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Stephen Parker

Welfare dependency and the logic of mutual obligation

Introduction

There is a vast and rapidly growing body of literature dealing with the intent, implications and other issues surrounding the controversial mutual obligation policies. Generally speaking, the literature on mutual obligation can be divided into two main strands. First, many articles examine the practical implications of the policy, delineate how it might fail to achieve its goals, exacerbate inequalities or highlight the apparent tension between the rhetoric and practice (e.g. Eardley, Saunders, & Evans 2000; McInnes 2000; Sanders 1999).

The second strand includes the examination of the historical development of current welfare policies in varying detail. Macintyre (1999), for example, identifies a change in welfare provision 'from entitlement to obligation', while Harris (2001) also tracks the changing framework of

unemployment benefits from the end of the Second World War to the present. Others (most notably Kinnear 2000 and Moss 2001) examine the general philosophical and ethical basis of mutual obligation in order to question its appropriateness.

Both approaches to the study of mutual obligation differ from the focus here.¹ Such recent literature does not investigate how the entrenched philosophical and value basis of mutual obligation is articulated or expressed in and through the policy language and rhetoric. Some articles have done this to a degree in relation to homelessness and other policies (for example, Fopp, 1995, 1996), but little has been done in relation to mutual obligation. This means that very little attention has been given to the manner in which specific meanings are embedded in the policy rhetoric itself, how such meanings are achieved, and how the language forms a coherent, 'logical' whole.

This article looks at how specific policy terms and concepts construct and frame the policy context and therefore prescribe certain policy directions. Policy language goes beyond mere words but

is embedded in a specific set of values. As Bessant observes:

Language is not simply the medium via which a simple correspondence is established between certain states of affairs in the world and the scientific 'truth' about social problems. It actively constructs the truths it purports to describe which the government must then step in and address via appropriate social policy (Bessant 2002, p.14).

The approach taken here differs from Bessant's analysis of metaphor in welfare policy rhetoric in some important respects. It has a more narrow focus, examining mutual obligation in particular rather than welfare generally. Also, it is not confined to viewing terms as metaphors. It is important to address key terms and concepts in the policy language in order to highlight how these define the problem of unemployment and related issues in specific ways which require specific policy responses. For the policy makers, such policy terms create an internally consistent system of meaning which forms the framework for mutual obligation.

Specifically, the paper analyses first how the Howard Government's concerns about alleged welfare dependence

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establishes the context of changes to be made to social security provision. By defining unemployment in terms of dependence, the stage is set for policies which seek to remedy the problems identified by the dependency framework. Second, the analysis turns to how the underlying principles of mutual obligation are defined in practice and work as a response to the notion of dependency. In other words, what follows is an analysis of the meanings policy terms assume in the context of the Government's ideological framework, and how these meanings shape the resultant policy. The aim is to understand the inner logic of mutual obligation rhetoric and how it is made consistent with the policy practice, while simultaneously exposing the poverty of such logic in order to highlight inadequacies in the policy. In the process, questions are raised such as: how is the mutuality in mutual obligation defined in practice? Is the obligation mutual? What underlying values render the seeming disparity of obligations legitimate?

Welfare dependence

The 'problem' of welfare dependence is pivotal in shaping mutual obligation. Despite being such an essential driving force of the policy, there is no explicitly stated definition of 'dependency' in the policy literature or in the rhetoric from the Federal Government (Henman 2002, p. 1). Often ambiguous or contradictory concepts lie behind the use of the term. Nonetheless, a working definition can be gleaned – with powerful consequences!

What is 'dependency'?

The term generally refers to the alleged attitudes and behaviours of welfare recipients who have come to depend upon the state for their means of

existence. But this covers all recipients, as by definition they are dependent upon income support and are not self-reliant. From the Government's perspective, however, dependency implies that recipients are not *capable* of self-reliance, not because of a lack of employment opportunities, but because they have lost the desire to work as a consequence of the nature of income support. Typically it is longer-term recipients who are purported to be in a state of dependence.

However, the perceived rise in 'dependence' is also linked to an increase in the numbers of people receiving income support. As the former Minister for Family and Community Services, Jocelyn Newman has said:

Let me give some feel for the extent of welfare dependency. While we have record levels of employment, there are now around 2.6 million people of workforce age on Government income support payments - around 1 in 5. Ten years ago, the figure was around 1.5 million people, or around 1 in 7 people (Newman 1999b, p. 4).

According to Newman (2000a, p. 2), this rise was because 'more than two-thirds of these people [were] not required to either look for work or make some other contribution to community life'. By identifying these issues, notions of dependency are linked to *all* welfare recipients. In applying the definition in this way, the Government is playing on the double meaning of dependence as both 1) simple receipt of income support and 2) a more serious 'condition' which allegedly afflicts long-term jobless people. This conflation points the way to a particular approach to welfare provision which casts the problem in terms of individual recipients.

Amplifying the alleged causes and consequences of dependency

The following quote from the former Minister for Employment and

Workplace Relations, Tony Abbott, highlights many of the Government's concerns foreshadowed above and illustrates the underlying values in the concept of dependence. He said:

In the absence of rigorous work tests, welfare benefits pitched close to the level of minimum wages eventually create a glass floor below which unemployment cannot fall. Why do some people not work? Because they do not have to. Why might a generous safety net designed to help people on the dole, coupled with wage restraint designed to boost jobs, only make unemployment worse? Because for many people working has become more trouble than it is worth. Wage restraint might indeed produce a glut of jobs but not of willing workers to fill them in the absence of either a strong work ethic or a welfare system geared to keeping people active (Abbott 2000b).

From this quote, there are three main points to be made about the alleged causes and consequences of dependence: 1) *what* is the stated cause of dependence; 2) *how* dependence is purported to be caused and 3) *how* is this assumed to affect the behaviour of recipients. These are addressed below.

First, according to the Government's scheme of welfare provision, it is the *welfare state itself* which is the main contributor of long-term unemployment and reliance on income support. Welfare dependence is said to be the product of a social security system which does not require recipients to strive for self-sufficiency through paid employment. According to Tony Abbott, '[T]he role of the welfare system in creating and sustaining unemployment has been one of the great unmentionables of Australian public policy debate' (2000b). 'In fact', Abbott stated elsewhere, 'official compassion arguably has done as much harm as good by trying to alleviate the results of poverty rather than its causes' (2001, p. 1). Thus, it is the perceived

causes of the lack of self-reliance among recipients.

Increasingly, the concept of dependency is not only applied to unemployed jobseekers (those on Newstart allowance) but to many other income support recipients of working age. The assumption is that because recipients of pensions (disability or aged, for example) and parenting allowances are not required to fulfil work tests, they are susceptible to dependence. Again, this conflates receiving income support with the notion of dependence.

The second point to be derived from Tony Abbott's quote above explains *how* traditional welfare is said to be a cause of dependence. The alleged 'harm' done by 'official compassion' is that despite employment opportunities, many people on welfare do not take up employment because 'guaranteeing the wherewithal for life can easily remove the motivation for work' (Abbott 2001, p. 2). According to this view, income support payments are set at or near the level of low paid work but do not require the skill or effort needed for employment. This, combined with high tax rates on recipients' earnings from any part-time work, does not provide any incentive to take up employment particularly when income from welfare is guaranteed. Thus the Government asserts that for many: 'working is almost more trouble than it's worth' (Abbott 2001, p. 1).

Thirdly, as a *consequence* of the lack of obligations on recipients in return for payments, there is the perception that the system is open to exploitation. The assertion made here goes beyond the language about the negative work ethic which allegedly is the result of the social security system. According to Newman, 'our entrenched culture of welfare dependency has meant that certain

members of our community are not only prepared, but feel entitled to exploit the social safety net' (1999b, p. 4). Income support which requires little of its recipients is said to foster a 'hammock mentality' and an 'entrenched entitlement mentality' whereby people come to expect 'something for nothing' because they are not required to earn the money they receive (Newman 1997, p. 2; Abbott 2000a, p. 4; Newman 1999b, p. 3). Therefore, prolonged income support is seen to not only inhibit the desire to work but increase the attachment to welfare.

The alleged consequences of dependency go beyond not wanting to work to not being *able* to work; dependency is said to deprive recipients of valuable social and work skills. As Minister Newman stated: 'Long-term dependency can have major social and economic consequences. It can lead to erosion of work skills, lower incomes, poorer health and risk of isolation from the community' (1999c, p. 6). Such recipients are said to lack work skills, responsibility, social networks, the capacity to participate in mainstream society, the desire to work and the financial incentives to move into paid work. Further, dependence is assumed to 'reduce people's opportunities to participate fully in society' resulting in 'poor skills and poor chances in the job market' (Newman 1999c, p. 6; 1997b, p. 4). They thus become less than full citizens, implying an inferior moral status. Such a definition emphasises that individual deficiencies are caused by 'permissive' welfare and thus contribute to long term unemployment (Abbott 2001, p. 4). The implication is that long term reliance on welfare renders it difficult for the 'victim' to function in modern society. In fact, according to the policy-maker's scenario, the 'victims' become dysfunctional.

Such a definition of dependence places the responsibility for unemployment on individual recipients and their alleged deficiencies. According to Government logic therefore, the definition lays the groundwork for policies which place emphasis on individual responsibility and correcting perceived behavioural deficiencies.

What does the government response need to be to counter 'dependency'?

After diagnosing the perceived faults in the welfare system – in terms of 'welfare dependency' and self-reliance – the Government prescribes specific policy solutions. Changes in the income support structure respond to the following concerns: the increase in the number of recipients; the relative lack of obligations on recipients; and the consequent alleged behavioural traits of recipients (that is, dependence). In doing so, the so-called reforms seek to address two main areas: the inadequate structure of past 'official compassion' (to use Tony Abbott's words); and individuals' responsibility for themselves.

Although these foci may seem in tension, it is the emphasis on individual responsibility which assumes prominence. The income support structure is said to be deficient because it does not do what it should, that is, foster 'a culture of self reliance' (FaCS 2000a, p. 1). In the words of the Government, reform should change the system 'from a largely passive, rigid structure that does not consistently reward work, to [a system] based on engaging people in active social and economic participation' (FaCS 2001, p. 2); assist to 'maximise peoples' capacity to improve their lives and to participate more fully in the social and economic life of their communities' (Newman 1998b, p. 4); and foster 'independence,

choice and self-reliance' (Newman 1999a, p. 3). What has been acceptable policy for decades – entitlement based income support – is diagnosed as the cause of the current problem. In other words, the underlying intent of the so-called reform is to modify the social security structure so that it increases individual responsibility and therefore overcomes dependency.

Further unpacking of mutual obligation can be achieved by taking into account the Government's definitions of what is 'mutual' and what are appropriate 'obligations'. Such definitions build upon, and converge with, the issues arising from the concept of 'welfare dependence'. The following section of the discussion reveals the internal coherence of such policies.

Mutual

The underlying assumptions of 'welfare dependence' – that is, that recipients need to be more self-reliant – inform the working definition of 'mutuality' and help to make the official rhetoric appear more consistent with the policy practice. The working definition of 'mutuality' in the context of welfare dependence can be exposed by identifying what the Government thinks it owes jobseekers and what obligations are then attributed to jobseekers. It will then be possible to illustrate how 'mutuality' appears to make sense in light of mutual obligation's philosophical framework and value base.

The Government defines mutual obligation as 'a broad set of policy initiatives based on the simple yet compelling premise that responsibility between the community and the individual flows both ways' (Newman 1999b, p. 3). This definition implies that what is provided by the state should be balanced by jobseekers 'giving something

back' to the community (Howard in Eardley *et al.* 2000, p. 5). This allegedly 'compelling premise' invokes notions of a 'social contract' and a 'two-way street' in which responsibility and obligation supposedly applies to both parties (the state and the individual). The Government defines such obligations thus:

...part of the contract the Government has with the Australian people is the principle of mutual obligation. There are two sides to this. The Government, on behalf of the community, has an obligation to help those who cannot provide for themselves. We do this by paying income support and providing other assistance. This includes employment services to help people get work.

In return, people who get income support from the Government have an obligation to tell the truth about their situation and do their very best to find work. In some cases though, people can get paid if they make a contribution to the community (Newman 1998a, p. 2).

From this statement, implications can be drawn not only about the nature and balance of the obligations in mutual obligation, but the values which underpin it and the deeper meanings which can be deduced from common policy terms. These can be addressed first by delineating what obligations the Government attributes to itself.

Expectations: the state and the individual

On the one hand, the Government assigns to itself the obligation to provide income support and other minimal services which (combined with tighter eligibility criteria and with more penalties for non-compliance) are supposed to foster self-reliance. Despite the general claim made in the quote above, an examination of the publicly available policy literature shows a general reluctance on the part of the

Government to explain *specifically* what it considers it owes to jobseekers. As indicated, the Government claims that its main obligation is to provide 'income support' and 'other assistance'. Other types of assistance, such as employment services which would seem to be very important in gaining employment, are relegated to an inferior status and usually included after the financial contribution made by the state.

For example, Centrelink has stated that the 'Australian community supports [jobseekers]...by paying income support and offering self-help facilities and referral services' (2001, p. 1). Newman has also recognised the Government's responsibility 'to provide adequate income support and other services' (2000b, p. 4). There is no real acknowledgment of the *responsibility* to provide any additional assistance which may be necessary for recipients to get work, other than referral to private agencies.

On the other hand, jobseekers (and other income support recipients) are assumed to be indebted to society because they receive 'financial assistance from taxpayers dollars' (Newman 1999a, p. 3). Prime Minister John Howard has stated that 'those in receipt of...assistance should give something back in return' (Eardley *et al.* 2000, p. 5). Similarly, Newman argued that those in receipt of income support 'should be encouraged to give something back to the community for that financial support' (1997b, p. 2). Thus, after a certain period on payments, jobseekers are obliged to participate in activities in addition to their job search requirements, the aim of which is to either increase individual jobseekers' employability or to contribute something to society (for example, part-time or 'voluntary' work). Failure to

comply may invoke penalties (breaches) including a total loss of income support for a set period.

Mutuality?

From the above, what can be said about the extent of mutuality between the two parties? It is arguable that mutual obligation is not mutual in the sense that it is *equal*; the two sides are not balanced. Yet the Government obviously believes it is equal. The questions which follow this argument would be: how is it that existing policies can be identified as 'mutual'? In other words, what underlying values render the policy rhetoric of mutuality consistent with policy practice?

The answer may be found in the way mutuality, or even equality, of responsibility is defined by the Government. In general usage, the term 'mutual' might imply a degree of equality between the two sides, a sense that what one gives and receives is *balanced* by what the other party gives and receives and that responsibility is shared *evenly*. In fact this definition is invoked by the Government in such statements as 'Mutual obligation holds that individuals have responsibilities to the community as well as the other way round. It encompasses the notion of 'give and take' which is part of every dealing worthy of the term relationship' (Abbott 2000a, p. 3).

By invoking this sense of mutuality between parties, it is made to appear as if they share responsibility equally and fairly and that the distribution of obligations is reasonable. In terms of the philosophical framework of mutual obligation, there is no tension between the rhetoric and practice and no lack of mutuality. Mutual obligation becomes 'mutual' in the Government's outlook because it addresses the perceived reasons why jobless people 'cannot' provide for

themselves: that is, because they are not encouraged to be self-sufficient.

A 'truly mutual' welfare system, in this context, involves individuals being self-reliant, with the role of the state 'reduced' to helping those in genuine need to become independent. Put differently, the distribution of obligations is accorded the status of 'mutual' because the policies seek to overcome dependence or avoid it altogether. However, this concept of mutuality is distorted as it essentially masks the *lack* of mutuality and effectively legitimises a disparity of responsibility. As will be argued below, it also camouflages the power exerted over jobseekers by the Government in imposing specific obligations.

Obligation

Having seen how the concept of mutuality works in practice, we need to analyse the function of the term 'obligation'. In such an analysis, the question which needs to be asked is: how are increased and strengthened obligations and penalties for non-compliance defended? How can they be considered fair or appropriate? In addressing such issues, other questions need to be considered, such as, where does the obligation really lie? What is the nature of such obligations? The following argument illustrates that the current distribution of obligations under mutual obligation reveals the policy's underpinning values. Again, the working definition of 'obligation' builds upon the concepts embedded in the notions of 'welfare dependence' and 'mutuality'.

Mutual obligation is said to be based on the 'premise that responsibility between the community and the individual flows both ways' (Newman 1999b, p. 3). Implicit in this premise is the assumption that the act of receiving income support generates an obligation

(Moss 2001, p. 1). That is, if a person invokes their right to welfare, they are therefore *obliged* to the providers of that support in one or more ways. People turning to the state in times of need, especially during periods of unemployment, are said to be obliged to 'give something back' to the community which supports them (Moss 2001, p. 1). If 'hard working men and women' (Newman 1999b, p. 5) subsidise unemployment payments, the argument goes, then those who 'benefit' from income support should be compelled to become self-reliant once again and overcome dependence. While on the face of it, this belief seems as compelling as any home-spun philosophy, critical analysis raises some important issues.

For example, what is there about the act of receiving unemployment or other benefits which inherently generates a particular obligation? It is an ascribed obligation, a constructed obligation, which arises from prior perspectives about the defects of previous social security arrangements in allegedly undermining values and behavioural characteristics which the Government prizes.

Second, what can be said about the *nature* of the obligations (as opposed to their distribution) imposed on both individual recipients and the state? One of the major criticisms of mutual obligation is the relative power held by recipients and the Government. On the one hand, people receiving income support must fulfil the conditions imposed on them in order to receive payment. They have no choice but to accept the rules and regulations imposed upon them by the Government or face the reduction, suspension or cancellation of their payment. On the other hand, the Government has the power to define what obligations must be fulfilled and the penalties applied for breach of those

obligations. Moreover, the Government is able to define what its *own* obligations are, to establish criteria for the fulfillment of those obligations and to set *its own* penalties for non-compliance. In reality, neither the Government, nor Centrelink, nor the private agencies which constitute the Job Network, are 'obliged' in the same way as recipients, and certainly, they do not face equivalent penalties for failure to fulfil their obligations which includes loss of livelihood. Their obligations do not carry the same weight if not fulfilled.

Thus the policy is not only a constructed 'mutual obligation' but the obligations are enforced and punitive. The power associated with the obligations is camouflaged and mollified through the language of 'mutuality' which asserts that obligations are fair. Put differently, the obligations invoked by mutual obligation, as noted by many critics, are not fairly or evenly distributed but are enforced with the clout of government regulations. A question begged here is: how can such obligations be defended? Addressing such a question involves analysing the underlying *philosophical* nature of the obligations and illustrating how obligations reveal the theoretical underpinnings of mutual obligation. Once again, this analysis builds upon the Government's definitions of 'dependence' and 'mutuality' to produce a justification for specific obligations.

How obligations are justified

The justification for obligations to which recipients are bound can be found in the underlying values of the policy. These stem from both the importance of self-reliance and the nature of dependency in the Government's philosophy. As argued above, self-reliance is itself perceived to be a virtue, a desired characteristic, an 'ought' which should



define a person's place in society. As Abbott has commented: 'a dollar earned is different from a dollar received' (2001, p. 3). To not endeavour to become self-reliant is to disadvantage the rest of society through higher welfare costs and a larger public sector. According to this view, it is therefore expected that dependent welfare recipients should become, or be obliged to become, like the ideal citizen: self-reliant, calling upon one's own resources in preference to calling upon others.

Further, because welfare dependency is said to remove both the motivation and ability of recipients to become independent it therefore becomes legitimate for the Government to impose more stringent requirements – to keep people active – and penalties for non-compliance. In the words of the Government, this is done by 'making work pay' and therefore 'making non-work not pay' (Abbott 2001, p. 4). In this context, it is considered appropriate to increase not only the number but the *force and strength* of obligations to

achieve self-reliance among recipients.

On the other side of the coin, the Government's attributed obligations to directly assist jobseekers are deliberately weakened so as discourage dependency. At the same time, the self-imposed obligation to foster self-reliance is strengthened through increasing requirements and penalties for recipients. In this sense, the Government is not 'giving' recipients concrete services, but providing the *context* in which jobless people supposedly learn to provide for themselves. The 'obligation' here is thus distinct from what would normally fall under the definition of 'being obliged' to another – that is to give to someone. The meaning of 'obligation' thus becomes distorted as it used to defend the exercise of power over those considered to lack essential and desirable characteristics.

By defining self-reliance as a preferred characteristic, policies which increase the obligation to become independent seem logically justified. According to Government rhetoric,

strengthened obligations on jobseekers are considered to correct the balance between the rights and obligations of income support recipients, a balance which has been distorted by 'unconditional welfare'. Therefore, obligations can be considered fair and 'reasonable' because they are deemed to achieve an ideal social and economic objective: self-reliance (Commonwealth of Australia 2002, p. 4).

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated how mutual obligation is constructed as a response to 'welfare dependency'. It has done this by analysing the reality created by policy rhetoric. By defining dependence as both a product of individual deficiency and of an ineffective welfare system, policies which place greater emphasis on the obligations of individual recipients while reducing the responsibility of the state, are legitimised and considered 'fair'. In doing so, the concepts behind 'dependency', 'mutual' and 'obligations' build on the presuppositions of the others to foreshadow a specific policy. As such, the language employed is greater than the sum of its parts and creates a self-legitimising discourse.

By defining the problem of unemployment in terms of the lack of obligations on recipients the policy becomes a matter of correcting the balance of what is given and what is expected. The shifting balance of obligations under mutual obligation is seen to achieve the ideal equilibrium of rights and responsibilities because it is said to place due emphasis on self-reliance. As self-reliance is considered the ideal state for citizens, then policies which emphasise it are legitimised. Obligations are mutual and appropriate if they place due emphasis on self-reliance.

However, what is asserted as a 'balance' is really an imbalance; what is asserted as parity is the disparity heavily in favour of the Government. Nonetheless, the 'imbalance' between what is received and given by recipients has been carefully constructed by the Government's rhetoric in such a way that its logic seems axiomatic. Once the imbalance has been constructed and the symptoms identified, the alleged personal and social malaise is diagnosed and the corrective becomes a punitive policy. In this way, from the recipients' perspective, 'mutual' is a ruse which distorts the nature of obligation which, in turn, is a euphemism for force despite the rhetoric of choice.

Furthermore, the focus on dependency as a result of personal failure and a deficient welfare system takes the emphasis away from other possible policy responses. By defining the problem with welfare thus, no mention is made of, for example, a failure of the market to provide suitable sustainable employment which, in turn, leads to more people relying on welfare for longer periods. By casting the problem in the language of 'dependency', the Government's masks its own values: that of individual responsibility (especially for life crises), smaller government (that is, less in the way of publicly managed labour market programs) and a belief in the infallibility of the market. As Moss notes, mutual obligation 'recasts the issue in terms of the attitudes and motivations of those affected by structural unemployment: an approach that ignores the demand side of the economy by seeing the problem as one that lies with the attitudes and dispositions of labour itself' (2001, p. 7).

Notes

- 1 The difference between Kinnear (2000) and Moss (2001) and the present paper is the analysis of *language* in revealing the philosophical content and value base of mutual obligation.

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