

Making Poverty History? The Impact of the Recession on Poverty Discourses in Australia

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The recession affected Australia in September 2008 and saw a 0.7 percent rise in the nation's unemployment (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). This increase saw more Australians become financially unstable and finding themselves in a state of poverty. The pre-recession discourse surrounding what constitutes poverty and who is affected by it, was challenged during this time, with a broader conceptualisation of poverty being socially acknowledged (Archer, 2009). Such pre-recession discourses include the "deserving poor" and "undeserving poor", welfare dependency and the "dole bludger", which all serve to individualise poverty. These pre-recession discourses, which are detrimental to the wellbeing of individuals living in poverty, were challenged momentarily during the recession. However, with political and social discourse arguing that the recession is now over, Australian society has seen a return to the pre-recession way of understanding poverty and its causes, much to the psychological and psychosocial detriment of those individuals living in poverty today.

Poverty has become a term that has been contested internationally over its definition (Lynch, 2005). What is known about poverty, however, is that it is a state that can affect the social, psychological and physical condition of individuals and communities globally (Jeppesen, 2009). The Global Financial Crisis (GFC), or recession as it is commonly known, saw a reconceptualisation of poverty in Australia. Prior to the recession, a negative stigma was attached to poverty (Marston & McDonald, 2007), with individuals living in poverty facing social exclusion, social identity crises and powerlessness as a result of social discourses that existed. In this paper the effects of the discourses of poverty prior to, during and after the recession will be examined, rather than focusing on the linguistic analysis of specific discourse examples. This examination of the impact of common discourses surrounding poverty in Australia will highlight the challenges associated with societal understandings and interpretations of poverty and the impacts that these discourses can have on the wellbeing of Australians, particularly those living in poverty.

Understanding the recession

The International Labour Organization (ILO) reported that, due to the recession, by the end of 2009 approximately 51 million jobs worldwide would be eliminated from the labour

market (Castillo, 2009). This would see, by the end of 2009, 18 million more unemployed people in comparison to the end of 2007 (Castillo, 2009). The recession affected Australia in September 2008, which saw the nation's unemployment rate rise by 0.7 percent in the three months leading up to March 2009 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). This increase saw the Australian unemployment rate reach 5.7%, which was its highest level since 2003 (Hudson Australia, 2009). Alongside this increase in unemployment in Australia, the Wesley Mission reported that the demand for financial assistance, food hampers and financial counselling in Sydney in the three months leading up to Christmas in 2008 increased by 17 percent (Macklin, 2009). Collier (2009) reports that the recession has not just impacted the mental health of those individuals who have experienced job loss, but it affected the broader community as the recession created a sense of vulnerability for all employed persons. It is evident that the recession has had a significant influence on the financial conditions of many Australians, affecting many who, based on the previously discussed discourse, did not conform to the stereotypical impoverished individual. This stereotype implies that those individuals experiencing poverty are characterised by laziness, dependency, poor decision-making

and a lack of morals (Peck, 2007; Reid & Herbert, 2005).

Exploring the discourse

Spoken, written or symbolic language, which is known as discourse, influences social interaction and social politics (Gee, 1999). Therefore, discourse is an important component of social life (Fairclough, 2003). The study of discourse is the study of language and the creation of meaning within society (Wetherell, 2004). Discourse has become a popular area of research and societal interest; however, few authors fail to acknowledge the theoretical perspective from which they are examining and discussing the discourse that they study. Although the study of discourse is highly compatible with the epistemological approach of social constructionism, there are a variety of positions within social constructionism that an author can take. Social constructionism argues that there are multiple realities that exist within society, as each community member plays a pivotal role in the construction of meaning through their own experiences and interactions (Crotty, 1998). Consequently, both the examination of discourse and social constructionism demonstrate that reality and meaning is socially constructed (Fairclough, 2003).

I will be examining discourse from a critical psychological perspective, examining the way that societal discourses can create and reinforce social problems, particularly in the areas of discrimination, oppression and social inequality. By examining the discourses that exist within a society, particularly in areas of political and social significance, researchers, and community members, are in a better position to reflect on the role that discourse can play in the development and maintenance of social structures and power relations (Karlberg, 2007).

Poverty discourses prior to the recession

The “deserving poor” vs. the “undeserving poor”

A social perception of poverty prominent in many Western societies until the Great Depression was the classification of poverty into

two categories; the “deserving poor” and the “undeserving poor” (O’Connor, 2001). Those individuals within the “deserving poor” category are socially recognised as having legitimate reasons, such as individuals with a disability, for their inability to engage in the labour market (Jeppesen, 2009). Through the creation of this “deserving poor” discourse, a binary opposite is constructed, which is the “undeserving poor”. To fall within this category requires that an individual does not have a justifiable reason or excuse, based on the attitudes and values of the broader community, for their poverty and consequently are to blame for their own financial and social shortcomings associated with this condition (Jeppesen, 2009). Examples of social groups or individuals who were, and often are still perceived to be, classified as “undeserving” include homeless people with criminal records, single mothers and people with mental health issues (Jeppesen, 2009). These groups become classified as being “undeserving” as they are thought to have made life choices which have led them to poverty and are therefore “undeserving” of social support and infrastructure to alleviate the stresses of this predicament. The creation of these two opposing categories facilitates the moral inclusion of one group, which consists of those individuals from the “deserving poor”, and excludes those individuals from the “undeserving poor” as they are attributed as being invaluable and incompetent members of the broader community (Jeppesen, 2009; Allan Hanson, 1997).

This discourse infiltrated Australian social policy during, and after, World War II, as pensions were provided to “deserving poor” groups and individuals, such as people with disabilities and widows (Chenoweth, 2008). Prior to World War II, only two forms of social benefits existed in Australia, which were the age pension introduced by the Federal Government in 1908 and a maternity allowance introduced in 1912 (Herscovitch & Stanton, 2008). Following the war, the Federal Government introduced a variety of pension schemes including a widows’ pension (Herscovitch & Stanton, 2008).

Therefore, the Federal Government implemented an initiative that defined those individuals who were perceived to experience poverty through no “fault” of their own as “deserving”, entitling them to public assistance and support. The language used in this construction of poverty, as well as the policy that resulted from it, implies that certain people who are poor are entitled to particular rights and social acknowledgment, whereas others are not, based solely on the social desirability of the community in which they reside rather than material need (Butterworth, Fairweather, Anstey, & Windsor, 2006). Furthermore, it indicates that poverty is socially acknowledged and accepted if the poor individual is deemed worthy of their financial and social situation (Chenoweth, 2008). This categorisation and labelling of being “undeserving” is demoralising and can encourage individuals to further disengage with society (Butterworth et al., 2006). This can result in an individual becoming even more embedded in a cycle of poverty as the oppressive discourses they are exposed to may discourage them from engaging in the labour market because they have internalised these stereotypes and have developed a negative perception of self-worth (Butterworth et al., 2006).

Welfare dependency and the “dole bludger”

After the Great Depression there was an emphasis on the need to create welfare programs that assisted all individuals experiencing poverty in Australia. As a result, poverty discourse shifted away from the notion of the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor and moved towards a discourse of welfare dependency (O’Connor, 2001). This discourse suggests that there is a moral threat associated with aiding people in poverty, as such assistance will jeopardise the motivation and self-discipline of the individual (Marston, 2008; O’Connor, 2001). Not only does this discourse liken those living in poverty who need welfare to loafers, but it is also based on an assumption that these “welfare dependent” individuals, who fall into the “undeserving poor” category, are creating unfair burdens on taxpayers (Marston, 2008). As a consequence,

these individuals are considered by the rest of society as immoral and a threat to the economy (Marston, 2008). A dichotomy was therefore created whereby dependence on the state was perceived as immoral and dependence on the labour market was perceived as socially desirable and moral (Marston, 2008).

In order to reduce welfare dependency, the focus of social policy has been on how to make the unemployed or underemployed more employable (Marston, 2008). It has been argued within the context of the welfare dependency discourse that unemployed individuals are being “job snobs” and would rather rely on state assistance than be employed in a job that they do not perceive as suitable (Dunn, 2010; Marston, 2008; O’Connor, 2001). This notion of the “job snob” inflicts blame on the unemployed or underemployed individual regardless of whether an appropriate job for that individual exists. As Marston (2008) notes, the freedom of choice within the labour market is compromised when an individual receives financial assistance from the state, due to the overwhelming social criticism associated with poverty discourse.

Another extension of the welfare dependency discourse of individuals living in poverty is the label of the “dole bludger”. This term was first used in 1974 and constructs welfare recipients as being opposed to the worker (Archer, 2009). Bludgers are perceived as contributing little, if anything, to society and as surviving off the effort and hard work of the worker, essentially exploiting the employed for personal gain (Archer, 2009; Levitas, 2005; O’Connor, 2001). Thus, the relationship between workers and “dole bludgers” is tainted by the discourse, creating feelings of resentment and injustice among those who are employed (Archer, 2009). Discourse like this not only fostered, and continues to foster, social exclusion for impoverished Australians, but it also provided a

justification for limiting welfare state expansion (Archer, 2009). Discrimination based on such discourses is rampant within Australian society and often contributes further to poverty as a result of lowered self-efficacy, learned helplessness, social disengagement and psychological oppression (Butterworth et al., 2006; Lynch, 2005) as well as serving to control and discipline those who are employed through creating a climate of fear and exclusion.

The individualisation of poverty

The discourse of the “deserving poor” and “undeserving poor” as well as the discourse of the “dole bludger” reflects a fundamental theme of Australia’s conceptualisation of poverty prior to the recession that poverty was the responsibility of the individual (Allan Hanson, 1997; Marston, 2008). Both discourses therefore imply that poverty is a conscious choice made by the individual and that they are in the position to control their own financial and social position (O’Connor, 2001). These discourses show that this conceptualisation of the individual being the agent of poverty remained in the public psyche (Kerr & Savelsberg, 1999). The societal ideology that poverty is within the realm of individual control and responsibility, rather than being the result of systemic problems, legitimises the reduction and restructuring of the welfare state (Chenoweth, 2008). The onus of responsibility is removed from society and social practices, policies and interactions are not considered pivotal areas which need to be addressed in order to alleviate poverty and the psychological effects of it (Chenoweth, 2008).

The theory of the “culture of poverty”, developed by Lewis in 1969 (cited in Cassiman, 2005), discredits the discourse that constructs individuals living in poverty as the primary agents of their condition. This is because these individuals may have developed dependency and lack of self-reliance through intergenerational transmission (Lewis, 1967, as cited in Cassiman, 2005). Furthermore, Karl Marx (1967, as cited in Allan Hanson, 1997) argued that labour demand increases with the accumulation of wealth; however, the rate at which capital grows is faster

than the demand of labour. Consequently, unemployment results and the responsibility for poverty cannot be solely bound in the individual poor person, but is a symptom of the capitalistic economic system of free markets and labour as a commodity (Allan Hanson, 1997).

Despite these arguments against the individualisation of poverty, societal discourse still reflects a belief that individuals living in poverty are responsible for their social condition. Impoverished individuals are therefore likely to suffer psychological oppression, which is the internalised negative view that an individual has which causes them to believe that they are not deserving of equal access to societal resources (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). This internalised view is the result of oppression by other members or groups within society, which limits one’s potential for self-determination, democratic participation and distributive justice (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). Impoverished individuals are continually oppressed by societal discourse that constructs individuals living in poverty as responsible for their financial hardship, immoral and dependent, leading to social exclusion and isolation (Butterworth et al., 2006; Marston & McDonald, 2007). Furthermore, the social argument that individuals should be able to elevate themselves out of poverty, and the ignorance of structural causes for poverty, can encourage feelings of guilt, powerlessness, shame and inadequacy as individuals are ineffective in being an agent of change in their social condition (Butterworth et al., 2006; Evans, 2007; Lynch, 2005; Scott, Ciarrochi, & Deane, 2004).

Active citizenship discourse

Another significant area of poverty discourse is the societal belief that participation in the labour market equates to active citizenship (Marston, 2008). Discourse surrounding employment and work within most capitalist societies, including Australia, places a high moral value on work, placing work and productivity as being of higher importance than

leisure (Marston, 2008). During the 2010 Election campaign, Prime Minister Julia Gillard reinforced the importance of employment for societal participation, arguing that employment allows individuals to engage and contribute with their society in a more meaningful way (Gillard, 2010). Due to this moral value placed on work, employment is socially constructed as an important element of social inclusion (Garrett, 2002; Richardson & Le Grand, 2002).

Individuals who are living in poverty are often unemployed or underemployed and consequently cannot conform to the moral expectations of social citizenship and identity which are desired.

The discrimination that individuals living in poverty face by other members of society, based on the premise of the previously mentioned discourses, can further hinder people's citizenship. This is because they are excluded from access to goods and services, health care and adequate housing and education (Lynch, 2005; Misturelli & Heffernan, 2008).

Additionally, the discrimination has a negative impact on their engagement with society and their individual wellbeing (Butterworth et al., 2006). What develops is an inactive citizenship resulting from the ignorance of the morality of people in poverty by the rest of society and subsequent invisibility within the social setting (Chenoweth, 2008). This social exclusion and invisibility of poverty allows 'mainstream' Australians to ignore the reality that poverty exists within their developed nation and therefore removes the onus of responsibility from them (Garrett, 2002; Marston, 2008). The shame and stigma attached to poverty and welfare within Australia has also seen many unemployed people choosing to go "under the radar" as a means to avoid social discrimination and the negative psychological effects associated with it (Cassiman, 2005; Chenoweth, 2008).

Based on the discourse surrounding poverty prior to the recession, a particular conceptualisation of what characterised a poor individual existed within Australian society. The scope of justice concerns participation and addresses who is within society's moral

boundaries and who is not (Opotow, 1995). Those individuals or groups that find themselves within the moral boundaries are protected by society's norms, rules and values (Opotow & McClelland, 2007). The social construction of poverty, as evidenced through discourse, some of which has already been explored in this paper, has placed impoverished individuals and groups outside of the scope of justice. This exclusion from the scope of justice permits discrimination and injustice to be directed at the poor with little or no consideration for the impact that this marginalisation will have on their wellbeing (Opotow & McClelland, 2007).

Poverty discourse during the recession

The recession challenged the poverty discourses and therefore, the societal conceptualisation of what constitutes poverty, and as a result, broadened the scope of understanding surrounding the issue (Archer, 2009). Poverty could no longer be excused as being a result of individual choice or responsibility, as the recession saw many Australians, particularly those in professional middle management roles, becoming unemployed or underemployed, in a fashion that was outside of their control (Archer, 2009). Unemployment and financial hardship was a realistic possibility for members of society who did not conform to the pre-existing discourse of poverty (Archer, 2009). Due to the recession, the Australian Government, along with the broader community, could no longer ignore the existence of poverty in the nation, as it was now situated within the scope of justice (Chenoweth, 2008, p. 53). This, in itself, indicates the impact that the recession had in illuminating the presence of poverty within Australia.

With the recession came a reconfiguration of the classification of the "deserving poor" and "undeserving poor". As the scope of justice in regards to poverty widened, and more Australians felt susceptible to the condition that had for so

long been the victim of social criticism and stigma, the definition of “deserving poor” broadened to include those individuals within society who had become unemployed or underemployed as a direct result of the recession (Castillo, 2009). Likewise, those who experienced a significant change to their employment status did not conform to either the “dole bludger” or “job snob” stereotype, and their predicament could not be attributed to individual responsibility or control as the recession was affecting employment on a worldwide level (Castillo, 2009).

Poverty discourse after the recession

In Australia, the current political and social discourse of the recession argues that Australia has survived the Global Financial Crisis therefore diminishing the threat of high unemployment (Gruen, 2010). According to Edwards (2010), it was evident by February 2010 that Australia “had not only avoided recession after the global financial crisis which climaxed in the second half of 2008, but was doing quite well” (p. 359). Dr. Ken Henry, the Secretary to the Treasury, echoed this sentiment in a speech he presented in March, 2010 to the Count Financial Canberra Conference, stating that “the strength of our financial system, particularly the banking sector, has been an important factor in cushioning Australia from the impact of the global financial crisis” (Henry, 2010, p. 4). Later in his speech, Henry also said that “it is fair to say that the global financial crisis itself is now behind us. While there is a risk of further adverse shocks in global financial markets, the period of extreme dislocation has now passed” (Henry, 2010, p. 7). As far as Australia was concerned, according to the nation’s political leaders, the recession was no longer a significant concern politically, socially or financially.

Australia has been heralded by the current Treasurer, Wayne Swan, as economically expanding, despite the recession, as Australia had another 166,000 jobs (Edwards, 2010). In contrast, the member economies of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) had lost four million jobs

since the recession began (Edwards, 2010). Despite the substantial increase in unemployment during the recession, political commentators have reported that Australia had escaped the recession with minimal damage (Edwards, 2010). In January 2010, Australia’s unemployment rate had fallen (Edwards, 2010); however, it was still higher than the rate of unemployment prior to the recession (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009).

Consequences of current discourse surrounding the recession

This discourse surrounding Australia’s “survival” of the recession re-establishes the scope of justice that we have as a nation in regards to poverty. As both Henry (2010) and Edwards (2010) argue that the recession is over, those individuals who continue to be underemployed, unemployed or are in jeopardy of losing their job due to the ongoing recovery from the recession, are located outside of the collective scope of the justice. This is because, according to political and social discourse, the recession no longer exists, and therefore it does not constitute a plausible reason for individuals to be experiencing poverty. As political figures and the society at large begin to ignore the existence of the recession and the ongoing consequences of it, the boundaries surrounding what constitutes as “deserving” and “undeserving” poor are reconfigured to replicate the attitudes towards poverty prior to the recession. Australians who have been, and continue to be, affected by the recession are now socially perceived as not having a legitimate reason for living in poverty, particularly as Australia managed to “avoid the recession” (Edwards, 2010).

Tajfel’s social identity theory also plays an important role in understanding the effects of the current discourse surrounding the recession on Australian society. Tajfel (1981) states that social categorisation “is a process of bringing together social objects or events in groups which are equivalent with regard to an individual’s actions, intentions and system of beliefs” (p. 254). The transmission of different

values between groups is part of the socialisation process, and also allows for the development of in-groups and out-groups. Social identity is achieved through these values and the consequences of group membership. Tajfel (1981) defines social identity as the individual's knowledge of their group membership as well as the emotional and social value attached to that membership, which is a component of the self-concept. Current discourses surrounding poverty and the recession state that those individuals who suffer unemployment, underemployment and financial hardship due to the recession no longer have a legitimate justification for their predicament because the recession is over. Therefore these individuals find themselves falling into the "undeserving poor" category determined in pre-recession poverty discourse. Consequently, individuals within this group have been allocated a negative social identity (Tajfel, 1981) constituting low social worth, lack of ability, and isolation. This negative impact on social identity is due to the disadvantaged position, characterised by invisibility and lack of social understanding of the complex nature of the impacts of the recession, which has been applied to them through the discourse.

Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggest that one way for individuals to negotiate this negative social identity is to move to another social group. However, in order for this to occur, social mobility between groups, in this case economic categories, needs to be realistic. In terms of economic mobility, many Western societies believe that economic success is achieved through individual effort (Williams, 2009). This viewpoint is a central tenet of much of the poverty discourse that existed prior to the recession and is a fundamental component of the "American Dream" (Williams, 2009); arguably a dream that is emulated in the Australian context. However, this widely held social belief ignores the structural impairments and limitations that can hinder economic mobility, such as the recession and social policy. It further encourages a negative social identity for those individuals who have experienced or are experiencing

poverty due to the recession as their economic position is perceived to be a direct consequence of their effort (Williams, 2009).

By ignoring the implications of the recession, the experiences of those individuals affected by unemployment, underemployment and the threat of poverty are delegitimised and individuals may be left to feel socially misunderstood and excluded (Cassiman, 2005; Janlert, 2009). According to Prilleltensky and Gonick (1996):

oppression entails a state of asymmetric power relations characterized by domination, subordination, and resistance, where the dominating persons or groups exercise their power by restricting access to material resources and by implanting in the subordinated persons or groups fear or self-deprecating views about themselves (pp. 129-130).

Oppression can occur both on an external level and an internal level (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). External forces which can cause oppression, such as the political discourse arguing that the recession is over and therefore delegitimising those individuals suffering from recession-related poverty, hinder the fulfilment of self-determination, distributive justice and democratic participation (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). In turn, psychological oppression occurs when the negative societal views held towards an individual and their social identity is internalised, resulting in lowered self-worth and a sense of disentitlement to societal resources and participation (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). As a result, individuals are faced with, and consequently internalise, the discourses that communicate they are undeserving of social resources and participation, and are lazy, immoral and exploiting the efforts of society's workers (Archer, 2009; O'Connor, 2001). They begin to believe the dominant discourse about their own self-worth, with learned helplessness, disengagement from society, pessimism and an

ignorance to the need to challenge social discrimination and their disadvantaged social position (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996).

As social policy within Australia is beginning to shift back to the original conceptualisation of poverty, whereby poverty is seen as a social condition which affects those individuals who do not have a legitimate reason for being poor, Australians living in poverty find themselves socially excluded and ignored (Garrett, 2002). A social hierarchy is manifested and maintained, those living in poverty are placed at the bottom of the social structure due to the social perception that they do not contribute anything of worth to society and that they depend on other citizens for success and development (Karlberg, 2007). The ramifications of this on the psychological wellbeing for this group of Australians is severe due to the social disengagement they experience (Marston & McDonald, 2007). According to Chenoweth (2008), this creates a social polarisation in society, as there is a vast increase in inequality. Furthermore, this creates a national identity tainted with social exclusion rather than one of cohesion and inclusion (Karlberg, 2007).

The way in which a society understands a social issue, such as poverty, influences the manner in which the issue is addressed and reconciled (Allan Hanson, 1997; Marston, 2008; Wenden, 2008). Therefore, the way that society, and the institutions within it, address the issue of poverty and create strategies to alleviate poverty, is influenced by the way in which poverty is conceptualised (Marston, 2008; Misturelli & Heffernan, 2008; Wenden, 2008). As Australia returns to a view of poverty which individualises the cause of the condition and which ignores the long-lasting ramifications of the global recession, it leads to strategies that fail to understand and tackle the complex social aspects which contribute to poverty, thus exacerbating the situation (Bradshaw, 2007). Poverty resulting from the recession is no longer considered a viable explanation for lack of financial stability, and therefore anti-poverty strategies with an emphasis on individual and psychological causes

may ignore the needs of recession-impacted individuals.

Conclusion

Poverty discourse in Australia has had a history of individualising the condition of poverty, with public and social commentaries and opinions using terms like “undeserving” and “deserving” poor, “welfare dependency” and “dole bludger” to define what poverty is and who it effects. The recession, which first affected Australia in September 2008 (Castillo, 2009), saw a momentary shift away from this discourse. Instead, poverty, underemployment and unemployment were more readily recognised as a social predicaments that could affect any member of society and were outside the control of the individual (Archer, 2009). Despite this reframing of what constitutes poverty and who it can effect, the current discourse surrounding Australia’s “survival” of the recession indicates a reversion back to the previous way of conceptualising poverty, which essentially ignores the condition of poverty and its long lasting psychological and psychosocial effects.

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