



Me and my mum at my sister's hen-do

Daniel Blake, a class in itself?

Yesterday I went with my mum to her second Work Capability Assessment. We were dropped off outside the building; the sign "Assessment Centre" was strangely unbranded, like a pop-up shop selling Christmas stock. We walked in as someone left, finding ourselves on the shop floor of the poorly renovated building. There were rows of seats on each of the side-walls, a locked door marked "assessment rooms" and an empty reception desk. We waited and looked out of the large shop windows whilst others looked in. The receptionist came through the front door, having been on lunch, and we filled in a form. We waited again. The temperature of the room lurched from hot dry blasts to a sharp chill each time the large front doors opened, using an automatic system that maintained an open position just that bit too long. A woman opened the locked door and my mum was called in. We walked in our Sunday best, along the corridor, overly thanking the woman in each interaction. We sat, my mum's small curled body distorted, seeking comfort on the office chair; mine woven in on itself, legs and arms crisscrossed around each other. The woman was chatting: "How was your journey?" The cultural norms of social interaction are difficult to suppress, but we have learnt that "Good, thank you" is an inappropriate response. The woman began her introduction, distancing herself from her practice, an almost involuntary head shake appeared to mirror our discomfort. We all knew the assessment had long since begun, but we humoured her, "Thank you" – again. "The questions may seem random, it is only because of the form" – but why should the form be random? "I am going to look at the computer screen, this is not because I am ignoring you" – but why should the computer sit between us? These small acts of humanising the Assessment since my mum's last experience bought into sharp relief the ongoing dehumanising process of claiming benefits. It is not enough to smile whilst you enact a violence upon the vulnerable. We no longer trust the system, and I cannot forgive the woman for her part within it.



The assessment centre: inaccessible by car, “by appointment only”

My mum’s first assessment was four years ago. Having undergone two major back surgeries, resulting in nerve damage causing severe and constant pain and the loss of feeling in her left leg, the consultants are clear that she can not work. Being called for the assessment was confusing – why was this necessary given the doctors’ diagnosis? Yet, this absurdity did not fire up defiance within my mum, she began to question herself. The authoritative tone of the correspondence, the formality of the process and the ongoing discursive destruction of the benefit claimant, acted to delegitimise her position as in need. Nevertheless, she drew upon the associated power of the medicalisation of her condition to gather together the strength of will to attend the assessment, and in doing so lay claim to deserving care. Unfortunately, the assessment itself is entrenched with these same discursive powers: the authority of the biomedical encapsulated in the claim that the assessor is a “trained Healthcare Professional”.

This authority was embodied by the middle-class woman who assessed my mum’s capability to work. A woman who remarked on my mum’s hair, “Such a pretty colour”, and flatteringly questioned my mum’s age. A woman who took an interest in my mum’s family life and the joy she feels when spending time with her granddaughter. A woman who asked my mum whether she keeps a clean home, keeps a clean body. Gendered, disablist and classed processes producing dominant accounts of respectability construct my mum as ‘Other’ and the assessment cannot be untangled from these forms of discrimination. The inherent power of the middle-class woman to define my mum within her classifying judgements of taste, alongside her perceived medical legitimisation, produced an interaction so marked by inequality it cannot be conceived as anything other than violent.

Following this assessment, my mum was deemed fit for work. In the assessment report, the evidence of my mum’s capability centred on her clean clothes, healthy hair, friendly manor, happiness, love for her family. Who is the “monstrous” other that this assessment seeks? There has been a sustained discursive (re)construction of those in need of support as morally abject; as ‘scroungers’, ‘shirkers’, ‘cheats’. The foundation of the Work Capability Assessment on the construction of this figurative character has produced a bizarre paradox whereby an ability to perform the incapacitated self, physically, socially and morally, is the means to access the benefit.

The requirement within the assessment to share a disabling account of the self is productive of these constructions, yet, this very performance is so widely devalued that it becomes a core site of resistance by those in need. It is through my mum's investment in performances of respectable working class woman that she carves out a positive sense of self as other to the dominant representations of those unable to work. In this way, the assessment is a powerful mode of classification, a mechanism of capitalist reproduction within which class inequality is entrenched.

It is this intersection of class and incapacity to work that the film 'I, Daniel Blake' stories. The film has of course been celebrated and critiqued, often simultaneously, across the media political spectrum. I went into the screening concerned that the poverty faced by those navigating the benefit system may be dramatized, the 'north' further romanticised. I worried that the only way we could imagine a deserving subject was as a white man, skilled and hardworking, suffering an illness separate from his social position, a cruel turn of fate. But this was not how I experienced the film. I felt its dark humour and moments of tenderness as an honest depiction of classed being. The character of Daniel Blake experienced his (re)positioning as 'sick' through discourses of class: worker/shirker; deserving/undeserving. The power of 'I, Daniel Blake' is that his destitution is not due to an unfair and unavoidable illness that prevents him from working, rather it is because he is working that his illness results in destitution. What I mean to say is that Daniel Blake's relation to work is the structural cause of his mistreatment, not his illness. The story brings to the fore the foundation of Employment Support Allowance within classed formations, the benefit is constituted on the assumption of a right to work, redefining the sick and disabled as unemployed. Therefore, the story fundamentally challenges the notion of a deserving and undeserving poor, not by showing us the life of a deserving man, but by highlighting the inherent exploitation of waged work. Through a representation of the dystopic capitalist formation of an enforced right to work, 'I, Daniel Blake' provides a stimulus for the utopian method, forwarded by Ruth Levitas (2001), as a means to measure the inhumanity of the current system.



Daniel Blake handing out his CV for work he is too ill to accept

Thus, I write this piece to open a conversation about what this utopia may look and feel like. Drawing upon Levitas' provocations, I believe an imagining of an ethic of care may enable a more open and critical engagement with an insidious 'work ethic', as an instrument of domination and social control. Further, a refusal to reproduce the capitalist regime through a resistance of discourses of 'inclusion', is made possible in the utopian imagining of a 'right not to work', outlined by Chris Grover and Linda Piggott (2015).

My motivation was to share the experience of an individual in order to make visible the structural. This is not an account of one who is deserving, different and distinct from an imagined other. This is an account of a life lived in spite of a system which reproduces its impossibility. Perhaps my mum will again be deemed too full of life to fit the dystopic construction of the benefit claimant. Regardless of the outcome of her assessment, the decision will feed into the continued legitimisation of paid work as the means to recognised citizenship. Therefore, I suggest that a critique of Employment Support Allowance must be located within a broader account of the disabling nature of paid work. The visibility of exploitation, the paradox of performing incapacity and the systematic denial of inequality within discourses of inclusion, means that the Work Capability Assessment is a productive site for class critique. As such, I argue that the sharing of stories of impossibility may ignite the possibility of utopic imaginings.

References

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Levitas, R., 2001. Against work: a utopian incursion into social policy. *Critical social policy*, 21(4), pp.449-465.

Link to blog

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