

Disability and Society

Current Issues

DisPovertyPorn: *Benefits Street* and the dis/ability paradox

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In this article, we offer a timely socio-cultural analysis, informed by a critical disability perspective (Goodley, 2011; 2014), of UK Channel 4's reality television series Benefits Street. Drawing on the work of Allen et al., 2014 and Jensen, 2013 on 'poverty porn', we broaden their analysis to ask how dis/ability disrupts the 'poverty porn' narrative? We pay attention to the dis/appearance of dis/ability on Benefits Street and in doing so, we also extend an analysis of how impairment labels function in people's lives as 'socio-cultural categories placing limits on what 'labelled' people "can do" and "can be" (Thomas, 2007:72)'. We suggest that both the articulation and erasure of dis/ability are used as a form of narrative prosthesis (Mitchell & Synder, 2000) to support the overarching story line that people on benefits are unworthy 'scroungers'.

Setting the Scene

As part of the process of disavowal and popular culture, Jensen (2013) points to the emergence of a new archetype of media representations of poor people with the rise of 'poverty porn' as a form of popular entertainment. Jensen defines 'poverty porn' as reality television programmes that seek to individualise poverty, and to blame and shame 'the poor' for the situations they find themselves in. At the same time, though, this shaming and blaming reveals a deep-rooted fascination with poor people. Those living in poverty become fascinating character inhabiting plotlines of displacement.

Perhaps the most notorious example of contemporary UK poverty porn Jensen describes is Channel 4's *Benefits Street*. As an exemplar of its type, *Benefits Street* documents the lives of the residents of James Turner Street in the city of Birmingham in the West Midlands of England in 2013 (aired in 2014 and now set to be repeated in Teesside). The relentless focus of the programme is on the failings of the *individual* residents who appear on the show. Yet, the systemic and structural forces that create social and economic disadvantage in the residents' lives are sidelined. Instead, the show appears to scream at the viewer, 'these idlers have brought this on themselves'. The implication is that we are encouraged to 'know' these fascinating yet failing creatures.

Academic critiques of poverty porn have drawn upon the intersections of class, race and gender to develop their analysis (Allen et al., 2014); dis/ability is, as is so often the case, absent from the socio-cultural analysis (Mallett and Runswick-Cole, 2014). Too often dis/ability occupies a medicalised category not worthy of sociological or cultural critique. When one acknowledges that dis/ability is a biopolitical construction then one is invited to become more critical and socio-cultural in terms of analysis. On *Benefits Street*, dis/ability occupies a complex space within the narrative. For

the purposes of the dominant story line (*people on benefits are scroungers*), it is necessary for dis/ability to be made both visible and invisible: sometimes dis/ability takes 'centre-stage', sometimes it is simply 'noises off'. It lurks around as a quintessential object of **disavowal**: to be desired and erased when necessary in order to say something particular about those living in poverty.

When dis/ability is centre stage

Deidre Kelly, described throughout the programme as White Dee (let us recognise at the least the racialised under-tones of the nomenclature here), takes centre stage. Dee is introduced as a 'single mum' bringing up her children 'on benefits'. She is also a disabled woman. Her mental health issues are frequently referred to in the course of the series; she is one of the 2.25 million people receiving 'disability benefits' (ONS, 2014). Despite her self-identification as a woman living with depression and a mental health service user, assessed by the state as being entitled to disability benefits, this is not enough to exclude her from the category of 'scrounger'. Within the programme, there are repeated implicit challenges to Dee's entitlement to her disability benefits. Her non-paid care work, as 'the mam of the street', or as carer for her neighbour 'Fungi' through his cancer scare (Allen et al., 2014), are not only depicted as acts of kindness, they are also offered as evidence of her capacity for paid work, and evidence that she is, in fact, a malingerer. Dee is portrayed as a woman who could work if only she wanted to. Dee's previous conviction for fraud and representations of her as a lazy mother all serve the purposes of the narrative – the residents of James Turner Street are (all) scroungers.

In press interviews and reports following the series, Dee's impairment status is explicitly challenged. Dee explained that: 'I haven't been on benefits my whole life. At the moment I am not in a place where (I can work). I suffer with depression and I am being

assessed for bipolar disorder (Cooper, no page, 2014). Nonetheless, White Dee was publically challenged in a television interview and accused of being 'bone idle' (Cooper, no page, 2014). A Conservative MP accused her, in the national press, of 'not being interested in finding a job' (Cooper, no page, 2014). Her subsequent appearance for a fee on another reality television programme was immediately seized upon as evidence that she could work – when she wanted to. Dee's status as mental health service user is made visible on *Benefits Street* because it supports the over-arching narrative, that Dee is a quintessential example of a 'scrounger', who uses disability falsely to claim state support.

When dis/ability is no more than noises off

In contrast to the focus on White Dee's status as a mental health service user and benefit claimant, other disabled residents' disability-related stories are redacted on *Benefits Street*. During the programmes, Mark Thomas and Becky Howe did not identify themselves, nor were they identified by the programme-makers, as disabled people. And yet, after the series finished, in a 'tell-all' article in *The Daily Mail* (a dreadful right wing British newspaper) Mark's grandparents describe the couple as having "learning difficulties" (Adams, 2014). This claim is supported by the revelation that Mark and Becky both attended the same school for children with special educational needs (Adams, 2014). And yet, in Mark and Becky's *Benefits Street* story dis/ability is 'noises off'. Given that Dee's dis/ability status was made known, the omission of this information about Mark and Becky from the *Benefits Street* story is worthy of some consideration.

It may simply be the case that neither Mark nor Becky wished to be identified as 'people with learning difficulties'; this would not be surprising given the stigma attached to the label of 'learning

difficulties' in contemporary British culture (Goodley, 2000). However, in contrast to Dee, it might have been that Mark and Vicky's impairment label was not incorporated into the story line because it didn't serve as narrative prosthesis (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000) to the 'scrounger' story.

In contemporary cultural contexts, and on *Benefits Street*, the label of 'person with learning difficulties' functions in different ways from the label of 'person with mental health issues'. Despite numerous attempts to de-stabilise the category of learning disabilities as a highly contested and socially constructed label (Goodley, 2011), 'learning difficulties', in the public imaginary, maintain the status of a sticky label mired in medicalised discourses. Being labeled with learning difficulties, in neoliberal Britain, can act as a label of forgiveness for those who admit their "handicap, social stigma, dependence, isolation and economic disadvantage"; those accepting the stigma may benefit from the politics of redistribution and welfare benefits (Stone 1994: 4 cited in Runswick-Cole, 2014: 8). They are the 'worthy' poor. Indeed, the perceived unemployability of people with learning disabilities has been part of the way this categorised identity at least since the Mental Deficiency Act constructed 'mental defectives' in 1913 (Humber, 2013). A century on, only 10% of disabled people with learning disabilities are in paid work; this figure has changed little over the last twenty years (Humber, 2013). Mark and Becky's characterization as feckless, work-shy scroungers would be more difficult to sustain if their status as people labeled with learning difficulties was made visible in the TV programme and if it had been claimed and accepted by Mark and Becky.

DisPovertyPorn

In our 2014 paper, developed as part of an on going research project *Big Society? Disabled People with learning disabilities and civil society* we described what we see as dis/ability's 'disruptive

potential' (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2014: 1). We described the ways in which the category of dis/ability 'enlarges, disrupts, pauses, questions and clarifies what it means to be human' (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2014: 2). Here, we also see the ways in which cultural understandings of impairment labels disrupt what it means to be a 'scrounger'.

On *Benefits Street*, impairment labels are deployed in different ways and carry out different cultural work – 'learning difficulties' makes possible the designation of 'the worthy poor', and so, for the purposes of the poverty porn story, must be hidden. "Mental health issues" offer no such road to forgiveness. As our analysis of poverty porn reveals, the socio-cultural construction of impairment labels, such as 'mental health issues' and 'learning difficulties', matter because these constructions have very real effects in people's lives as Dee and Mark and Becky's experiences demonstrate.

Working the dis/ability complex we notice that scrounging is clearly the remit of the non-disabled, abled-bodied (ability) while neediness is associated with the deficiencies associated with impairment (dis/ability). At the same time, though, the 'dis' of disability demands us to think again about the dominant implicit assumption of the working individual associated with the idealized citizen. What of those who cannot work? Will they be recognised as citizens or forever cast off as deficient outsiders, living on the edges of political life? Thinking of poverty, work and identity through the prism of dis/ability permits us to enlarge our understandings of humanity.

Any analysis of 'poverty porn' that fails to pay attention to the disruptive presence of dis/ability is diminished in its explanatory power.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the support of the Economic and Social Research Council *Big Society? Disabled People with learning disabilities and civil society* (ES/K004883/1).

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