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Constructing Spaces of Discourse and 'Regroupment': The Case of Women's Self-Reliant Groups in Scotland

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Abstract

In liberal welfare systems, social security policy has been increasingly shifting towards conditionality and individualisation (Knotz, 2019). It is within this context that failure to meet the set conditions becomes personal rather than systemic. This has been enabled by policy discourses that construct poverty and unemployment as the result of personal failure and poor social behaviour. While this area of study over emphasises 'the constraints imposed by discourse' (Bacchi, 2000: 55), alternative discourses are often developed. This paper draws on ethnographic research investigating the development of self-reliant groups (SRGs) in Scotland. SRGs are small groups of women supporting each other in creating opportunities for personal development. We find that the process of involvement and sharing of experiences between women at the forefront of welfare reform led to the development of a counter public sphere. Yet, the experience doesn't move fully towards actions for transformative social change.

Keywords: individualisation; conditionality; regroupment; counter public sphere; self-reliant groups

Introduction

Social security policy in liberal welfare systems has been increasingly shifting towards conditionality and models of 'welfare-to-work' (Dwyer and Wright, 2014, Raffass, 2017, Brady, 2018). This has been enabled by policy discourses that construct poverty and unemployment as the result of 'personal failure and poor social behaviour, facilitated by expensive benefits payments that make few demands of recipients' (Wiggan, 2012: 384). Unravelling the policy discourse makes it possible to understand what is framed as the problem that requires intervention (Bacchi, 2000, Pantazis, 2016) and the political and cultural values in which the solutions are embedded (Prior et al., 2012). Arguably, there is a trend within this area of study to overemphasise 'the constraints imposed by discourse' (Bacchi, 2000: 55), which uncritically embraces a

Habermasian conceptualisation of 'the public' that too easily dismisses the emergence of other public spheres as arenas for counter-discourses to develop (Fraser, 1990). Self Reliant Groups (SRGs) represent an example of such alternative enactments.

SRGs are small groups of women (4 to 10) from a shared economic and/or social background supporting each other in creating opportunities for personal development. The SRGs are based on an Indian model of Self Help Groups (SHGs) where women meet regularly and agree to start saving, rotating leadership, and sharing skills. In Scotland, the SRGs were the result of a project that funded a group of women living in some of the most deprived neighbourhoods to travel to India to learn about the SHGs. Through this experience, the women were introduced to discourse influenced by the movement in India, which focuses on empowerment through collective management of savings, loans and entrepreneurial activity. Yet, as recipients of social security, they were also the focus of the individualising discourse that supported the Welfare Reform Act (2012) in the UK. Simultaneously, within the Scottish context, there were moves to mitigate some of the impacts of the welfare changes through the introduction of alternative discourses about fairness and responsibility (Birrell and Gray, 2014, Gibb, 2015). In navigating these complexities, we argue, the women developed discursive spaces to counter dominant narratives.

This paper draws from extensive ethnographic research which began in 2011 to consider how and why SRGs were forming and what impact they had on those involved. Findings from this study show that SRGs initially developed in a way that reproduced ideas of individualising discourse of welfare reform. However, they soon became a space where stigma was reduced as members shared and validated one another's experiences (Baker Collins et al., 2011) Although SRGs were created to support empowerment through self-reliance (and eventually employment), the empowering potential was realized through sharing of experiences in relation to poverty and the welfare system. While the findings in this paper speak to the contributions of other investigations of the lived experiences of the social security system (see for example Dwyer (2002), Dwyer and Wright (2014), Edmiston (2017), Patrick (2017), this paper offers a different perspective to a widely debated theme in two ways. Firstly, by focusing on a distinct, under-researched group (women's self-reliant groups). Secondly, by applying a theoretical lens that is rooted not in debates surrounding social citizenship broadly defined but instead those particular, emergent spaces of solidarity which can nurture challenges to dominant individualising pressures and which reveal how women from deprived communities can themselves change the language, framing and boundaries of discourse (McKee, 2009). The very existence of such a counterpublic indicates not only a plurality of public spheres but also the potential for the widening contestation of dominant discourses (Fraser, 1990). However, as we highlight, given the power dynamics

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involved, the material impacts of the dominant discourse were much more difficult to overcome.

Policy discourse

By and large, three strands within the discourse of UK social security policy can be identified. Firstly, an individualising of the problem of poverty exemplified by the influence of the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) and their report 'Breakdown Britain'. Secondly, a focus on the perceived inefficiency in the size and costs of the welfare state, and the need for reforms (Wiggan, 2012). Thirdly, a framing of fairness, generating difference between those viewed as contributing and those who are dependent (Dwyer, 2002), exemplified by "The Coalition: our programme for government – Freedom Fairness Responsibility (2010)[1] and then Chancellor George Osborne conjuring the image of the 'next door neighbour sleeping off a life on benefits' (Osborne, 2012).

This language makes implicit and explicit normative judgements about what it means to be the 'ideal subject', emphasising the value and sense of responsibility underpinning paid work in contrast with the 'selfishness' displayed by those unwilling to work (Dwyer and Wright, 2014, Patrick, 2012, Wright, 2012).

The combination of these discursive strands were used to justify the increased levels of conditionality (Dywer and Wright, 2012) and culminated in the Welfare Reform Act (2012). The Act resulted in reduction in payments, higher levels of eligibility and means testing, plus a new sanction regime (Beatty et al., 2015).

Within this context SRGs were established and shifted from a space that reproduced individualising discourses to one in which women's experiences were validated in ways that allowed them to begin to question and challenge dominant narratives. Before turning to our empirical findings, we must recognise the ways in which policy discourses are translated into the everyday lives of the women at the centre of this study.

Legitimising individualisation and conditionality

Social security policies in liberal welfare systems have been increasingly shifting towards *conditionality* – that is, the use of conditions attached to the provision of benefits, and models of 'welfare' based on the predisposition of individuals to be in work (Dwyer and Wright, 2014, Brady, 2018; Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). Competing pressures on government spending in times of crisis and austerity further enable the shift to greater conditionality and individualisation within welfare systems (Knotz, 2019); within this context failure to meet the set conditions becomes personal rather than systemic (Raffass, 2017).

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At an individual level, there is a mismatch between policy rhetoric of benefits as a 'lifestyle choice' or a personal failure, and the reality of claimants who are struggling to 'get by' (Patrick, 2014). Nevertheless, many internalise the stigma and individualisation associated with the social security system (Patrick, 2017, Wright, 2012). Individualising poverty creates specific dilemmas. For example, a study on the experiences of welfare reform among recipients of out-of-work benefits in Leeds (Patrick, 2017) revealed that the conditions imposed on claimants compromised the duty and obligations individuals felt as parents, undermining their capacity to make their own choices about what being a 'good citizen' entails (ibid). More specifically, for women, this is further complicated by what Turgeon (2018) describes as the ideal of 'intensive mothering' – that is, the ideal of motherhood framed in terms of being physically present and playing a key role in facilitating the future success of children. This resource intensive idealisation of motherhood can create dilemmas for how women balance work and parenting. Furthermore, research illustrates how working-class women have long had to demonstrate their success in motherhood through their ability to make ends meet and being a source of respectability (Skeggs, 1997, 2005). This takes place against a background where welfare conditionality becomes the norm in the UK, leaving women caught between competing demands and interests, constraining the decisions that lone parents can make about what it means to be a good parent (Rafferty and Wiggan 2011). Moreover, through the crafting of narratives of a 'broken Britain' a pathologizing of parenting takes place in order to justify punitive measures against those in receipt of welfare support (Jensen, 2018). In this context, it is important for women to create spaces in which they can develop counter narratives and build connections with others in similar positions.

Beyond the consideration of wider context and structural issues, a sense of self-identity and self-esteem are necessary for an individual's agency (Lister, 2004). The development of self-esteem, defined as 'a stable sense of one's own separate identity and a confidence that one is worthy to participate in political life' (James, 1992: 60), can be a challenge for those subject to stigmatising and individualising narratives. Research shows that there are significant stigmatising effects of individualised narratives around work and welfare (Baumberg, 2016). So much so, that those experiencing hardship can deny their own poverty while rearticulating those narratives of the 'undeserving poor' that stem from dominant policy and media discourses (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). Many individuals internalise the discourses and in some cases describe themselves as 'scroungers' (Patrick, 2014) and begin to 'govern and critique their own behaviour as they seek to fulfil the contemporary requirements of the dutiful citizen' (Patrick, 2017: 301). Being stigmatised means that it can feel 'risky and even frightening' (Patrick, 2020: 255) for people to talk about their

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experiences, including the use of their agency to challenge stigmatising narratives and create new ones.

Given the stigmatising effects of individualised discourses there is much evidence that illustrates the ways that people seek to differentiate themselves from those deemed less deserving. Pemberton et al. (2016) describe these strategies as those of 'distancing and demarcation'. One way that this strategy is put into practice is by narrating and framing identities in relation to work histories and roles as parents and carers (Broughton, 2002, Pemberton et al., 2016) or as volunteers (Fuller *et al*., 2008). In this framing, individuals focus on specific events that have resulted in their poverty and distance themselves from the personal failings they perceive in others in the same circumstances. These strategies serve as part of an 'othering' process (Lister, 2004) that can undermine collective attempts to fight or challenge representations of poverty, and the structures that uphold it (Lister, 2004, Pemberton et al., 2016, Taylor-Gooby, 2013). Therefore, individuals may be limited in countering stigmatising discourses. Consequently, we turn our focus to explore the potential of collective endeavours that may offer space for alternative narratives to be articulated.

The collective creation of counter-discourse

Discourse has power in how it is used to shape and justify policies and it is also used as a disciplinary mechanism for creating governable subjects (Fairclough 1992). However, research has contested many of the claims made within the discourses described, and the creation of the ideal governable subject is rarely a material reality (McKee, 2009). Individuals do not engage in an unthinking way and uncritically enact an ideal subject; instead, people practice some level of choice and reasoning in order to meet their own needs and ideals (Clarke and Newman 2007, McKee, 2009). Thus, individuals who are the focus for disciplinary discourses also exercise *agency*.

Agency is of course enacted in context, where 'people are constrained by the social environments in which they must think and act' (Martin and Dennis, 2010: 11). It is also enacted in different ways. On the one hand, there is the agency of 'getting by', through navigating life on a low income within the context of a punitive welfare system; and, on the other hand, there is the agency of getting organised, which relates to collective actions that generate alternative narratives and form the basis for social change (Lister, 2020).

When theorising the potential for space that enables the development of alternative narratives to emerge we can turn to those conceptual discussions that encompass those within society who have been at the sharp end of 'anti-welfare commonsense' (Jensen and Tyler, 2015), and whose voices have been excluded from public discourse. For this reason, we turn to the work of Fraser (1990) who as part of her critical interrogation of the Habermasian public sphere, posits the

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existence of 'counterpublics' which offer the space for alternative narratives to emerge. What these counterpublics provide, as Fraser elaborates, is a discursive space which can emerge as a consequence of the exclusions that are evident in the wider public sphere. Counterpublics offer the expansion of discursive space in ways that enable the deliberation of issues that were previously not exposed to contestation. Gauging the impact or potential impact of the expansion of this discursive space is not without its challenges. However, Fraser (1990) usefully provides us with a clear insight into how the generation of a counterpublic sphere may contain the potential for the empowerment of excluded and stigmatised groups:

> 'On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides'
>
> (Fraser, 1990: 68).

In the analysis that follows we show that SRGs engage in a process of regroupment (Fraser 1990), carving a space that is outside of the dominant discourse of 'anti-welfare commonsense' (Jensen and Tyler, 2015). The 'counterpublic sphere' thus helps us to better understand how the women draw upon their lived experiences to begin formulating a set of narratives that contrast with those efforts to construct them as governable welfare subjects. It also helps us to gauge the emancipatory potential of SRGs, a potential that may be intentional or unintentional.

Background to the study and methods

This paper draws on ethnographic data generated over a period of three years. The research began in 2011 and followed the development of SRGs to consider how and why they were forming and what impact they had on those involved. SRGs began in Scotland as a result of a project funded by the Church of Scotland that supported a group of women living and/or working in some of the most deprived areas of Scotland to travel to India to learn about SHGs. The aim was for those involved in the visit to return to their own communities to develop a similar type of group. An umbrella organisation, WEvolution, was established to act as a facilitator and support for the new groups, mirroring the model in India.

SHGs, established in India in the 1970s, have been a vehicle for women's empowerment (Brody et al., 2015) and financial inclusion (Cnaan et al., 2012) with some tension about the relative importance of the two aims (Taylor, 2011). Research has shown that women's empowerment has been developed through SHGs, most often achieved through the experiences of handling money and making financial decisions, solidarity and improved social networks and gaining respect from the household and wider community (Brody et al., 2015). However,

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others have argued that SHGs, in India and beyond, cannot be viewed as a panacea for issues of inequality and poverty without consideration of structural exclusions (Mayoux 1998). This requires appropriate institutional responses to the root causes of financial exclusion and women's position in society, rather than on individual behaviours and actions. This concern reflects a tension that is also evident in the development of SRGs in the UK. Whilst both SRGs and SHGs can reflect dominant individualising discourse, they can also offer members the opportunity to use the space to create counter discourses.

Over the period of three years the researcher attended organisational meetings with WEvolution and a variety of formal and informal events related to SRGs. The researcher also participated in over 60 SRG meetings with two different SRGs, Edgeburn and Whitehurst. Over time Edgeburn SRG began to focus on learning new skills and in doing so began weekly sewing sessions led by one of the more experienced SRG members: they created products to sell at local craft markers. Whitehurst SRG established a lunch club and met weekly to make and serve soup, sandwiches and run a game of bingo for the local community. The researcher took part in these activities and field notes were taken to record the interactions – in addition, 24 in-depth interviews with SRG members ($n = 19$) were also carried out.

The analytical process is not a distinct phase in ethnographic research; rather, it is an ongoing activity as researchers clarify concepts with research participants, follow up on hunches and make decisions about who to talk to next. During time spent away from the field this activity is undertaken more systematically when transcripts and fieldnotes are sorted and organised in order to begin a more structured analytical process (Crang and Cook, 2007). Using qualitative data analysis software Nvivo (QSR, 2010), a first round of coding was undertaken. This focused on description, to create an initial index, or inventory of the data, in order to become familiar with the scope and coverage (Mason, 2017, Saldana, 2015). Throughout this process the impact of ongoing welfare reforms and the associated language (policy discourse) was evident. Returning to fieldnotes, transcripts and previous analysis, the data was re-coded using a constant comparative method (Glaser 1965, Hammersley 1981) to explore the ways in which policy discourses were used. Drawing on previous analysis of social policy discourse at the time of the 2012 welfare reforms (Pantazis, 2016; Pemberton et al., 2016; Wiggan, 2012), codes were used to identify where and how discourse was enacted or challenged. This process was both inductive and deductive (Wilson and Chaddha, 2009) moving back and forth between the data and existing theory in order to generate stronger analytical categories. These categories are reported on in the sections that follow and include; reproducing individualisation, challenges to dominant discourses and tensions between collective and individual narratives.

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In this paper, pseudonyms are applied to SRG members, but not to the umbrella organisation as it is not possible to offer more than a 'thin veiling' of the true identity (Guenther, 2000). This is due to the small sample, the level of interest from the media and specificities of the project. It was made clear to the participants that anonymity could not be guaranteed but individual details and characteristics have not been included in order to make it difficult for the women to be identified. A research ethics application was approved by Glasgow Caledonian University in February, 2012. Written or verbal consent was secured from all participants and all were given the chance to withdraw from the research or have their comments be taken 'off the record' (Spradley 1980: 22).

Findings

SRGs as a solution to personal shortcomings – Reproducing individualisation

When describing the reasons for joining an SRG, and the benefits of doing so, many women used *language that reproduced the discourse of individualisation* – that is, they often attributed unemployment and poverty to personal failings and saw the SRGs as a way to rectify such failings. In the quote below Rachel described the expectations she had when joining the SRG:

> 'I just want myself to be confident, like reliable, you know if you're going out to get a job a lot of people rely on people to do the job for them well. I expect myself to be reliable, to work hard and be confident.'
>
> Rachel

Stacey talked more directly about the value of SRGs in relation to developing skills and qualities deemed valuable to the workplace:

> 'It is a fixed time, so that's good for the work environment. It's fixed and regular, it's a commitment. That's important because I would eventually like to be working and it's good to have a routine and discipline like that, to have to answer for yourself. You have to be there in time.'
>
> Stacey

Although SRG members were encouraged to think about formal work experiences they often returned to the idea that because they were out of work, they did not have the right qualities or skills. SRGs were perceived as a way to gain these qualities as made clear in the following account:

> 'The thought of getting a job would have terrified me . . . if you're a mum and you're looking after your family and that's what you've done for the last however long, that just how it becomes for you, just looking after your family. So getting out to SRG I know I can do it now, I know I can be part of a team, I know I can put the work in and I know I can sell stuff!'
>
> Lorna

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In this extract Lorna appears to under-emphasise the skills and qualities necessary for motherhood and instead to place value on the more practical skills learnt within the SRG environment. When discussing the definition of an SRG and how she would describe the group, she returned to the notion of work experience and training:

> 'It's obviously, maybe for women like me it's given me a wee taste of what working life might be like because maybe a lot of women join SRG or a wee group with company and that but it's not, there's a wee bit more to it than just having a women's group so there is kind of gaining experience about meeting people and doing stuff you have never done before, obviously for someone like me [rather] than somebody that's worked all their days'
>
> Lorna

In describing the benefits of SRG membership in terms of rectifying personal failings, Lorna shows the SRG serve as a way to demonstrate social worth (Pemberton et al., 2016, Broughton, 2002). Though not explicit, it could be argued that SRG members use their membership as a demarcation tactic (Pemberton et al., 2016) to differentiate themselves from those who are not taking the same steps they are to become more employable. The language used mirrors that which is present in individualising narratives in that SRG members highlight their personal failings and see SRGs as valuable, in part because of the way they hope the activities within the group will address their perceived failings and prepare them for work.

Creating space for an alternative narrative

In establishing the SRGs in Scotland the space to create an alternative narrative is evident in the initial funding application, which the researcher was given access to, and highlighted the importance of shifting power. While emphasising training and skills development is often a way of focusing on individual rather than structural solutions to poverty, inequality and power imbalance featured in the application rationale and subsequent training materials, as critiques of power structures.

> 'The rationale for the programme is to be able to find a concrete and visible way of shifting power and responsibility for creating economic and social sustainability from the hands of the few to the hands of the many, who can release incredible value-creating creativity and productivity with varying degrees of social impact and wellbeing in Scotland. We have seen how SHGs have had a major impact in the Indian subcontinent and want to enable similar impact in Scotland.'
>
> (Mathias, 2010)

Observations of a SRG training sessions show the interaction of a focus on individual behaviours and the acknowledgement of the issues of the uneven distribution of power and resources. This creates space to question problems of power and structure. The following extract from fieldnotes was taken when observing an SRG training session:

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> "One of the training activities involved the women identifying the skills and qualities they had that they would be able to contribute to the group, and the possible development of a business. When it looked like the group were struggling to come up with any examples Amanda *[one of the founding SRG members who took part in the initial trip to India]* reminded them to think about the skills they had outside of the paid workplace. She encouraged them to think about the skills they use in their roles as homemakers and mothers, she used the following specific examples; budgeting, managing busy schedules, caring and negotiating."
>
> Extract from fieldnotes

In being supported to think this way – albeit within a market frame – there is a subtle challenge to the ways that skills are valued, and in particular the tendency to undervalue unpaid work undertaken within the private sphere of the home. This thinking is in stark contrast to the narratives that equate being unemployed with laziness and 'scrounging' (Bagguley and Mann, 1992; Shildrick, 2018) and indicates how the SRGs created an opportunity for regroupment and the development of a sphere for a counterdiscourse to emerge.

Alternative narratives were further created in the collective space of the SRG through members sharing stories and experiences. There were numerous occasions when SRGs met, and in the process of informal conversations relayed their experiences of and feelings about single parenthood, joblessness, and interactions with the Jobcentre and Work Programme providers. The following is a description of a conversation, written up within the researchers fieldnotes, that was had between the researcher and two SRG members:

> "Caroline talked about her experience at *[name of Work Programme provider]*, she repeated the story she had told me about having to reschedule a couple of meetings, then being threatened with sanctions on her benefits. She described how she had been close to crying and that she was worried about how to look after her child with no money. Jo was very sympathetic, and agreed with Caroline about how hard it was to be doing it all on your own. They talked about their children for a while, Jo saying that it was hard when the kids were younger, she said that the only reason that she was able to be serious about getting into work in the past few years is because her kids are older and are able to stay at home on their own. We talked about the zero hour contracts that are almost impossible for single parents as they need to be flexible, which can be hard when you have kids, both Caroline and Jo talked about how important it was to be able to drop everything if you got a call from the school or the kids are ill."
>
> Extract from fieldnotes

In the interaction described, Caroline shared an experience which Jo immediately recognised in the way it reflected her own. In this way, through the sharing of experiences these women began to create 'counterdiscourses', to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs'.

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Challenging dominant discourses

As well as enhancing personal skills and rectifying behavioural problems, SRG members saw their involvement in the groups as beneficial in providing a 'social space' and peer support. It is within this social space that the potential for the process of withdrawal and regroupment described by Fraser (1990) was identified. The support often centred on the women's roles of mothers and created a feeling of mutual respect and understanding of shared life experiences. Two SRG members described this as being 'all in the same boat'.

> 'It's just getting more confidence from when I came in here. Every time I came in here I took something away with me, more positive things, to look at all of them [SRG members] and how they like doing their stuff, how their situation with their families, and all of that . . . every time I would learn something there . . . as well, how to talk to the children. Sometimes I'll talk to [then] if I've got any problems. I ask them and they help me . . . All of my situations, house-wise or anything. Now I come to the group and ask them if I need anything.'
>
> Nicola

However, the dominant narratives and discourses were difficult to counter and as the drive towards productivity and employment increased there was less time and space for the processes described above. The following excerpt highlights the tensions in balancing different types of activity in more detail:

> Stacey: Probably we should have a little bit longer than the two hours and we probably should meet a couple of times. But it's quite a commitment when you have children. One day longer would be better, so we can establish some impact each day. It was quite nice before, when we used to come in the tables we set a bit bigger and we would face each other and have a chat first and that was quite nice. But the drawback was that it took time to get to the [sewing] machines and then it was finishing time. But probably quite nice to all sit as a group and chat because we don't have as much of that now.
>
> Me: And why don't you have as much of that now?
>
> Stacey: Because we come straight in to work. And part of the group for this kind of thing is a fellowship to bring each other together and support each other. Because part of the reason it's all women at the moment, is that we can share things to do with women and being mums. But I find we don't really do that now because we're all disjointed.

In this exchange Stacey switched between the desire for more time to work and the desire for more time to spend as a group to talk, share stories and support one another. She also highlights that even the two hours per week commitment is a big one when you have children, though it is far less than many formal jobs. In having these conversations as a group, and discussing the ways in which they may or may not commit more time to production and skills development women began to question the assumptions made within the discourse that

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places such significant value on paid work above all else (Lister, 2020; Patrick, 2012). In questioning the purpose and value of paid work the group turned down the offer to produce a range of products for a local shop. The SRG felt that it was an unrealistic arrangement from which they would receive only minimal benefit. It would increase the pressure and time commitment and may prove a financial risk due to the amount paid and their social security payments.

As part of the advocacy role that they played, WEvolution organised and facilitated a meeting between SRGs and a representative of the Jobcentre Plus. The aim was for the meeting to be the start of an ongoing dialogue to consider the ways to link the work experience aspects of the SRG with the training and job preparation activities expected by the Jobcentre Plus. However, the discussion that took place in the lead up to, and within the meeting further highlight the ways in which SRG members were beginning to question the assumptions within dominant policy discourses and create a space of collective solidarity.

In order to prepare for the meeting, the SRG members most affected by the welfare reforms – specifically, the new levels of conditionality – came together to talk about their experiences. A sense of shared understanding and experience was created as the women recognised and sympathised with one another's stories. Caroline was particularly upset by the attitude of an advisor who she felt did not appreciate the caring responsibilities she had as a mother. Appointments were arranged for outside of school hours, leading to problems with childcare. When she arrived late as her child had been ill, she was threatened with sanctions. Stacey empathised and shared an equivalent story, saying that the whole process was 'not human' because people worked to targets and did not consider the individual circumstances of those they were working with. Jo confirmed this perspective saying that the targets were all about money so they 'just give you a list of jobs and want you to apply for as many as possible without understanding your issues'.

When the meeting with the Jobcentre Plus representative took place there were immediate difficulties as the focus turned to individualised advice and action plans. This entirely ignored the importance of the *collective endeavour* of the SRGs and the unpaid nature of the work they were undertaking at the time of the meeting. One piece of advice was for the women to do a 'better off' calculation which provides an indication of how much extra income someone could expect once they move back into employment. Jo had been advised that she would only be £20 per week 'better off'. The representative said Jo should try to 'change her mindset' and think about it as £20 to treat herself each week. Once the meeting was over the SRG members joked about how little £20 was, especially when you consider the cost of travelling to work and trying to save some money. Lorna agreed and added that in terms of a 'treat' £20 was no use when you have three children.

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The interactions described here, in which women sympathise and empathise with one another, are indicative of many that took place within the SRGs as they became spaces to share stories and advice. The understanding of shared life experiences meant that women felt they were, as two SRG members said in interviews, 'all in the same boat'. Michelle said that when she was 'feeling down' the SRG was the best place for her. When I asked why she responded:

> 'Because you've company and people that's on the same level as you. And maybe if I'm down about money or something then a lot of the girls in the group don't work so we're all in the same boat so we can all have a moan about the same thing . . . Nobody's any better than anybody else . . . in there we're all on the same level, we've all started from the same.'
>
> Michelle

The process of sharing experiences, without judgement provides SRG members with a sense of solidarity and belonging (Baker Collins et al., 2011, Pell, 2008) and provides further insight into the regroupment that occurs in such spaces, where the women could describe their social reality in their own words as Fraser (1990) suggests.

Discussion

This paper draws on ethnographic data generated over a period of three years (2011 -2013), following the development of SRGs in Scotland. The discussion of the findings shows that while SRGs initially developed in ways that reproduced the individualising discourse of welfare reform, the process of involvement with and the shared experiences of other women led to the development of a counter public sphere. In this way, we argue, the SRG experience enabled women to begin to acknowledge their individual agency and grow their collective consciousness. Agency here thus moves from that of simply getting by, to one of generating new narratives about their experiences (Lister, 2020), yet it doesn't result in transformative change due to the structures of the policy environment which limit the potential for a change in material circumstances of the SRG members. Consequently, rather than being a vocal movement, the SRGs are more akin to the 'quiet politics' (Hall, 2020) that is produced, often by marginalised women, through interpersonal relationships entangled in political contexts.

The initial value of SRGs was felt to be in the opportunity to develop new skills and qualities in order to rectify personal failings, for example the drive to develop confidence and reliability as characteristics deemed valuable to the workplace. The organisation (WEvolution) also emphasised training and skills development for entrepreneurship in the initial funding application, which could be viewed as a way to focus on individualised solutions to poverty.

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From the members' perspective, the idea of being out of work as lacking the "right qualities or skills" was recurrent in the initial meetings and the SRGs were perceived as a way to gain these qualities. In doing so, they were enacting many of the values that are implicit within these dominant discourses.

Here our findings reflect previous studies which show that marginalised groups often reproduce dominant policy discourses of individualisation (Feldman and Schram, 2018, Patrick, 2014). In utilising the discourse in this way the women were able to use SRG membership as a demarcation tactic (Pemberton et al., 2016). However, while this individualising discourse served as an implicit demarcation tactic, it took place within the context of a collective. This meant that through the process of sharing experiences, which so often reflected their own, it became easier for the women involved in the SRG to recognise that what is often framed as personal failure may be the symptom of a wider issue than individual shortcomings.

In this way, the SRG space became one in which members shared and validated one another's experiences (Baker Collins et al., 2011) and within this space, the shortfalls of the context as well as their own conditions were acknowledged and discussed. Thus, through regroupment into a counter public sphere, alternative narratives and strategies were developed. For example, alongside the language and framing of the initial project, the original 11 women involved also played a role in developing the SRG discourse in the ways in which they discussed their motivations for their engagement, and in their aims for how they saw the movement progressing. In some cases, there were examples of the utilisation of dominant discourses of individualisation, and in others a desire to create a movement of solidarity.

The group increasingly acknowledged the issues of the uneven distribution of power and resources, questioning power and structure rather than solely their own behaviours. By introducing ideas of collectivism, power and inequality the SRG members were able to draw on alternative discourses in order to meet their own needs and ideals (McKee, 2009). This is perhaps most evident in the pivotal interaction with the Jobcentre Plus representatives. The SRGs members questioned the practices of welfare provision and the implications these have in their ability to pursue change. In sharing the interaction, the women were able to critically reflect on the experience and rather than rejecting stigmatising labels and distancing themselves from the discourse (Pemberton et al., 2016, Lister, 2020, Taylor-Gooby, 2013) the SRG members were able to challenge it. In this counter public sphere, the dominant individualising pressures were discussed and challenged, suggesting that the language, framing and boundaries of discourse can change (McKee, 2009). Moreover, the very existence of such a counterpublic indicates not only a plurality of public spheres but also the potential for the widening contestation of dominant discourses (Fraser, 1990).

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However, as this paper highlights, the material impacts of the discourse are much more difficult to overcome (Martin and Dennis, 2010). Indeed, the prominence of the policy narrative around unemployment and welfare reform indicates there are limits to the material impacts that the SRGs could have. As noted by Pulkingham *et al.* (2010) 'women do not negotiate the ideological and political constraints on welfare policies on equal terms' (p.286). This was clear within the interaction with the Jobcentre Plus representative. There is some evidence of a divergent discourse around social security within the Scottish context (Wiggan, 2017) and the use of 'lived experience' within the development of devolved areas of the social security system (Lister, 2020). The extent to which this offers space for counterdiscourses to have an impact on policy is yet to be fully understood.

Conclusion

In a context where strong tropes seek to discursively construct those experiencing poverty and inequality as governable welfare subjects, it is perhaps too easy to over-emphasise the constraints of discourse. By using in depth ethnographic methods this study illuminates the potential for those with lived experience of the welfare system in the UK to withdraw from and contest dominant narratives that centre around stigma and instead describe their social reality in their own words through the space offered by SRGs. We argue that the SRGs offered a space for regroupment, with the interaction with the Jobcentre Plus representative as a key moment in which the SRG members identified the extent to which they had shared experiences and the need for contestation of the dominant narratives, albeit at a small scale. This paper offers a novel perspective on a widely debated issue. It corroborates the findings of other contributions and reiterates, through the use of a different theoretical perspective – that of counterpublics – how opportunities of challenging the dominant discourse are present even on the small scale example of a self-reliant group. Despite this, this opening it is not yet developed or scaled enough to challenge the dominant discourse or policy environment in such a way that translates to material change.

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Competing interests

The author(s) declare none

Note

1 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/78977/coalition_programme_for_government.pdf

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