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## Forum - The Crip, the Fat and the Ugly in an Age of Austerity: Resistance, Reclamation, and Affirmation

### Working to Feel Better or Feeling Better to Work? Discourses of Wellbeing in Austerity Reality TV

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**Abstract:** By focusing on discourses within the ‘cultural economy’ of reality TV, the following considers the wider positioning of waged labor as essential for mental health during a period of austerity. The findings suggest that discourses of mental health and wellbeing construct figures of a ‘good’ welfare-recipient as one who achieves wellbeing through distancing themselves from the welfare state and progress toward waged work. Framed within the landscape of ‘psycho-politics’, wellbeing and unemployment are arguably entangled to legitimize current welfare policy, placing responsibility on individuals for economic and health security and dissolving concerns over austerity’s systemic impact.

**Keywords:** austerity; mental health; reality TV

## Introduction

Under late capitalism, waged work has become an almost unquestionable activity that the majority of individuals should do for their own and social benefit. A review commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in the UK argued there are “economic, social and moral arguments that work is the most effective way to improve the well-being of individuals” (Waddell and Burton, 2006, p. vii). Using the lens of disability, activist-scholars have challenged such normative discourses of waged labor (Graby, 2015; Taylor, 2004). Graby (2015) evaluates ground gained by campaigns centered on disabled peoples’ ‘Right to Work’ through the removal of employment barriers. Although noting their significance for increasing disabled peoples’ rights, Graby questions whether inclusion in capitalist structures of employment can ever result in disabled peoples’ liberation. Drawing on Amberley (2002), he argues that a capitalist labor market will never accommodate the needs of all disabled people, instead championing the role of a rights-based welfare system.

Picking up threads of Graby’s (2015) argument, the following article critically evaluates the discursive constructions of waged work and wellbeing during the specific economic context of current UK austerity. This period of austerity has led to a reduction of state welfare, increasing precarity, and as outlined fully below, has been criticized for its negative impact on mental health. At the same time, policy makers continue to stress the role of employment as a precursor to wellbeing. For example, the 2015 UK Conservative government rolled out a new ‘Fit for Work’ service to facilitate employees’ return to work following sickness, justified by the premise that “being out of work has a negative impact on

your health and wellbeing” (fitforwork.org). The mental health campaigning charity Mind has criticized government strategies around work and mental health, arguing that not enough is done to support wellbeing in the workplace (Mind, 2014). Yet Mind was itself criticized for overestimating the contributions waged work can make toward good health whilst remaining uncritical of the ‘toxic assumptions’ behind radically reformed welfare models following the implementation of UK austerity (Void, 2015).

Fiscal Austerity was implemented by the 2010 Coalition government in response to the recent financial crisis, resulting in heavy restructuring and retrenchment of state services including ‘radical’ welfare reforms (Mattheys, 2015). Despite ‘deep-cuts’, improvement to the UKs financial health was slow, leaving economists to label the approach counter-productive (Allen, 2017). Yet the ‘logic’ of austerity prevails. Luongo (2015) argues that the business-finance community succeeded in securing a logic of austerity supporting interests of transnational capital and strengthening neoliberal ideology, positioning austerity as “a site of ideological and discursive struggle” (De Benedictis & Gill, 2016, para. 4) with a key discourse of ‘necessity’ (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016). This discourse of ‘necessity’ gives reductions in welfare spending “a plausible appeal” (Green, Buckner, Milton, Powell, Salway, & Moffatt, 2017, p. 27) and Jensen (2014) notes how welfare cuts are justified through fresh and recycled representations of the ‘feckless’ welfare-recipient.

Nevertheless, even in a culture where austerity is typically unquestioned in mainstream discourse, concern has been raised over its negative impact on mental health (Mattheys, 2015). Mental health difficulties, antidepressant use and suicide have increased post-recession (Barr, Kinderman, & Whitehead, 2015; Frasilho, Matos, Salonna, Guerreiro, Storti, & Gaspar, 2015; Van Hal, 2015), however these effects are shown to be softened in countries that retained strong social safety nets (Van Hal, 2015; Wahlbeck & McDaid, 2012). Austerity’s thinning of such safety nets means less protection is offered against the deleterious effects of the most recent economic crisis. Accordingly, associations have been made between UK austerity policies and declining mental health (McGrath, Griffin & Mundy, 2015), with those at the sharp edge of welfare reforms frequently positioned as at particular risk.

As such, in anticipation of the 2015 governmental budget, mental health workers signed a letter in UK newspaper *The Guardian* proposing that austerity is greatly damaging mental health (“Austerity and a malign”, 2015). Despite protests, the government’s austerity program continued and when the Conservative government came into power in 2015, their first actions were to reduce the household benefit cap and freeze working age benefits (Beresford, 2015). This new round of cuts, alongside further devolution of powers to local councils, is said to have led to ‘super-austerity’ (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016).

It is reasonable to question how, given the apparent weight of evidence of the negative psychological impact of austerity, the economic policy itself has remained relatively intact. Friedli and Stearn (2015) argue that the adverse mental health impact of austerity has been modulated by a reformulation of structural issues such as poverty and unemployment as reflecting individual ‘psychological failures’ and ‘bad’ attitudes. They note how individuals

must “modify attitudes, beliefs and personality...through the imposition of positive affect” to improve their own situations; most notably through the attainment of waged work (p. 40). This follows an individualizing trend characteristic of neoliberalism (Rose, 1992; Scharff, 2005), where late twentieth-century concepts such as ‘empowerment’ and ‘consumerism’ have created narratives of personal responsibility (Harris, Wathen & Wyatt, 2010). Although the roots of individualized health narratives are embedded in discourses that predate current austerity, it’s argued that austerity plays a particular role in consolidating the positioning of individuals as responsible for maintaining their own wellbeing. Firstly, austerity has allowed for a furthering of neoliberal ideals with emphasis on a reduced welfare state and increased privatization. Further, since the current period of austerity, levels of social inequality have increased (Cavero & Poinasamy, 2013). As such, it’s conceivable that increased focus on individual responsibility helps interrupt connections between social and health inequality that could critique austerity policies as Friedli and Stearn (2015) suggest.

Jensen (2014) argues that to criticize welfare policy, we must first understand the ‘cultural economies’ that form and legitimize welfare ‘common sense’. To consider how dominant discourses of waged work, welfare and wellbeing are constructed during a period of austerity, the current research analyses narratives found within a subgenre of reality TV known as ‘austerity porn’ (Allen, Tyler & Sara De Benedictis, 2014) or ‘austerity reality TV’; a genre said to be rich in neoliberal and austere values contributing to anti-welfare discourse (Jensen, 2014; Jensen & Tyler, 2015; Vander Schee & Kline, 2012). Biressi and Nunn (2012) note how reality TV has sustained the attraction of large audiences, altering the ‘terrain’ of factual programming, therefore placing reality TV as a valuable site for exploring everyday discourse. For example, Channel 4’s *Benefits Street*, a British TV program following the lives of residents living on one street in Birmingham claimed to be infamous for high unemployment, drew audiences of 4.3 million, becoming the channel’s most watched show in the weeks aired (“Weekly top 30”, 2014). Jensen (2014) notes that the preferred ‘figure’ (see Tyler, 2013) of such programs is the ‘skiver’, remodeling social problems into problems of individual welfare dependence and irresponsibility. Negra and Tasker (2014) explain that this focus on individuals means anger is deflected from austerity’s structural problems and targeted instead “toward class peer groups who are imagined as retaining undeserved ‘privileges’ in a time of austerity” (2014, p.1).

However, Beresford (2016, p. 422) argues the subtext of ‘austerity porn’ can be “ambiguous and complex”. ‘Implicit’ forms of austerity reality TV appear to be concerned with showing the difficult ‘reality’ for welfare-recipients rather than the obvious shaming and ‘othering’ within more researched examples (Beresford, 2016). They are considered “well meaning”, if “ill-conceived” (Collins, 2013, para. 2). For example, BBC’s *Great British Menu Budget* aimed to be “packed full of great economical cooking on unfeasibly tiny budgets” whilst “changing the way we think about hunger and poverty” (“BBC One prices”, 2013). Beresford (2016) observes how such programs tell ‘sad stories’ that continue to reduce issues of welfare to an individual level, offering no substantial strategies for change.

Austerity reality TV research has mainly focused on ‘explicit’ forms, such as *Benefits*

*Street* with Kelly (or ‘White Dee’) the analytic figure of choice (for example see Allen, Tyler & De Benedictis, 2014; Runswick-Cole & Goodley, 2015). Following Beresford (2016), the current research analyzed both ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’ examples of austerity reality TV to explore how more subtle examples of the genre fit alongside the more overt.

The current analysis includes narratives where individuals show any period of negative affect. This broad scope allows an understanding of how affect is positioned in relation to welfare during a period of austerity following Friedli and Stearn's (2015) concerns that affect has become weaponized within welfare policy. By providing an in-depth discussion of mental health and wellbeing narratives within ‘implicit’ and ‘explicit’ examples of austerity reality TV, the analyses hopes to understand the dominant construction of waged work, welfare and mental health. The identified discourses can help understand how waged work and wellbeing are co-constructed, and whether concerns over austerity’s negative impact on mental health are dampened by shifting the focus from structural concerns onto individuals, responsibilized for their own life biographies (Rose, 1992; Scharff, 2005).

## Methods

This study used a discursive analytic framework, applied to ‘implicit’ and ‘explicit’ examples of austerity reality TV. The research aimed to include examples from the five most watched public broadcast television channels<sup>1</sup>, however no examples from ITV fit the inclusion criteria.

### Sampling Decisions

Programs considered for analysis were first aired in the UK from 2010 (the beginning of the current austerity period). Following a description of austerity reality TV by Allen, Tyler and De Benedictis (2014) programs employed non-actors, appeared improvised and non-scripted and were made in a documentary ‘style’ related but distinct from documentary realism (see Jensen and Ringrose, 2014).

Due to the research aims, programs were included that featured an individual experiencing or who previously experienced a period of psychological distress or negative affect. So the semantic coherence of the samples was preserved, all scenes in one episode/series involving the individual were analysed as one ‘narrative’.

### Chosen Narratives

Twelve narratives were analyzed; six included explicit mentions of past/present mental health difficulties including anxiety, depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Six narratives included examples where individuals undergo a period of negative affect shown through physical displays of tears, expressing how they felt ‘shit’ or ‘depressed’ or through concern shown by others for their wellbeing (Table 1).

## Analytic Process

The analytic process utilized both Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis and constructivist grounded analysis heavily influenced by Willott and Griffin (1997). Their method allows data and theory to be considered side-by-side, whilst considering the historical contexts that produce/reproduce discourses. After breaking down transcribed data into 'chunks', 'chunks' were assigned codes consisting of a single or few words that described 'in-vivo' themes. Examples of recurrent themes included 'benefits' and 'anxiety'. Each theme was considered in turn to discern the different ways the theme was 'talked about'. This allowed significant patterns to be identified, and these 'discursive patterns' were then considered across themes. Following Willott and Griffin (1997), when considering such 'discursive patterns', previous literature was consulted to move the analysis beyond Grounded Theory influences by allowing room for interpretation.

Once all themes from all narratives were reviewed, key 'discursive patterns' were chosen for further analysis. These were discourses that 'loomed large' in the data and/or enabled the research aims to be addressed. Theoretical accounts of the discourses were created by considering the key discursive constructs of historical enquiry/genealogy, power and subjectification as suggested by Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2009).

## Findings

### Claiming to Claim: From 'Can't' to 'Won't' Work

The analysis found that representations of mental health were often made visible, alongside physical disability, to help sculpt the dominant discourse of the welfare 'maligner'. For example, Phil from Channel 5's *Can't Work, Won't Work* receives employment support allowance and disability allowance for multiple health conditions including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Phil is positioned as refusing to take action to change his circumstances, believing he is entitled to more welfare. The narrator maintains:

"The ex-soldier claims he's not able to work because of various health issues, so he claims employment and support allowance" ('Can't Work Won't Work', Channel5, January, 2015).

Similarly, in *My Big Benefits Family*, the narrator says of Grandmother Annette with multiple health disabilities, including depression, "She says she's simply unable to work" ('My Big Benefits Family', Channel5, January, 2015). Both these examples position individuals as receiving welfare because *they* say they need to and not because of any independent assessment. This isn't to suggest that individuals aren't best placed to evaluate their own lived experiences, but when positioned in the dominant expert-led discourse of health, this absence of professional corroboration could be seen as delegitimizing Phil and Annette's assessments of their health.



Runswick-Cole and Goodley (2015) analyzed the narrative of Kelly ('White Dee') within Channel 4's *Benefit Street*. The narrative made frequent reference to Kelly's mental health difficulties whilst at the same time focusing on the non-paid care work she does to support her neighbor, arguably emphasizing her ability to 'work'. Like Kelly, Phil and Annette's narratives show them partaking in informal work. Annette cares for a large family whereas Phil volunteers for a food bank. Reminders of Phil's volunteering are actively positioned next to mentions of ill health as the narrator explains how his health "hasn't improved" but he is "still helping at the local food bank." The honing in on Annette's ability to look after others and Phil's capability as a voluntary worker is arguably used to confuse the boundaries between those who 'can't' and 'won't' work, placed alongside an overall lack of direct representation of mental health difficulties affecting individuals' day-to-day activities.

Building on Runswick-Cole and Goodley (2015), we argue visibility is given to mental health and wellbeing not only to construct a 'malingerer' discourse, but to also shape the 'good' welfare-recipient. Several narratives analyzed involved individuals undergoing a 'transformation', a trope often identified within reality TV (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008; Skeggs, 2009), positioning them along a journey of change from welfare 'dependence' toward employability and independence. Such narratives contained a 'feel good TV' texture, yet it's argued that affect is mobilized within the transformations to support dominant discourses of austerity wellbeing.

### **Working to Feel Better/Feeling Better to Work**

Certain psychological states were made visible during specific moments of individual narratives, depending on their place within their 'work journey'. 'Worklessness' was often associated with negative affect. For example, a lone mother from the *Future State of Welfare* explains "I can't get a job so I'm sitting in the house depressed" ('Future State of Welfare with John Humphreys', BBC2, October, 2011). In contrast, positive states were associated with progress made toward employment. Maria from *Life in Debt Valley* notes how she has good and bad days, but the day she attained employment was "a bloody good day" ('Life in Debt Valley', BBC1, March, 2016). For welfare-recipient Vanessa from *Benefits Britain 1949*, her mother remarks how waged work would "help her state of mind...because, like, she's got summat new in her life" ('Benefits Britain 1948', Channel4, August, 2013).

Midway through Vanessa's narrative, she is filmed crying following a day's work experience at a recycling plant, cut short by a bout of pain caused by fibromyalgia. Although there's potential for the program to weaponize this as a form of malingering, Vanessa's disability was used to assist a different discourse. It was suggested to Vanessa that, although manual work was not an option for her, she was able to partake in 'light office work', and an appointment for her was made at a recruitment agency. Consequently, no reasonable adjustments were needed to support Vanessa retain work in an environment such as the recycling plant, a job she started enjoying, and instead Vanessa moulded herself until she was

suitable for her new destined role. This involved undergoing a physical transformation after being told her usual attire was not appropriate for work in an office. Vanessa concluded:

“I can’t wait to be putting a wage on the table, earning my keep and not having to be dependent on the welfare state ... it’s going to be a real buzz for me”.

For Vanessa, movement along the journey toward waged work was achieved through her own transformation, resulting in an implied elevation of mood. Vanessa has become the ‘good’ welfare-recipients, or “the active welfare subject” who is “a figure of aspiration, a transformation possible only via coerced self-improvement” (Wright, 2016, p. 2).

David’s narrative within BBC’s *Saints and Scroungers* contained another example of this integration between work and wellbeing. The program differentiates between the “benefit thieves” and those “who actually deserve help” (*Saints and Scroungers*, BBC1, February, 2016). Positioned as a ‘Saint’, David’s narrative contains a series of interviews between himself and the narrator where David recounts two periods of depression. The first, he explains, was overcome through discovering an exercise class he first attended and then instructed (presumably self-employed). Upon sustaining an injury, David could no longer teach and entered a second depressive phase. It was hinted that the injury was in part his own fault, as he remembers “who can I blame for it? And the only person was myself. My body was constantly aching with the exercise, so I didn’t recognize the signs”, subtly positioning David as responsible for mitigating the consequences of unemployment. He explained how he was “sat at home, feeling sorry for myself”, “didn’t know what to do” and was “totally self-centered” until he imagined a new business idea. As the show’s presenter visits David’s new place of work, he remarks, “This is your reality now... this is where we are after those dark days”, encapsulating the discursive positioning of work as having a direct impact on mental health. David’s narrative not only shows how work is positioned as having a positive impact on wellbeing, but before this could actualize, David needed to stop feeling ‘sorry’ for himself. Any space to consider the emotional impact of suddenly being plunged into precariousness through changes of health was paved over, with David seeing himself as being ‘self-centered’ for lamenting his lost career. A quick and visible shift in David’s psychological state was positioned as necessary, suggesting a change in his frame of mind helped him progress in his journey toward the waged work – a light at an end of the tunnel.

Tammy’s narrative in *The Fairy Jobmother* contained a similar ‘therapeutic’ process. Hamad (2014) has previously noted the therapeutic role *The Fairy Jobmother* (Hayley) occupies. They note how Hayley “counsels participants in emotional and psychological terms, typically providing an empathetic tactile affective display in response to a solicited tearful breakdown” as an ‘epiphany’ which reveals the ‘root cause’ of worklessness (p. 234). This was clearly apparent within Tammy’s narrative, who at first shows resistance to the work experience she’s instructed to perform. Tammy’s ‘negative’ attitude is reformulated through a ‘therapeutic’ realization as she is made to confront this ‘negativity’ by Hayley who insists, “You look for the negative in everything... I don’t understand why,” to which Tammy replies, “I haven’t got that much self-esteem... Cus I was bullied throughout at school” (*The Fairy*



Jobmother', Channel4, July, 2011). This exchange opens up a key area for change - Tammy's self-esteem. Fitting with the dominant discursive pattern that 'work is good for you', taking steps toward waged work is positioned as necessary, as Hayley notes waged work means people can "feel better about themselves". Toward the end of her narrative as Tammy finds a voluntary position within a Sure Start Children's Centre, she notes, "I've changed in my person a lot. I've put my barrier down. I'm accepting help from people. Yep, new, positive Tammy."

For *Great British Benefit Handout's* Racheal, confidence was framed as the psychological barrier preventing her from securing waged work. This is despite the manager of a fitness club where she volunteers acknowledging he would employ her "in a heartbeat" because she is "committed, on time, great with the people" ('The Great British Benefits Handout', Channel5, 2016). Racheal is nonetheless instructed to work through her confidence 'issue' with psychologist Honey Lancaster by entering local businesses unsolicited to leave her curriculum vitae (CV).

Both Racheal and Tammy's narratives suggest that a 'therapeutic' process enables the psychological change needed for individuals to progress in their journey toward work. Yet this is called into question as both individuals are also instructed to *perform* their positive affect. When Tammy undertakes a day of work experience at a homeless shelter where she is serving food, she voices concern that this form of labor feels very distant from her social work ambitions and shows physical discomfort as the smell of the food makes her feel nauseous. The 'Fairy Jobmother' views this as a marker of how little Tammy 'cares' and instructs her to perform 'service with a smile.' For Racheal, as she is handing out her CV to a local business, psychologist Honey notes:

"She's really sort of not being very warm and personable. but that's why this is so important for her to get some chances at practising doing this, so that when there is a job she really wants to go for, she actually comes across as a bit more confident."

These narratives normalize two key related proponents of neoliberal work highlighted by Couldry (2008) of emotional labor and surveillance. Couldry (2008) notes how as emotional labor is expected in the workplace, much of this will be performative as employees are required to not only do their jobs, but portray the relevant expected feelings required by the labor process. The possibility of permanent workplace surveillance means there is more pressure on employees to 'deep act' such feelings (Stagg, as cited in Couldry, 2008, p. 6), meaning they need the ability to convincingly 'play the part'. In these examples, the performative is presented as an important arena for self-work where being able to 'act' in ways that show the right feelings helps the formation of the 'good' welfare-recipient. The proposed deep psychological changes that the search for work can bring about are then sidelined within the transformation process, placing the securing of employment above or at least on par with the therapeutic process itself.

## She's Just Not at a Point yet Where She Can Truly Move Forward: Happy Endings, But Only for Some

The findings this far suggest improvement to wellbeing can be achieved through the journey toward waged work, but also that this journey requires self-work in order to reach the appropriate stage of positive affect required to become the 'good' employee. Yet not all narratives concluded with 'happy endings' (attainment of waged work and psychological relief). This reserving of 'happy endings' only for some helps consider the self-management practice austerity rewards and the psychological regulation necessary to 'succeed'.

For example, Sue's narrative within *The Fairy Jobmother* abruptly ends when she is unable to continue the work-club due to declining mental health. *The Fairy Jobmother* concludes:

"She's just not it at a point yet where she can truly move forward, and I have to take that on board and respect her decision" ('The Fairy Jobmother', Channel 4, June, 2011).

To 'truly' move forward, an individual must find waged work, deflecting value away from the improvement of wellbeing for its own sake. It was emphasized that ending the work-club was Sue's decision, leaving little room to consider how austerity's pressure to secure waged work may affect mental health. Instead Sue is constructed as losing hope and it's implied that wellbeing should only be pursued if it has some relation to waged work.

Bill's narrative from BBC's 'Secret Life of Work' had the main affective component of anger, resulting from unfair dismissal from his railway job. Bill shows little psychological investment in the search for *new* work and simply goes through instructed motions, contrasting with the discourses above that reward the committed, conforming individualized job seeker. Bill however is active in the instigation of collective action to get his job back, and contacts old colleagues to picket against replacement agency workers. This act of collective organizing is repeatedly deligitimized with the narrative lingering over a phone call where a colleague declined to join the action and emphasis placed on the lack of official union support Bill receives, and the protesters alcohol consumption. Bill's narrative comes to an end as the narrator concludes:

"Bill's story has also moved on... He fought so hard for his job, because he thought he might get it back. He now know that's not going to happen" ('A Life Without of Work' BBC2, October, 2010).

Here, 'moving on' implies that a future is dependent on him letting go of anger and collective organizing, suggesting that welfare-recipients benefit from being compliant to government welfare programs. This distinguishes any challenge to austerity job loss, and turns the focus away from collective struggles and onto individual decisions.

Both Bill and Sue's narratives suggest the only way of 'moving forward' is through navigating the affective states that allows an individual to partake in waged work. Similarly, in Channel 4's *Keeping up with the Khans*, Bug, who has a history of PTSD shares:

"I want to be off benefits eventually. I want to be independent...to feel like I've achieved something in life and I've given back to the community" ('Keeping up with the Khans', Channel 4, February, 2016).

Bug recounts his past as an environmental activist, and he currently organizes community litter-picks. Despite this, his reliance on welfare means Bug cannot position himself as 'independent' or as 'achieving' enough in life, again showing how one's value is best attained through waged work.

## Discussion

The findings show how the narratives analyzed weave relationships between wellbeing, welfare and waged work. Therapy and job searching become entangled as psychologists act as job coaches (as seen in Rachel's narrative) and job coaches as therapists (as seen in Tammy's narrative). This relationship is captured within two main discursive threads. The first positions work as necessary for wellbeing (*working to feel better*) as shown for example in Maria's narrative (BBC's *Life in Debt Valley*) who described the day she found work as a 'bloody good day', or David's narrative (BBC's *Saints and Scroungers*), who sank into depression when waged work was lost. However, research suggests the relationship between work and wellbeing isn't so straight-forward. Butterworth, Leach, Strazdins, Olesen, Rodgers and Broom (2011) found that, although on the whole their participants in waged work reported higher levels of wellbeing, those in *poor quality* work were more likely to experience poor mental health than those in receipt of welfare.

The second discursive thread suggests individuals need to work on themselves in order to attain the right affective states that will help them progress along a journey toward waged work (*feeling better to work*). Individuals need to stop 'feeling sorry for themselves' (David), to get a 'buzz' from the prospect of waged work (Vanessa) and let go of the past (Bill) otherwise they cannot 'truly move forward' (Sue).

Allen, Tyler and De Benedictis (2014) argue that narratives within reality TV can help unpick the key questions "What counts as labour? What counts as work? Who and what has value and is value?" (Section.5.4). These questions are held at the forefront of the following discussion, whilst keeping the lens focused on the politics of austerity.

### When is Work Valued?

The narratives position 'work' as contributing to better wellbeing, yet what makes 'work' valued appears 'slippery' and in need of negotiation. Perhaps counter intuitively, it's argued flexibility allows the boundary between the 'good' welfare-recipient and the welfare dependent to be more frequently drawn. For example, Phil's volunteering (Channel5 *Can't*

*Work Won't Work*) isn't positioned as valued work, made explicit through the program's title, allowing Phil to fit into the narrative of 'malingering'. For Tammy (Channel 4 *The Fairy Jobmother*), securing a volunteering position is celebrated. In contrast to Phil, Tammy's volunteering is seen as a sign of a changed attitude and as a step toward waged work. Tammy's transformation is shown as a success, despite a lack of any material change of circumstance. This supports Moore (2012) who notes welfare policy aims not to find people employment but foster the 'right' attitude toward employability (as cited in Friedli and Stearn, 2015 p. 41). This 'slippery' definition of work complicates the dominant discourse that 'waged work supports wellbeing', as wellbeing is no longer found within the act of labor itself. Despite this, a relationship between wellbeing and waged work in the analyzed narratives remains intact, and it's argued that this relationship is supported by and supports the politics of austerity.

### Wellbeing as Positive Thinking

It is argued that 'work-ready' attitudes have become deeply entrenched in the concept of austerity wellbeing. Friedli and Stearn (2015) note how sculpting a 'work positive' outlook is now common and often mandatory within welfare practice, a concept they call 'psycho-compulsion'. Psycho-compulsion is argued to 'rebrand' unemployment as a mental health issue, where individuals will find work if only they adopt the right attitude.

Psycho-politics<sup>2</sup> not only changes the concept of unemployment, but shapes the concept of wellbeing itself as it becomes embedded within the theory that legitimizes governmental practises of welfare entitlement. Shakespeare, Watson and Alghaib (2017) assert how the new Work Capability Assessment used to assess individuals' 'ability' to work is based on a model of disability constructed by Waddell and Alyward (2006, 2010 as cited in Shakespeare, Watson and Alghaib, 2017) that overemphasizes the psychological factors associated with common health conditions. Mental distress is positioned as the fruit of 'bad attitudes' and places responsibility onto the individual to change how they think about their health. They argue:

"For most people with common health problems, decisions about being (un)fit for working, taking sickness absence or claiming benefits are conscious and rational decisions, free choices with full awareness and intent, for which they must take responsibility" (as cited in Shakespeare, Watson and Alghaib, 2017, p. 21).

'Responsibility' takes the form of 'positive thinking' and 'changed attitudes' as good mental health is made into an individual choice (Friedli and Stearn, 2015). Even narratives centered on individuals with diagnosed and complex mental health difficulties, such as Annette's (*My Big Benefits Family*) and Phil's (*Can't Work Won't Work*) contained no depictions of mental health support in and of itself. Instead, mental health difficulties can be approached through self-management, which requires a positive attitude and can do spirit. Brijnath and Antoniadou (2016) view the move to self-management as 'troubling' for when mental health difficulties such as depression are positioned as a problem within the individual

requiring internal change, again we erase socio-cultural factors such as class, poverty and work inequalities and the State is absolved of responsibility for change (Gattuso et al., 2005; Peacock et al., 2014a; Teghtsoonian as cited in Brijnath & Antoniadou, 2016). People just need the right attitude to use the recourses at their ready disposal.

Atkinson (2015) warns that the current landscape of psycho-politics means wellbeing in government rhetoric has moved from an endpoint of policy and a marker of social progress to a “process factor influencing other desirable policy goals” (p. 48). This has important implications, as Atkinson (2015) asserts, because when wellbeing is placed as an end point, it’s difficult to ignore the impacting structural inequalities. When wellbeing is placed as part of a process toward other outcomes (such as employment), responsibility for wellbeing is moved away from collective responsibility onto the individual. This echoes Taylor’s (2011) caution that the current “concept of wellbeing needs to be treated with caution” as it embeds itself within common trends of individualization and a “marketised view of social provision” (p. 279). Callard and Stearn (2015) note how psycho-politics means individuals are coerced to take responsibility for wellbeing through sculpting the can do attitudes employers favor in spite of the “low pay, no pay economy”, the rise in “precarious, exploitative and part-time jobs” (para. 17) and its likely impact on mental health.

### **Wellbeing is Independence**

The emphasis on the self-management of mental health arguably reflects the neoliberal value given to independence. Several of the narratives conflated independence with waged work and receiving welfare with dependency. Positive affect could be drawn from the expected independence waged work could bring (for example Vanessa getting a ‘buzz’ out of the prospect of ‘earning a wage’), whilst those whose mental health didn’t allow for waged work remained ‘dependent’ on welfare (Bug).

Fine and Glendinning (2005) argue that “autonomy and independence... are promoted as universal and largely unproblematic goals” (p. 602) and that dependency is a State seen as actively needed to be ‘reversed’. At the same time, wellbeing is positioned as a moral necessity as Thornton (2010) explains that hope is fabricated as an “obligatory lifestyle commitment”, necessary to ‘recover’ from poor mental health with a failure to have hope translating into a moral failing (p. 328).

It is argued the entanglement of wellbeing and morality is exaggerated in austere times as ‘good’ mental health signifies a motivated and productive worker, a subjectivity laden itself with moral worth. Wellbeing and independence become intertwined valued constructs, attained through one’s distancing from the welfare state. Taylor (2011) asserts how conflating independence with happiness relies on “normative constructions of the individual and the social” as agency is knotted with ‘independence’ (p. 792). They argue concepts of wellbeing should question that agency can only be achieved through independence, or that the individual is ever separated from social processes (such as entitlement to welfare). As Fine and Glendinning (2005) argue, independence is influenced by the social, with the boundary

between independence and dependence more porous than assumed. A more fluid concept of dependency is one that can be complicated by social barriers, therefore requiring social solutions, going against austerity's logic. Therefore, not only does the logic of austerity remain preserved, but so does an individualistic model of disability.

### Concluding Remarks

Reality TV has been positioned as a way of understanding the 'cultural economies' that contribute toward austerity 'common sense' and is a valuable asset to those who wish to critically study welfare policy (Jensen, 2014). The current analysis helps unearth discourses promoting certain ideals around welfare, work, and mental health in the current period of austerity, where wellbeing can only be thought of in its relation to productive labor and productive labor is seen as essential for wellbeing.

A limitation to the research is that the analytic methods are unable to help understand the lived experiences of those the discourses identified claim to represent. They are unable to tap into the psychosocial dynamics of welfare policy where other methods can (see Froggett, 2012; Hitchen, 2016; Hunter, 2015; Stenner, Barnes & Taylor, 2008). However, by exposing the dominant discourses that shape our present and future perceptions of wellbeing and waged labor, we can more critically engage with the construction of the 'good' and 'worthy' welfare-recipient as one who actively strives to detach from welfare and secure wellbeing by proxy through employment practice. We can question why wellbeing has become another condition for citizens to manage so that they can ensure they are 'fit to work' and where the eugenic-logic of austerity may leave those disabled by their mental health.

The welfare narratives disperse discussions over the potential effects of austerity on wellbeing, presenting 'worklessness' as the issue and waged work as the solution. Individuals must adjust, undertaking self-labor to attain the affective state required for employment opportunities needed to sustain wellbeing (Friedli and Stearn, 2015). As Hamad (2014) shares in their own reflections on *The Fairy Jobmother*, individuals 'enact' their own social care (p. 236). Such employment discourse is another frontier of what Rimke (2016) labels 'psychocentrism'; a form of social injustice where correction of individual 'flaws' is favored against economic and structural justice. Friedli and Stearn (2015) note how this rhetoric supports the widening of 'psycho-compulsion' within welfare policy, which unemployed individuals must engage with or risk blame for not improving their own circumstances, despite research suggesting inappropriate work itself can be to the detriment to wellbeing (Butterworth et al., 2011).

**Table 1 Character Narratives**

Narrative	Original host channel/year aired	Explicit/Implicit	Reason for Inclusion



Bill: <i>A Life Without Work</i>	BBC2/2010	Implicit	Experiencing anger after forced unemployment
David: <i>Saints and Scroungers</i> 'Series 4 Episode 14'	BBC1/2013	Explicit	History of depression
Lone mother: <i>The Future State of Welfare with John Humphreys</i>	BBC2/2011	Implicit	Lone mother mentioned feeling 'depressed'
Maria: <i>Life in Debt Valley</i>	BBC1/2016	Explicit	Includes a scene where Maria cries
Tammy: <i>The Fairy Jobmother</i> 'Series 2 Episode 3'	Channel4/2011	Implicit	Tammy is singled out for her 'poor self-esteem' and 'negative attitude'
Sue: <i>The Fairy Jobmother</i> 'Series 2 Episode 4'	Channel4/2011	Implicit	History of mental health difficulties.
Bug: <i>Keeping up with the Khans</i> 'Season 1 Episode 4'	Channel4/2016	Explicit	Experience of PTSD.
Vanessa: <i>Benefits Britain 1949</i> 'Season 1 Episode 2'	Channel4/2013	Implicit	In one scene, Vanessa appears to be crying.
Joanna: <i>Keeping up with the Khans</i> 'Season 1 Episode 4'	Channel4/2016	Explicit	Described as having mental health difficulties by her boyfriend/ ex-boyfriend.
Phil: <i>Benefits: Can't Work Won't Work</i>	Channel5/2015	Explicit	Experience of PTSD.
Racheal: <i>Great British Benefits Handout</i>	Channel5/2016	Implicit	History of anxiety
Annette: <i>Benefits: My Big Benefits Family</i>	Channel5/2015	Explicit	Experiences depression.

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## Endnotes

1. Until the introduction of Free View in 2002, Channels 1 – 5 were the only channels available in the UK without subscription and are still the five most watched UK TV channels. The Broadcasting Corporation (BBC One and Two) is primarily publicly funded through household TV licenses. ITV (Independent Television), Channel 4 and 5 are commercial channels that gain revenue through advertising.
2. ‘Psycho-politics’ used here departs from Franz Fanon’s use of the same term,

which argues that ‘symptoms’ of mental distress are not found within the colonized individual, but are inherent in the structural conditions of colonization . However, Fanon’s concept of psychopolitics also has relevance when considering the effect of austerity as discussed by Mills (2018).