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Preferred subject and shadow: gender, class, subjectivities and Australian government Mutual Obligations policies.

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Abstract

This paper provides some insights into a study[1] that investigated the lived effects of Australian government Mutual Obligations policies on the subjectivities of poor and working class young women and girls. In the study, young women and girls were positioned at the centre of policy analysis. This paper shows how an analysis of information generated through this study, identified two subject positions as being made available by Mutual Obligations policies. These are preferred subject and shadow. The analysis offered in this paper shows how these subject positions were taken up and enacted by the marginalised young women and girls who worked as students-as-researchers[2] in the study.

Introduction

Australian Mutual Obligations policies, described in the document *Participation support for a more equitable Australia: final report of the reference group on welfare reform, July 2000* (McClure 2000a) were the focus of the study. Australian Mutual Obligations policies represent a departure from previous welfare policies. As 'active' welfare policies, those who must live its effects are positioned as being obliged to other members of the community for welfare support. An analysis of the policy text itself reveals how welfare recipients are positioned as responsible for a number of failures. These failures include completing school, finding paid work and being a sole parent. Other deficits attributed to welfare recipients include a general lack of skills and training. These explanations conceal structural causes of inequality, and social and cultural disadvantage.

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[1] The thesis, *Policing and practicing subjectivities: poor and working class young women and girls and Australian government Mutual Obligations policies* is presently being examined.

[2] The students-as-researchers approach developed for the study is described and discussed in detail in Edwards 2004, 2003a, 2003b).

Mutual Obligations policies, their discourses, implementation strategies and the relations they construct between themselves and policy subjects are the focus of the analysis offered in the study. The central concern of this paper is to show how the dominant and authoritative discourses of the policies were taken up and enacted by policy subjects engaged as students-as-researchers in the study.

Organised in two sections, this paper firstly describes the research problem and illustrates two subject positions made available by Mutual Obligations policies. Second, it shows how the subject positions made available by the policies are taken up and enacted by the poor and working class young women and girls as policy subjects.

The research problem

There is a tripartite relationship between school, the labour market and the welfare system. A number of factors affect how poor and working class young women and girls are able to insulate themselves from unemployment and lives of poverty. Remaining in school until the completion of valued credentials is difficult for those whose lives feature low socio-economic status. Increased pressure is felt in these homes, partly because of the spiralling costs associated with keeping young people living at home and meeting their basic living costs, but also as they begin to experience and expect some autonomy from the family in social and leisure activities. As well, changes to income support payments diminish the capacity of poor and working class families to adequately provide for many of the needs of young people. Changes to the provision of income support for and to young people include those implemented as part of the *Youth Allowance* policy (Department of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs: DEETYA 1998). These changes and those implemented subsequently as

Mutual Obligations policies have increased the pressures on these families who experience harsh socio-economic conditions. In the sub-sections that follow, I describe the contextual factors, including government policy changes that impact on these young lives.

School, education and training

The first of the active income support policies to be implemented by the Australian Howard Government, the *Youth Allowance* policy, (DEETYA 1998) aimed to replace a number of income support payments to young people. The *Youth Allowance* and subsequent Mutual Obligations policies represented a departure from previous welfare and income support arrangements. Requiring young people to participate in defined activities to remain eligible for income support, the stated intent of the *Youth Allowance* was to assist young people to move between work, education and training. However, the implementation strategies that are features of the *Youth Allowance* and other Mutual Obligations policies, require the performance of activities and the establishment of relations counterproductive to these aims. For example, young people must nominate their parents bank account for the payment of the *Youth Allowance* and therefore, remain positioned as dependent on their parents for income and other basic needs. As well, they must remain in, or return to schools noted for their difficulty in meeting the needs, interests and aspirations of young people living in poverty (Dwyer, Stokes, Tyler & Holdsworth 1998).

Many of these young people who leave school with none, or less valued credentials are unable to access training, further education or employment. This is in part because of increasing costs, including fees and charges associated with 'spiralling credentialism' at TAFE colleges, universities and with private training

providers. Without the capacity to purchase a ticket into the world of paid work, through an inability to participate in this new economy of credentials and fees, these young people are unable to gain a foothold in the labour market in anything other than casual, part-time and seasonal work. For some, even this is difficult.

The labour market

There are three factors that need to be considered when examining the relationship of poor and working class young women and girls to the labour market. Firstly, the youth labour market is said to have collapsed (Youth Affairs Council of South Australia: YACSA 1997/98; Dwyer 1995, 1997; Wooden 1998). Entry level jobs often taken by young people upon leaving school have disappeared, and what has replaced these jobs and has strengthened is the part-time and casual nature of employment. Casual and part-time workers, described by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS: 2002a) as 'underemployed' increased by 25% between September 2000 and September 2001. One third of the underemployed were aged under 25 years (ABS 2002a). This increase in part-time and casual work has been accompanied by a decline in full-time work, 'between 1971 and 2001, the proportion of employed persons working full-time declined from 89% to 69% (ABS 2003a:1).

Young women and girls remain disadvantaged in the labour market through the limited number of post-school training options such as apprenticeships. ABS data shows that 45.2% of all Australian women who are employed are employed part-time (ABS 2003b: 1). Other ABS data (2002b: 1) states that 61% of the underutilised or underemployed workers between September 2000 and September 2001 were women. Importantly, '37% of all persons working part-time

and wanting to work more hours were under 25 years of age' (p. 4). The above briefly highlights the relative disadvantage of women and especially young women. They experience long periods of unemployment and underemployment, a more limited range of options outside of school and are over represented in the data on part-time work. Women are also over-represented in the data on lone-parents.

Living arrangements

The Australian Census 2001 provides a snapshot of the living arrangements of Australians (ABS 2002c). Of the total households in Australia, 2.3% are lone-father families with children under the age of 15 years. This compares with 19.3% of all Australian households headed by a sole-parent female with children under the age of 15 years, as described in Australian Social Trends data (ABS 2002c).

Australian Social Trends data (ABS 2003c) shows a 53% increase in one parent families with dependent children during the period 1986 to 2001, while 'couple families with children, increased by only 3%' (p. 1). The number of sole-parent families doubled in this period. Of these one-parent families in 1986 and 2001, 83% were lone mothers (p. 6). The ABS (2003c) states that lone-mothers tended to have younger children living with them than lone-fathers' (p. 2). The situation as the children grow older changes, with 39% of those aged over 15 years living with their mothers and 56% living with their fathers. Of all of the children in lone-parent households, 22% of those aged under 4 years lived with their mothers, and 9% lived with their fathers.

Data and analysis provided by the ABS identifies one-parent families headed by a female as vulnerable, and 'at greater risk of poverty than couple families' (ABS

2003c: 3). One of the causes of their financial vulnerability is the greater difficulty participating in paid employment as a lone-parent, especially when children are very young. However, despite being thought to be reluctant to re-enter the workforce, 46% of sole-parents with children under the age of 15 years are employed (ABS 2002b). Lone-fathers participate in employment at a greater rate than lone-mothers, because as described above, lone-fathers have responsibility for the care of older children. The data show that the 1994-95, 'average weekly income for lone-father families was $506 compared to $385 for lone-mother families' (ABS 1997: 4). Of these lone parents, 56% were in the workforce in 1996, 52% of these participating in paid work were lone-mothers, while partnered mothers participate at the rate of 63%. Lone-fathers have a participation rate of 77%. Lone-mothers experience unemployment at a higher rate than lone-fathers, (17% and 9% respectively). The numbers receiving the sole-parent-pension, according to this data, fluctuate— 'between 84% and 90% while the proportion of lone fathers receiving the payment has risen from 33% to 47%' (ABS 1997: 6).

Women and girls are over-represented in the statistics about unemployment, underemployment and part-time work. Their over-representation in the data shows the vulnerability that is associated with low incomes and poverty. Therefore, any welfare reform changes introduced by the Australian Howard government disproportionately affect poor and working class young women and girls. In any analysis of welfare reform policies that require Mutual Obligations, the focus must be on how these changes affect them and identify the consequences that flow from the policy implementation.

Subject positions made available by Mutual Obligations policies

In an analysis of the ways in which the poor and working class young women and girls took up and enacted subject positions made available by Mutual Obligations policies, I identified two subject positions. Preferred subject of policy and shadow. In conceptualising these subject positions I drew on the work of Valerie Walkerdine, Helen Lucey and June Melody (2001), Beverly Skeggs (1997) Nancy Fraser (1987, 1993, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1996 1997a; 1997b, 2000) and Carl Jung (1968, 1972, 1974, 1983). The work of Walkerdine et al (2001) and Skeggs (1997) was important in arriving at a contemporary understanding of subjectivities focusing on class and gender. To their psychosocial explanations, I incorporated Fraser's (1996, 1997, 2000) conceptualisations of 'injustice', 'bivalent collectivities' and 'status subordination' that enabled me to hold at the forefront of my analysis the effects of injustice on the lives of girls and young women from the working classes, the emotional and lived effects as well as the political imperatives facing young women. I named this conceptualisation for this study as hy-bivalent subjectivities, acknowledging my intellectual debt to the aforementioned theorists.

The 'shadow' (Jung 1968), is another subject position made available to poor and working class young women and girls through the dominant and authoritative discourses of Mutual Obligations policies. The concept of the shadow is a pyschotheraputic concept and I use it to build on the transitional space advocated by Skeggs (1997) and Walkerdine et al (2001). The shadow is said to be the parts of ourselves that we disown (Jung 1968). Often our personal shadow contains characteristics of others that we find abhorrent and deny in ourselves. When individuals listen to themselves as they describe the characteristics of another that they dislike, they can gain some insights into what it is they dislike

about themselves, or fear becoming. The process of projection is an unconscious expression of the shadow, that is, when we describe the features of another whose characteristics we despise, we are projecting our own fears and anxieties onto the shadow.

The concept of the shadow enabled me to illustrate how policy discourses construct relations where certain segments of the population are 'Othered'. From here I will refer to this process as 'being made shadow', and I describe what I mean here. By using this term, 'being made shadow', I follow Foucault (1982: 208) and his descriptions of 'dividing practices'. Foucault used the term to illustrate how a segment of the population is identified, described and pathologised. I foreshadow the strategy of dividing practices as being evident through the discourses of Mutual Obligations policies where the shadow is ascribed with the negative characteristics discarded and denied by the preferred policy subject of Mutual Obligations policies. In following Foucault (2000: 211), I also appropriate his term, 'multiform-tactics' as a concept to describe and analyse the implementation strategies of Mutual Obligations policies. I adopt it to mean the coercive and self-examination strategies that invite policy subjects to act on themselves to arrive at the attitudinal changes required by government in Mutual Obligations policies.[3]

In the following subsections I provide some brief insights into how the poor and working class young women and girls who acted as students-as-researchers made the Other, shadow. In my analysis, I identified how Mutual Obligations policies make available the discursive spaces for the dominant and authoritative discourses to be taken up. My analysis identifies four dominant discourses, discourses of individualism; discourses of participation; discourses of

[3] This concept and my use of it is explained in great detail in Edwards (2004).

punishment; and, discourses of downward envy. In this paper, I focus on discourses of individualism, illustrating how the dominant and authoritative discourses of Mutual Obligations policies were taken up and enacted by the poor and working class young women and girls who acted as students-as-researchers.

Discourses of individualism

Key discursive shifts in welfare reform position the problems of welfare with recipients. This has occurred through dominant discourses that situate problems as being with individuals who have failed to develop adequate skills through education and training (McClure 2000a). Failure and blame for unemployment become accepted as individual responsibility. As well, discourses of individualism privilege traditional nuclear families headed by heterosexual couples. There is an inconsistency contained in McClure (2000a) who acknowledges increased numbers of sole-parent households, while proposing strategies that actively discriminate against them. These strategies include the imposition of harsh eligibility criteria both on *Youth Allowance* and sole-parent payments—twin strategies overwhelmingly affecting sole parent households in poverty. Rather than promoting participation, Mutual Obligations policies are transparently connected to broader economic concerns, and these concerns provide impetus for reducing payments and eligibility to existing clients, while reducing access to new recipients. This is evident through McClure's (2000a) claims that more members of the community are reliant on income support, and through the comparisons he makes with welfare provision in other OECD countries.

In the following subsections, I illustrate how the students-as-researchers I worked with took up different subject positions made available by Mutual Obligations policies. Some demonstrated a lack of compassion, thereby constructing others as shadow, whilst some, in describing subjective experience, saw how others were

diminished through Mutual Obligations policies. Thus they took up the shadow position made available to them by Mutual Obligations policies.

Traditional conceptions of the family

Mutual Obligations policies effectively situate the family as responsible for young people for increasing periods of time. This has occurred through strategies that remove young people's access to independent income support payments such as *Newstart* and *Job Search Allowance*, and through raising the age eligibility criteria for these payments and for the *Youth Allowance*. A result is that young people are increasingly reliant on their parents, and furthermore, this policy change assumes traditional family arrangements with a male breadwinner. A recent report by ACOSS (Davidson 2003) identified increasing rates of poverty amongst families with teenagers because of escalating living costs such as food, school fees, clothing and leisure activities, with costs exceeding the financial support offered to them. Davidson also reported that for low income sole parent families, 'overall family income actually falls when the youngest child reaches 5, 16 and 18 years' (2003: 6). This is because *Rent Assistance* as defined in the *Social Security Act 1991* (CTH: DFACS 2003e) is no longer provided to teenagers living at home who receive *Youth Allowance*. As well, parenting payments cease and the Family Tax Benefit is also no longer available when the young person is unemployed. These families are between $35 and $73 per week worse off when the young person begins to receive the *Youth Allowance* of $85 per week (Davidson 2003).[4]

[4] Davidson (2003:10) provides information that shows that over the period 1982 to 1995, financial dependence of young people aged 15-17 years on their families increased from under 80% to more than 95%. Similarly, for those in the 18-20 year age group reliant on their parents, numbers have increased from under 40% to over 60%. Reliance of those aged between 21-24 years remains unchanged at 30%. Davidson cites the reasons for this as including the fact that 18 to 21 year olds are made more dependent through the government's imposition of income and assets tests on their families in indexing welfare payments.

Everyday life for significant numbers of young Australians is characterised by increased financial hardship on families, especially sole-parent families, and this itself contributes to homelessness. Mutual Obligations policies and the application of harsh eligibility criteria effectively create 'non-citizens' (Fraser 1996) through strategies that diminish welfare recipients. Fraser (1996) suggests that this is a feature of the institutionalised norms that consider the nuclear family as normal, while sole parent families have become seen as feminised and abnormal, therefore capable of being treated in demeaning ways.

As well as through harsh eligibility criteria, increasing dependence of young people on their families also occurs through 'multi-form tactics' such as breaching and sanctions. In the transcribed discussions from the English group of students-as-researchers that follow, we discussed the *Youth Allowance* and its role in assisting young people's independence. The *Youth Allowance* describes the independence of young people as a stated aim. However, the rules diminish young people because payments are made to the parent unless parental consent is given for the young person to receive it themselves, prior to age eighteen. A contradiction between the rhetoric and the practice of independence is contained in the *Youth Allowance* policy. Young people are obliged to participate in education and training to remain eligible for payments, and further diminishment occurs through breaching for non-attendance at school, and through other surveillance mechanisms that report their movements.

Individualism discourses are enacted in the transcripts of the English group below, as we discuss the rules as they apply to *Youth Allowance*. Chloe reports that her mother receives the *Youth Allowance* on her behalf: 'Yeah, mine does. That annoys me because Mum says if I'm naughty, I'm not getting it'. Karen explains to the rest of the group that these rules apply, 'Until you're eighteen'… unless you have a really good reason'. Alice comments, 'I don't understand that. If it's *Youth*

Allowance, it's your money, but it's going to your parents?' (Transcript: English: 26 February 2001).

The students-as-researchers group saw the incongruence of these arrangements, and was concerned about Karen's sister who got cut off, '[b]ecause she had more than five unexplained absences [from school] and they cut her off' … 'She didn't have any money for like six weeks'. Some express compassion, with Karen concluding that '[e]veryone should get paid to go to school, anyway' (Transcript: English: 26 February 2001). In a discussion two days later (Transcript: English: 28 February 2001), Chantelle comments, '[d]o you know how much Mum gets for me? Seventy-nine cents'. She explains to the rest of the group:

> Chantelle: Because she earns too much. Like your parents … every single parent gets something for you, and it's called tax something, and if they earn too much, they only get seventy-nine cents, and now they're cutting it off. I don't even get seventy-nine cents any more because I'm not a full time student (Transcript: English: 28 February 2001).

Chloe summarises the feeling of the group when she remarks, 'It's a PARENT *Youth Allowance*' (Transcript: English: 28 February 2001). In the above conversations it is evident that some young people believe this situation to be unfair, and they express compassion for others. It is possible to read into the comments their sense of diminishment in situations, perceived as unfair. The National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS 2000) in its report, *Changing social and legal frameworks for young Australians* describes the situation for young people as follows:

> … in some areas there are signs of the state withdrawing support and retracting from intervention, in others there is clear evidence of a much more interventionist and arguably more controlling approach (p. 8).

Further, NYARS (2000: 15) adds that these relations 'contribute to the disentitlement of young people from a range of social and economic supports that were previously available'. One aim, intentional or otherwise, of Mutual

Obligations policies is to diminish young Australians. This diminishment occurs at both the level of feelings when they experience the absence of compassion of others and as status subordination that occurs when the group in question experience decreased recognition within social life. This happens when some actors are constituted 'as inferior, excluded, wholly other or simply invisible…'. Status subordination is 'juridified, expressly codified in formal law; in other cases, it is institutionalized via government policies, administrative codes or professional practice' (Fraser 2000: 114). Receiving seventy-nine cents a fortnight for caring for a teenager must make young people themselves and their parents feel diminished. In the above, it is possible to see how the young people have adopted the position of shadow in relation to Mutual Obligations policies. The position is of shadow and in this instance, diminishment is a consequence of being constructed as a part of the policy problem.

It is evident above that students-as-researchers cease projecting onto the shadow when the experiences they describe are close to personal experience. In the section that follows I will show how this same group was very critical of other groups of income support recipients such as sole-parents, the unemployed and other groups at the margins. The students-as-researchers in this group may have had parents who were unemployed or sole parents; however, this is not revealed in the group at this stage. There are two possible explanations for this. They may be cautious about making comments that could be interpreted as criticisms of other members of the group, their peers and their families as well as keeping themselves safe.[5]

Diminishing whole families

It is not only that young people are diminished in these relationships; whole families are subjected to strategies that in effect diminish them. The extract below from my field notes shows some of the realities a young woman named Karen

[5] In teaching students research skills, I also provided information and explicit instruction about safe self-disclosure, reminding them of the importance of keeping themselves safe.

lives in her working class life. She works hard at a part-time job, and was more often than not, late to class. As I recorded in my field notes (6 June 2001), 'Karen's mum goes to work early and her sister is left with the responsibility of getting her to school - she always arrives late - at about 9.50 seems to be the regular time of arrival'. A more detailed excerpt from my field notes below details a conversation on 7 June 2001.

> Writing about her Mum. Karen was 16 the other day, I noticed her gold bracelet. She is the youngest in the family. Mum works at 4 part-time jobs. She doesn't get any sole parent pension at all now, she must return to work-a patchwork of (un)employment. Karen does not want me to tell, we have this conversation at the front of the room in hushed tones. She doesn't want the others to know about her life. I ask her if now that she gets *Youth Allowance* if she can cut back her hours of part-time work. She currently works 15-21 hours per week and is a full-time student. She likes working she says. I ask her how the *Youth Allowance* policy could be fairer to her and her Mum. Karen doesn't know—you just get on with it she says. No point fighting, it gets you nowhere. I ask if this is how Mum feels, where did she get these ideas from? Probably Mum she thinks. I tell her this is precisely the stuff that our study was about, this is what she needs to write down.
>
> Karen finishes the lesson having completed a good bit of writing. I say to her, Karen this is really good, you are really bright, when you put your mind to it you can really do some great work. Karen seems confused and disbelieving, I insist, no-one else in the class has produced anything like this during the lesson. I'm embarrassing her—no—she just wants to get a job and leave school at the end of the year. (FN: Work Education: 7 June 2001)

In my description of our conversation above, I see how I am contributing to the 'discourse of unlimited choice' by asking Karen to transform herself into the 'right kind of employable' (Walkerdine et al 2001: 3) or teachable subject. Whilst attempting to challenge the discourses of Mutual Obligations policies, I am also reinforcing these discourses of 'self-responsibility' and 'self-invention' that are characteristics of hybrid subjectivities described by Walkerdine et al (2001). Observed reflexively, I see how I abandon the position of researcher and take up the position of teacher, feminist and moral guardian. Karen's silence in class and her late arrivals might be what Walkderdine et al (2001: 145) would describe as

'psychic defence against poverty'. Karen's choice of isolating herself socially might be because she conceals aspects of her life from her peers. The effect appears to be a sense of diminishment that is evident in not only what Karen says, but in her mannerisms, self isolation and the sense of herself I saw in the classroom.

In *Growing up girl* (Walkerdine et al 2001) the authors found that young women in their study did not make demands on their parents, recognising that household finances were tight. Similarly, Karen takes an increased amount of self-responsibility through her part-time work to ease the burden on her mother. She sets up a vicious cycle of non-achievement for herself, too tired to arrive on time or to contribute in lessons, and not able or willing to think about the future past leaving school.[6] For Karen, hy-bivalent subjectivities is a concept that reflects how she lives and understands her working class life. At 16 years of age, Karen recognises class as an important aspect of her life, accepting this as natural and part of daily existence. This life remains unchallenged because she is too exhausted to engage with the intellectual struggle that might set her 'free', and perhaps because she lacks a knowledge of the possibilities that might be available to her. In her understandings of the world, she expresses compassion for her mother and her situation but none for herself and this is how she remains strong.

Walkerdine et al (2001: 151) describe the strength of the working class women and their parents in their study. Like Karen's mother above, working-class parents described by Walkerdine et al (2001: 151) 'often talked about how they had tried to give their daughters the message that life was a struggle and something that must be survived'. Karen describes her mother as providing her with the same beliefs; that is, the struggle will always end the same way, so there is little point engaging in conflict. Karen anxiously hides from her peers the reality of the different

[6] This desire for a job straight after she finishes school described in my field notes (7June 2001) is different to the desire Karen described in her journal entry (22 February 2001). Hy-bivalent subjectivities can be seen, in Karen's case as shifting, constantly under reconstruction and often incoherent.

circumstances that she and her mother and sister face. Her understanding is about the complexity of patching together, or crafting an existence from a number of casual and part-time jobs. This is what her mother does and what she understands she will also need to do, reflecting discourses of individualism as lived in this class location by Karen and her Mum. It is difficult to see how the situations faced daily by Karen and her Mum contribute to higher self-esteem that is a stated goal of Mutual Obligations policies.

Karen shows some signs of agency. For example, arriving late to class everyday whilst, presumably, arriving promptly at work, shows how Karen is able to regulate and self-regulate her behaviour. In the work environment at least, Karen has shaped herself into the ideal or preferred subject/worker. The multiform tactic that aims to strengthen the social forces is therefore effective in establishing the relation between Mutual Obligations polices and Karen's hy-bivalent subjectivities because she enacts the preferred subject of policy through becoming a self-reliant and punctual worker.

Failure of individuals

McClure (2000a) is silent about structural issues, individualising fault and blame for unemployment. He positions responsibility with those who do not have appropriate skills to take up the opportunities that are available. The problems with individual responsibility are said to arise from a lack of motivation and 'those who need help to define and achieve their own goals for participation and self-reliance' (McClure 2000a: 40). Feedback to the Interim report (McClure 2000b) was acknowledged in the Final report (McClure 2000a). McClure noting the following concerns by many Australians about the requirements of Mutual Obligations policies.

> In most cases there was acceptance that it is reasonable to expect people with the capacity for employment to seek work or improve their job prospects. Respondents argued however, that such expectations must take account of the state of the labour market and individual circumstances. Some responses argued that placing conditions on income support diminishes citizenship rights to an adequate minimum income (McClure 2000a: 33).
>
> And,
>
> There is considerable community concern about the impact of financial penalties on low-income people, with few other resources (McClure 2000a: 40)

Despite these concerns, and the clear wishes expressed by those consulted, Mutual Obligations policies do not take into account the diminished labour market and structural barriers to employment.

McClure (2000a) acknowledges that sole-parents need to have access to 'family-friendly work practices that recognise caring responsibilities' (McClure 2000a: 38) and for indigenous people he calls for a recognition of the 'systematic discrimination by businesses towards indigenous people' (p. 38). Relevant structural issues also include the stagnation of the Howard government in introducing policies that would support women with children to remain in paid work.[7] For McClure (2000a), and for some of the students-as-researchers who adopt the discourses of individualism, the problems are with the individuals and their lack of skills and education. Mutual Obligations policies fail to address the other basic issues that result in non-participation in paid work such as the under supply of adequate child care.

Chloe and the other student-as-researchers attempt to read between the lines of Mutual Obligations policies and identify any hidden messages. Chloe says, 'It SAYS its *work for the dole*, but I reckon they're like more basing it around getting

[7] Anne Summers (2003) describes the 'Baby Bonus' as 'the most insidious of the Howard government's policies designed to undermine women's equality' (p. 153). As well, she critiques childcare policy and the Family Tax Benefits as being inadequate and failing to 'recognise the cost of raising children' (p. 151).

people job opportunities, in a sense, like they're giving them the skills so that they CAN get [a job]'. Sue disagrees and puts forward an alternative explanation, 'How can you get a job opportunity get from cleaning your street and picking up papers?' Meanwhile, Roland adopts the dominant discourses of the policies when he comments, 'Cos they received references from their supervisors, and they get um, they get a certificate which they can add to their resume on their work experience'. Bernie adds, 'Isn't it a cheap way for the government to get people to clean up for them?' (Transcript: English: 5 March 2001).

Two different readings of Mutual Obligations policies emerge from this discussion. Chloe and Roland take up the policy and its discourses as preferred subjects, whilst Sue and Bernie provide a more critical reading of the text that includes expressions of compassion, reflecting different understandings of work for the dole practices and their lived effects and how they might lead to diminishment. Sue and Bernie interrupt the discourses of individualism contained in Mutual Obligations policies, taking up a shadow position. In many ways, Sue and Bernie have constructed a 'counter-discourse'[8] to Mutual Obligations policies, suggesting that the motives behind Mutual Obligations are connected to the governments desire to have access to cheap labour.

An assessment task was required of students-as-researchers where they were asked to identify what we termed 'buzz words' within documents available to promote Mutual Obligations policies (Centrelink 1997).[9] The English group

[8] In the thesis, I develop five counter-discourses that aim to speak back to Mutual Obligations policies. These 'counter-discourses' were developed from an analysis of the transcribed interview material from the interviews conducted by students-as-researchers with marginalised young women.

[9] These Centrelink documents analysed by the group included, but were not limited to the following: *Opportunities for building confidence and gaining work experience* (1997); *Life after school*, (1998); *Work for the dole opens up for year 12 school leavers* (1999); *Austudy payment: the guide* (2000); and *Youth Allowance: the guide* (2001). With the shift towards publication on the world wide web similar

managed this activity well, whereas the Work Education group struggled. An excerpt from Alice's English 'buzz word' assignment appears below.

> …The people who chose not to stay at school and don't get jobs, now have to *work for the dole*. Many people believe this is just a cheap way to get some local work done for minimal cost. By doing this, the unemployed will only receive around $20 extra a fortnight. It appears that they are continually doing similar activities and not really learning any new skills.
>
> The reason for young people taking on this system is based on false advertising. Brochures and documents that are handed out explaining how the system works uses buzz words such as 'gives everyone a go', 'essential training', 'valuable experience' and 'valued learning'. If you picked up anything and read these words on it, it would make it sound so brilliant. Power operates in this text through the use of language that is manipulative and the brochures that are placed out advertising *work for the dole* glamorise the program making it seem far more interesting and valuable than it really is.
>
> Working for the dole does however have a few positive aspects. The government will not be paying out money to those who just sit at home, people now have to work for what money they get. (This more so benefits the working public, as now they do not feel violated that the unemployed are getting off lightly). But there are so many points about this whole situation, which are wrong, and just plain devious.
>
> Bad aspects of working for the dole include the fact that it is cheap labour; the government is using the people who aren't currently employed to do someone else's dirty work. However, the people that live off the dole as an easy lifestyle will be getting out and doing a little work for what they receive. It makes it worse when not all the people that are unemployed are lazy. There are stereotypes that the unemployed sit and do nothing all day. Unfortunately, for most of the unemployed people, there are reasons behind their unemployment, such as health or closure of businesses. On top of working for the dole a lot of people are also looking for jobs … (emphasis added: AT: Alice: English: 2 April 2001).

Alice is struggling with conflicting messages, information and beliefs while she attempts in some places to interrupt the discourses of blame and skill deficits, features of discourses of individualism. As well, Alice engages with the topic of power describing how 'language' is used to achieve certain goals. However, in

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documents to those analysed by students-as-researchers are available at the Australian Employment Services website (2001).

repeating the dominant discourses that rely on stereotypical images she adopts the position of preferred subject, projecting shadow images onto the unemployed. For example, Alice adopts the 'no rights without responsibilities' mantra that implies that welfare recipients owe the rest of us for their benefits. What her writing shows is the shifting nature of hy-bivalent subjectivities as Alice simultaneously occupies competing subject positions.

In the following extract, Chloe adopts a strong position and maintains this position. She concludes her piece re-reading the document (Centrelink 2000) from three different perspectives.

> I believe that the *work for the dole* policy is wrong and unfair, for the following reasons. For example, the policy document leads people to believe that there are a lot of good opportunities working for the dole. The document uses buzz words and buzz phrases such as 'build your confidence' and 'develop new skills'. The policy makes the suggestion that after working for the dole you will find employment. In this essay I am going to make an analysis of what I think working for the dole is about.
>
> The *work for the dole* policy document contains buzz words and phrases throughout it. For example, '*work for the dole* is an opportunity to improve your job prospects, gain valuable work experience and help your local community'. It promises opportunities to meet new people , meet challenges and take responsibility. These buzz words and phrases lead people to believe they are guaranteed employment after they have been on *work for the dole* program. Not only have these buzz words and phrases influenced people to believe work for the dole is a really good opportunity, they have targeted the young unemployed and school dropouts. I think this is really unfair because the people are generally trying to find employment.
>
> There are many threats made throughout the policy documents to get people to comply with the rules of the policy. Most of the time they are threatening to either cancel or reduce payments. This shows that the government has the power over the young unemployed, students and anyone else on government benefits who have no power.

> I am going to re-read the policy document from three different perspectives, a young person, a parent of a young person and a government official. From the perspective of a young person the policy gives an intimidating view on the government. It makes you think that the government is doing you a favour by being eligible for *work for the dole*. I think it also leads them to believe that they are ensured employment after working for the dole with statements such as, 'If you take part in a *work for the dole* project, you'll get valuable work experience that employers are often looking for.'
>
> Overall, I think that from the perspective of a young person, *work for the dole* is portrayed as being better than it is. From a parent's perspective the *work for the dole* program doesn't look that bad as it helps prevent dole bludgers, and gets people out into the community and doing something worthwhile. But on the other hand the *work for the dole* document encourages youth to leave school early. For example, '*work for the dole opens up for year 12 school leavers*' (Centrelink 1999). I believe statements like this have hidden meanings, if you have finished school and have been on particular government benefits for over three months you are expected to work for the dole anyway. I think this statement simple reminds people they can quit school to *work for the dole*, because it will make it easier for them to find employment with the experience they learn from the program. From a government officials point of view it's a good way to get back a bit of money being outlaid for the dole. This is basically the dirty work that no-one else wants to do and for free. …
>
> The way I think these people have been singled out is extremely unfair, how can early school leavers and unemployed youth be expected to fit into the world, when they are being treated differently to everyone else? (emphasis added; reference inserted: AT: Chloe: English: 22 March 2001)

Chloe attempts to interrupt the discourses of individualism that describe failure to develop skills as features of Mutual Obligations policies. She is challenging the rhetoric that argues that *work for the dole* has the potential to assist the unemployed and early school leavers to develop skills. Offering a new reading of *work for the dole* arrangements, Chloe suggests that the powerful rhetoric of Mutual Obligations policies promoted through *work for the dole*, might actually encourage early school leaving. Chloe shows some compassion for the unemployed thereby avoiding adopting the position of the preferred subject of Mutual Obligations policies. This is in contrast to Alice who shifts between subject positions. Chloe also provides a reading of power in relation to Mutual Obligations policies. Here

she adopts a top down model of power, viewing it as something that one group possesses and is exerted over others, with those at the bottom, having 'no power'.

Other students-as-researchers in this group such as Sue, adopt the dominant discourses of the policy taking up the position of preferred subject, individualising fault, blame and failure, stating emphatically, 'It's their fault for being cut off' (Transcript: English: 26 February 2001). Bernie, in a much more considered way comments, 'Yeah, they make 'em independent because they have to find a job for themselves and that and no-one else can find them a job. If they want it, then this serves them, like if they don't want to get a job or don't try enough and get off, then that's their own fault for not being independent' (Transcript: English: 26 February 2001). Roland attempts to provide an explanation that has him adopting a more compassionate position between preferred subject and shadow.

> Roland: Yeah. … It's not the government's fault. It's partly their fault ... but it's also the unemployed, or whatever, person, for not trying to get a job and that, like just slacked around, do nothing. It sort of works both ways (Transcript: English: 26 February 2001).

Discourses circulating in the classroom enacted by the students-as-researchers feature an absence of compassion for the unemployed with fault and blame for unemployment being the result of the individuals many failures, to get a job, to get skills and for 'slacking around'. In these discussions, some are relegated as shadow. This absence of compassion is a part of individualism discourses that emerges as what I name, 'discourses of downward envy'[10]. In summary, an absence of compassion produces discourses of downward envy, and results in the diminishment of those positioned by the dominant discourses of Mutual Obligations policies. Enactment of discourses of downward envy were not restricted to the English class. I introduce below the Work Education group of students-as-researchers amongst whom the following conversation took place:

[10] This conceptualisation is described in greater detail in Edwards (2004).

> Jasmine: They say I'm Aboriginal. I'm going to feel sorry for myself, I want to go and get drunk ...
>
> Jan: Aboriginal students have the lowest completion rates of secondary schooling …
>
> Jasmine: Yeah, and who's fault is that? (Transcript: Work Education: 30 April 2001).

Despite my attempt above[11] to counter Jasmine's argument and offer some alternatives to the discourses of downward envy, my comments about the disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal Australians in schooling and in the community more generally, were met with derision and vitriol, by Jasmine and at other times by many of the students-as-researchers. I felt that I was the target of harassment for expressing such views. Discourses of individualism as enacted by Jasmine are an expression of no compassion where the individual is responsible for their own success or failure regardless of the circumstances surrounding success or failure. These dominant individualising discourses target welfare recipients as a small number of the Australian community for a lack of compassion, resulting in their diminishment.

Conclusion

This is a brief and partial account of my study that examined the lived experience of poor and working class young women and girls in relation to Mutual Obligations policies. In this paper I have identified and shown how different subject positions are made available by government Mutual Obligations policies. I have illustrated how the young women I worked with took up and enacted these subject positions.

Discourses of individualism as enacted by the young women was but one of the dominant discourses made available by policy and taken up by the young women. What I have illustrated here is how government policy has lived effects on hy-bivalent subjectivities of poor and working class young women and girls. The

[11] These attempts have been reported elsewhere. See for example, Edwards (2003a).

above has illustrated how those positioned as shadow by Mutual Obligations policies use processes of projection to position those amongst them as shadow, thus denying and discarding aspects of the self they find abhorrent. The shadow is and the preferred subject of policy are two subject positions made available in the discursive spaces created by the dominant discourses of Mutual Obligations policies. This paper has illustrated how poor and working class young women and girls who acted as students-as-researchers in the study took up and enacted the subject positions made available to them by Mutual Obligations policies.

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