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The selective foregrounding of social structures in factual welfare television: A multimodal analysis

Abstract

Factual welfare television has been described as stigmatising and individualising—representing its participants as failures in a meritocratic society. This paper, however, revisits the 2014 British documentary *Benefits Street* and argues that it tends to humanise its cast, showing them as trapped in two social structures of *benefits* (i.e., the social security system) and *street* (i.e., the deprived local community). Using a multimodal critical discourse studies approach, the paper analyses the verbal, visual and sound tracks of the most popular episode to explore how these modes combine to portray the structure of *benefits* as stultifying, and the *street* as a restrictive community. These structures are selectively foregrounded at the expense of the wider, arguably more impactful structures of neoliberal austerity and welfare reform that characterised the political economy of Britain in 2014. The residents' troubles, therefore, appear to be grounded in the two restrictive structures of *benefits* and *street*, and individualistic post-welfarism—surely implicated in their problems—becomes the solution.

Keywords

Factual welfare television, multimodal critical discourse studies, neoliberalism, post-welfarism, reality TV, social class, social structure

1) Introduction

Benefits Street was a controversial British “post-reality TV documentary” (Fisher 2014, para. 5) focusing on people living on social security benefits. It was released in 2014, during an outbreak of anti-benefits moral panic (Morrison 2021, 385). The show centred on several out-of-work residents of James Turner Street in Birmingham (the UK’s second largest city, located in the West Midlands) and prompted a polarising “media storm” (De Benedictis, Allen, and Jensen 2017) of both criticism and praise. Some commentators argued it shone an uncomfortable but important spotlight on poverty (e.g., Nelson 2014); others that it demonised and misrepresented its participants (e.g., Hanley 2014). It also caused divisions among those participants. In 2020, an article in the popular British news outlet Mail Online featured its most prominent cast member Deirdre “White Dee” Kelly claiming that the programme drove a wedge between the residents. She went on to argue that this was “one of the biggest regrets ever. We were like one massive family. But how it was portrayed by the TV editing ripped us apart” (Riley 2020, para. 40–41).

This paper explores that editing, along with other changes that the show’s creators (Love Productions) made when recontextualising the cast members’ lives into *Benefits Street*. In doing this, I use a multimodal critical discourse studies (MCDS) approach to analyse how the programme represented James Turner Street, and how these representations reflect and shape understandings of “post-welfarism” (defined as a neoliberal ideology which views the Keynesian social-democratic welfare state as redundant or counter-productive). While looking back to the more settled aftermath of the fiery *Benefits Street* debate, the main argument this paper makes is that the programme selectively represents *benefits* and the *street* as twin structures that cause and maintain the characters’ poverty, positioning the cast members as victims of a restrictive benefits system and local community. As the broader political-economic structures of Britain in 2014 are left unexplored, these smaller-scale

structures of social protection and community appear to be the forces which stifle the protagonists, and therefore individualistic post-welfarism is the apparent solution. To reach these findings, I focus on the episode as a multimodal text. This allows me to explore the ways that each of the text's modes (primarily voice-over, image and music) interact to produce meaning potentials that would be overly blunt in a purely linguistic text, especially in this public broadcast context.

In the next sections, I lay some theoretical and contextual foundations by reviewing existing work on social class in reality television (RTV) and by discussing social structure and neoliberal austerity. Then, I introduce the *Benefits Street* dataset for this paper; my MCDS approach; and relevant work on voice-over, image and musical sound. For the analysis, I look at extracts from the programme to explore how two stifling social structures of *benefits* and *street* are multimodally constructed in the programme. The paper concludes with a discussion of how the show helps to shape post-welfarism by presenting its characters as troubled but without exploring the political-economic setting for their plight.

2) Social class representations in reality TV

In terms of genre, *Benefits Street* has been called a “post-reality TV documentary”, meaning that it combines the hallmarks of RTV (e.g., heavily edited character and narrative construction) with a serious documentary aesthetic (Fisher 2014, para. 5). Regarding content, the programme is an example of “factual welfare television” (FWT) (De Benedictis, Allen, and Jensen 2017). Therefore, this section first gives an overview of scholarship dealing with social class in RTV, then narrows down to FWT, and culminates by situating this study within the existing work.

A rich body of scholarship has explored RTV representations of social class (e.g., Eriksson 2015; Eriksson and Machin 2017; Skeggs 2009; Tyler 2011). Wood and Skeggs

(2011, 15) describe RTV as a neoliberal entertainment product where the lack of personal-historical context means that the participants' failures (and occasionally successes) are coded as purely individual rather than structurally influenced. This point is exemplified by Taylor's (2011) study of *The Hills*, a programme which follows "four twenty-something female friends who live and work in the glamorous culture industries of Los Angeles" (119). Taylor shows that, by never mentioning class or lineage, and portraying the participants' elite lifestyles as available to all, the show propagates neoliberal myths of an entirely meritocratic, classless society. While notable RTV shows do focus on elites (e.g., *The Osbournes*), working-class people are over-represented as participants (Wood and Skeggs 2011, 2). Couldry (2011) explores this use of "ordinary people" as stars and finds that, although RTV may appear to give the working classes a voice, it actually reinforces, rather than challenges, class discriminations. One way it does this is through a highly judgemental tone, usually aimed at members of classes for whom RTV (rather than unpaid internships) is their best chance of a media career. Class judgement occurs via what Lyle (2008) describes as RTV's normative "middle-class gaze".

In Britain in the 2010s, a new format emerged from RTV which De Benedictis et al. (2017) call "factual welfare television". FWT not only reflected the pervasive anti-benefits mood of the day but also intervened by helping to shape public beliefs about poverty and social protection—even explicitly used by some politicians in policy discussions (Jensen 2014, 4). Scholars of media discourse have examined several examples of FWT, including *Benefit Busters* (Biressi 2011) and *Benefits Britain: The Live Debate* (Wood 2014). The majority of scholarship, however, has been focused on the most controversial and commercially successful example of the genre: Channel 4's *Benefits Street*. While very little work has analysed its representations in depth (but see Barton and Davis 2016), several studies have looked at audience reactions (e.g., Baker and McEnery 2015; Paterson, Peplow,

and Grainger 2017; van Der Bom et al. 2017). As an example, Paterson et al. (2017, 202) showed *Benefits Street* clips to participants and found that, in their responses, they “attribute[d] stance to benefit claimants” by claiming to know their internal dispositions, using formulations such as “they get pregnant because they think...”. Furthermore, watching the clips encouraged the participants to express wider beliefs about benefits recipients (e.g., that they all smoke and drink), even if those actions were absent from the extracts. Overall, the authors conclude that *Benefits Street* is a “site for the perpetuation of existing stereotypes about benefit claimants” (2017, 212), and call for critical linguistic analysis of its representations.

This study, therefore, is firstly situated as a response to this call, while amending “linguistic” to “multimodal”. In this approach, my work draws closely on the scholarship of Göran Eriksson. A common theme of Eriksson’s work on Swedish RTV is how the programmes use various semiotic modes to ridicule their working-class participants, showing them as flawed consumers (Eriksson 2015); morally evaluating them as deficient (Eriksson 2016); and using music as a less explicit (but just as pervasive) means of delegitimation (Eriksson and Machin 2017). Each of these studies is situated in the political-economic context of twenty-first-century Sweden, as it continues its shift from social-democratic welfare state to a neoliberal economy with lower taxes and social security benefits. Depictions of the working classes as ridiculous therefore offer viewers a group whose poverty can be blamed on their poor choices, thus contributing to the delegitimation of their class and justifying cuts in redistributive spending. Most prior scholarship on *Benefits Street* has likewise focused on it as a stigmatising and individualising text (e.g., Paterson, Coffey-Glover, and Peplow 2016). However, Eriksson (2015) also mentions that “benefits here are represented as bad for the recipients as they reduce people’s motivation to work” (2015, 22) and that, as well as ridicule, the participants in the show he studies are sometimes portrayed

with warmth (2015, 28). It is on these two points specifically that my study builds, shifting the focus from how certain classes or groups are ridiculed, stigmatised or atomised, onto how certain structures (i.e., social protection and local community) are shown as harmful or stultifying for the (also often warmly depicted or humanised) participants. The following section explores social structure as a concept and the specific political-economic structures of Britain in 2014.

3) Social structure and neoliberal austerity

Burke and Stetts (2009, 4–6) see social structures as “emerging from individual actions, as those actions are patterned across time and across persons”. They elaborate that social structures are thus broader-scale abstractions which individuals do not experience directly, even as their “patterns of action” combine to form the structure. Despite this patchwork nature, some structures are easily recognised and nominalised, entering our quotidian language as things like Toyota, FC Barcelona, the Jones family and Lagos. Others—such as “the working class” or “the alt right”—are recognised but do not have legal status or designated locations and are thus more difficult to delineate. The final set discussed by Burke and Stetts are all but invisible without careful attention, including the structures that help to enable or prevent certain (classed, raced, gendered) people from reaching certain positions of power. Burke and Stetts’ definition emphasises the impossibility of talking about social structure as distinct from individual agency, which Ahearn (2001, 112) defines as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act”. Both definitions, then, (of structure and agency) acknowledge the interplay between the two, where social structures form, enable and constrain individual actions *and* are formed, enabled and constrained *by* individual actions. This structure/agency dialectic features in several prominent sociological accounts, including Bourdieu’s (1977) “theory of practice” and Giddens’ (1984) “structuration theory”.

Before introducing the specific social structures which this paper argues are foregrounded in *Benefits Street*, it is necessary to set the scene by discussing the wider political-economic structures of the UK in the year of its release. In 2014, the British economy was still recovering from the global financial crisis of 2008/9 (most often blamed on decades of inequality-deepening neoliberal economics; e.g., Kotz 2009), and austerity was the order of the day. Berry (2017, 1–2) argues that choosing an austere path to recovery placed the burden of reducing the budget deficit not on the elites who were ultimately responsible for the crisis, but on the “ordinary working people” who were not. In the UK, he observes that “austerity economics became an opportunistic-ideological excuse to shrink the size of the state, reduce public spending in the longer term and rely on the market and private sector to increase investment”. In 2014, though unemployment had fallen to 6.11% from a post-crash high of 8.04% in 2011 (Macrotrends 2021), rates of in-work poverty were steadily rising. By 2017, the UK would record its highest ever numbers of “working poor” (Hick and Lanau 2017, 3).

In this context, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government began making “the deepest and most precipitate cuts ever made in social provision” (Taylor-Gooby 2013, viii). For Patrick (2015), the Coalition’s mission was to rewrite the social protection contract between state and citizen via increases in conditionality and sanctions, and reductions in eligibility and the real value of benefits. Through her research into the “rhetoric and reality” of social protection reform, she found that, rather than encouraging her participants into the job market, the reforms hampered their chances of finding work. For example, one young man reported that his benefits sanction meant he could only afford one full meal per day, and that his resultingly gaunt appearance made potential employers suspicious that he was dependent on drugs. Such findings were corroborated in larger-scale studies on social security conditionality (e.g., Wright et al. 2018). Overall, there is a

consensus among social researchers that the problem of a bleak economic and lower-income employment climate was transformed through the “alchemy of austerity” (Clarke and Newman 2012) into issues of “welfare dependence’, ‘cultures of entitlement’, and ‘irresponsibility’” (Jensen 2014, 2). Another young jobseeker participating in Patrick’s (2015, 26) study offered a succinct rebuttal to “lifestyle choice” narratives, asking: “Who would choose this?”

With this context in mind, the main argument made here is that *Benefits Street* selectively foregrounds certain structures. The wider, political-economic climate of austerity and social security reform discussed above is referenced only in passing and is certainly not explored as an explanatory factor for the residents’ poverty. Instead, the programme foregrounds two lesser and interlocked structures of *benefits* (i.e., dependency on the social protection system) and *street* (i.e., a restrictive local community) as keeping the residents poor. These structures are “lesser” in the sense that, arguably, they have a much lower impact on the residents’ lives than the broader structures of a low-wage, often precarious job market; reduced benefits; and strict conditionality regimes. The structures are “interlocked” in the sense that they both feed into the “welfare dependency” discourse of “benefits ghettos”.

On this point, MacDonald et al. (2014) searched for evidence of intergenerationally transmitted “cultures of worklessness” in two extremely deprived neighbourhoods in Glasgow and Teesside and concluded that the trope was a myth, as despite the high rates of unemployment, most working-age people were in jobs, and even among the unemployed, the culture tended more towards aspiration than contentment. The authors conclude by asking why Teesside, for example, has suffered such high unemployment since the 1980s, when, in its 1970s industrial heyday, with low unemployment and high skilled, well-paying jobs, the area was “the third most prosperous local economy in the UK” (2014, 5). MacDonald et al. conclude that this drastic change can be explained not through a sudden “epidemic of

laziness” but by asking complex questions of how “global forces and national policies combined to spell the rapid deindustrialisation of places and how this has meant the economic dispossession of the working-class [...]” (2014, 5). It is these macro socioeconomic complexities, this paper contends, that *Benefits Street* overlooks, while selectively foregrounding two lesser structures as restrictive forces.

4) *Benefits Street* series 1, episode 3

Benefits Street was produced by Love Productions for Channel 4 and ran two distinct series (with a total of ten regular episodes), one set in Birmingham, and the other in Teesside. Both series were similar in format, focusing on the day-to-day lives of residents in deprived neighbourhoods. For this paper, the most popular *Benefits Street* episode was selected (series 1, episode 3). With 6.48 million television viewers, it was the most watched instalment of both series, and on YouTube the episode received 2.3 million views, far ahead of the next most popular episode (series 1, episode 1) which, at the time of writing, had 376,418. This suggests that episode three’s theme (parents and children) resonated with viewers, perhaps because the intergenerational aspect explores poverty and unemployment as persistent issues. The episode runs for 45 minutes, 31 seconds and was posted on 24th December 2016, two years after it first aired on Channel 4 on 20th January 2014. It was blocked from YouTube on copyright grounds sometime between the 4th and 19th of June 2020. At the time of writing, the link still takes the viewer to the page (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nYneg3qR8U&t=365s>), but the video is unavailable.¹ I transcribed the episode in full (including verbal, visual and sound tracks) and include extracts from the transcript as the analysis proceeds.

¹ The episode itself has been uploaded by another user, and was available here at time of writing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6k7-8vaXxXs>

5) Multimodal critical discourse studies

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 28) state that “all the modes deployed in a multimodal [...] text contribute to meaning”. MCDS involves closely and critically examining how, “on a particular occasion, in a particular ‘text’” (2001, 30), certain discourses and ideologies are carried by those different modes (Breazu and Machin 2018). This is a suitable approach to *Benefits Street* because, as Machin (2013) points out, ideological discourses are not only found in political rhetoric and news media but also in the taken-for-granted world of everyday entertainment. To explore this multimodally, I examine the three main tracks that form the episode: verbal, visual and sound.

As Love Productions are “authors” of the text (Goffman 1981, 144–145), the voice-over they add to the programme is an important element of the verbal track. Montgomery (2019, 138) describes voice-over as extra-diegetic—added in post-production and spoken by an unseen narrator who exists outside the narrative world. The liminal nature of the voice-over’s position may be why Kozloff (1988, 129) concludes that it creates a bridge between narrative and viewer by placing the latter in the role of “invited confidante”. Voice-over can also fulfil the function of Goffman’s (1986, 227) “mediator”, a unique character able to comment reflexively on the action in a way that “immersed” characters cannot. For Thornborrow (2017, 148), voice-over is one of the main speech forms that constitute documentaries and RTV. Thornborrow (2015) finds that voice-overs perform different roles in different programmes, from explanatory and orienting (2015, 37/55), to character construction, evaluation and humour (2015, 53–57).

The visual track consists of mostly moving and occasionally still images. Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) seminal work on the “grammar of visual design” is fundamental here. Defining grammar socially, as a normative set of group understandings, they find grammatical structures in the world of image. A pertinent example is image composition,

which includes the structure the authors call “information value”. As Western scripts read from left to right, Western forms of visual communication tend to produce images which have “new” or contestable information on the right-hand side, and “given” or common-sense information on the left. This does not mean that the image’s producer or consumer has to accept these statuses, only that the image exists within that structure, and thus is presented “as though it had that status or value” (2006, 181). This point can be illustrated using the grammar of language, where a poet, say, could write a sentence back-to-front for artistic reasons but could not escape the normative linguistic structure, so the sentence would be recognised as “back-to-front”, and that understanding would produce certain effects or connotations. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, 186) also provide and explore many examples to demonstrate that, in Western visual communication, information placed on the lower portion of the image tends to (or is expected to) deal with the real or “down to earth” and the upper with the ideal or “generalised essence”—“its, ostensibly, most salient part” (2006, 186). As an example, consider YouTube page design, where the (salient, eponymous) videos are placed above the (down-to-earth, vernacular) comments.

Finally, the soundtrack is mostly instrumental music, which Way and McKerrell (2017, 3) see as a mode that can “communicate discourses of power, agency and social-positioning”. They also acknowledge that music is much more open to interpretation than language or image, which makes the analyst’s job harder (see also Eriksson and Machin 2017). Van Leeuwen (1999, 10/205) suggests that context and experience can help interpret the meaning potentials of musical sound. For context, music on television usually co-occurs with image and/or language, and in certain communities of practice or genres. This helps support reasonable interpretations, especially if the analyst has knowledge of the context in question. Regarding experience, there are inherent qualities to musical sound which we interpret in terms of how our voices would physically produce the sounds. For example,

raising pitch requires vocal effort, which results in the meaning potentials of upward pitch movement as including energetic, stimulating, and so on (1999, 94). These experiential meaning potentials preclude certain interpretations and make others more likely. Playing hunt music to a child at bedtime would be as incongruent as playing a lullaby to a hunting party, because both forms of music have qualities (e.g., tempo, volume) which make them fit their respective, embodied activities (Tagg 1984, 8). The meanings of these sounds are not fixed or objective, but neither are they entirely subjective. Van Leeuwen (1999, 194–195) describes them as inter-subjective, as the meanings are ultimately personal and unique, but from a broadly shared, embodied experience which makes certain interpretations more likely. Therefore, using context (and knowledge of contexts) to aid analysis, it is possible to interpret the meanings of musical sound and offer them up for inter-subjective dialogue.

6) Analysis: Selective structures

The two analysis sections explore how the episode in question foregrounds the two structures of *benefits* and *street*. In section 4.1, I discuss the episode's title sequence, and how it represents James Turner Street as *Benefits Street* and *benefits* as a demotivating social structure. In 4.2, I focus on how the episode presents the *street* as a similarly constraining structure where the younger members are destined to repeat their elders' mistakes. In the discussion and conclusion, I explore how presenting social protection (*benefits*) and community (*street*) as constraints, but without wider political-economic context means that the two structures appear to be root causes of the residents' problems. I then ask what implications this has for the shaping of post-welfare ideologies.

As the analysis progresses, extracts are included where appropriate, presented as tables with five columns: line number, speaker, verbal track, visual track, soundtrack. Track columns are roughly synchronised, so the verbal, visual and audio changes that happen

concurrently in the episode are represented on the same line of the transcript. Line numbers can thus refer to verbal, visual and/or audio information. In terms of participants, the narrator (Tony Hirst) refers to cast members using their first names, and I follow this convention. To distinguish the narrator from cast, I use his surname “Hirst”. Unnamed residents appear as “Resident 1” and so on, abbreviated to “R1”.




6.1) *A place of Benefits*








This section examines the programme’s title sequence and asks how it presents James Turner Street as a place of *benefits* while suggesting that benefits are a demotivating social structure. The title sequence is important because it “set[s] the stage and frames what follows” (Goffman 1986, 257) and thus helps guide viewers’ interpretations of the show itself. Also, it was the programme’s most repeatedly broadcast segment and almost certainly reached the most viewers. The sequence is 1 minute 42 seconds, from which I analyse three short extracts.

Extract 1 opens as Hirst begins to introduce the street, after 18 seconds of the trailer has elapsed.

Extract 1 “...not your average street”

[*Benefits Street s01e03* — 00:18 to 0:42]

Line	Speaker	Verbal Track	Visual Track	Sound Track
1 2 3	Hirst	James Turner Street in Birmingham (--) is not your average street (2.0)		
4		there are ninety nine houses		
5		(1.8)		

6 7	R1	<<in Romanian; English subtitles> it's like a jail here>		
8	Hirst	thirteen nationalities		
9	R2	yeah <<beeped out> wanker>		<key/mode change from C# Dorian to B Aeolian>
10		(1.4)		
11	Hirst	and most of the residents=		
12	Mark	=PENNY FOR THE POOR=		
13	Hirst	=are claiming benefits		



Extract 1 begins ambiguously (“James Turner Street...is not your average street”; lines 1–3), then its tone becomes more negative, until it finally taps into “benefits scrounger” discourses. After learning that the street is “like a jail” (lines 6–7), tension between the white residents and incoming migrants is hinted at (“thirteen nationalities” / “yeah...wanker”; lines 8–9). The background music supports this increasing tension, by switching at line 9 from C# Dorian to B Aeolian. While both (musical) modes are minor, Dorian has a bright raised sixth, which Aeolian lacks (Musicality 2017). This move into a gloomier musical context fits with Hirst’s next utterance “most of the residents...are claiming benefits” (lines 11/13). Over half of British families claim benefits such as state pensions and child benefit (DWP 2019). However, Hirst’s thematisation of *benefits* as a fundamental characteristic of the street’s residents, interspersed with a shot of a working-age couple sitting on a sofa in the daytime







claiming poverty (line 12), draws viewers’ attention to the stricter, stigmatised meaning of benefits, as “handouts” for the unemployed (Baumberg, Bell, and Gaffney 2012, 37). The incongruous al fresco sofa positions its occupiers as “comfortable outcasts”, and Mark’s shout is reminiscent of nineteenth-century street beggars. Placed immediately before “claiming benefits”, they (and perhaps the street’s residents in general) are cast in the role of “undeserving poor”, a notion which emerged following the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which separated (deviant and wilful) “pauperism” from (benign, unfortunate) “poverty”. The Act labelled the majority of the poor as “vicious and indolent”, laying the foundations for today’s pathological “scrounger” discourses (Morrison 2019, 62). Hence, the extract combines speech, music and image to evoke a “*Benefits Street* scrounger” narrative. But, as we shall see, this is not the full picture.

Extract 2 begins one second after Extract 1 ends.

Extract 2 “But times are getting tougher”

[*Benefits Street* s01e03 — 00:43 to 00:59]

1	Hirst	(1.3)		<stronger, repetitive drumbeat and staccato piano chord stabs enter>
2		but times are getting tougher		
3	Charlene	your housing benefit is gonna get		
4		cut (.)		
5		what kind of nonsense is that		

6 7	Hirst	they're having to learn to get by on less		
8				
9 10	Mark	how are we supposed to live on fifty pound a week		
11	Hirst	and rely on each other		
12		more		
13 14	Mark	if council won't come and pick it up (--)		
15		we'll do it ourselves		



In Extract 2, the visual and verbal tracks suggest that *benefits* is a restrictive social structure. This is done by twice repeating a similar pattern of: (A) Hirst says (in a rather ambiguous, decontextualised way) that benefits will be cut. (B) Cast member complains. (C) More active cast member appears. This happens firstly when (A) Hirst says “times are getting tougher” (line 2), and (B) we see a woman laying back in her sofa complaining about housing benefit cuts (lines 3–5). Then, (C) we are shown a man with a broken leg dragging a vacuum down the street (line 5). A similar sequence occurs over the next few shots: (A) Hirst tells us that the cast “are having to learn to get by on less” (lines 6–7). Then, (B) Mark complains about benefit cuts (lines 9–10), before we see a pile of rubbish (line 11) and (C) an autonomous, motivated Mark preparing to clean it up (lines 13–15). The contrast in attitude between the complaining figures and the next, more active ones is stark, and could be interpreted as

suggesting that benefits cause entitlement, and cuts cause immediate resentment, but in the long-run produce more motivated agents. The second sequence goes further, as Hirst’s speech is edited over a shot of cast members drinking and smoking (line 6–7). This suggests that the cuts will be beneficial, as less money means less alcohol and tobacco. To emphasise this, the camera performs a version of Skeggs’ (2009, 635) RTV “judgement shot”, by zooming in on a beer can (line 8).

Extract 3 is the closing shot of the sequence.

Extract 3 “That’s our fucking road!”

[*Benefits Street s01e03* — 01:26 to 01:42]

1 2	Fungi	THAT’S OUR <<bleeped out> FUCKING> ROAD (6.2)		<crescendo, then final piano note and phaser effect to fade>
3				

The final shot of the sequence cements the discourses of James Turner Street as a place characterised by *benefits*. It begins with a daytime shot of a visibly drunk resident nicknamed Fungi with two friends dressed in sportswear like stereotypical “chavs” (Bennett 2013, 148) walking past the street sign (lines 1–2). A crescendo then brings multimodal chaos, as the louder beat jars with the censor’s beep placed over the expletive in “That’s our [fucking] road!” McKenzie (2015, 91) observes that residents of a deprived neighbourhood in Nottingham feel pride in “being St. Ann’s”, despite knowing that others may look down on them. Fungi seems to be similarly self-ascribing a defiantly prideful identity here. The possessive pronoun “our” also suggests a parochial nativism—a working-class stereotype that would, in time, be used against Brexit voters (McKenzie 2017, 205). Indeed, ending the

sequence with this shot of Fungi and friends, drunk and swearing in daylight, claiming that James Turner Street is “[their] road” sets up a connection which could be summarised as “ultimately, this street belongs to these kinds of people who dress like chavs and spend their days drinking”. It also suggests that these stereotypical semiotics and behaviours will continue into the forthcoming episode. The soundtrack emphasises this, as the music ends on a high-pitched piano note, which, by refusing cadence, promises “there is more to come” (van Leeuwen 1999, 98).

Finally, the textual overlay “BENEFITS STREET” (line 3) appears above the “JAMES TURNER ST.” sign, four times larger, and also in capitals. This literally brands the street as a place of *benefits*, which is the most prominent word, in the upper central position of the screen. Returning to Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) image composition, the title’s position and size gives it maximal salience. The original street sign is in the “given” and “real” positions, and “BENEFITS STREET” is “new” and “ideal”. This positions “JAMES TURNER ST.” as old news, just a generic street sign, while the new designation gives the street’s “generalised essence” (2006, 186). All this has the effect of redesignating the street as a place of “benefits” while suggesting that the shot of Fungi and his friends is typical not just of this street, but of benefits claimants more broadly. Indeed, the final shot, which includes both “JAMES TURNER ST.” and “BENEFITS STREET” simultaneously individualises the street, as an aberrant, extreme example of “welfare dependency” and positions it as indicative of countless other supposedly benefits-addled streets across the country.

6.2) *The generation of poverty on the Street*

Having looked at how James Turner Street is depicted as a place constrained by *benefits*, in this section I focus on how the structure of *street* is also portrayed as trapping its younger residents, suggesting that the local community generates its own poverty. To do this, I




analyse one longer extract where footage of White Dee talking about her son Gerrard is juxtaposed with shots of him interacting with two drunken adults in the street.






Extract 4 begins with Fungi’s friend wearing a blue plastic bag on his head, chanting a Birmingham City Football Club song (23:43). He and Fungi are sitting on a doorstep drinking and smoking, and it seems that, prior to the scene, Fungi has slightly burned his friend’s face with a flaming aerosol can. Gerrard approaches them on his bike, and they start to chat. The two fairly drunk friends argue about the injury and how often they see their children. Shots from a talking-head interview with Dee are interspersed with this, where she expresses concern about Gerrard’s future.

Extract 4 “Because that’s society, isn’t it?”

[*Benefits Street s01e03 — 23:43 to 25:09*]

1	R3	fucking BLUE ARMY (2.0)		<<abrasive guitar sound over hip hop beat enters>
2		we’re BLUE we’re		
3	Fungi	[do you want a light?]		
4	R3	[WHITE] we’re fucking dynami’		
5		(.) YEAH I DO		
6	Hirst	White Dee’s son Gerrard (.) has		
7		spent the whole five years of his		
8		life on James Turner Street		
9	White	I think he’s more streetwise than		
10	Dee	his sister (.)		
11		and that’s SCARY		

12 13	Fungi	(4.0) you know erm (1.0) Lynx and things like that		<music exits>>
14	Gerrard	yeah [I know them]		
15 16 17	Fungi	[what you do is you spray] that (- -) and you put your lighter underneath it		
18 19 20 21 22	White Dee	he knows way too much for a five year old (--) you know what I mean and that's just from being riding up and down the road on his bike		
23 24	Fungi	only cause I've got to see the [family at the weekend]		
25	R3	[ha I don't] give a FUCK=		
26 27	Fungi	=I have I've got to see my family at the [weekend]		
28 29	R3	[I've got] to see my kids as well and you've [done]		
30	Fungi	[listen]		
31	R3	that [to me]		
32 33		[listen] how often do you see [your kids]		
34 35	R3	[look at that] (--) I'm seeing them later		
36	Fungi	right how often do you see your kids		
37	R3	(2.0) it doesn't make a difference		
38 39 40	Fungi	yeah it FUCKING DOES (1.0) don't even GO THERE <unintelligible>		
41 42 43	White Dee	he'll know what a cigarette is he knows what's (-) what's a spliff is (.)		
44		he's gone from like (.)		
45 46		calling it broccoli he used to think it was broccoli at first		
47 48	Fungi	eeyar give us a drag of that man before you smoke it Blue		

49 50	R3	alright man (--) twos (unintelligible)		
51 52	Fungi	what you think you're you're gonna get twos off ME now		
53 54 55 56	White Dee	I have thought what is there for HIM (.) is it destined that he'll just grow up and he'll be part of a GA:NG=		
57	Gerrard	=SPIDERMAN ner ner ner ner ner=		
58	White Dee	=cause that's society isn't it?		
59	Gerrard	(unintelligible)		<<abrasive guitar sound over hip hop beat enters and exits on non- cadential note>>

This scene illustrates how the technique of “rearrangement” can be used to great effect when recontextualising social practice (van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999); in this case when the social practice of “living on James Turner Street” was recontextualised into a FWT programme. Editing Dee’s words alongside this particular street scene legitimises her concerns. Firstly, Dee worries that Gerrard is more streetwise than his teenage sister (lines 9–11), and that this comes from “riding up and down the road on his bike” (lines 18–22). In between these shots, we see vivid evidence of this, as Gerrard sits on his bike while Fungi teaches him how to make an aerosol flamethrower (lines 12–17). After the men argue about how often they see their children, which keeps the intergenerational theme central, Dee explains that Gerrard, from innocently assuming cannabis was broccoli, now knows what drugs and cigarettes are. As she says this, we see a five-second shot of Gerrard in close up,

his eyes carefully looking the two men up and down, as if trying to make sense of what he sees (lines 41–44). Next, we see the men from Gerrard’s point of view, looking over them as they sit on a doorstep arguing about a cigarette (“give us a drag of that”; lines 47–52). As we see the drunk, absent fathers from Gerrard’s perspective, we are encouraged to ask how his young mind is processing the information. In Sennett and Cobb’s (1972/1977, 128) seminal ethnography, they found that the working-class father “doesn’t ask the child to take the parents’ lives as a model, but as a warning”, meaning that the fathers hope their children will experience social mobility that they themselves did not. Whether Gerrard sees the men as a model or a warning is unclear, but they are certainly presented as a questionable influence on him. Combining this scene with Dee’s maternal concerns for his future sets them in a dialectic relationship, where the street scene is evidence of her concerns, and her concerns are evidence that the street scene is typical, not cherry-picked.

The colour and music in this sequence do extra work to suggest a troubled future for Gerrard. Fungi and friend are dressed in greys and blues and almost blend into the street. Gerrard also has a grey hoodie on, but it has orange trimmings, and he has red trousers and a bright orange bike. Colours are signifiers, not signs, and their meanings can vary enormously depending on context (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 232). In this segment, Gerrard is partly dressed in the same grey as Fungi but is strikingly differentiated from the men and the street by his bright, warm oranges. This could be taken as symbolising the energetic fire of youth, destined to burn out, and leave Gerrard in Fungi’s grey. The music is a repetitive, harsh beat with an abrasive guitar sound. The dissonant loop of the music suggests a kind of dynamic stasis, where the music is moving but there is no progression, just repetition. Gerrard is different from the two men, dressed colourfully, and too young to be guilty. Dee expressed concerns, in a separate interview. Juxtaposing those maternal worries over this scene gives the impression that, yes, Gerrard may be different now, but over time, he will be drawn into

the stasis that the cyclical loop of the music signifies; as poverty and failure generate themselves. Dee finally asks if his destiny is to “...be part of a gang?” (lines 53–56). The last shot of the scene shows Gerrard not with the older drinkers, who are clearly not gang members, but with Callum (lines 57/59), a peer whose behavioural problems dominate his parents’ storyline in the episode (e.g., 11:12). The music returns at this point, repeating once and then ending on another high, non-cadential note (line 59), as if to bring the progression that was absent beforehand. Progression from the older generation’s addictions to alcohol and cigarettes to the next generation’s urban gangs, with the associations of harder drugs and violence that they bring.

6.3) Summary of analysis

To summarise the above analysis, in 6.1, the title sequence combines music, voice-over, image and a textual overlay to suggest that the street—an abject token of an abject type—is characterised by the demotivating structure of “benefits”. In 6.2, Extract 4 portrays the street as a place where “the young are trapped in poverty”. These selective representations of restrictive structures are typical of the episode. Regarding “benefits”, for example, a frustrated, directionless Mark is shown exiting the Job Centre angrily mouthing expletives (03:26), but later, we see a suited-up Mark with purpose, as he performs his new, impossibly precarious charity-collections role—the grinding conditions of which are barely acknowledged, let alone discussed (36:17). For “street”, Hirst tells us twice that James Turner Street has lots of single parents (03:01, 12:02), and, as one of Fungi’s very drunk friends stumbles over the road shouting unintelligibly at some children, that “kids learn a lot about life from the grown-ups of James Turner Street” (21:33).

Crucially, while the social structures of *benefits* and *street* are explored in the episode, Birmingham’s post-industrial context is never mentioned, and austerity and welfare reforms

are referenced only in passing (e.g., when Hirst tells us that “new benefits rules are having a big impact on the street”; 26:08). Instead, two lesser, interlocked structures are foregrounded, and these structures are what the residents apparently need to escape. As the Department of Work and Pensions put it in 2010: “The benefits system has shaped the poorest in a way that has trapped generation after generation in a spiral of dependency and poverty” (DWP, in Wiggan 2012, 388). Thus, the problems become, not neoliberal austerity, in-work poverty and extreme social security retrenchment, but *benefits* and the *street*. And if these are the problems, then individualistic, non-redistributive post-welfarism—surely no friend of the poor—becomes a compassionate *solution* to those apparently trapped in these selectively foregrounded structures.

7) Discussion & conclusion

Though *Benefits Street* may have some stigmatising aspects (e.g., the filming and broadcasting of intoxicated residents), it is perhaps the troubled and hopeless nature of the characters and their predicaments that contribute most to the shaping of post-welfare ideologies. The above scenes do not always show us the characters at their best, but however misguided some may be (e.g., in teaching a five-year-old how to make a flamethrower), there is little evidence of wilful malevolence in the above extracts or the programme in general. Actually, the participants were well-received by large portions of the viewership, with Fungi, for example, being described in the press as a “loveable rogue” (Richardson 2019, para. 2) and claiming in a follow-up appearance that he’d had a “really good response” from the public.² During a live debate on benefits arranged as a series coda, conservative writer Douglas Murray is asked if he likes the characters and responds “almost all of the people in it

² *Benefits Street: The Last Word*, 06:47. On the point of context, after it being hinted at (but again not explored) in the original series, we learn in this follow-up appearance that Fungi was raped twice as a teenager, and that this contributed to his substance misuse issues. Sadly, he died in 2019 from a suspected drug overdose.

come across in the end as very likeable in all sorts of ways. *But* [...] most people I think watching it would think how tragic it is frankly, that there are people in this country who live such frankly hopeless lives”. The implication to this point certainly is tragic: The more likeable the characters, and the more we want them to succeed, the more we wish to see them cut free of their bonds. The camera never zooms out far enough to show us the wider, political-economic structures they are trapped in. Instead, we see them stuck in two frustrating structures of *benefits* and *street*, and this is what they apparently need to escape.

This paper contributes to the extant literature on *Benefits Street* and factual welfare television in several ways. To begin with, it has undertaken the first detailed, critical multimodal analysis of the programme, which provides evidence for future researchers not just of one text’s ideological effects, but of *how* various modes contribute to their realisation. This renders the findings potentially useful when researching other multimodal texts. Secondly, it complicates the common assertion that FWT (and reality TV more broadly) represents poverty as an “individual pathology” where social structures are overlooked (De Benedictis, Allen, and Jensen 2017, 340). As we have seen, the programme does emphasise social structures—albeit in a selective manner—which is something that future FWT or RTV researchers may want to consider. Finally, its post-welfare effects are perhaps achieved more through humanising its subjects, rather than stigmatising them. A subtle blend of multimodal discourse shows us people without hope apparently caught in the brambles of social security and restrictive community, and therefore individualistic post-welfarism becomes the obvious solution. This appeal to human compassion may well exert more influence than a predominantly stigmatising text could, and this tension between sympathy and stigma is something that future researchers of social class discourse might want to explore.

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