and of course this shaping of the participants’ subsequent turns is important. The actual question asked by the interviewer again asks the participants what they ‘think’, and as such discursive space is opened up to speak

in general terms about ‘who ... should be allowed in’. In the context of this formulation of her positional statement on immigration, we then see Kate mobilise unemployment as a rhetorical resource. Notably, Kate counters Jack’s argument by suggesting that rather than ‘help[ing] the country’, immigrants ‘could be stealing all our jobs’. The metaphor of theft construes immigrants’ employment seeking as criminally illegitimate, and the use of ECFs (‘all our jobs’; ‘All our people’) constitutes the problem as acutely serious. Thus Kate argues that immigrants, no matter how well qualified, have no rights to seek employment in Britain, reserving such rights for ‘our people’.

Moreover, in this extract we see a clear example of a social explanation for unemployment. Kate treats the arrival of people with a ‘trade’ from ‘different countries’ as causing ‘all our people’ to be ‘out of jobs’. This provides a contrast with her earlier argument in which she constructed a category of people who ‘don’t work at all and ... claim benefits all the time’ (see extract 3) which drew upon the normative work ethic common in discussions of un/employment in theory.

In this context, then, the agency of individual members of ‘our people’ is treated as potentially limited by immigration. Whereas previously, individuals who find themselves unemployed were exhorted to ‘make an effort’, with the underlying assumption that unemployment may be the result of laziness, in the context of discussions concerning immigration, an alternative version of unemployment could be constructed by participants – one in which ‘our people’ were helpless victims of the process of immigration. These arguments construct two contrasting versions of human agency – an individualistic conception of

humans as being relatively unconstrained agents, and a conception of humans as being at the mercy of social and economic processes beyond their control. What is striking about the present data is that both of these conceptions can be used to argue for exclusion from claiming social citizenship rights. When un/employment was constructed as a matter of individual effort, social rights could be denied to those who do not display this effort. When un/employment was treated as a matter of processes of immigration, social rights could be denied to those who are not members of the polity.

### Discussion

The present study has demonstrated the ways in which ideological themes of social citizenship, agency and membership are constructed, wrestled with and resolved in the research interview talk of a sample of 14-16 year-olds in Northern England. In discussions of un/employment in theory tensions between rights and responsibilities could be resolved through the invocation of the work ethic and the construction of the 'effortful citizen' (cf. Gibson, 2009). However, in discussions of immigration, an alternative criterion based around membership could also be constructed. This effectively constructed unemployment amongst the resident population of the UK as the result of socio-economic processes of migration. This variation need not be seen as evidence of the limitations of human discursive consciousness, or even as necessarily contradictory. Whereas previous research which has studied popular discourse on welfare has tended to treat such findings as a problem which the analyst must seek to address through tracing consistencies in participants' reasoning, it is possible to suggest that these individual and social

explanations for unemployment represent different commonsense ways of talking about unemployment which are occasioned by the contexts in which they occur.

Notably, in extracts 1 and 2 the participants whose utterances were constructed by the interviewer as being potentially inconsistent sought to resolve this through the construction of a criterion of effortfulness. Equally, participants who constructed unemployment in both individual and social terms might seek to construct consistencies in their lines of argument themselves if they were worked up as being in need of clarification. Importantly, however, this would depend upon these lines of argument being worked up *as contradictory* in the first place. To do this as part of the analysis, as has been done in previous research, is to step momentarily outside of the analytic mode and to engage in the very arguments which our participants themselves have been debating. As will by now be clear, this represents a key shift from many previous analyses of citizenship talk in that the status of any given line of argument as inherently contradictory or not is treated as a participants' concern, rather than as a matter for the analyst.

A further way in which the present findings point to a more complicated picture than suggested by previous research on popular conceptions of welfare and social citizenship is in their implications for our understanding of the 'dominance' of one ideology over another. Based on the first part of the present analysis, it may be suggested that an individualistic conception of unemployment appears to dominate over what, following Dean (2004), we might refer to as a 'solidaristic' ideology. However, this is only the case when discussing un/employment in theory. The fact that many social scientific approaches (both qualitative and quantitative) rely on participants' responses to direct questions concerning their



‘thoughts’ on the topic of interest to the researcher may account for why previous research has tended to find individualistic ideology dominating. In contrast, when we explore how participants construct unemployment in relation to immigration, we see something quite different. It is therefore difficult to maintain the image of individualistic ideologies dominating over solidaristic ones when confronted with formulations which prioritise the employment rights of one’s fellow citizens over those of ‘immigrants’. Moreover, this variety of ‘solidarity’ is clearly circumscribed by state borders – the corollary of solidarity with one’s fellow citizens here is the exclusion of non-citizens (cf. Billig, 1995).

The consequence of this line of argument is, therefore, to suggest that rather than seeing solidaristic discourses as necessarily providing a potential antidote to individualistic conceptions of social citizenship (cf. Dean, 2004), the potentially exclusionary nature of both should be considered. Whereas conceptions of welfare entitlement based around ‘effort’ function to hold individual co-nationals to account for their own status as unemployed, so those conceptions which display ‘solidarity’ with co-nationals function to deny social citizenship rights for those defined as not belonging to this group. Following the arguments of authors such as Wetherell and Potter (1992) and Billig et al. (1988), we might therefore suggest that these ways of talking about social citizenship rights and responsibilities potentially serve to reinforce a series of ideological assumptions around who is entitled to welfare, and what those entitlements are contingent upon.

It should be emphasised that the limited nature of the sample points to the need for further research exploring these issues with more diverse groups of

participants. Nevertheless, some tentative conclusions can be drawn from the present study which demand exploration in future work. First, it is notable that for these respondents, questions concerning the commonsense psychology of individuals were inseparable from debates concerning who should and shouldn't be entitled to receive unemployment benefits. As discursive psychologists have noted, psychological terms are used to perform social actions in a variety of contexts (Edwards & Potter, 1992). In particular, the use of terms such as 'effort' and 'laziness' to formulate judgments concerning the merits of welfare claimants suggests the availability not only of a generally individualistic conception of social citizenship rights and responsibilities, but also of a conception of rights as specifically contingent upon displaying certain psychological characteristics. The ideological function of such accounts is to predicate social citizenship rights on individual psychology, and ultimately to legitimize the denial of social citizenship as being the result of a fair system which rewards individual 'effort' and punishes 'laziness' (see also Gibson, 2009). Such a set of assumptions inevitably neglects the possibility that individual psychology could be inextricably bound up with social processes, and reinforces what Rose (1999, p. 269) describes as the government of those identified as having 'pathologies of the will'. That such assumptions are mobilised by a group of young people who have received formal educational instruction in citizenship is suggestive of the ideological effects of attempts to equip young people with the 'cultural capital' necessary to constitute themselves as competent citizens, and whilst any suggestion of a direct causal linkage between educational programmes and responses to social scientific

interview questions should be treated as grossly speculative, it is nevertheless striking that these accounts are so readily constructed.

Second, it is worth reflecting on the connections between the analysis presented here and recent debates concerning the identification of ideological themes in discourse. The present study has sought to attend to both the local contextual and more distal ideological foci current in discursive and rhetorical psychologies. Of course, such a strategy carries with it the risk of failing to satisfy advocates of either approach, but it is my contention that both are necessary for a complete discourse analytic approach (cf. Wetherell, 1998). Both individual and social explanations of unemployment were constructed in order to perform specific actions within the local context of the interview. As several commentators have noted (e.g. Potter & Hepburn, 2005; Wooffitt, 2005), any analysis which fails to recognise the local function of discourse is in danger of grossly oversimplifying matters. Yet these explanations of unemployment are still recognisable as the individual and social ‘myths’ noted by Edelman (1977) and Billig et al (1988), and any approach which treats them exclusively as the product of the type of interaction in which they occur is potentially neglecting the wider ideological function of constructions such as these – as argued above, both individual and social explanations have the potential to legitimate exclusionary practices.

Ultimately, the matter is an empirical one, and in this respect we begin to return to the idea of the discursive study of ideology as a cumulative enterprise which might proceed by the successive mapping of ideological functions across a variety of contexts. Whilst particular ideological formulations should be studied

in their specificity, the search for patterning across datasets (as is common for local interactional functions in Conversation Analysis) should be equally possible. Indeed, this is already a feature of much ideology work in discursive and rhetorical psychologies. The basic thrust of this over-arching position is, therefore, that while attention to *both* interaction and ideology is necessary for discursive and rhetorical psychologies, neither is sufficient in isolation.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2005 the UK Government introduced the ‘Life in the UK test’ to be taken by people seeking British citizenship (see <http://www.lifeintheuktest.gov.uk>). At the time of its launch Government ministers emphasised that it did not constitute a test of Britishness (see [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/4391710.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4391710.stm)).

<sup>2</sup> All names reported are pseudonyms.