The static welfare claimant vs. the dynamic migrant

Contrasting figures of personhood in YouTube comments

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The study analyses YouTube comments attached to an episode of *Benefits Street* (a British factual welfare television programme) which enregister two figures of personhood: "The static, unmotivated British benefits claimant" and "the dynamic, driven migrant". Using Park's (2021) critical heuristic of time, space and affect, the study finds that the welfare claimant figure is constructed as a social failure, and the migrant as both a yardstick (to measure the failure) and a rattan stick (to punish it). The key factor is mobility: The migrant experiences social mobility via mental mobility (i.e., motivation) and spatial mobility (i.e., travelling for opportunities). The welfare claimant's lack of mental and spatial mobility prevents their social mobility. Ultimately, the paper argues that contrasting the figures represents an attack on rootedness and a celebration of neoliberal mobility based in ideals of meritocracy and the erasure of social class as a relevant construct.

Keywords: political discourse, social media discourse, social class, enregisterment, figures of personhood, mobility, neoliberalism

1. Introduction

> [...] how do you complain about immigrants using tax money when they work hard but then you have brits literally fucking so they can get paid [...]
>
> – DaWei (YouTube comment 2018)

Above is an illustrative example of this paper's dataset: YouTube comments attached to *Benefits Street*, a British factual welfare television programme (De Benedictis, Allen, and Jensen 2017) which focused on the day-to-day lives of mostly unemployed residents of a socioeconomically deprived part of England.

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The sample comment illustrates a recurrent phenomenon in the thread, where welfare claimants are compared (usually unfavourably) with migrants, despite the latter group not featuring in the video the comments accompany. This tendency partly reflects the febrile national debates on welfare and migration that characterized much of the 2010s, which this research revisits by examining comments made from 2016 to 2020 about a TV show from 2014.

In the previous, pre-Covid decade, the situation and discourse around benefits and immigration was quite different to today and can be considered as belonging to another historical "archive". Blommaert (2005, 99–104) describes this concept of Foucault's (1969) as what can be expressed and understood during particular time-spaces. As we speak from within its rules, it is impossible to describe our current archive (Ibid., 102), so studying previous archives permits a clearer view. Examining these debates from the 2010s provides insight into the links between social security, social class, and migration and how they were perceived and discussed in the public square. These elements remain highly interrelated today (when, for example, the minimum combined income required for a spousal visa will more than double by 2025), and social media is still clearly implicated in representations of minorities (e.g., Aldamen 2023). Therefore, the findings from this research can add nuance to understandings of the links between politics, discourse, and comparative representations of societal groups.

To do this, the study examines a tendency across the comments to construct two distinct, opposing "figures of personhood" (see Section 2): "the static welfare claimant" and "the dynamic migrant". To explore the figures and their construction, the paper employs Park's (2021) "time, space, affect" analytical heuristic, which aims to facilitate the discovery of connections between "figures of personhood and the political conditions of social life." My analysis ultimately finds that mobility is the key, ideological benchmark which separates the "winners" (i.e., the migrants) from the "losers" (welfare claimants).

Discourses surrounding *Benefits Street* are worth exploring for two main reasons. Firstly, research has found that YouTube comments consistently reflect the content of the video they accompany (Edgerly et al. 2013, 285), so it is interesting that, despite the near total absence of migration as a theme in the source video, the topic frequently occurs in the comments. Secondly, welfare claimants and immigrants both generally receive a bad press in (social) media discourse (see Section 3), so this apparent reversal of migrants/migration as praiseworthy is notable.

The comments will be analysed and discussed in Sections 7 and 8. Before that, I will introduce the central notions of enregisterment and figures of personhood (Section 2), summarise work on benefits claimant and migrant representations

(Sections 3 and 4), introduce the study's data (Section 5), and discuss the paper's methodology (Section 6).

2. Enregistering figures of personhood

Agha (2011, 172–73) understands "figures of personhood" not as "timeless forms", but as "performable behaviours" which can index the social persona of the performer or, more relevant here, be re-interpreted as generic signs invoking "social types". This point – that the figures are performable behaviours/signs which invoke social types, rather than social types themselves – speaks to the notion of enregisterment which linguistic anthropologists Agha (2005) and Silverstein (2003) developed by building on foundational work by Jakobson and Peirce (Johnstone 2016, 633). As Johnstone observes, linguistic signs become enregistered when they repeatedly co-occur with certain kinds of social activities or alignments, dress or demeanour and thus become indexically linked with a social persona.

As an example, Park (2021, 57–58) discusses "a widely circulated figure of personhood in Korea: the incompetent Korean speaker of English." This figure embodies the widespread belief that, despite learning and investing in English for many years, Koreans cannot engage in practical conversation, especially with foreigners. By analysing advertisements from an English-learning platform, Park relays their detailed depictions of the "incompetent" figure (e.g., in a locale known for high-end English language schools, a woman carrying English language textbooks and listening to English recordings becomes paralysed and starts sweating profusely after being asked directions in English) and argues that they "reference, characterize, and evaluate the Korean speaker of English through the figure of personhood they invoke" (Ibid., 59).

Indeed, once a set of signs can recognisably index a figure of personhood for a certain group (i.e., they have become "enregistered" for a particular "social domain"; Agha 2005, 38/47), the figure can be recontextualised in various, unpredictable ways, including being recognised as a "stereotypic figure by many persons, functionally effective as a normative ideal for some, as a counter-model for others" (Agha 2011, 173). This is where figures of personhood go beyond the "representation of social actors" in discourse (van Leeuwen 2003) to become recognisable, fleshed out characters (as with the Korean figure above, whom the advert chronotopically situates according to several typical traits). Therefore, while "many persons" may recognise a figure of personhood as "stereotypic" (Agha 2011, 173), the figures are generally more complex, socially grounded "icons (or images) of personhood" (Ibid., 172–73). Stereotypes, on the other hand, are

glossed by Reyes (2004, 174) as "simply 'typical' features; at best, they are approximate descriptors [...]" which summarises their more generalised, lower resolution nature. Park (2014, 3–4) agrees, seeing stereotypes as "associat[ing] a typified behavior to a social group", but figures of personhood as more detailed – including signs that relate to appearance, behaviour, demeanour, character, and/or practice (Park 2021, 49) – and situated in a more complex and chronotopically specific social context. This paper argues that, when invoking and discussing the migrant and welfare claimant figures, commenters go beyond the "stereotypic" level to hold them up (respectively) as a detailed "normative ideal" and "counter model".

3. Discursive representations of benefits claimants and immigrants

In 2010s Britain, the subjects of benefits and immigration were particularly fraught, with major events and talking points dominating the news cycle at times. For example, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition embarked on a programme of economic austerity which led to the "deepest and most precipitate cuts ever made in social provision" (Taylor-Gooby 2013, viii). According to Morrison (2019, 34), this policy was justified by a deliberate thematising of benefits cheats in political discourse, which bled into the media and public spheres. While austerity ground on, the "European migrant crisis" began in 2015, when 1.3 million people (many fleeing the Syrian civil war) requested asylum in EU states (Barlai et al. 2017). These political events were mass-mediated and became the subject of intense scrutiny and debate. Thus, this section deals with political and media discourse, including social media.

Notions of the "deserving" and "undeserving poor" have been a feature of British public discourse since the 16th century, when religious alms-givers distinguished between those who could not work (e.g., the disabled and elderly) and those who were able-bodied but would not work (McIntosh 2005, 461). In Victorian times, the idea was more forcefully recast as the "respectable working class" versus the "residuum" (Welshman 2013, 16–17). These dichotomies were clearly echoed in the 2010s benefits debates, as detailed by Morrison (2019). Exploring depictions of benefits claimants in political and media discourse, he finds that a fundamental move was the redefining of "fairness" by the ruling coalition. Then finance minister George Osborne's (2010, cited in Morrison 2019, 14) announcement that "we are all in this together" and must all "make a contribution" became a recurring trope which reinforced a simplified, antagonistic binary between "contributors" (i.e., taxpayers) and "non-contributors" (welfare claimants). The binary was rhetorically expressed as "workers vs. shirkers" or "strivers vs. skivers" (Ibid., 15), with the malingering latter groups used as evidence

that the welfare state was "broken", and therefore needed reforming (Ibid., 16; see also Wiggan, 2012). It was from this febrile, anti-benefits atmosphere that *Benefits Street* emerged, bringing its own representations of a malfunctioning system.

My own multimodal analysis of *Benefits Street* found that the show portrayed the structures of *Benefits* (i.e., the social security system) and *Street* (i.e., the local community) as repressive forces on the residents, who were portrayed more as misguided victims than active villains (Daly 2024). Paterson et al. (2016, 202) showed clips of the show to focus groups and observed how they "attribute[d] stance to benefit claimants" by discussing their internal thoughts and motivations, expressed in forms like "they get pregnant because they think…." The clips also led participants to express broader stereotypes about benefit claimants (e.g., about them smoking and drinking), even though those actions were not present in the segments. Baker and McEnery (2015, 262) looked at live tweets sent during *Benefits Britain: The Live Debate*. They found that benefits claimants were either represented as "idle" or "victims" and argued that both depictions were disempowering. However, they also found a well-organised opposition to the on-screen depictions, and other researchers studied such counter-hegemonic discourses. Jensen (2014, 5) mentions "interruptions to the congealing of this [anti-benefits] commonsense" from *Benefits Street* participants themselves who could be highly critical of the show's representations (e.g., Suart 2014) and memes which, for example, photoshopped Buckingham Palace onto the *Benefits Street* title page (see also Feltwell et al. 2017).

KhosraviNik (2010) explored macro scale representations of refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants in British newspapers from 1996 to 2006. He found that, despite clear differences in discursive strategies correlating with differing periods, events, newspaper genres (i.e., tabloid or broadsheet), and the outlets' political orientations, the discourses on the three groups reflect and/or partly constitute similar "negative macro structures". For example, in the topoi (argument structures) used, conservative tabloids tended to directly reproduce existing "layman's stereotypes" (e.g., about abuse of welfare system or threat to community values) while conservative broadsheets alluded to them in creative ways that produced new arguments. Liberal newspapers (both broadsheets) tended to draw on topoi of humanitarianism and justice, although, as with Baker & McEnery's (2015) Twitter study (above), this was characterized by KhosraviNik more as "constructing victims" than positive representation.

While analysing media professionals' perceptions of their own practices across six EU countries including the UK, Bennett et al. (2013) identified four key tendencies which recent research had found in reporting on third-country nationals (first-generation immigrants without EU citizenship.) These were: (1) Fuzzy group designations and negative labelling; (2) representing migrants negatively, e.g., as

victims; (3) over-representing of officials/under-representing of migrants in quotations; and (4) relative absence of wider European context. As with benefits claimants above, Bennett et al. stress that the representations are not entirely negative. Some studies show increases in investigative reporting, counter argument, and more emphasis on migrant sources, which indicate less essentialising media depictions. Despite these strains of resistance, however, it seems fair to summarise representations of welfare claimants and immigrants as predominantly negative.

4. Peasants, cosmopolitans, somewheres, and anywheres

Two particularly relevant representations are worth unpicking and comparing in detail. Firstly, using data from a large-scale linguistic ethnography, Creese and Blackledge (2020) studied narratives about migration involving two female immigrants to Britain: Winnie, a librarian from Hong Kong, and Margot, an actor from Poland. In Winnie's conversations with colleagues in Birmingham (also migrants, from India and mainland China), they discussed the topic of arranged marriage, and in doing so, drew on two contrastive stereotypes: "the peasant" and "the cosmopolitan". Separately, in a short film, Margo also invoked both figures, to address the discrimination she experiences in everyday life. These themes were further discussed in her rehearsal space with two British colleagues who wanted her to use "a bit of Polish" as part of a performance, and in ethnographic interviews led by one of the researchers. The authors describe "typifications of the peasant figure" as "at best unsophisticated and naïve, and at worse bigoted, blinkered, backward-looking, and intolerant." The cosmopolitan, on the other hand was "for the most part worldly, educated, open-minded, and forward-looking." In general, the women aligned with the cosmopolitan figure and away from the peasant, though Margot did critique the peasant character through the eyes of the apparently sophisticated, but ultimately prejudiced liberal cosmopolitan. Even Margot, however, strongly identified as a metropolitan (and presumably cosmopolitan) Londoner. Overall, the figures were deployed to articulate (dis)preferred ideologies regarding migration (i.e., dynamic mobility largely good, parochial rootedness largely bad).

The peasant and cosmopolitan share many characteristics with David Goodhart's (2017) "somewheres" and "anywheres". In Goodhart's social dichotomy (mostly based on social attitudes survey data and including a significant number of "in-betweeners"), the typical British anywhere is a mobile, progressive, metropolitan liberal who attended a residential university. Their worldview broadly welcomes change, individualism, internationalism, self-realisation and equality in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and sometimes social

class. In contrast, the average somewhere is socially conservative and has roots in a small town or suburb. They did not attend university and are in the bottom three quartiles of the income/class scale. They value security, tradition, a slower pace of change, reciprocity and national citizen favouritism.

As Goodhart's (2017) offers a detailed, ideological rendering of a complex social situation, his dichotomy can be seen as a more fleshed out, chronotopically situated version of the peasant and cosmopolitan invoked in Creese and Blackledge's (2020) data. As seen in Section 2, Agha (2011) states that figures of personhood are not "timeless forms", which distinguishes them (and the figures of welfare claimant and migrant) from Creese and Blackledge's characters, whom they describe as identifiable, unchanging types ("like the hero of the epic tale"; ibid., 423). While, as we shall see, commenters constructing the welfare claimant and the migrant draw (respectively) on noticeable characteristics of the peasant and cosmopolitan, the two figures at the centre of this paper are constructed in fairly high resolution and situated in a specific time-space. Thus, as argued in Section 2, though they draw on stereotypes, they ultimately offer a detailed "normative ideal" and "counter model".

5. *Benefits Street* on YouTube

The paper works with a dataset of 5,282 YouTube comments attached to an episode of *Benefits Street*. The first series, released in 2014, followed the day-to-day lives of residents living on a high-unemployment street in Birmingham, the UK's second largest city. It described its aim as to "reveal the reality of life on benefits" (Channel 4 2014), where "benefits" is roughly equivalent to the US term "welfare". The series was a major media event, bringing Channel 4's largest viewing figures of 2014 and was hugely controversial and polarising, invoking large amounts of condemnation, and some praise. Critical voices included the 1,800 complaints the media watchdog Ofcom received about its first series; left-leaning journalists calling it *poverty porn* (e.g., McGiffin 2014); and academics criticising it for, amongst other things, showing a selective, inaccurate image of poverty (MacDonald, Shildrick, and Furlong 2014); exploiting its cast (Ellis 2014); and overlooking the wider political-economic context for the residents' plight (Daly 2024). In terms of praise, conservative commentators saw it as shining an uncomfortable but important spotlight on poverty (e.g., Nelson 2014), and even critical journalists and academics found redeeming features such as sympathetically treated characters (Brooker 2014, paras. 8–9); episodes which challenged dominant media discourses about benefits (Fisher 2014, paras. 1–2); or moving scenes presenting the bleak realities of poverty (Wood 2014, para. 3).

In sum, it seems fair to describe *Benefits Street* as a complex, multidimensional text which was not as straightforwardly problematic or enlightening as its most extreme commentary suggested.

The episode central to this paper's dataset focuses on children and parenting. It was the most watched of both series, with 6.48 million viewers, and the most popular on YouTube, receiving 2,307,345 views from December 2016, until its removal on copyright grounds in June 2020.[1] The episode (third in the series) mostly follows the home life of Becky and Mark, a young unemployed couple struggling with the behavioural problems of their three-year-old, Callum. Alongside this, we are shown the programme's most prominent resident, "White Dee", and her mostly tender, sometimes fraught relationship with her two children: teenager Caitlin and five-year-old Gerrard. The final character followed is the quietly emotional and regretful Sam, a recovering heroin user whose son has been removed from her care. All these characters are white British nationals, and the issue of immigration is only hinted at once in the episode. This is during the opening sequence, where the narrator tells viewers hat the street is home to "thirteen nationalities", after which a newly arrived migrant says (in Romanian, with subtitles), "it's like a jail here".

6. Time, space, affect analysis

To analyse the comments posted in response to the episode, I employ Park's (2021) analytical heuristic of "time, space and affect". For Park, analysing figures of personhood as feeling subjects located in specific time-spaces helps link those analyses with broader power relations, thus facilitating the critical, socially grounded study of language use (Ibid., 48). Park explains that the schema is not an analytical framework, but rather "stimuli for the analytic imagination" which can help operationalise the figure of personhood concept and facilitate the creative discovery of links between the figures and "the political conditions of social life" (Ibid., 52). Park's heuristic recognises that "participants in metapragmatic discourse locate figures of personhood in relation to specific time-spaces and specific subjective positions" (Ibid., 52), and that the figures are always deployed by embodied agents with (stratified) material, chronotopic positionings and goals of their own. In short, the deployment of figures of personhood is about how the figures are positioned by discourse participants, and how those participants align

1. The original page with the removed episode is at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onYneg3qR8U&t=365s. At time of writing, the episode is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6k7–8vaXxXs&t=2294s.

with them (i.e., as they recognise, enact, or evaluate them). This fits well with Agha's (2011, 173) point that the "actual persons" in discourse about figures of personhood are those who describe or refer to the figures (see Section 5). According to Park (2021), these alignments are situated in time-space and engender a variety of affective responses from participants. Thus, in attending to this situated, material embodiment, the analyst can gain insight into the social ramifications of the deployment of such figures (Ibid., 54–55).

While utilising Park's (2021) heuristic, I make a slight adaptation, by emphasising "cognition" alongside "affect". This is because, in my examples, while commenters do refer to the figures as "feeling subjects", they are also discussed as "thinking subjects" (especially focusing on beliefs and attitudes). It should be noted that this adaptation is a heuristic simplification, as there may be no ontological distinction between cognition and affect (Duncan and Barrett 2007).

To prepare for the following analysis, the 5,282 comments were downloaded, read and coded using spreadsheet software as part of a larger research project. The coding scheme was developed based on the project's different themes and needs as it developed. For instance, codes included "discourses of poverty", "double voicing", "metalanguage", and "intertextuality". Having noticed the recurrent references to migrants despite the group's absence from the video, those comments (numbering 48) were later coded separately and compared with mentions of the welfare claimant figure (numbering 576). Unsurprisingly, given the video content, comments referring to the migrant figure are not typical of the thread overall, but they (and those that discuss the welfare claimant) do tend to recycle similar tropes, which suggests that the two contrasted characters are emergent figures of personhood. A smaller collection of anti-migrant comments (10) channel a discourse we could call "immigrants on benefits". However, the welfare claimant: negative/migrant: positive discourses are more typical of this aspect of the thread. In the following analysis, examples are shown that illustrate this typicality, in terms of traits and distinctions between the figures.

7. The static welfare claimant vs. the dynamic migrant: Analysing contrastive figures of personhood

This analysis first explores the construction of the welfare claimant, then the migrant. Both sections begin by collating and analysing single comments which add up to quite detailed images of each figure and then look at how commenters invoke the figures in interaction, and to what effects. As discussed, I structure my analysis around Park's (2021) time, space, affect heuristic, while orienting to cognition as well as affect. Usernames are anonymised while retaining the flavour of the original name.

7.1 The welfare claimant

The first figure can be called "the static and unmotivated British welfare claimant", and is characterised by a "somewhere" rootedness, and lack of dynamism caused by the apparently stultifying effects of social security benefits. More specifically, the native British benefits claimant is drawn – with parallels to Creese and Blackledge's (2020) peasant – as demotivated, dysfunctional, entitled, ignorant, immigrant-blaming, immobile, irresponsible, lazy, privileged, pro-Brexit, racist, undisciplined and uneducated. Space allows four illustrative comments to be cited in Table 1.

Table 1. The welfare claimant

Number	Username	Comment	Line numbers
1A	Fabienne Mayer	[...] These people are all UK citizens with one of the	1
		best passports in the world...you can travel	2
		anywhere. Uni and school is free and available if you	3
		have the right grades.yet they do nothing.while so many	4
		would literally put their lifes in danger in order to make	5
		it to the UK, these people have no idea that they were	6
		born with so much privilege. [...]	7
1B	Leighton Amr	These are the down-syndrome retards who voted brexit	8
		because "all these immigrants on benefits means i dont	9
		get as much for not working".	10
		Fucking disguting sub-human scum this lot	11
1C	KeithTheBro	These are the type of people that say immigrants are	12
		taking our jobs or jobs are hard to get, yet they make no	13
		attempt to stay active getting a job its laughable.	14
1D	Dominic Alonso	Scrap benefits then they'll soon shift their asses, having	15
		the comfort of benefits encourages the lazy cunts to not	16
		work.	17

An analytical consideration of space, time, and affect/cognition is revealing in terms of the sociopolitical positioning of the welfare-claimant. For space, all portrayals of the figure are situated in the UK, either explicitly (1A, 1B) or implicitly (1C, 1D), as expected, given the video content. Comments 1A and 1C add an "inactive" trait, while the former links travel with educational attainment and assumes

the welfare claimant avoids both ("you can travel anywhere. Uni and school is free…yet they do nothing", lines 2–4). Similarly, 1D describes the figure as immobile and lazy ("shift their asses" / "lazy cunts", lines 15–16).

Time intersects with these depictions of space, as commenters position Britain as a 2010s European state, referencing Brexit (1B) and the EU migrant crisis ("put their lifes in danger…to make it to the UK", 1A, lines 5–6). 1D's reference to the "comfort of benefits" (line 16) is typical of the thread as a whole and commenters' tendency to orient towards 21st century post-welfarism, where the Keynesian consensus is continually questioned and state benefits seen as causing, not ameliorating poverty (Jensen and Tyler 2015, 3).

Whereas comment 1B entails an affective response of "disgu(s)t" towards the welfare-recipient figure (line 11), all four commenters ascribe certain cognitive traits. Welfare claimants are seen as ignorant of their privilege compared with struggling migrants and refugees ("these people have no idea", 1A, line 6); "retarded" and entitled regarding their asssumed anti-immigration reasons for voting for Brexit (1B, lines 8–10); and unmotivated (1C) because they receive benefits (1D).

In sum, we see a tendency to position the welfare claimant as static (1A, 1C), parochial (1B) and spoiled by the welfare state (1D). This can be compared with the more dynamic, go-getting migrant, introduced next.

7.2 The migrant

The second figure is "the dynamic and driven migrant" – an "anywhere" striver who achieves a spatial and social mobility far beyond that of the welfare-claimant. The migrant is ambitious; contributive (to society in general, and specifically to the social protection budget); enterprising; hardworking; independent; and mobile. Table 2 provides an illustrative sample of comments:

Table 2. The migrant

Number	Username	Comment	Line numbers
2A	Plenty	So these losers whinge that the immigrants take all of	1
		their jobs, yet it is only the immigrants that want to work	2
		[…]	3
2B	Sara Daoudi	Shouldn't have failed your GCSEs then they blame	4
		immigrants that we took over their jobs lool how ironic.	5
		No offence but Immigrants are more hardworking at least	6

Table 2. *(continued)*

Number	Username	Comment	Line numbers
		they do something especially even if they were poor. Its	7
		cause of us you all a roof to live under.	8
2C	HotRod	[*responding to a comment suggesting the welfare budget be invested in education and training*]	
		The schools are fine. People come to the UK with grains	9
		of sand in their pockets & their kids go to the ropeiest	10
		schools & yet will leave with a hat full of qualifications	11
		because they have a work ethic & self discipline!	12
2D	Lily	[...] Im an immigrant and Ive taken advantage of this	13
		amazing opportunity Ive been given, and it makes me so	14
		angry when people dont. There is NO excuse. Its all	15
		FREE.	16

While rejecting the "migrant as victim" trope (Bennett et al. 2012), each comment has an interesting relationship to time, space, and affect/cognition. For 2A and 2B, there is an implied contemporary UK context, with assumptions that British-born benefits recipients express resentment towards incoming migrants for taking their jobs, despite those immigrants working harder and funding their benefits.

In terms of place, comment 2C describes migrants with pockets containing only "grains of sand" (which alludes to hot, dusty countries of origin), and them having to put their children in the "ropeiest" (i.e., "ropiest"/lowest quality) schools. Both these points homogenise arriving migrants as poor, but despite this difficult start, their children are expected to excel academically (line 11), a statement which, it should be noted, is grounded in some truth. In terms of ethnicity, the top three performing groups in British schools come from Chinese, Indian and "Asian other" backgrounds (gov.uk 2022). While cultural reasons such as an emphasis on education may be implicated, attributing these groups' overachievement solely to hard work and discipline (line 12) is a simplification with a somewhat neoliberal tone. For example, a very high proportion (around one third) of British Indians occupy the two highest social classes when measured by occupation and income (gov.uk 2018), so the average British Indian child is unlikely to attend one of the "ropiest" schools. Indeed, there is presumably a complex, dialectic relationship between any group's average class background and average performance at school, which the homogenising comment overlooks.

Commenter 2D self-identifies as a migrant and visually renders her affective state of anger through capitalisation (lines 15–16). The cognitive trait of "making excuses" is implicitly ascribed to the welfare claimant, while the migrant "takes advantage of opportunities" (lines 14–15). The exact opportunities are unclear but could feasibly be state-provided training or educational programmes. While celebrating these opportunities, the commenter portrays them not as a public service paid for by collective taxation, but as a privilege doled out by the state ("it's all FREE" lines 15–16).

In short, as well as sharp elbowed (2D), the migrant is portrayed as motivated to find work (2A), contributive to social security (2B), and able to succeed despite a tough start through self-discipline and hard work (2C). Having collated and introduced the scattered references to the two figures of personhood, the following two sections explore how the two figures are invoked in interaction and the effects this can bring.

7.3 Comparing the welfare claimant and migrant in interaction

7.3.1 *"[M]ost people are victims of their own circumstance…"*

The first interaction, between "HotRod" (the thread's most prolific poster, commenting exactly 100 times) and "Shorty", begins in disagreement about whether struggling people should be given help. As the turns progress, common ground is found, and the interaction illustrates how discourse connects neoliberal ideas about mobility and mindset with the relative performance of the welfare claimant and migrant figures.

Shorty's initial message of helping "victims" (see Section 3) morphs into one of self-reliance after HotRod's input. When invoking the notion of mindset (line 11), Shorty appears to orient towards the "fixed / growth" dichotomy introduced by psychologist Carol Dweck (2006). Dweck's fixed mindset (attributed here to the welfare claimant) is characterised as "believing that your qualities are carved in stone" (Ibid., 7), whereas the growth (migrant) mindset sees "the hand you're dealt" as "just the starting point for development" because "your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts" (Ibid., 8). In terms of time, and while acknowledging the impact that self-belief and determination can have on people facing difficulties, the book's motivational phrasing may index its peak neoliberal-era publication date. This fits uncomfortably with Shorty's assertion that young people in poverty fear a "tough future" (lines 21–22), as the British generation born between 1980 and 2000 are indeed the first since 1881 expected to be poorer than their parents, with most blame put on the 2008 financial crisis (e.g., Clegg 2017) which is generally understood as a failure of

Table 3. "[M]ost people are victims…"

Number	Username	Comment and replies	Line numbers
3A	Shorty	most people are victims of their own circumstance, and	1
		should be helped not judged	2
3B	HotRod	Oh stop it! They have more than enough help! People	3
		come to the UK with grains of sand in their pockets &	4
		within a few years & living in 3 million piles of bricks	5
		with 80.000 piece of German metal parked outside! YOU	6
		are the problem with this "excuse" mentality! People like	7
		this have won the Lottery & pissed it all up the wall	8
		within 5 years! *"Helped*" don't make me laugh!	9
3C	Shorty	That's not my point (maybe my first response was a little	10
		vague). The point I was trying to make is about a mindset.	11
		I myself live in the UK and am a third generation	12
		immigrant and the way i was raised is all ways to drive	13
		and strive for money. I was made hungry from a young	14
		age to be rich. Whereas your typical lad from one of these	15
		areas has a teen mum and no dad. Its not what in their	16
		wallet but what in the mind. I am a firm believer	17
		that people like ETthehiphoppreacher and Jordan	18
		Peterson provide the right message for these young kids	19
		who see no future to carve one out for themselves.	20
		Beneath the attempt to look hard is a scared boy with a	21
		tough future and he is not ready to deal with it. Its a	23
		culture change that must take place. One where the govt	24
		aren't a safety net.	25
		[…]	

neoliberal economics (e.g., Kotz 2009). For space, Shorty's characterisation of the two figures is based on a distinction between his/her own upbringing in the UK as a "third generation immigrant" and that of "your typical lad from one of these areas" (lines 12–13, 15–16). This claiming of a dynamic migrant identity in contrast to the static welfare-claimant, even though Shorty and parents were apparently born in the UK, depicts the migrant figure as anywhere and welfare

claimant as somewhere. Shorty only "lives" in the UK (line 12), whereas the "typical lad" is "from" one of those areas, with the respective implications of "temporary choice" and "permanent fact" these terms can bring.

HotRod invokes space, time, and mindset in his response. The products of German engineering/manufacturing are invoked as something to aspire to (line 6), which, given the West Midlands setting for *Benefits Street*, is interesting. In the 1970s, 60% of British cars were manufactured in that region, before the industry's sharp decline led to severe economic contraction and unemployment (Donnelly, Begley, and Collis 2017, 56–57). Indeed, British de-industrialisation was "faster and more enduring, and the social cost was much greater" than in (West) Germany, which took a cautious, interventionist approach based on social objectives more than market forces (Wild 1989, 335–36). HotRod, however, does not link the on-screen unemployment with the aspiration for German cars and instead sees the locals as having "won the lottery" and wasted their fortune on frivolities ("pissed it all up the wall", lines 8–9). Another interesting choice of HotRod's is to express "car" and "house" through elemental imagery ("piece of metal", "piles of bricks", lines 5–6). This may implicitly reinforce the meritocratic, neoliberal narrative in which he situates migrants, where they patiently progress from grains of sand, to piles of bricks, to houses worth three million pounds. Shorty agrees, offering a solution which is almost the ideological opposite of his/her first suggestion: A "culture change" prompted by the removal of the welfare state's "safety net" (lines 22–24).

7.3.2 *"[H]ave to move far far away from the place she lives…"*

The next interaction is between Alex Bakerton and Jakub Novak. Alex's opening criticism is based on a sequence in the video where shots of Mark drinking beer with friends are followed by one of him asking how his family are "supposed to live on fifty pound a week?"

Despite Alex's opening comment (line 1) being based on shots of Mark and his friends, the inclusion of the modifier "always", and the elision of both clauses' subjects once more suggests that the on-screen characters are tokens of the welfare-claimant type, with an irresponsible, petty-criminal mindset added to the list of tendencies (lines 2–6). Given its vast regional inequalities (McCann 2016), shoplifting rates in the UK vary hugely. The time-space referenced is likely one of these high shoplifting areas, which tend to be in deindustrialised regions such as South Wales and Yorkshire (Brighton Analytics 2024). Again, however, deindustrialisation is not considered as a factor. Instead, Jakub relates his experience as a struggling young migrant worker who had to move repeatedly between the UK and his poorer home country (lines 7–10). This view of mobility as a solution is emphasised by his hope for "[t]hat addicted girl" (Sam; see Section 2), which is

Table 4. "[H]ave to move far far away…"

Number	Username	Comment and replies	Line numbers
4A	Alex Bakerton	50 a week. But always got enough for beer	1
4B	Jakub Novak	easy go to off licence. Most of these places have fridges	2
		next to entrance. Grab and take. Used to live in UK seen	3
		it all	4
4C	Alex Bakerton	*@Jakub Novak* I live in the uk. So know 100% what you	5
		mean	6
4D	Jakub Novak	its crazy right? that young family pisses me off. I have	7
		been in strugle when in their age. I came to UK and back	8
		from and to poor country and still could manage better	9
		than them. The young lad is just lazy and if youre lazy	10
		and do jack shit then you slowly become an stupid idiot….	11
		I am sorry for the kids. For me as a father who is burning	12
		ass to provide for kids its really disturbing. That addicted	13
		girl could stand a chance but she would have to move far	14
		far away from the place she lives in and start fresh	15
		without them stupid strong piss taste beer cans.	16

predicated on her moving "far far away from the place she lives in" to "start fresh" (lines 13–16). Contrasting with 7.3.1, this is an example of "live" being preferred to "from": Sam may "stand a chance" (line 14) because she only "lives" on James Turner Street and thus may not belong there.

8. Discussion

Commenters clearly do discursive and interactional work to construct these two, detailed figures of personhood. The illustrative sample of comments shows that the welfare claimant figure is recurrently depicted as static (1A, 1C), resentful towards immigrants (2A, 2B), irresponsible (4A), and stuck, both in a culture of entitlement (3C, lines 22–24), and a place of delinquency (4A; 4D, lines 13–16). The migrant, on the other hand, is motivated (2A), contributive (2B), hard-

working (2C), hungry for success (3C, lines 12–15), and dynamic/mobile (4D, lines 7–10).

As to why they might be invoking the figures, Johnstone (2016, 640–641), suggests several situations when enregisterment might be interactionally useful, three of which are clearly present in the above examples. Some are "support for a claim in argument" (e.g., comment 1B, where the welfare claimant figure is fictitiously voiced to explain his/her assumed vote for Brexit) or "creating common ground" (e.g., most visibly in conversations 7.3.1 and 7.3.2.) Finally, most instances seem to be "stancetaking", with the stance object generally being welfare claimants or, by extension, the welfare state (e.g., 2D, which is both.)

That commenters' ultimate target is the welfare claimant not the migrant becomes clear when looking at the emergent reasons for enregistering the figure. Firstly, almost all the cited comments include a second or third-person plural pronoun to refer to welfare claimants (e.g., "you", "they" or "these people/losers"; 1A, 1B, 1C, 1D, 2A, 2B, 3B [elided], 4A). In general, the figure of the migrant tends to be used as both a yardstick with which to measure the welfare claimant's failure, and a rattan stick with which to beat them. Both kinds of stick are evident in comments such as 1A, 2A, 2B, 2C, 2D, 3C, 4D, which use a comparative frame as the yardstick (e.g., "…immigrants are more hardworking", 2B) where the welfare claimant comes off worse (i.e., the rattan stick.) These portrayals are homogenising and ultimately about weaponising one peripheral group against another, two criticisms also made of the "Asian-American as model minority" trope (Crystal 1989, 405). Qualitatively, the comparisons tend to cohere around the migrant figure standing in for dynamism; both mental and physical. Being dynamic in these ways leads to upward social mobility, which the welfare claimant fails to achieve because he/she is mentally and physically static. Thus, the construction of neither the welfare claimant nor the migrant is "about the figure [itself]" (Park 2021, 54), but about enregistering a social dichotomy of "failing somewhere inertia" vs. "upward anywhere mobility".

The question remains of why the migrant figure was chosen as the weapon. The most obvious reason is that migration was another hot topic at that time, as discussed in Section 3. Thus, it may have been natural to compare two often disparaged groups in this way. This feeds into the model minority discourse mentioned above, as in "If *they* can succeed, why can't *you*?" As several commenters self-identify as migrants (2B, 2D, 3C, 4D), there also appears to be some positive self-representation happening. When two groups are routinely stigmatised, creating comparative distinction for one's own group may be desirable. That this only happens from migrants and not welfare claimants could be a self-selecting feature of the process of enregisterment: While members of both groups can and do occupy a range of social classes, commenters enregister an "underclass" welfare-claimant figure, someone cut adrift from respectable society and apparently difficult to identify with. Other reasons relate to the somewhere/anywhere dichotomy introduced in Section 4. The clear grouping of "welfare claimant as lazy somewhere" and "migrant as dynamic anywhere" is an attack on rootedness and a celebration of mobility. Common myths about the Brexit vote no doubt feed into these ideologies, such as it being primarily an anti-immigration statement born of working-class ignorance (see McKenzie 2017). Interestingly, comments such as 1B, 1C, 2A, 2B position the welfare claimant as blaming the migrant for their failures. In this sense, the commenters may see themselves as doing social justice work, by sticking up for migrants against "these [...] down syndrome retards who voted brexit" (1B) and "these losers [who] whinge that the immigrants take all of their jobs" (2A). The erasure of social class in favour of gender, race, and other identity categories is surely implicated here (see Block 2014).

Finally, the commenters may be doing the everyday discursive work of elite, neoliberal anywheres by imagining a structureless world of free-floating agents unbound by restrictions like social-security benefits or national borders. This reading touches on the nexus of neoliberalism and neofeudalism (see Dean 2021; Hudson 2012). Without wishing to draw anachronistic comparisons, the welfare claimant figure clearly invokes Creese and Blackledge's (2020) "peasant" or the feudal serf for whom social mobility is unimaginable. However, the assumption of a meritocratic system means that the welfare claimants are assumed to have the ability to lift themselves out of servitude, if only they were more dynamic. This must be another reason why they invoke scorn, not sympathy.

9. Conclusion

This paper makes the following contributions to the study of language and politics, all of which may be worth further study. Firstly, given the raft of academic

work on the negative portrayal of immigrants in British and European media (see Section 3), it is noteworthy that migrants are portrayed in a somewhat positive light, as a new incarnation of the "model minority" discourse. As the question of immigration remains pertinent in different ways (see Section 1), it will be interesting to see if and how this characterisation holds. Second, we have seen that the semiotic process of enregistering figures of personhood can be used to explain local inequalities. The migrant figure is deployed to measure and punish the welfare claimant's failures and thus explain why both are in their apparent positions. This enregisterment need not be limited to social media, and other (perhaps multimodal) iterations may be interesting to explore. Finally, the discursive linking of mental, spatial and social mobility brings together several key issues of the contemporary era. This study explored them in the context of neoliberalism. If social class polarisation continues (with discourses like the ones explored here no doubt greasing the wheels), future studies may productively use the lens of neofeudalism.

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