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Constructions of Welfare Recipients and Work in New Zealand

newspapers:

An examination of discourse and policy

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Abstract

This paper drew from discursive psychology and Foucauldian discourse analysis to analyse and critique constructions of welfare, its recipients and proposed policies as they were discussed in 200 New Zealand newspaper accounts published between 2005 and 2014. Analysis identified three dominant discursive formations related to welfare and work in the media accounts: the culture of dependence, carrot-stick discourse and work as a panacea. Media accounts were examined for stereotypical constructions of welfare recipients to reveal the promotion of particular social positions, attributions of blame and practices. Media accounts of proposed welfare policies that drew from these discursive formations were similarly examined to demonstrate the potential for media constructions to inform policy changes. Media accounts that resisted the dominant discursive formations were examined for alternative accounts of welfare recipients, work and policy. The dominant discursive formations were demonstrated to rest on a neoliberal social framework that promoted the interests of dominant social groups and shifted blame off an unequal society and economic structure onto welfare recipients. These findings demonstrate a need to increase the representation of welfare recipients' interests through research exploring their lived experiences of dependence and the continued critique of existing social and power structures.

Preface

The inspiration for this body of research stemmed from two events in my life. The first was the three-month period I spent on the Unemployment Benefit after completing my undergraduate studies in 2012. The second event occurred when I picked up a young female hitchhiker a few years later. During our conversation she identified herself as a welfare recipient then proceeded to tell me how all the other people she saw at WINZ were taking advantage of the system. That she would provide such an account of her fellow welfare recipients intrigued me. Inspired by these events I began to read around the subject of the role of media accounts in the production of social discourse. During this reading process the interaction between media accounts and social policy stood out as a subject worthy of further examination.

This body of research is the fulfilment of my curiosity and a desire to resist that hitchhikers account of welfare.

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