



## Understanding welfare conditionality in the context of a generational habitus: A qualitative study of older citizens in England



Sarah Milton<sup>a,\*</sup>, Stefanie Buckner<sup>b</sup>, Sarah Salway<sup>c</sup>, Katie Powell<sup>c</sup>, Suzanne Moffatt<sup>d</sup>, Judith Green<sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Health Services Research & Policy, Faculty of Public Health & Policy, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, 15-17 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9SH, UK

<sup>b</sup> Department of Public Health and Primary Care, University of Cambridge, Strangeways Research Laboratory, Worts Causeway, Cambridge CB1 8RN, UK

<sup>c</sup> Section of Public Health, ScHARR, University of Sheffield, Regent Court, 30 Regent Street, Sheffield, S1 4DA, UK

<sup>d</sup> Institute of Health & Society, Newcastle University, Baddiley Clark Building, Richardson Road, Newcastle upon Tyne NE2 4AX, UK

<sup>e</sup> Department of Health Services Research & Policy, Faculty of Public Health & Policy, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, 15-17 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9SH, UK

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### ABSTRACT

In many welfare states, 'austerity' policies have ignited debates about the fairness and cost-effectiveness of universal welfare benefits, with benefits received by older citizens a particular topic of concern. Empirical studies suggest that conditionality generates problems of access and uptake but, to date, there has been little research on how different conditions of entitlement are understood by older citizens. This study drew on interviews with 29 older citizens from three areas of England to explore how eligibility for and uptake of different kinds of welfare benefits were understood. In interviews, current entitlement was understood in relation to a generational habitus, in which 'our generation' was framed as sharing cohort experiences, and moral orientations to self-reliance, hard work and struggle. Entitlement to some welfare benefits was taken for granted as a reward owed by the state to its citizens for hard-earned lives. State transfers such as pensions, free travel and fuel subsidies were congruent with a nationalised generational habitus, and fostered recognition, self-worth and the sense of a generation as a collective. In contrast, transfers contingent on economic or need-based conditionality were more explicitly framed as 'benefits', and negatively associated with vulnerability and moral contestation. Uptake was therefore often incompatible with their generational habitus. Calls for introducing further conditionality to benefits for older adults are often based on claims that this will increase fairness and equality. Our analysis suggests, however, that introducing conditionality has the potential to promote inequality and foster differentiation and division, within the older population and between generations.

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### Introduction

In many welfare states, 'austerity' policies have ignited debates about the fairness and cost-effectiveness of universal

welfare benefits, with benefits received by older people a particular area of concern. This paper explores the meanings and values attributed to the receipt of different kinds of welfare benefits by older people in England. It situates their understandings of the British welfare state, and the role of universal and conditional benefits, within a discussion of a 'generational habitus'.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [sarah.milton@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:sarah.milton@lshtm.ac.uk) (S. Milton), [judith.green@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:judith.green@lshtm.ac.uk) (J. Green).

### A 'special' generation?

A constellation of cohort experiences marked by changing economic, demographic and cultural histories has shaped the current political and social orientations of those coming to retirement in early twenty-first century western Europe: often described as a 'special' or 'pioneering' generation (Twigg & Majima, 2014). For example, the cohorts that grew up following the second world war have arguably benefited socially and financially from expanded educational opportunities and relatively stable employment (Higgs & Gilleard, 2010), with the first twenty-five years of the welfare state an age of full employment, and mass affluence (Fraser, 2009). The postwar generation of 'baby boomers' or 'baby bulgers' (Higgs & Gilleard, 2010) were a large generation, and the early beneficiaries of a universalist approach to health and social security (Moffatt, Higgs, Rummery, & Jones, 2012) and generous pension entitlements, following higher levels of income and material comfort than previous generations (Higgs & Gilleard, 2010). Culturally, coming to adulthood in the sixties, this generation was also at the forefront of youth culture, leading the way in creating a consumer society (Moffatt & Higgs, 2007).

The concept of the 'Third Age' describes how these histories play out in the retirements of those, roughly between their 50s and 70s in age, in the early 21st century (Twigg & Majima, 2014). The Third Age has been conceptualised as a 'cultural field', formed by a logic of values including choice, autonomy, self-expression and pleasure originating in a period of change in the early 1960s (Gilleard, Higgs, Hyde, Wiggins, & Blane, 2005; Higgs & Gilleard, 2010; Jones, Leontowitsch, & Higgs, 2010) and summarised as:

a period post-retirement, freed from the constraints of work and, to some degree, family responsibility...marked by leisure, pleasure and self-development

(Twigg & Majima, 2014: 1)

Whilst acknowledging that the concept of 'generation' by itself is contested, Gilleard and Higgs have developed the concept of 'generational habitus' to characterise the style of this cohort (Gilleard & Higgs, 2002; Gilleard & Higgs, 2008; Higgs et al., 2009). Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and practice, the 'generational habitus' arises within a particular generational field of social practice that develops through time, producing a distinct consciousness of historical experiences, different from those that precede them, and carried in dispositions and practices as people grow old (Twigg & Majima, 2014).

### *Generational habitus and the welfare landscape in England*

If the generational habitus of the Third Age was forged in the context of cohort experiences of the welfare state, it is timely to address how contemporary welfare changes are understood in terms of that habitus to offer insight into the possible ramifications of these changes. Older people in England are currently eligible to receive a range of State transfers of resources ('benefits'). Some entitlements are based on chronological age; others on financial contributions from earnings; and others on evidence of material need. Housing benefit, for example, is

available to those in financial need. The UK state pension is a contributory scheme, based on payments over the life course. Currently the qualifying age for men is 65, with parity for women being attained in 2018. By October 2020, the qualifying age will rise to 66 for both men and women (Department For Work & Pensions, 2013). Entitlements such as free travel passes, TV licenses and prescriptions, and winter fuel payments differ somewhat from the state pension, as they are not based on specific contributions deducted from salaries at source but are provided to older citizens from the wider tax base. The processes for claiming benefits vary; for example individuals must apply for entitlements such as free travel passes, whilst winter fuel payments are paid automatically upon reaching state pension age.

As in other European welfare states, however, the welfare landscape in England is currently undergoing significant political and ideological change, dating from neoliberal reforms in the last decades of the twentieth century (de Vogli, 2011; Dwyer, 2004). The British welfare state, like others in Europe, was built on a pay-as-you-go social contract between those in and outside of the labour market; where in general each generation up until now has received back roughly what it has invested in (Walker, 2012). In the 1980s, in what Walker (2012) describes as 'first wave neoliberalism', severe cuts were made to both the Basic State Pension (BSP) and the State Earnings-related Pension (SERP). With 'second wave neoliberalism', Walker suggests that the prospects for future generations of retirees are worsening under the guise of austerity economics (Walker, 2012). Recent reforms (e.g. the *Welfare Reform Act 2012*) in England represent the most fundamental changes to the benefits system since the inception of the welfare state. One aspect of reform has been what Dwyer (2004), in relation to benefits for those of working age, has called 'creeping conditionality', in which entitlements formerly based on implicit contracts of social citizenship rights become reframed as individualised behavioural interventions. This represents a significant qualitative shift from a post-war welfare contract based upon notions of need and entitlement, towards the notion that rights are conditional on the acceptance of attendant individual responsibilities (Dwyer, 2004).

To date, austerity policies in the UK have affected younger people and those of working age more than older citizens (McKee & Stuckler, 2013). However, in a context where universal welfare benefits are increasingly questioned and less taken for granted, those benefits that all retirees receive have become a particular topic of concern. If older people have been relatively protected to date from the erosion of welfare entitlement, one notable feature of the recent economic climate has been the emergence of discourses of intergenerational conflict, with arguments that the 'baby-boomers' have taken more than their fair share out of the welfare state, have accumulated wealth, and lived beyond their means at the expense of subsequent generations (Falkingham & Victor, 1991; Higgs & Gilleard, 2010; Willetts, 2010). It has been noted that older people are rapidly becoming one of the 'undeserving' or to be blamed groups, to be treated with suspicion (Walker, 2012). Internationally, commentators have noted the potential for intergenerational conflict as states struggle to pay for benefits for a growing population of older citizens (Binstock, 2010). This view has been termed the 'new ageism':

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