

## Youth and mutual obligation: discipline for the dole

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Sharon Cooper

The University of Newcastle, Australia.

edsac@alinga.newcastle.edu.au

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### Abstract

The welfare reform of the current federal government not only operates on the level of the restructuring of the labour market, but also on the level of the restructuring of the lives of those who receive benefits. Long-standing discourses about the nature of the young unemployed have always been part and parcel of governments' approaches to welfare, however, with the introduction of Mutual Obligation policies, we have seen even more emphasis placed upon the characteristics of the citizen, and the reform of the individual. This paper employs Foucault's articulation of discipline, and the operations of techniques of disciplinary power, to examine how Mutual Obligation can be seen as a form of discipline which not only uses, but also produces, constructions of individualised characteristics of the young unemployed. The analysis moves beyond showing how the relationship between public discourse and social policy influence each other in terms of this construction. Rather, it suggests that the construction lies at, and plays upon, the very heart of the level of minute details of individual existence.

### Introduction

*When one wishes to individualise the healthy, normal and law-abiding adult, it is always by asking him how much of the child he has in him, what secret madness lies within him, what fundamental crime he has dreamt of committing* (Foucault, 1977, p. 193).

There has recently emerged a body of writing concerned with the issue of new more conservative welfare policies and 'mutual obligation', and the construction of the subjects of social welfare, and citizenship. Allan (1997) outlines neo-conservative governments' arguments for restricting social welfare in terms of the way that welfare recipients are constructed: as 'de-moralised' (e.g. lacking in work ethic, energy, and initiative, or having moral weaknesses, being lazy, and irresponsible, or avoiding the responsibility of looking after themselves); as being the subjects of the discourse which replaces the language of rights with that of duties; and in terms of 'universality' where there is a real perception that many people who do not need benefits but who continue to depend upon them. The negative characteristics are also identified by Dean (1998): the unemployed citizen is perceived as having poor morale and motivation, negative attitudes to the labour market, and a life characterised by boredom, a loss of social obligation, and a real risk of becoming welfare dependent.

MacDonald (1999) writes from the rights versus obligations perspective within the context of the notion of social citizenship and new conception of what this means. She claims that the construction of the recipients of unemployment benefits are as Aconditional citizens whose rights can be withdrawn@ (p. 2). Macintyre (1999) agrees with the formation of a new relationship between the>citizen= and the State B the citizen being someone who has the right to ask for support as long as he or she gives something back in return. As part of this >new= obligation-based construction, the unemployed citizen is Aobliged to participate in practices of self-shaping, self-cultivation and self-presentation@ as consumers of the labour market (Dean, 1998, p. 92).

Bessant (2000) has examined the government=s official justifications of the Aworkfare@ scheme (as Work for the Dole schemes have commonly been known) and questions what these say about the way the government views as the causes of unemployment in Australia. She believes that the young people affected by such policies are not seen as citizens because citizenship entails being in paid work which carries with it both moral and social values, and that they are constructed in rhetoric as lacking skills and work ethic, as well as self-discipline.

These analyses go some way to explaining the construction of the young unemployed, and are therefore very useful. However, the analysis I propose to undertake here is not based upon government rationales or philosophies, but is based upon the underlying and subtle (in some cases not so subtle) forms of power that can be described as techniques of >discipline=, which have >self-discipline=as a desired effect.

Michel Foucault, in his well-known book *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison* (1977) elaborated on Adiscipline@ as a form of power which has as its main intent to train those over whom it is exercised. He describes discipline as Amethods which made meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility@ (p. 137). Foucault argues that one cannot understand the whole if one does not pay attention to the minutiae, and the understanding of discipline involves an examination of the finer details, the micro level of the functioning of power.

Such an analysis was carried out by Gore (1995) as an empirical study within and across various pedagogical sites. Her framework, built upon identifying eight distinct but interwoven techniques of disciplinary power within Foucault=s work, proved to be useful for understanding power and the effects of it within this context. Dean (1998) also advocates an understanding of the techniques of power as they apply to their target and their objective as part of understanding how the government intend to Aework the ethical lives of unemployed citizens@.

It can be shown that the current federal government=s policies for young unemployed people, characterised by their emphasis on>mutual obligation= and rules which ensure this reciprocal arrangement, can be understood as an exemplar of this form of power: these policies are constituted by techniques of disciplinary power, which have as their aim the training of young people so that they may evolve to be part of that group of >normal= adult citizens.

This paper has as its intention an analysis of the various techniques used by the current government in policies for the young unemployed, as they typify the micro level functioning of power in Australian society over a particular social group. It will use Gore=s extraction of eight distinguishable, but interwoven, techniques of disciplinary power from Foucault=s work B totalisation, classification, individualisation, distribution, regulation, surveillance, normalisation, and exclusion. While I have used this order for the purpose of demonstrating

the links between these techniques, it is important to note that their interaction is not simply in the form of a linear top-down process, rather, they serve to interactively (re)form and (re)define each other. Further, I intend to discuss how an understanding of these techniques and their interaction with each other may enable us to view the construction of young unemployed people by the government and society on an individualised level, and thus, their everyday existence as subjects of discipline and with self-discipline as a target.

## **The techniques of discipline**

### *Totalisation*

Totalisation, or the specification of collectivities, giving collective character (Gore, 1995, p. 179) is something which is at the heart of both the Mutual Obligation policies themselves and the rhetoric associated with them. John Howard's Social coalition, of which Mutual Obligation is a major part, is based upon such totalisation.

Put simply, it describes a partnership of individuals, families, businesses, government, welfare and charitable organisations, each contributing their unique resources and expertise to tackle disadvantage at its source . . . most of all, the social coalition is firmly rooted in notions of mutual obligation that those who have done well have an obligation to the less fortunate and that those who are supported by the community should give something in return (Howard, December 22, 1999).

Elsewhere throughout the government's claims, Mutual Obligation policies (especially Work for the Dole, but also in reference to gaining employment) are touted as establishing and strengthening the links that the young unemployed have with their communities and the community at large. Such sentiments clearly mark these people as having a need to be brought back into the fold. The decision to discipline is based upon this.

Thus, the totalising statements of the government construct the young unemployed as in danger of being dissociated from the community, or dissociating themselves through not giving something in return, when they should be an integral part of the mutual relationships between all sectors of it, albeit classified by another totalising statement as less fortunate.

### *Classification*

At the same time that Howard emphasises the less fortunate (that is, the young unemployed) as part of a collective, he differentiates this group from the rest of society by polarising those who have resources and those who don't. Foucault defines classification as something that hierarchizes, and here the words less fortunate do just that: they place those he refers to at the lower end of a hierarchy defined by the ownership of monetary resources.

Classification in Mutual Obligation policies and rhetoric also serves to differentiate in other ways. It marks those who do not conform to particular norms (this is subject to normalisation/exclusion which I will discuss later). The young unemployed are distinguished as a particular social group simply through their having being targeted as the primary group to which the harsher welfare rules of mutual obligation policies should apply. Even though the target group has been extended to include those up to 35 years of age, it remains clear that mutual obligation was originally manufactured as a >youth= policy (or, at least, an economic policy having >youth= as its sample population).

Two constructions are evident through this classification. Firstly, this group, identified as unemployed, and therefore not belonging to the working society, are seen as needing specific policies designed to bring them into line, which, will ultimately lead to their change in classification. Secondly, the group is identified as young and unemployed, and therefore in need of more rigorous rules than the older unemployed because they have specific characteristics (these will be discussed presently). The differentiation of the young constructs them as lacking the traits of adulthood even though they are 18 years of age and over.

Belonging to these groups, differentiated from others who do not need special policy treatment, imputes particular personal and individualised characteristics both implicitly and explicitly alluded to in policies and rhetoric. It places the group at the bottom of a hierarchy defined by wealth, employment and adult attributes. The >us= and >them= nature of such classification works to construct the individual traits of the members of these groups as different either through lack or ownership of certain attributes and qualities. As mentioned before, totalisation is at the level of society, but this also contains totalisation at the level of the group which has been differentiated from others.

### *Individualisation*

Foucault describes individualisation as the production of a describable, analysable object, or, as Gore puts it 'giving individual character to oneself or another' (1995, p. 178). Through classification, lack of self-responsibility and motivation, work-related skills and work ethic, independence, moral obligation to the community, and in some cases numeracy and literacy achievement, become individual and personal characteristics imputed to the young unemployed person through the policies and rhetoric of Mutual Obligation.

Further individualisation is found in the way that a young person is to take their own responsibility for adhering to the rules. In effect the government says that if one does not have desirable personal characteristics, and eliminate others, they are personally and individually responsible for the consequences.

Mutual obligation policies, according to official rationales, are largely designed to encourage or enforce particular desired individual characteristics in young people, while at the same time eliminating these others which are not seen as being desirable. Thus, individualisation is the very core of mutual obligation policies, and is not only part of the disciplinary process (through ascription) but also as an end result. Foucault makes it clear that the individual is both the object and effect of disciplinary power.

Through classification and individualisation, young unemployed people are then made the subject of various other forms of disciplinary power based upon the characteristics ascribed to the individual. The first, and overarching, form is distribution.

### *Distribution*

Mutual obligation policies require that those classified as young and unemployed are subject to arrangement. We can understand Foucault as defining distribution as the creation of a disciplinary space in which actions are organised with respect to both space and time. Foucault discusses how such a technique is interested in the 'genesis' of the individual. Which involves an evolution towards some fixed and stable point. On a >universal= level one can view the governing of the transition from school to work as a form of distribution which has these characteristics. However, it is also distribution applied to the particular group B the young unemployed B which serves to construct them.

Foucault writes about time-tables and programmes which manage actions and apportion them such that idle time is eliminated and useful time (which is made up of prescribed exercises and movements) is optimised. This can clearly be seen in the government's policies through: the increase in the number of jobs to be sought; the requirement that face-to-face contact be made with employers; the introduction of Work for the Dole schemes; and, even in the requirement of personally handing in forms and attending interviews with various relevant agents/agencies.

This organisation of time constructs the young unemployed person as someone who is in need of organisation B as not being responsible enough to organise themselves. But it is the imposition of activities (and more of them) that is of importance here. There has always been a strong social opinion that those who are unemployed waste their time through leisure rather than using it to find themselves a job or attending training. By increasing the amount of >useful= time the government has effectively taken away the >personal= time of the young unemployed, implying that giving time to young people to do what they want yields undesirable outcomes. Such undesirable outcomes, often articulated in general discourse, include wasting tax-payers' money, or encouraging a culture of delinquency. It is worth noting that distribution, although not specifically talked about by Foucault in this way, is evident on the level of resources. That is, the distribution of individuals is closely associated with it a distribution of public money and resources. These activities, this distribution, both involves and allows for what Gore calls the Aregulation@ of the individual.

### *Regulation*

Gore (1995, p. 180) defines regulation as Acontrolling by rule, subject to restrictions, invoking a rule, including sanction, reward, punishment@. Quite obviously, regulation is at the very core of Mutual Obligation policies, and of other welfare policies as well.

The effect of the strictly articulated rules within Mutual Obligation policies are such that the very lives of unemployed young people, if they adhere to the rules, are controlled by them through making employer contacts, filling in forms, undertaking activities, etc. They are part of the framework within which these people must live and control their own lives, and accept and allow their lives to be controlled in such a manner.

The lives of unemployed young people are subject to certain restrictions. These restrictions are placed upon their leisure time by requiring their time to be spent job seeking or training. They are also placed upon their conduct within these spheres. They are restricted from relocating to a place where job prospects are low, from giving up a job for A no good reason@, and for turning down a A perfectly good@ job offer.

The inclusion of certain sanctions and punishments within the rules of Mutual Obligation policies epitomise the technique of regulation, with penalties given for breaches of rules. These sorts of penalties are exemplary of Foucault's notion that punishment is linked to gratification, in an arrangement that separates >good= and >evil=: if the rules are broken, payment is reduced or suspended, thus affecting the quality of life of the young unemployed; whereas, if the rules are adhered to, payment will not be affected and the recipient is gratified by being able to conduct his or her life >comfortably=.

The structure of the breaching rules further serve to exemplify Foucault's view of A punishment@ as part of regulation in mutual Obligation policies B A to punish is to exercise@ (p. 180). Their corrective intent is obvious in their nature as tiered according to their incidence (harsher penalties apply for >re-offences=). It becomes highly undesirable to break the rules even once, let alone more than once.



The existence of very specific rules in Mutual Obligation policies construct the young unemployed in a very specific way: as disorganised and not to be trusted with their own actions. In short, they are characterised as having an inherent predisposition for irresponsibility and the tendency to do the >wrong= thing. Thus, the young unemployed must be carefully watched over.

### *Surveillance*

Surveillance is defined as Asupervising, closely observing, watching, threatening to watch or expecting to be watched@ (Gore, 1995, p. 169). Foucault emphasises registration and the filling in of forms (even more, Athe registration of the pathological must be highly centralised@ (p. 196)), but he also emphasises that surveillance is often carried out by more than one agent: Aits functioning is that of a network of relations from top to bottom, but also to a certain extent from bottom to top and laterally@ (p. 176).

Centrelink scrutinises fortnightly forms handed in by recipients, may verify their content by contacting employers named on the forms, and requires a doctor=s certificate should the recipient not have fulfilled requirements. Employers which the recipient has approached are required not only to sign the form themselves for verification, but are asked to call a hotline should any >non-genuine=approaches be made to them.

However it is the recipient him- or herself who is most active in their own surveillance, providing the means by which they can be watched over. They do not only expect themselves to be watched, but must in effect allow themselves to be watched over if they are to receive benefits, and they often do not know when their actions may be audited. This is reminiscent of the desired effect of Bentham=s *panopticon* which Foucault discusses in great detail: AHe who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection@ (pp. 202-3).

It is the reason for this supervision (apart from allowing the government to assess the effects of its policies) that is also very important for the recipient=s self-construction: the supervision is to make sure that the recipient is following the rules, not breaking the rules, not rorting the system. One in this position in effect must acknowledge that either they are seen to, or do, have the potential to act dishonestly. Tightened requirements are part of a framework that is designed to eliminate the possibility of recipients committing moral fraud, of being >dole cheats=, and thus imputes them with the potential and disposition to act in an immoral manner.

Surveillance allows for normalising judgements to be made, that is, to ascertain whether certain standards are or are not being met. This is >normalisation= and >exclusion=, which are the final two forms of disciplinary power to which I will now turn.

### *Normalisation and exclusion*

I will consider the techniques of normalisation and exclusion together as they are, in effect, complementary. Normalisation involves setting standards which define >normality= within the given context, whereas exclusion refers to setting limits or boundaries which define difference or deviation from the norm in the given context.

In reference to the whole of society, through totalising statements, the norm is defined as belonging to a community in which all have a role to play, and must fulfill moral and social obligations. Through comparison, which is often how normalising judgements are made

according to Foucault, the young unemployed have been constructed as being excluded from this >normal= group, thus becoming part of a separately classified group in which other norms are defined, apart from being young and unemployed.

For unemployed young people, and others required to >participate= in Mutual Obligation activities, normality is defined in a number of ways: through setting conduct standards when participating in Work for the Dole activities (Awork co-operatively@, Aapply yourself to your duties to the best of your ability@, Afollow your supervisor=s reasonable directions@, and A treat [others] with respect@ (Centrelink, 2000)); by setting minimum limits to the number of jobs or interviews to be sought; by listing those activities which one may undertake to meet the standards set for >mutual obligation=; and, in setting >acceptable= excuses for not adhering strictly to the rules.

Perhaps one of the clearest cases of normalising judgement occurs at the level of assessment of individuals in terms of their literacy and numeracy:

AA survey by the Australian bureau of Statistics showed that there are lower levels of literacy/numeracy among unemployed people than among Australians in general . . . Those selected for training will have been professionally assessed as having literacy/numeracy skills below National Reporting System Level 3.@ (Kemp, 1998).

Exclusion, then, is defined when these normalised standards are not met. For most cases, exclusion means having to forgo benefits or entitlement to benefits (>breaching=) for a period of time depending upon the level of non-conformity. In effect this is an exclusion from having the ability and the means to carry out one=s normal activities due to increased financial strain. In terms of literacy and numeracy, though, exclusion means being classified as part of another group and given special treatment which has as its ideal to eliminate the deficiencies and make normal (that is, the bring them to the level of AAustralians in general@).

## Conclusion

As I have intended to demonstrate, Foucault=s notions of the micro-level techniques of disciplinary power are readily applicable to the current federal government=s Mutual Obligation policies for the young unemployed. In effect, Mutual Obligation *is* discipline. While it is true that existing constructions of >youth= and unemployed >youth= determine these techniques of discipline, the reverse is also true. The disciplinary power not only perpetuates current constructions, but has as its purpose the development of new constructions. As Foucault maintains, power is not necessarily repressive: it can be productive.

The techniques are interwoven forming a complex array of mechanisms which define, play upon, and redefine the individual. From the specification of society as a coalition, and classifying the groups which make up this coalition, individual characteristics are imputed to the young unemployed, mechanisms (forms of discipline) are put into place based upon these and to correct them in order to create desired characteristics.

The construction of the young unemployed (as lacking skills, work ethic, self-regulation and other social and moral values) shown through the above analysis, that is, through the very existence of these techniques of discipline, are not surprising nor are they new. But it is the level upon which they work that is of interest here. They are unfortunate to have no resources, to belong to a social group which is at the lower end of the social hierarchy, but it is at an individual level that faults and deficits are imputed through the vision of the normal, adult, working citizen. This analysis has the intention of going beyond showing how the

relationship between public discourse and social policy influence each other in terms of this construction, because the construction goes to the very heart of the level of the minute details of individual existence.

Guidance and organisation are seen to be required not only from the level of the State, but, more importantly, on the level of the self, as Dean (1998) also claims. The rules and regulations, the need to be constantly watched over (and allow oneself to be watched over), are there because a lack of >normal= adult/citizen characteristics translates to a childlike irresponsibility, inherent weakness, and an innate tendency to >misbehave=.

Thus, punishments are built into the framework B the archetypal form of discipline used to bring children into line. Like the classic form of child discipline, exclusion (from other social groups, from economic assistance) is used to teach the lesson that one must conform and allow others to enforce the rules in order to become included. This exclusion is also reminiscent of a parental warning: Aif you don=t do your chores and appreciate what we do for you, you can=t have your pocket money@.

The chores are exercises designed to instill particular characteristics, eliminating the existence and the possibility of others which upset the order of the totality. They are meant to enforce the evolution of that normal, adult, working citizen who needs little discipline, because they are able to manage themselves within the established frameworks of the >normal=. Through classification and individualisation, these processes work with the aim to normalise and to totalise.

For the young unemployed a discussion about the fairness of imputing age-old, generalised, and largely negative characteristics to them, and acting upon them, is of little consequence. By totalising and classifying, the individual characteristics are brought into play whether or not they actually do exist at an individual level. Thus their actual existence, or lack of it, does not affect the existence of the disciplinary power: a young job seeker who can manage their own time and act upon their own initiative must still come under the disciplinary power that enforces time management and self-responsibility. That power, by its very existence, by managing, regulating and watching over the individual characteristics, in effect brings them into existence. They exist because the young unemployed must live and move within the framework of their existence.



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