

# **'Moving life stories tell us just why politics matters': Personal narratives in tabloid anti-austerity campaigns**

## **Introduction**

Tabloid journalism is often disparaged for its 'soft' human interest stories, as appealing to readers' emotions and favouring the sensational over the socially and politically significant (e.g. Franklin, 1997; Sparks, 1992). However, critics have also acknowledged that personal narratives can "increase our knowledge and understanding of important events" (Bird, 1998: 45) if they extrapolate from the personal to the general. On the other hand, a focus exclusively on the personal can falsely "offer the experiences of the individual as the direct and unmediated key to the understanding of the social totality", excluding social and economic structures (Sparks, 1992: 41). In news stories about welfare, the poor can be blamed for their own poverty, and be accorded responsibility for overcoming their situation or celebrated for doing so in narratives of triumph over adversity.

In common with the European tabloid press, British tabloid journalism presents the newspaper "as speaking for the common citizen and "common sense", often mobilizing a tone of outrage" (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 211). The dominant political orientation of that outrage is "reactionary popular" (Sparks, 1992: 41) or "right-wing populism" (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 211) that tends to blame social problems on folk devils such as benefits 'scroungers', which could construct, or at least reinforce, a populist imagined community (Conboy 2006). However, there are also left-leaning, Labour party-supporting tabloids, which stake a similar claim to speak for the ordinary citizen but avoid demeaning benefits claimants in the same way (Harper, 2014). This article will examine the use of personal narratives in two campaigns against a controversial welfare reform popularly known as the 'bedroom tax' that ran in the *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday People* over the course of 2013, to evaluate whether they succeeded in translating the individual narratives of suffering into political advocacy.

## **Personal narratives, empathy, and political engagement**

Myra MacDonald (2000) argues that human interest stories are not inherently conservative, and are used to construct varying kinds of narrative with differing intentions and likely reception. Whilst some may cynically pander to prejudices, confirm fears and provide entertainment, others challenge misrepresentation by providing testimony, which invites identification, but also "prompts the viewer into interrogative mode by marking the limits of mere emotional vicariousness", by identifying the gap "between the official rhetoric and experience" (MacDonald, 2000: 261). In other words, by understanding another's position or predicament the audience can develop a more critical understanding of social mores or public policy. To be politically engaged, then, human interest stories must show how abstract or complex social structures and policy changes affect people in concrete and emotionally evocative ways.

The first element is to invite identification by eliciting empathy. Wahl-Jorgensen (2013b: 315) draws on Frosh and Pinchevski's notion of an "injunction to care" to demonstrate how journalists appeal to shared cultural expectations about emotional responses to suffering, such as the parental heartache that contextualizes a child's illness. It is not only popular media that uses such emotional appeals, but also highly regarded forms such as investigative and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalism (Ettema and Glasser, 1998; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013a, 2013b).

Therefore, like broadsheet investigations, tabloid campaigns use victim testimonials to establish the significance of the problem. However, as part of this they are also used to establish the 'deservingness' of the victims, which brings a danger of pandering to the prejudices of the audience (MacDonald, 2000). It is no coincidence that "a significant number of Pulitzer Prize-winning stories drew on accounts of dead or sick children as a way of illustrating broader themes" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013a: 140), as was the case in post-devolution Scottish press campaigns on drug dealing, hospital closure and asylum detention (Birks, 2011) and more recently in relation to the Syrian refugee crisis. The vulnerability of children and their lack of agency make them 'good victims' (Langer, 1992).

Langer argues that the construction of 'good victims' in popular news media requires that they find themselves in unexpected and preferably serious circumstances that are "suffered and not chosen" (1992: 116), against which they are helpless (see also Birks, 2011). Moreover, Ettema and Glasser (1998) found similar discourse in 'serious' investigative journalism, where "innocence has to be painstakingly made real through narrative" (1998: 115). Victims needed to be framed in such a way to avoid their being blamed for, or seen as deserving of, their own victimisation. For example, an investigation into rape in US jails needed to establish that victims were convicted of minor, non-violent offences such as shoplifting, or were later acquitted. Ettema and Glasser recognise that the moral impulse here is culturally conservative with a tendency to "affirm conventional interpretations of right and wrong", without interrogating them (1998: 114).

Benefits claimants are one such group routinely othered in popular news discourse, stereotyped as lazy or hampered by dependency, profligate and having excessive children (Hancock, 2004; Harper, 2014; Lens, 2002), so we would expect to see particular efforts to present them as sympathetic in campaigns against benefit cuts. However, in their construction as 'good victims', conventional judgements about the 'undeserving poor' may remain unchallenged, and in fact a focus on their personal characteristics and behaviour could obscure the structural social and economic constraints on their agency.

Ettema and Glasser (1998: 128) see the exclusion of structural explanations as intrinsic to the dramatic requirements of narrative storytelling, which privilege an outraged reaction and exclude essential details of systemic failure as "anticlimactic". However, the problem may rather be that the dominant mode of storytelling is confessional *melodrama*, which takes the comforting form of narratives of self-improvement and triumph against adversity, reassuring us that we can solve our own problems, but responsabilizing the poor. The audience response to personal narratives of poverty is therefore more likely to be pity than empathy, eliciting egoistic charitable reactions instead of political opposition to inequality (Lugo-Ocando, 2015: 173).

To take human interest stories into more political territory, they must connect the particular to the universal, and take responsibility for the problem by seeking to change it (Lugo-Ocando, 2015; Peters, 2011: 39). Lugo-Ocando (2015: 174-5) argues that "journalism needs to narrativise news on poverty in the context of risk and uncertainty [...] by changing the position of those who suffer from the distant 'other' to one of 'us'". If we can understand our social position as at least in part based in good luck, and imagine the possibility that circumstances outside our control could lead to a reversal of fortune, then we can truly empathise with the poor and disenfranchised and therefore feel a social responsibility to them.

One way to do this would be to use statistics to draw “equivalences” between the personal narrative that inspires compassion and the generalizable political interests, for example, to show how widespread a problem is (Boltanski 1999: 11). Another approach is found in literary journalism, to use personal narratives not only to give the story meaning but as a jumping off point to imagine infinite others from their perspectives (Greenberg, 2014: 528). However, those specific people must be treated as individuals with particular motives and agency, not simply as types related to their social position with motives ascribed accordingly, as this closes down critical thinking and debate. The story must remain dialogical, or, in Arendt’s terms, agonistic (Silverstone, 2007: 53). The use of ‘victims’ as news sources, allowing them to speak in their own voices, is an important aspect of dialogical stories.

### **Sources, testimony and witnessing**

Whilst news media continue to favour official and other elite sources, ‘ordinary people’ have an increasing (if still typically limited) role, especially in human interest stories (Ross, 2007). Once it was the eyewitness whose role it was to engage the audience in the story, because they were simultaneously involved *and* disinterested and could therefore both make the victim “more authentically sympathetic” and “guarantee the details of his misfortune” (Langer, 1992: 120). Increasingly, however, that personal legitimacy is invested in the victims themselves as authentically emotional in their response to their victimisation (Birks, 2014: 215-220). As Wahl-Jorgensen (2013a: 132) notes, “The way in which outrage is mobilized [...] is by getting a credible individual affected by the wrongdoing to denounce it in public, usually by sharing their own personal (and emotional) experience”. Indeed, Peters (2011: 31) argues that the “victim-witness” has a particular “prestige” because “the indisputables of pain and death can serve as a resource to persuade others of the truth of one’s words of witness”.

This points to the importance of attributing an active role to those whose individual stories are used to service the universal point. However, in a study of media use of personal narratives in coverage of welfare reform, Vicki Lens (2002) cautions that mere access is not sufficient. She argues that women on welfare have internalised the dominant stereotype of the ‘welfare queen’ and “often respond by separating themselves from and by denigrating other recipients or blaming themselves for their poverty” (2002: 14). Affective responses to oppression and marginalisation can translate into conflicting emotions including shame and anger, which may not be consciously felt or rationally derived from their experience, and “likely affects the very existence, degree, and types of political action engaged in by members of the group” (Gould, 2010: 30).

On the other hand, research in Scandinavian countries – those most associated with social democratic media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) – indicates that a *non*-personalised approach to welfare stories does not either guarantee a progressive framing of the issue. Lunsdstrom (2013: 630) found that whilst Swedish reporting of welfare fraud was “articulated as a social problem”, rather than personal narratives vilifying individuals as in the UK, the framing “in both countries establishes a neoliberal, financialized and individualized notion of welfare dependency” that undermines the welfare state by constructing recipients as undeserving. Lens (2002: 14) concludes that progressive coverage of welfare reform must include “empowered recipients” who are able to relate their experience to the structural context of inequality and social injustice and are “seeking collective action and social change”.

In summary, a politicised use of personal narrative would need to firstly mobilize empathy for those affected without pandering to stereotypes, whilst secondly illustrating the gap between politicians’ rhetoric and ordinary people’s experience, therefore connecting their individual

experiences to infinite others and to wider social and political mechanisms. Finally it would also include the testimony of those affected in their own voices, expressing their own subjectivity, but also exercising political agency, especially collectively.

### **The Welfare Act 2012 and the 'Bedroom Tax': Justifications and challenges**

The Welfare Act 2012 introduced a raft of changes to social security as part of a wider austerity agenda aimed at cutting public spending, that attempted to redefine what was adequate or 'fair to the taxpayer'. In an initially unnoticed clause, those who were judged to be 'under-occupying' their home by having a 'spare room' were compelled to either move to a smaller home or lose 14% of their housing benefit<sup>1</sup>, or 25% for two or more 'spare' rooms. The rationale given for this was to correct a shortage of social housing, explained by under-occupation of the existing housing stock rather than the failure to replace council houses bought up through the right to buy scheme. The Conservative-led coalition government (2010-15) belatedly coined the alternative terms 'under-occupancy penalty' and 'removal of the spare room subsidy' to reflect this rationale, but by this time the term 'bedroom tax' had gained popular currency, and so is the term used throughout this article.

The policy caused particular problems for those who needed their 'spare' room, such as separated parents who did not have main custody of their child, parents of young soldiers whose room would be empty for longer than the permitted period, as well as for disabled people who might need a room for a carer to stay, to store specialist medical equipment, or for their partner to sleep in a separate room. Disabled people were also often reluctant to move because their homes were adapted to enable them to live independently (and of course the cost of adapting another home likely would be more than the cost saving of the smaller property), as were others dependent on support from nearby family or the local community. These individual circumstances all challenge the government definition of 'spare rooms', which is a significant aspect of their political justification, but to focus on these factors at the policy level would also risk distinguishing such 'deserving' cases and neglecting more general hardship, structural inequality and the case for welfare in principle.

A more politically strategic challenge might target the two stated reasons for the change in policy – the shortage of social housing capacity and the 'need' to cut the welfare bill. Firstly because the shortage was especially acute in smaller homes, so the policy threatened to leave larger homes empty because smaller families could no longer afford to live in them. Secondly, given this shortage in the social sector, housing benefit claimants could be forced to move into smaller but more expensive homes in the private rented sector, potentially *increasing* the welfare bill. This provides a practical and structural critique that can be generalized to all affected claimants, but doesn't tackle the underlying assumptions about benefits recipients.

Finally, then, the campaigns could challenge this political framing of the poor as taking more housing than they need as part of a broader stigmatizing discourse of the profligate poor as wasteful and enjoying undeserved luxuries. This would mean trying to change readers' minds about the need for welfare reform more broadly, in a context dominated by anti-welfare rhetoric and widespread assumptions – even on the left – that public opinion was not sympathetic to benefits claimants.

The following analysis will examine the extent to which the two campaigns employed personal narratives and structural critiques in the terms explored above. It is based on a content analysis of 473 articles in the *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday People* newspapers, from the launch of the campaigns

in January 2013 to the point where the coverage began to peter out at the end of the year. The sample was downloaded from Nexis using the search term “bedroom tax OR spare room subsidy OR (under-occup\* AND housing benefit)” and duplicate articles eliminated. A sub-set of 113 articles was also identified in the course of this analysis for qualitative thematic analysis to elaborate on the quantitative findings.

The analysis categorised each article on 10 substantive criteria. The first set of criteria analysed whether the article featured any personal accounts of individuals affected by the bedroom tax, and if so whether they were quoted. It also recorded whether those quoted were passively recounting their circumstances as helpless victims or were politicised, for instance criticising the government or calling for the policy to be changed or revoked. Secondly, the various potential challenges were noted: mention of individual circumstances, practical objections, and support for or challenge to the claimed need for welfare reform in general, and connectedly, whether the articles either challenged or reinforced stereotypes of benefits ‘scroungers’. Finally, specific political, moral and emotional criteria were recorded: appeals to social justice or expression of class politics; moral judgements made of the government, for instance as heartless or venal; and emotional language. Emotion was coded for explicit references, rather than stories intended to elicit emotion (which is more difficult to consistently identify), and categorised in terms of the subject to whom emotion was primarily attributed (affected individuals, publics, politicians and others) and distinguishing anger, as a more political emotion, from others such as fear, worry and shame.

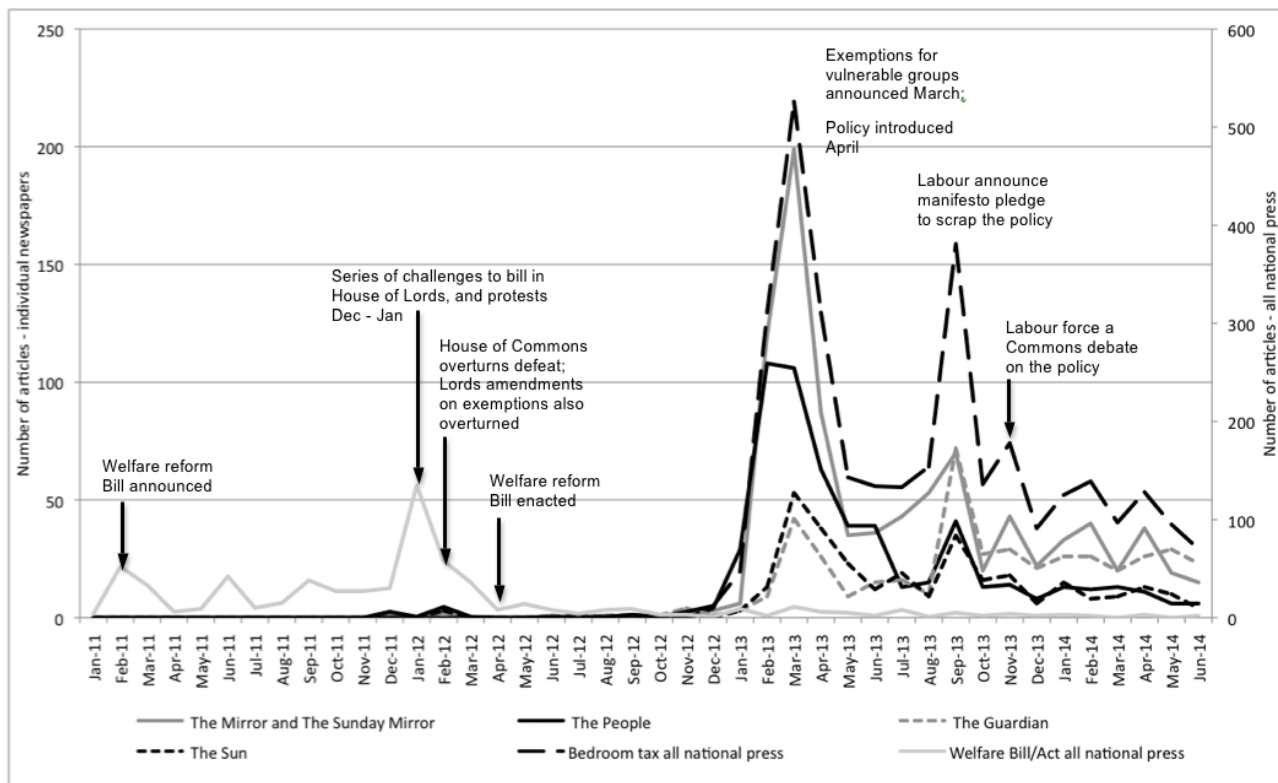
These campaigns are selected as outlier case studies to examine an exception to the dominant patterns of framing in the popular news media. They are not taken as representative of broader coverage, but used to interrogate what is possible in terms of popular political journalism within existing conditions, even if it is not routine. As the content analysis examines *all* articles from the selected campaigns, no statistical tests have been used. Before moving on to the analysis of the campaigns, the next two sections give an overview of the coverage of welfare reform in general and the bedroom tax in particular across the national press, with a particular focus on the representation of public opinion on the issue.

### **The Bedroom Tax in the News**

During the period in which it was being debated in parliament, coverage of the Welfare Reform Bill was surprisingly limited, as indicated in figure 1. Well over a third of the 538 articles were in the *Guardian*, which gave the bill more than three times the coverage of the second most attentive newspaper (*The Times*). Although the *Mirror* only accounted for 8% of this sample, it was immediately critical of the bill whilst the majority of newspapers were supportive; the *Sunday People*, however, only mentioned it twice. In the run up to the publication of the bill the conservative press published government spin on “illegal immigrants” claiming benefits and numbers of children “growing up on the dole” and therefore getting stuck in “intergenerational worklessness” (*Daily Mail* and *Express* 14/02/11), and a “war” or “crackdown” on “sicknote Britain” (*Daily Mail* and *Express* 17/02/11).

Cuts to housing benefit were mentioned first in a letter to the *Scottish Express* from a housing association (20/01/11), but that may have referred to other proposed cuts, and no reference was made to spare bedrooms until June (*Independent* 07/06/11). The term ‘bedroom tax’ first appeared toward the end of 2011 in the *Mirror* (09/12/11), but since it was not attributed to a source it is not clear who coined the term. However, this labelling of the policy as a ‘tax’ was not the trigger for widespread coverage. Once the House of Commons had overturned the Lords

amendments and the bill was passed, the policy was largely limited to the pages of the *Guardian's* Society supplement and associated blog – which is aimed specifically at public sector professionals – until the start of 2013. The politicization of the issue – shifting it from a specialist to a mainstream issue – followed a strategically timed intervention by the Labour Party raising the issue of the impact on soldiers and disabled people in the news lull between Christmas and New Year (*Mirror* and *Telegraph* 26/12/12, *People* 30/12/12), as pointed out by ex-spin doctor Damian McBride (*Independent* 28/12/12).



**Figure 1:** Coverage of Welfare Reform Bill in national press and Bedroom Tax in national and selected press (top four newspapers by number of articles)  
 Source: Nexis unedited search returns, moderate similarity setting

The *Mirror* and *People* took up the issue in earnest in mid-January 2013. The volume of articles peaked in March 2013, on the run up to the policy coming into force in April (please see figure 1). Over the summer the papers struggled to maintain the story, with short articles featuring new case studies or criticising the ministers responsible for blunders and hypocrisy, but interest revived in September with the Labour Party finally succumbing to pressure to pledge to reverse the policy if they won the next election, and to a lesser extent in November when Labour tabled an opposition debate. Coverage then dwindled, as it became apparent that the government were prepared to weather the storm and retain the policy.

**The resonance of stereotypes: public opinion on welfare reform**

When the Welfare Reform Bill was announced, criticism was muted, even in the left-liberal quality press. Columnists such as Polly Toynbee (*Guardian* 19/02/11, 27/01/12, 29/03/13) and Will Hutton (*Observer* 09/12/12) reproduced the widespread journalistic assumption that the public was in favour of welfare reform and unsympathetic to claimants, though they framed this as a product of right-wing rhetoric from the government backed up by the conservative press.

But Cameron's gift for planting great political myths in the popular imagination, aided by his mighty press, means he wins most arguments - until found out. This week it's welfare. Polls show the public deeply believes immigrant/teen mother/druggy idlers live the high life on others' hard-earned taxes. One anecdote is worth a hundred facts, but phoney facts can be very useful too - until found out. (Polly Toynbee, *Guardian* 19/02/11)

Toynbee recognises the mythologizing potential of personal narratives, with atypical cases standing as a synecdoche for the whole welfare system. A particularly prominent case occurred during the sample period when Mick Philpott, father of 17 children, was found guilty of manslaughter of six of them in a failed plot to appear to save the children from a house fire, frame his former lover and regain custody. He was notoriously described in a *Daily Mail* front page headline as the "Vile Product of Welfare UK" (2nd April 2013) though this framing was resisted by the *Mirror* as well as the liberal broadsheets (Harper 2014).

Dominant assessments of public opinion, therefore, assumed people to be unconcerned about those less well-off, but especially resentful of those perceived as undeservedly having more. The Prime Minister's account of this, writing in *The Sun* (07/04/13) was that "no one wants to work hard every day and see their hard-earned taxes being used to fund things they themselves cannot afford, or keep generations dependent on welfare". This view was not limited to Conservative politicians, however – after losing the 2010 general election Labour reflected on "how far the party has drifted from mainstream public opinion", especially on sins such as "wealth without work" (Liam Byrne quoted in *Guardian* 13/06/11). Both of these statements reinforce a stereotype of generous benefits funding profligate lifestyles.

It is common for politicians and journalists to make unsubstantiated claims about public opinion that become a self-reinforcing discourse, but in this instance the claims were unusually often supported by references (though mostly vague and non-specific) to opinion polling. This was frequently interpreted as forestalling any political opposition to the austerity agenda:

However, the subject is difficult for the Liberal Democrats - as well as Labour - as polls show the public overwhelmingly supports the idea of a cap. (*Independent* 24/01/12)

However, the unusually high and increasing number of opinion polls (ComRes for the BBC, Nov 2012; Populus for Conservative Party, Dec 2012; YouGov for *The Sun*, Apr 2013) arguably indicates that the issue was increasingly seen as contentious.

Significantly, however, polling specifically on the bedroom tax gives a different picture. Successive ComRes polls commissioned by the *People* (Feb and April) and the National Housing Federation (Sept) suggested a gradual growth in opposition to the 'bedroom tax' over 2013 (from 45% in February, and 51% in April to 59% in September agreeing that the policy should be abandoned). Most tellingly, in November 2013, the Department for Work and Pensions felt it necessary to publish a report on "Public Perceptions of the Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy" based on polling by Ipsos-MORI and prefaced with explanatory context of the exceptions and 'easements' introduced in response to criticism. This showed that more people supported the policy than opposed it, but that they were *less* supportive when given more information.

However, the responses to more detailed questions suggested that the shift in opinion was particularly related to the special circumstances of 'deserving' cases. Whilst 87% supported the statement "Tenants in social housing who need a spare bedroom for sick or disabled family members should be exempt from the 'Bedroom Tax'" (ComRes Apr 2013), two-thirds of respondents still agreed that the welfare system was broken. This suggests that the extent to

which the personal narratives were extrapolated to a broader political argument was limited at least in its impact.

### The role of personal testimony: Identifying the gap between official rhetoric and experience

Personal testimony was central to the campaigns from the start. The first story of the campaign related to Welfare Reform Minister, Lord Freud's response to a divorced dad in a radio call-in programme (*Mirror* 15/01/13, *People* 20/01/13), and was swiftly followed up with a series of case studies. Overall, a quarter of the campaign articles included at least one personal story and victim-witnesses were quoted in over two-thirds of these. A higher proportion of stories in the *Sunday People* focused on personal stories, individual circumstances, and emotional responses (see table 1) although this included more emphasis on readers' sympathy and politician's anger. This emphasis reflects the less political nature of the Sunday paper, as the *Mirror* tended to mention the bedroom tax in stories about welfare reform in general, and in normal political reporting of politicians and parliament, in a way that the *People* rarely did. However, whilst the *Mirror* was also more likely to quote victim-witnesses, a greater proportion of those who were quoted in the *People* made political or oppositional statements, perhaps because the *People* was focused more on opposing the policy than the wider socio-political context.

	Mirror		People		Total	
Personal story	63	19.4%	53	35.6%	116	24.5%
<i>Victim quoted (of personal stories)</i>	49	77.8%	30	56.6%	79	68.1%
<i>Victim politicised (of quoted)</i>	38	60.3%	25	83.3%	63	79.7%
Challenging stereotypes	56	17.3%	21	14.1%	77	16.3%
Reinforcing stereotypes	3	0.9%	1	0.7%	4	0.8%
Individual circumstances	115	35.5%	67	45.0%	182	38.5%
Practical objections	91	28.1%	55	36.9%	146	30.9%
Class politics or social justice	158	48.8%	56	37.6%	214	45.2%
Moral judgement of government	144	44.4%	74	49.7%	218	46.1%
Welfare reform necessary	12	3.7%	8	5.4%	20	4.2%
Welfare reform not necessary	9	2.8%	0	0.0%	9	1.9%
Emotional language	77	23.8%	64	43.0%	141	29.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>324</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>473</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

**Table 1.** Proportion of articles that contained analysis criteria

As suggested by MacDonald, personal stories helped to identify gaps between official rhetoric and experience, especially in terms of the availability of social housing stock. Almost a third of campaign articles cited practical arguments, the vast majority of which were related to the shortage of one and two bedroom houses for smaller families and empty-nesters to move into.



Pub barmaid Jackie Heale, 56, of Hebburn, South Tyneside, has worked all her life - and still does. "I'm no scrounger," she said, proudly. "I would happily move to a smaller place but there just aren't any to be had." (quoted in *People* 17/03/13)

This, and the many other accounts of people 'trapped' in houses they could no longer afford, challenged the government's assertion that the policy would free up 'spare' capacity in social housing for larger families and points to infrastructural rather than behavioural causes of the social housing shortage.

This example also reflects a smaller category of stories about the low paid and precariously employed *working* poor that break down the false distinction between those in work and those on benefits<sup>3</sup>. These included powerful examples to counter the Conservative rhetoric of being the party of working people, such as those who "snubbed the dole after being made redundant" and instead "tried to do the right thing" by embracing entrepreneurial risk with uneven success (market trader quoted in *Mirror* 02/04/13). This also emphasizes another form of risk, that of being made redundant, that readers may understand as something that could just as easily happen to them. Writing in the *Mirror* (31/03/13), the political commentator and activist Owen Jones made this explicit: "If you're among the hundreds being made redundant you'll be branded a "skiver" while your benefits are slashed." Although these stories accept and even reinforce dominant conceptions of social responsibility and contribution in purely economic terms, they do allow the audience to imagine infinite others who are typically branded as lazy scroungers similarly having more complex stories in which their best efforts are frustrated by the risks inherent in the economic system.

In addition to the stereotype of the lazy benefit claimant who has never worked, personal narratives challenged the stereotype of the profligate benefits recipient, believed to generate resentment among those in work but struggling to get by. This was challenged with accounts of miserable existences without the distraction of even a TV, and being left with stark choices of heating or eating, as well as direct challenges by those affected.

"I just don't understand why disabled people are being scapegoated", Lindsey says. "We don't want to be on benefits. It makes me sick to think that people think we're scroungers. We don't drink, smoke, do drugs or even go on holiday" (quoted by Ros Wynne-Jones, *Mirror* 10/07/13)

Although one disabled victim distinguished herself from "fraudulent people" who "have the energy to play the system - whereas genuinely ill people don't and they get hit hardest" (*Mirror* 03/04/13), another rejected the label not just for herself but for all benefits claimants: "People talk about scroungers getting rich on benefits but I haven't met any." (*People* 31/03/13). Overall, only around a sixth (16.3%) of articles challenged stereotypes of benefits claimants, but in the context of the British tabloid press this is far higher than might be expected.

More articles referred to particular circumstances of affected individuals (38.5%), the vast majority of which involved disability and chronic illness, than either practical objections (30.9%) or stereotypes, though this was not entirely disproportionate given that it was estimated that two-thirds of those paying the bedroom tax were disabled (*Mirror* 02/12/13). This slight bias could be because disabled people make for 'good victims', as they can be portrayed as vulnerable, helpless and tragic, with the danger that they are constructed in terms of a trope and instrumentalised to generate pity. As in Langers' account, disabled people, in particular, were prevented from working by bad fortune that was neither expected nor chosen.

I didn't choose to get this ill and don't want to be in a wheelchair having to rely on benefits. I would love to go back a few years when I was a physiotherapist and earning a decent living. (quoted in *Mirror* 03/04/13)

However, this quote does allow the speaker an identity beyond that of wheelchair-bound victim, and encourages readers to understand that disabled and chronically ill people do not have an easy life on benefits that one would envy.

It is principally for this reason that 58.9% of stories with an emotional angle attributed feelings such as anxiety, fear, misery and despair (but not, significantly, shame) to affected individuals, whilst only 9.9% focused on their anger at the injustice of the policy. Another potentially political emotion, however, was frustration at Kafkaesque bureaucratic decisions, such as to fund a necessary extension to provide a disabled child a downstairs bedroom with hoist, only to then withhold housing benefit after designating it a 'spare bedroom'.

There were 105 descriptions of those affected as 'victims' and 128 as 'vulnerable' across the 473 articles, but only 20 uses of 'tragic', three-quarters of which were about a woman who took her own life. Furthermore, the use of 'victim', and even 'vulnerable', does not determine the framing of affected individuals as passive. For example, in an article about a union initiative to gather accounts of how austerity was affecting people's lives, headlined "Cuts victims say it's time Cam took note", columnist Ros Wynne-Jones wrote "Over the next fortnight, they have the power to shine a spotlight on the hidden casualties of austerity – and empower vulnerable people to start fighting back" (*Mirror* 26/06/13). Although agency is attributed foremost to the union, 'victims' are envisaged in collective action.

Reports on collective action included a petition of personal stories handed in to Downing St (*Mirror* 05/06/13, 17/07/13), a 'sleepout' protest (*People* 18/08/13, *Mirror* 21/08/13), and a protest march:

THEY came in their thousands... the vulnerable, the suffering, the poor, the disabled – battling to beat the bedroom tax. These were not militants. They were in wheelchairs, they walked with sticks, some wore Army uniforms. (*People* 17/03/13)

Here, the protesters' vulnerability is used to legitimise them, framing them in a discourse of authenticity to distinguish them from 'militant' *political* protesters. However, even these reports were infrequent, perhaps because most protests were locally organised and targeted local authorities. Even national disabled group Disabled People Against the Cuts (DPAC), who achieved some recognition for other campaigning work alongside UK Uncut, were only mentioned once (*Mirror* 15/05/13), as was an online petition by "a disabled mother and grandmother" calling for Work and Pensions Secretary Ian Duncan Smith "to be held to account over use of statistics" (*Mirror* 20/11/13), both by Wynne-Jones.

As in the US (Lens 2002), newspapers often relied on campaign groups and charities to make generalizations in a more explicitly political way, in particular, the sense that the majority on benefits were long-term claimants, and even 'trapped' in multi-generational benefits dependency.

"These benefit changes are a symptom of an understanding of people in poverty that is just wrong," he said. "It is an understanding of people that they somehow deserve their poverty. The poorest are not lazy. The majority of people on long-term benefits are ill or disabled. The majority on unemployment benefit get a new job within 13 weeks". (Methodist church campaigner, quoted in *Mirror* 01/04/13)

This article also quotes Crisis and the Child Poverty Action Group, and elsewhere key civil society organizations included the National Housing Federation, who supplied statistics from housing associations on property shortages and numbers in arrears, and the Trussell Trust, who provided statistics on food bank use. However, whilst both papers reported NHF figures frequently – and more than the broadsheet newspapers – only the *Mirror* reported on food poverty figures, reflecting editorial differences on welfare reform in general. It is worth noting, however, that these organisations are accorded more credibility and discursive power to speak for victims as a whole than the individuals providing testimony of experience.

### **The role of editorial and opinion: extrapolating from the personal to the political**

The *Mirror's* opinion columnists took up the issue repeatedly over the year, including ex-Labour Minister John Prescott (nine columns), Paul Routledge (six), Brian Reade (nine), Kevin Maguire (23) and Ros Wynne-Jones (45). These columnists argued that the unemployed and low-paid were affected by social structures that they explained in terms of government policies and the exercise of class interests, in particular, a chronic jobs shortage and the impact of successive Conservative housing policies going back to the Thatcher government's Right to Buy scheme. Several *Mirror* columnists, including Wynne-Jones (*Mirror* 27/03/13) and Maguire (*Mirror* 06/03/13), raised the issue of buy-to-let landlords profiting from ex-council houses, and a guest column from Eileen Short of Defend Council Housing pointed out that many cabinet ministers are themselves landlords (*Mirror* 05/03/13) and therefore profiting from their own policies. In contrast, the *People* ran very few and very short columns on the subject, making up 6.1% of articles in comparison to 28% in the *Mirror*. Instead, they dedicated 21 of their 52 editorials over the period to the bedroom tax, making up 14.2% of their articles on the issue, almost double the *Mirror's* 7.7%. They were primarily focused on pressure for the policy to be scrapped, giving little attention to the wider politics of class and housing.

The *People* were less likely than the *Mirror* to raise social justice or class politics and less likely to challenge stereotypes of benefit claimants (please see table 2), suggesting that, whilst their campaign was aimed squarely at influencing policymaking, it was not politically engaged in quite the same way as the *Mirror*. Indeed, the paper never challenged the argument that welfare reform was necessary, even in quotes, and three editorials agreed that it *was* necessary. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, whilst 80% of *Mirror* editorials on the bedroom tax made some reference to social justice or class politics, 62% of *People* editorials did *not*. The *People* even prevaricated over whether it opposed the policy altogether or simply sought exemptions for deserving cases.

TWO thirds of voters in a Sunday People poll today say the welfare system is broken. They're not wrong there. [...] We are not asking Iain Duncan Smith to live on £53 a week, like many victims of this tax. Nor are we asking him to abandon bedroom tax entirely. We are asking him to treat housing benefit claimants as individuals - by taking individual circumstances into account. (editorial, *People* 07/04/13)

The *People* relied more on references to public opinion to substantiate its opposition, including letters to the editor, which were introduced with summaries attributing an emotional response, such as "Our story on the bedroom tax [...] angered you" (*People* 27/01/15). The *Mirror* did something similar but recognised a more political motivation, such as "You are disgusted at yet another attack on the poor and say the rich should be taxed instead" (01/02/13).

However, letter-writers and victim-witnesses occasionally appeared to ventriloquize the editorial position of the newspapers in quite similar ways, especially in terms of remote or uncaring politicians in London offices who haven't thought through how the policy will affect people (for

example, near identical quotes from a suicide victim's son, quoted in *Mirror* 13/05/13, and witness, *Mirror* 14/05/13). It seems likely in these cases that the journalists asked interviewees leading questions or invited them to agree with statements. This is perhaps understandable, if those affected are not accustomed to interpreting their experience in broader social and political ways. Interestingly, however, *Mirror* campaigning columnist Ros Wynne-Jones<sup>5</sup> took a more radical approach to politicizing the subjects of her stories, by taking a group of them to the Labour Party Conference, and later to the House of Commons for the opposition debate.

She explicitly stated the intended purpose of these stories in a feature article headlined, "Moving life stories tell us just why politics matters":

The Government doesn't want you to hear the human stories behind austerity. And no wonder, because we know our stories work. Last week Ed Miliband met Danielle Heard, a young woman who has survived multiple cancers but is now faced by the Bedroom Tax - whose story we told in this column.

At the conference, Miliband announced he would drop the tax and cited Danielle as an inspiration. (*Mirror* 25/09/13)

Of course this oversimplifies the shift in Labour policy given that their willingness to make political capital out of opposition to government policy increasingly appeared opportunist, but it suggests that Labour spin doctors saw personal testimony as a way to sell a potentially unpopular u-turn on welfare cuts.

	Ros Wynne-Jones		Mirror opinion and editorial		People opinion and editorial		Total	
Personal story	20	44.4%	24	20.7%	8	26.7%	116	24.5%
<i>Victim quoted</i>	16	80.0%	16	66.7%	1	12.5%	79	68.1%
<i>Victim politicised</i>	13	81.3%	13	81.3%	1	100.0%	63	79.7%
Challenging stereotypes	16	35.6%	21	18.1%	3	10.0%	77	16.3%
Reinforcing stereotypes	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	4	0.8%
Individual circumstances	18	40.0%	33	28.4%	9	30.0%	182	38.5%
Practical objections	12	26.7%	28	24.1%	13	43.3%	146	30.9%
Class politics or social justice	13	28.9%	63	54.3%	11	36.7%	214	45.2%
Welfare reform necessary	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	4	13.3%	20	4.2%
Welfare reform not necessary	2	4.4%	4	3.4%	0	0.0%	9	1.9%
Moral judgement of govt	20	44.4%	52	44.8%	14	46.7%	218	46.1%
All emotion	16	35.6%	25	21.6%	10	33.3%	141	29.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>473</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

**Table 2.** Comparison between Daily Mirror and Sunday People opinion and editorial

At the Commons opposition debate, Wynne-Jones watched from the public gallery with victim-witnesses as their stories were recounted by Labour constituency MPs and the Shadow Ministers for Welfare and the Disabled. Their reactions were described as a mixture of distress, incredulity and indignation at the tone of the debate and the response to their stories. Wynne-Jones framed ministers' response in moral terms, in particular that they appeared out of touch with the realities of people's experience – a “disconnect” of “light years” – which she related directly to a lack of empathy.

It is not shameful to lose a debate, but it was shaming to watch Government ministers close their ears to the stories pouring from the Opposition benches.

Many of the stories belonged to people in the gallery who heard how the Tories and Lib Dems couldn't care less about their disabled children. Tories dismissed their stories as “crocodile tears”. (*Mirror* 13/11/13)

Conservative MPs suggested, here and elsewhere in the debate, that the emotional tenor of the opposition to the policy was populist and lacking in “substance”. One comment that the debate was “too loud” Wynne-Jones reported “made campaigners want to roar” in outrage. “They are just a playing a bloody game,” one woman was quoted saying, “I didn't think they just wouldn't care at all” (*Mirror* 13/11/13), articulating the ‘injunction to care’ in explicitly political terms.

In general, Wynne-Jones was far more likely to feature personal stories, either than other columnists or than the overall coverage, with 44.4% mentioning at least one case study, and in eight in ten of those cases quoted the affected individual directly. Her anti-austerity politics is therefore very much rooted in the personal experience of those suffering its effects most acutely. Accordingly, Wynne-Jones was more than twice as likely as average to challenge stereotypes, but more interestingly, she resisted the conventions of the 'good victim' by refusing to portray those affected as perfectly virtuous, but as human, and as no less deserving for being flawed: “not a scrounger or perhaps even a striver - just a normal person with strengths and flaws.” (*Mirror* 20/03/13). Despite making less direct reference to social justice or class politics (28.9%) than average (45.2%), she was also more likely to counter the assertion that welfare reform in general was needed, which was a challenge rarely put forward elsewhere, even if government ministers' assertions on the matter were largely reported sceptically.

## Conclusion

Both campaigns attempted to mobilize an injunction to care that was intrinsically attached to a political goal, as campaigns that opposed a government policy (albeit to different degrees). A significant proportion of this focused on the particular circumstances of groups such as the disabled, but in doing so the newspapers challenged stereotypes lazy scroungers and profligate lifestyles that applied to benefits claimants more broadly. In both newspapers, personal narratives were used to challenge the government's rhetoric on the shortage of social housing, with individuals reporting that their local housing association could not offer them a smaller home, connected to a general pattern reported by housing associations and the NHF. Nonetheless, the *People* shrank from following this challenge – to the practical and rhetorical justifications of the policy – through to a broader critique of welfare reform or austerity. By accepting the 'need' to reduce the welfare bill as a whole, the *People* did not attribute responsibility to wider society or attempt to elicit a sense of responsibility among its readers. Admittedly the *Mirror's* class politics attributed responsibility to the wealthy rather than their core audience, but it did connect individuals' experience to the principles of the welfare state.

The connection between the personal and political was largely made in statistics from civil society research and by *Mirror* columnists, but the sheer volume of personal narratives over the course of the campaigns in itself established that it was a social problem that could only be resolved through policy change. Some actively politicised benefits claimants were quoted, including two organisers of collective action and several protest march participants, but due to the sustained nature of the campaign and the fragmented form of anti-austerity protest, most victim-witnesses featured were less politically engaged. Given that the objective of the campaign was to press for a reversal of the policy, however, those affected were encouraged, and occasionally perhaps led, to explicitly criticise the government. There is a danger in this that victim-witnesses could be instrumentalised to further the campaign goal, especially in the *Sunday People*, which seemed more focused on gaining concessions it could claim as a 'win' than in challenging the broader socio-political structures of the austerity agenda in solidarity with benefits claimants.

How, though, could newspapers overcome the problem that those affected by welfare reform are so marginalised, othered and isolated by dominant stereotypes and assessments of public resentment that they are more often fearful than angered, other than by resisting and countering those stereotypes? In as far as newspapers *do* politically organise their readers and other publics it tends to be in a very hierarchical way using petitions and marches to lend force to their claims to speak *for* a substantial public (Birks, 2011). If it is important to support grassroots mobilization in solidarity rather than lead protest to bolster the newspaper's own prestige, the newspaper's role is rather limited where the grassroots is weak.

In this context, Ros Wynne-Jones suggests a possible solution – in taking affected individuals to the Labour Party conference and Westminster debate she engaged in small-scale organisation, but in allowing them to speak in their own voices she demonstrated solidarity. However, Conservative ministers' dismissal of personal narratives as testimony, as party political instrumentalisation of their prestige as victim-witnesses, points to a wider problem with the political use of personal narratives, which is the dominant tendency to dismiss the emotional as manipulative and political expressions of solidarity with the poor as inauthentic. Nonetheless, government politicians were arguably being disingenuous in dismissing emotion, since they expressed a great deal of sympathy for the resentment of hard-working taxpayers. This suggests that disagreement over the place of emotion in politics is a dispute over "epistemic authority" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013a: 139) – whose assessments of public feeling are accepted as legitimate.

## Notes

1. Housing benefit is paid to the unemployed and low paid to cover or contribute to housing costs in both social and private rental property.
2. The government placed considerable pressure on the BBC, in particular, to use their preferred term (Dominiczak 2013) much as they did over the BBC'S presentation of the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review (Kay and Salter 2014: 765), however, their claim that it is more accurate or neutral is questionable – although a reduction in benefit is not a tax, the alternatives imply the removal of undeserved payment and discouragement of undesirable behaviour, ignoring structural explanations related to housing supply.
3. Research by *Inside Housing* (Brown 2013) indicated that just under a fifth of housing benefit claimants were in work, and that overall almost 1 million benefits claimants were employed.

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