Exploring what the Notion of 'Lived Experience' Offers for Social Policy Analysis

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Abstract

In this article, we suggest that social policy may be on the cusp of a large-scale adoption of the notion of lived experience. However, within social policy and allied disciplines, the growing use of the term 'lived experience' is unaccompanied by discussion of what it may mean or imply. We argue that now is a good time to consider what this term could mean for social policy analysis. The peculiarities of Anglo-centric nature of the broader term 'experience' is explored, before we identify and discuss several roots from which understandings of 'lived experience' as a concept and a research strategy have grown; namely phenomenology, feminist writing and ethnography. Drawing on multiple historical and contemporary international literatures, we identify a set of dilemmas and propositions around: assumed authenticity, questioning taken-for-grantedness, intercorporeality, embodied subjectivity; political strategies of recognition, risks of essentialising, and immediacy of unique personal experiences versus inscription of discourse. We argue that lived experience can inform sharp critique and offer an innovative window on aspects of the 'shared typical'. Our central intention is to encourage and frame debate over what lived experience could mean theoretically and methodologically within social policy contexts and what the implications may be for its continued use.

Introduction

'Lived experience' is an increasingly popular term amongst social policy scholars. It has been adopted in a range of studies, for example to: represent the perspectives of young fathers over time (Neale, 2016; Neale *et al.*, 2015); understand climate change (Abbot, 2012; 2014a/b); explore unemployment (Anaf *et al.*, 2012); debunk popular anti-welfare myths, and give voice to unemployed and disabled benefit claimants and food-bank users (Garthwaite, 2015; 2016; Patrick, 2014; 2016a; 2016b; 2017; Wright, 2016). 'Lived experience' is also growing in popular appeal (Hoerger, 2016) and in the 'real world' of social policy. It has been used in the third sector (Croucher, 2017; Hudson-Sharp *et al.*, 2016; Basset *et al.*, 2010; Elliot, 2016), by NHS trusts (for example in 'Lived Experience Panels') and the Scottish Government (2017, 'Social Security Experience Panels') to frame user involvement in service improvement and for 'engaging closely with citizens to design effective, compassionate policies' (Irvine, 2016: 23-24). However, there is a strong tendency for the term 'lived experience' to be used with little or no clarification about what it might mean or imply.

In our own research (McIntosh, 2003a/b; Wright, 2016), we have found the idea of lived experience both intuitive and useful, but have become increasingly perplexed by its potential to seem vacuous or contradictory – what is any experience if it is not lived? This prompted us to explore its origins and applications in greater depth to appreciate the concept afresh, with the intention of enriching understandings and reflecting on what 'lived experience' could mean for social policy analysis. We began with wide-ranging purposive literature searches to answer the questions: what is 'lived experience'; how has it been used in the social policy literature; where does it come from; and in which related contexts has it developed? We read closely the existing 'lived experience' social policy literature. Faced with an enormity of possibilities, we then proceeded to read selections of literature that we identified as addressing 'lived experience' or 'policy' and 'experience', from linguistics, philosophy, history, health, interpretivist political science, sociology and ethnography. We then focused on three bodies of work that emerged as offering the most fruitful insights to social policy concerns. Phenomenology was the essential reference point, given its long and clear association with 'lived experience'; feminist writing addressed concerns about oppression, voice and critical purpose; and the ethnography literature was included because of its methodological

connection with 'lived experience'. These international and interdisciplinary literatures raised further questions that inspired us to make new connections with selected readings from sociology and cultural theory that we felt crystallised debates or offered potential routes forward.

Before exploring what adding the 'lived' prefix to 'experience' might signify or propose, we reflect on a linguistic issue – the centrality of the broader concept of 'experience' within Anglophone academic endeavour. We then discuss the development and use of 'lived experience' within phenomenology, feminist writing and ethnography, which represent existing contexts that much contemporary usage of the term has become largely detached from, before considering the extent to which lived experience can speak beyond the individual. Our intention is less to do with providing our own precise definitions of lived experience, or prescriptions about its use, and more to do with opening deliberative space to explore new conceptual and methodological possibilities for social policy and related disciplines.

Interrogating 'experience': a 'characteristically Anglo perspective'?

It would be uncontroversial to argue that social policy research is centrally concerned with investigating and representing forms of experience – for example 30 per cent of abstracts for the 2017 *SPA Conference* involved research on 'experience'. Notably, the term 'experience' operates at a powerful intuitive level; we sense what is being referred to without really having to explain it. Something of that sentiment was conveyed over 40 years ago, by Raymond Williams (1983 [1976]) when he noted that:

> Experience… is the fullest, most open, most active kind of consciousness, and it includes feeling as well as thought… the general usefulness of experience is so widely recognized that it is difficult to know who would want to challenge it while it [permits] radically different conclusions to be drawn from diversely gathered and interpreted observations (127).

It is thus crucial for our subsequent discussion of lived experience to note the deep cultural presence of the term 'experience' in the English language as a clue to its taken-for-

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grantedness. In her revealing study of three English words '*Experience*, *Evidence and Sense'*, Wierzbicka (2010) echoes Williams' comment above by emphasising the centrality of the experience in Anglo 'thought world[s]' and culture:

> To put it bluntly, to understand Anglo culture and to see it in a historical comparative perspective, we need to understand the meanings, the history, and the cultural underpinnings of the English word *experience*. (30)

The importance of the word experience in the English language goes some way to explaining the intuitive, and culturally shared, force of the term and why it is routinely employed in such a prominent way with little explication – as Williams (1983: 127) says 'it is difficult to know who would want to challenge it'. Wierzbicka further notes:

> The word *experience* plays a vital role in English speakers' ways of thinking and provides a prism through which they interpret the world. While its range of use is broad and includes a number of distinct senses, several of these senses have a common theme that reflects a characteristically Anglo perspective on the world and on human life. This is why the word *experience* is often untranslatable (without distortion) into other languages, even European languages (2010: 31, emphasis in the original).

This deep cultural presence can also have the effect of giving experience an authenticity that can be assumed rather than justified. Consequently, tapping into people's experience can give a researcher a powerful sense of gaining direct access to a solid base of pure knowledge. This assumption appears to have a heavy influence on the ways in which the notion of '*lived* experience' is applied. As Scott puts it, 'What could be truer … than a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through?' (1992: 24).

Reporting that it is based on experience is praised as the best possible source of knowledge about what happens in the world – a *limited* source but the most reliable of all. Wierzbicka suggests that one does not think like this in other languages (2010: 33). In this sense, appeals to experience can give the impression of foundationalism. For Scott (1992), however,

'experience' is not to be assumed but requires explanation when experience becomes the bedrock upon which explanation is built:

> Questions about the constructed nature of experience, how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured – about language (or discourse) and history – are left aside (25).

Essentially, Scott (*ibid*.) argues that we need to attend to the historical processes that produce experiences and notes that:

> It is not individuals who have experiences, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which is produced'. (25)

Below we will pick up on the implications of this for social policy.

Situating 'lived experience'

Despite our caution surrounding definitions of lived experience, it may useful to begin with a broad description that would be understood as faithful to its general usage:

> [lived experience involves] representation and understanding of a researcher or research subject's human experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence one's perception of knowledge. [… it] responds not only to people's experiences, but also to how people live through and respond to those experiences. […] Lived experience seeks to understand the distinctions between lives and experiences and tries to understand why some experiences are privileged over others (Boylorn, 2008: 490).

Within social policy, lived experience has been deployed in several research contexts to emphasise the worth of subjective experiences to empirical inquiry and the importance of agency (Neale, 2018; Wright, 2016). For Neale (2016; *et al.*, 2015) and Patrick (2014; 2016a; 2016b) there has been a close association between the use of Qualitative Longitudinal

Research methods and lived experience. These studies emphasise the 'lived' aspect of lived experience, in the sense of *living through* change and continuity in life circumstances and trajectories to capture subjective states as they unfold over time (Edwards and Irwin, 2010; Neale *et al.*, 2012). Lived experiences are especially relevant where they are shaped and mediated by policies, policy-related discourses and the practices of front-line welfare agencies. The more broadly-defined ebb and flow of experience has been of less interest to social policy researchers than traditional disciplinary concerns such as poverty, transitions on and off social security benefits and marginalisation.

This portrayal of lived experience offers valuable insight. However, 'lived experience' remains largely intuitive in its appeal to a social policy audience. Emergent use of 'lived experience' in the social policy literature tends to pick it up as a free-floating notion, untethered from the theoretical and methodological contexts in which it originated, has been deployed and critiqued. Of course, 'lived experience' is an indeterminate construct that continues to evolve in different ways in parallel literatures. Thus we are not arguing that allied disciplines have the definitive say on what 'lived experience' means, rather, we argue that social policy research can be enriched by drawing from a set of new insights that have not, until now, featured in debate. To illustrate some of what is not being said about the pre-existing connotations of 'lived experience', we examine three loose and inter-related traditions that have regularly been concerned with 'lived experience': phenomenology, versions of feminism and ethnographic approaches.

Phenomenology and lived experience

The closest association that the term lived experience has is with the phenomenological tradition (Mapp, 2008; van Mannen, 2014 and 2015). As Burch (1990: 132) puts it, '[t]he locus of phenomenological reflection, its beginning and end, is the intelligibility of lived experience'. Indeed, the association is so close that saying that the focus of the research is on lived experience can be a byword for it being 'phenomenological'. Phenomenology is most closely associated as a philosophical movement with Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). It stood in contrast to positivistic approaches and was centrally concerned with questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and describing phenomena as they manifest themselves in an intentional manner in and through the consciousness of the experiencer (Moran, 2000). It

was viewed fundamentally as a radical, and critical, way of doing philosophy that would 'return to … lived human experience in all its richness' (Moran, 2000: 5). For van Manen (2015: 9), phenomenology is concerned with a critical understanding of the world 'as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it', with the aim of 'gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences'. In short, to get back to 'things themselves' by setting aside the clutter of our familiar acceptance of the world we inhabit and by 'throwing suspicion on everyday experiences' (Crotty, 1998: 81).

Such basic tenets were then taken in a range of influential directions by philosophical luminaries including Sartre ([1943] 2003), Heidegger ([1953] 2010), Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 1962) and Levinas ([1961] 1991), leaving us with a rich and imposing body of work. Caelli points out, there is no single or straight-forward source of truth about what 'lived experience' might mean:

'[I]n undertaking a phenomenological project […] researchers soon find out that […] there exist few sources that offer concrete directions, in spite of the extraordinarily voluminous writings about phenomenology that exist' (2001: 275).

However, Paley (2017) takes van Manen (2015), and a wide range of 'phenomenological' writers generally (Lindseth and Norberg, 2004; Mapp, 2008; Pascal *et al*., 2010; Finch, 2004; Finlay, 2011), to task for deploying 'lived experience' without further comment or elaboration, as being essentially axiomatic. Paley (2017) then goes on to argue convincingly that in practice most studies that purport to be 'phenomenological' in approach do little other than follow an established convention of referencing some of the big hitters in the phenomenological tradition, claim to be uncovering lived experience (which often features in the title), and then move on to outline what is an otherwise conventional small-scale qualitative approach involving 'in-depth' interviews. Paley's target is nursing and health-related studies, but his critique of 'phenomenological qualitative research' has wider currency. This critique might be taken as an endorsement of the prevailing tendency for social policy research to refer to 'lived experience' without the empty appropriation of the 'phenomenology' label. However, we believe that the phenomenological tradition does offer

insights that might usefully stimulate ongoing debate for social policy research, particularly in relation to method, subjectivity and individuality.

In an influential text, Gallagher and Zahavi (2012) outline their understanding of a phenomenological method and, in doing so, dismiss the idea that it involves mystical introspection:

> We should [...] not commit the mistake of interpreting the notion of experience in purely mentalistic terms, as if it were something that happened in a pure mental space. (2012: 25)

Phenomenology is fundamentally rooted in the description, analysis and interpretation of lived experience. A key step to achieving this is the suspension of the 'natural attitude' via a procedure Husserl named the 'epoche'. This is not a radical scepticism about the existence of the world as such but involves a change of attitude towards the reality we routinely encounter, one which puts aside 'the naivety of simply taking the world for granted, thereby ignoring the contribution of consciousness' (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2012: 25). Again, this does not involve a turn 'inwards' but starts from the world in which we live and how it appears to us. Capturing the invariant structures of experiences also leads us away from an overly individualised understanding of experience – even if our 'natural' mode of experiencing is one which is egocentric and embodied. Key aspects of our experience of phenomena can be shared and compared with others, another methodological tool described as 'intersubjective corroboration' (*ibid*.).

It is worth noting Crotty's (1998:83) comments on what he sees as the diminishing of the critical spirit of phenomenology as it was modified and accommodated in North America, where research approaches labelled 'phenomenological' operate within prevailing cultural norms and do not attempt to lift the analysis out of the natural attitude. As he says:

> What has emerged under the rubric of 'phenomenology' is a quite single-minded effort to identify, understand, describe and maintain the subjective experiences of the respondents. It is [...] expressly uncritical. There is much talk of 'putting oneself in the

place of the other' […] [but] research of this kind emerges as an exploration, via personal experiences, of prevailing cultural understandings.

However, this criticism does not apply uniformly. For example, Trigg's (2012, 2017) critical phenomenological research provides illuminating analyses of place, memory and anxiety. This type of more avowedly phenomenological approach can offer inspiration to social policy researchers.

Feminism and lived experience

Discussion of 'lived experience' has also developed within the field of feminist phenomenology since the 1930s and 1940s (Heinämaa and Rodemeyer, 2010), and it is here, we believe, that many of the more illuminating insights from phenomenology have found an application that can resonate with social policy concerns and issues. The foundational feminist theorising of Simone de Beauvoir ([1949] 2010) and Edith Stein ([1932-33] 1996), called for sexual difference to be recognised as women's embodied experience and consciousness. Beauvoir's approach drew on Husserl's distinction between 'bodies as objects for (allegedly) detached scrutiny or investigation (*Körper*) and bodies as we 'live' them as sites of embodied subjectivity (*Leib*) (Kruks, 2014: 76). Phenomenology by this reading offered some feminists:

> access to significant registers of women's lives, to embodied and affective ways of knowing, judging and acting that cannot be grasped by discourse analysis or by other objectivising approaches to 'experience'. (Kruks, 2014: 90).

Concerns with 'the lived experience of the gendered subject' (Heinämaa and Rodemeyer, 2010: 7) became centrally about 'making the invisible visible' and 'giving voice' as a political project. During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a great deal of collective momentum behind the objective of 'bringing to voice and sharing of women's experiences as key to developing "sisterhood" and to building women's collective resistance to their subordination' (Kruks, 2014: 75). However, this was challenged in the 1990s by growing support for the position that:

> 'Women's experience' de facto stood for the experiences of only a certain subgroup of privileged (white, middle class, heterosexual) women. Additionally, poststructuralist feminists began to insist on the … essentialising nature of the unified identity claims: the appeal to experience was increasingly dismissed as both politically dangerous and methodologically naive. (*ibid*.).

Young (2005) argues that feminism need not be constrained by discursive poststructuralism, which objects to the use of 'experience' in feminist history as being essentialist and a form of 'incontestable evidence' (Scott, 1992). Kruks (2014: 85) argues that 'the body is not *only* a text or a site of discursive inscription […] it is the site of both one's lived experience and one's particular style of acting, and of expressing and communicating who one is' and that we can 'apprehend experience from the point of view of a subject that is also constituted' (*ibid*., 84).

The point is, as Smith puts it, to begin research from 'where we are actually located, embodied, in the local historicity and particularities of our lived worlds' (Smith, 1987: 8). Doing so can legitimise discussion of aspects of life and identities that are widely regarded as low status, inferior, deviant or simply unworthy of discussion. Researching lived experience can, therefore, signify a strategy of recognition that is attentive to feelings, bodily states, interactions and identities that tend to be devalued or ignored. In this sense, lived experience can be invoked as a shorthand for empathy, conferring respect and esteem.

Beauvoir (2010 [1949]), for example, began not with assumed social structures, but by assembling narratives based on the detail of her own personal lived experience and by representing the voices of other women, to identify commonalities in everyday interaction and self-reflection. Despite the intervening generations of social change, it remains easy to observe fundamental differences between what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman. For example, it could be argued that accounts of 'everyday sexism' (Bates, 2014; Solnit, 2014) are very much about women's embodied encounters, where a core dimension of 'being-in-the-world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) is to inhabit a sexed body (Young, 2005).

Feminists continue to produce thoughtful theoretical and empirical work that values understandings of embodied gendered 'lived experiences' (Fisher and Embree, 2000;

Heinämaa and Rodemeyer, 2010; Kruks, 2001; Olkowski and Weiss, 2006). Perhaps the most important contribution of the feminist literature is to put lived experience to a hopeful purpose, because 'by unveiling what is habitual, it also reveals our agency to reconfigure it' (Kruks, 2014: 87). Here there is an affinity with social policy traditions that seek to animate inequalities and highlight disadvantages, rather than simply documenting these as abstract or empirical processes.

Ethnography and lived experience: 'this elusive stuff of feeling and sensation'
Ethnographic methods have a long lineage going back to anthropology and developed together through sociological debates relating to, amongst other things, phenomenology and symbolic interactionism (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Prus, 1996; Schutz, 1988). Traditionally, ethnographic methods were rarely used for social policy analysis, but have become more popular (Garthwaite, 2016; Wright, 2003). Ethnography – albeit without the focus on lived experience – has also been promoted as part of a parallel 'interpretive' turn in North American and European political science for the study of policy processes (Bevir and Rhodes, 2012; Gains, 2011; Rhodes and Bevir, 2015; Rhodes, 2011) and to understand experience as evidence for policy making (Rhodes and Fleming, 2018).

The goal of ethnography is 'to achieve intimate familiarity with one's subject matter' to develop theory 'sensitive to the interpretive and interactive features of human group life' (Prus, 1996: 2). It is here that the notion of lived experience can be situated. As Becker suggests:

> Some representations of society aim to give users a sense of what the lives and experiences of the people and organisations described are like. […] to go beyond reporting on regularities and patterns of behaviour, statements of social rules and norms ... They want the reader or viewer to experience what it would be like to be in those situations themselves as participants. […] Representations of 'lived experience' – this elusive stuff of feeling and sensation – may be based on very close observation, on detailed interviews, or on access to such privileged documents as letters or diaries. (2007: 102)

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For social policy, researching lived experience using ethnographic methodologies can provide a way to understand shared meanings over how sense is made of social and public policies (Yanow, 2000). A more politicised aim would be to create accurate depictions that can have a sharp critical edge and wield a measure of transformative power, not least of all because '[e]thnography like art is always political' (Denzin, 1996: 512). Documenting 'the social practices and everyday lives of people most deeply affected' by policies can cast some light on the forces behind the immediate or seemingly self-evident 'givens' of policy-related interactions (Stack, 1997: 191). Ethnography provides evidence 'to create social policies that respect the variety of human experiences' (*ibid.*) and is then seen to be an ideal technique for investigating 'the concrete practices through which a policy is enforced in everyday life' (Dubois, 2009: 222). However, there is also a question about who decides how things 'really are'? Ethnography emphasises the grounding of research findings in 'fidelity to the phenomena under study' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 7), but:

> many contemporary methodologists seem to want it both ways. They seem to claim simultaneously that knowledge is relativistic and perspectival, and that their approach gives more direct access to the real phenomena of 'lived experience' (Atkinson and Housley, 2003: 141).

Denzin (1996: 83), as a prominent advocate of investigating lived experience ethnographically, is keen to ensure that 'the person is fused with the everyday'. However, he is sceptical of 'realism writ large – the attempt to accurately reproduce a real, external world of objects and to accurately map and represent that world with a high degree of verisimilitude' (*ibid*. 93). Instead, he suggests innovative methods such as ethnodrama and theatrical performance to highlight the moral and social construction of life worlds from multiple perspectives. Similarly, Ellis and Flaherty (1992: 1) resist the temptation to appeal to a singular truth and instead equate subjectivity with 'human lived experience and the physical, political and historical context of that experience'. They advocate autoethnography aimed at understanding how 'one's sense of self is conditioned by the peculiarities of time, place, and activity' (*ibid.*, 9), including 'political and cultural forces that condition emotional experience' (*ibid.,* 3). Within the ethnographic literature, those committed to investigating lived experience emphasise detailed enquiry, attentive listening and immersive empathy. This

is related to an expectation that researchers assemble textured accounts from a creative range of intensive methods. This gives food for thought to social policy researchers who might aim to create narratives or performances brought to life by observations of the fine-grain of the situations under investigation, that consider the particularities of context, are sensitive to the nuances of place, and take seriously the task of appreciating the self of the research subject and the reflexive self of the researcher. Next, we consider the extent to which an appeal to lived experience necessarily implies a focus on the individual.

Individuality and the shared typical – towards a 'structure of feeling'?

One of the challenges in capturing the subtleties of lived experience is that, on the face of it, it seems to speak to a set of sensations that are wholly individualised; part of the timeless 'other minds' problem, lacking accessibility to and by others. As Bruner says:

> We can only experience our own life, what is received by our own consciousness. We can never know completely another's experiences, even though we may have many clues and make inferences all the time. (1986: 5)

Emphasising an experience that is 'lived' immediately puts the focus on an experience that is highly individual or unique. This of course poses difficulties for generating generalisable accounts based on lived experience. It is possible that, whilst establishing knowledge claims based on experience, wider social structures and narratives that shape, or even cause, disadvantage, disempowerment and oppression are moved further to the background, hidden from analytical gaze (Scott, 1992). However, recent social policy writing that has sought to foreground 'lived experience' actually seeks to do the opposite of this. Garthwaite (2014; 2016), Patrick (2014; 2017) and Wright (2016) contrast the lived experience of benefit recipients with inaccurate policy narratives and inappropriate policy responses.

The extent to which our own lived experience is truly individual, not based in a commonality of experience and cut off from the possibility of the understanding of others, can be exaggerated. Such an individualised view can of course be seen as a product of a particular socio-economic and cultural formation. As Abrahams (1986) suggests:

> Because our individual experiences are so central to the ways in which we put together a sense of our own identity ... [we] do everything we can to hold on to our sense of uniqueness (50).

This is an intractable problem for social researchers, one of moving from the specific to the generalisable, the idiographic to the nomothetic (Mancias, 2006). But our own 'experience' tells us that experiences have elements of commonality that may allow them to be shared, and perhaps learned from. Abrahams puts it more pointedly, when he states that: 'experience tells us that what happens to us is never so original, especially as we must discuss it' (1986: 50). This being the case, then our experiences can be rooted in particular prevailing forms and trends. As Highmore puts it: '[I]f experience is the material out of which a life is fashioned, this experience is also profoundly historical' (2011: 42). Wilhelm Dilthey [1833-1911] suggested we could transcend the 'narrow sphere of experience by interpreting *expressions*' (quoted in Bruner, 1986: 5, emphasis added). This leads us into the murky waters of 'interpretation' and the methodology of hermeneutics, but his notion of 'expressions' can offer a more pragmatic route. Expressions, as discussed by Dilthey, can include representations, images, performances and texts. As Highmore points out:

> What we can experience is also determined by the cultural forms that allow it to find expression … [and] must include the very cultural material of representation as it is lived out, in performances, in action, in everyday life (2011: 42).

For Bruner (1986:6), the relationship between experience and its expression is complex and problematic '[o]nly a naïve positivist would believe that expressions are equivalent to reality; and we recognize in everyday life the gap between experience and its symbolic manifestation in expression'. However, expressions can be usefully understood as 'encapsulations of the experience of others [and] crystallized secretions of once living human experience' (*ibid.*). Expressions can be found in the:

> Dominant narratives of a historical era, important rituals and festivals, and classic works of art [which] define and illuminate inner experience. ... In a life history … the

> distinction is between life as lived (reality), life as experienced (experience), and life as told (expression) (Bruner, 1986: 5-6).

So, perhaps, we can understand lived experience as the stuff of mediation between intersubjective experiences and specific historical/temporal locations. Lived experience is rooted in the everyday and the routine and gives it that particular inflection, unstated but inferable from the writings above. Thus, forms of lived experience can be usefully understood as involving clusters of commonality and shared intersubjective experiences. These are not so unique and individualised as to be out of the reach of a social policy researcher and can form a basis from where we can find recurring patterns and typical forms of behaviour and concerns (Prus, 1996; Schutz, 1988). Abrahams (1986) notes that the flexibility inherent in the word experience can combine and capture the 'ordinary' and the 'extraordinary'. As Abrahams (1986) says, 'so much of life is already there, enshrined in its circle of meaning as it is used in the vernacular':

> Experiences happen to individuals and are therefore sometimes to be regarded as idiosyncratic; but these very same occurrences might, under other circumstances, be usefully regarded as typical (49).

It is this 'typicality' that can form the basis of an approach that can compare and contrast the lived experience of a range of individuals who are ostensibly, comparably, in a similar situation. For example, commonalities in the experience of receiving benefits and living in poverty, fear of losing entitlement, the strain of job search and the urge to emphasise distance from undeserving claimants can be observed in and between dramatised accounts (e.g. the film '*I Daniel Blake*') and research participants in studies of particular times and places. For example, several researchers (Charlesworth, 2000; Fletcher *et al.*, 2016; Garthwaite, 2014; Patrick, 2017; Wright, 2003), in separate studies, identify what Kingfisher (1996) labelled as 'bad-people-exist-but-I'm-not-one-of-them' in her study of lone mothers in the US:

> Jacqui distinguished herself from others by stating that 'some of them on benefits they have cars, holidays, all sorts'. (Garthwaite, 2014: 793)

> I'm aware of people out there who don't want to work, who, you know, abuse the system. (lone mother, Fletcher, *et al.,* 2016: 178)

The consistency of these accounts suggests that being out of work and claiming benefits holds specific subjective interpretations that can be considered as the 'shared typical'. Decades ago, C. Wright Mills (1940) made a similar point about 'situated actions and vocabularies of motive'. Although the focus is on the giving of 'motives' for particular social actions, the location of the explanation, Mills argues, is not [wholly] to be found in the individual but more the:

> situation that an individual[s] may find themselves in; it keeps clearly in mind that both motives and actions very often originate not from within [individuals] but from the situation that individuals find themselves (906).

For Mills, 'typical constellations of motives' can be formed at particular historical moments that individuals can draw upon and articulate in such a way that they can show consistencies and recurrent themes, as in the example of benefit receipt, above. For Mills, this does not represent drilling down into some truly authentic and prior experiences – '[t]here is no way to plumb behind verbalisation' – but, he suggests:

> There is an empirical way in which we can guide and limit, in given historical situations, investigations of motives … by the construction of typical vocabularies of motive that are extant in types of situations and actions. […] Rather than interpreting actions and language as external manifestations of subjective and deeper lying elements in individuals, the research task is the locating of particular types of action within typical frames of normative actions and socially situated clusters of motive' (1940: 910-913).

Raymond Williams (1961) can also usefully figure once more via his concept of 'structures of feeling'. This concept involves tapping into a set of experiences common at a particular time or place, not reducible solely to an individual; 'social experiences in solution':

> For here we find a particular sense of life, a particular community of experience hardly needing expression, through which the characteristics of our way of life that an external analyst could describe are in some way passed, giving them a particular and characteristic colour. We are usually most aware of this when we notice the contrasts between generations, who never talk quite the 'same language'. […] The term I would suggest to describe it is *structure of feeling* (48, emphasis in original).

This presents the prospect of social policy research that can discern a 'structure of feeling' across different communities or groups (for example benefit claimants), and how these manifest in talk, behaviour and actions. Lived experiences link to cultural changes relating to understandings of social security and welfare, people on the dole, unemployed, claimants, benefit cheats, etc. (Wright, 2016).

In methodological terms, uncovering lived experience as a typicality and/or a 'structure of feeling', would imply augmenting in-depth interviewing with diaries, video and longitudinal ethnographic techniques (Neale, 2018). For Prus (1996), the closely related notion of intersubjectivity can only be accessed via ethnography and perhaps this may be the most powerful way to tap into an *anthropology of experience*, to borrow the title of Turner and Bruner's (1986) edited collection.

Another methodological option is auto-ethnography, rarely utilised in social policy research, as a route to offer insight and scope for discipline-specific innovation, either as a sole research strategy or in combination with other researchers (combined/multiple auto-ethnographies) or other methods, e.g. interviewing or observation (Ellis, 1991). Social policy researchers have lived experiences as users of health and social services that are relevant to the topics they write about. Many more have lived experiences as policy advisors, or as board members, directors or advisors for local authorities or charities, e.g. housing associations, anti-poverty charities, or environmental campaigns, or are involved in e.g. political parties or campaigns, welfare rights advice, government research or food-bank volunteering. Writing auto-ethnographically about these aspects of our own lives is one way in which lived experience can be explored at a deep level. It is perhaps the only possibility for documenting internal realisations and reflections on intersubjective interaction. Even then, it only offers one

perspective on processes that inherently involve others. Although in its purest form, lived experience research seeks immediacy, gaining insight into anyone's experience but one's own is always going to involve discussion of past events, mediated by memory and cognitive distance. Social policy researchers, with appropriate caveats, could assemble accounts that draw on their own experiences of the fields that they are researching, e.g. as welfare-to-work advisers (Kaufman, 2018). Although auto-ethnography raises ethical issues, these are surmountable. However, a potential pitfall of auto-ethnography is the criticism levelled at Beauvoir (1949), that it risks favouring the perspectives of the author-as-researcher, which may be privileged by, for example, class position.

Conclusion

In this article, we have considered the growing interest in the notion of 'lived experience' in social policy. In this sphere it has been associated with Qualitative Longitudinal Research, with a distinctive temporal dimension of 'living through' (Neale, 2016) change and continuity and has offered insight into how agency is exercised over time, in relation to policies, discourses and welfare services. We also acknowledged that, in social policy as well as related disciplines, 'lived experience' is used as a compelling basis of knowledge or form of evidence, which is usually invoked without exploration or clarification about what the term itself might mean or imply. We have, therefore, explored some of its origins and applications in greater depth. In doing this, we have observed that social policy as a discipline maintains an epistemological predilection for empiricism that foregrounds experiential ways of knowing. Unwittingly, perhaps, this orientates the subject around an Anglophone peculiarity given that the English word 'experience' is laden with meanings that are not obviously shared in other languages and carries the distinct connotation that 'experience' is self-evidently important and real (Scott, 1992; Wierzbicka, 2010). The more recent popularity of the notion of 'lived experience' embeds this supposition and further involves implicit claims to an assumed deep authenticity: after all, what could possibly matter more to policy research than a real experience that has been lived through?

Whilst 'lived experience' can hold intuitive appeal as a rhetorical device, our closer inspection offers insights from influential associated theoretical and methodological traditions: phenomenology, selected feminist writing and ethnography. We cast our net wide to conduct

purposive literature reviews, drawing on insights from literature in the fields of cultural theory, philosophy, political science, health, linguistics and sociology, encompassing historical and conceptual debates from Europe, North America and Australia. The principal reference point is the important, but sometimes almost impenetrable and contradictory, phenomenology literature, which highlights the importance of 'interrogating taken for granted practices of knowing' (Campbell, 2003: 7) and places emphasis on intercorporeality (Trigg, 2012; 2017). More pointedly, feminist phenomenology demonstrates how 'lived experience' can be used as a lens to understand and express gendered and embodied subjectivities. Perhaps most usefully for social policy, this speaks to the political strategy of recognition: giving voice and making the invisible visible as a response to subordination. Feminist debates also offer a reminder of the risks of essentialising identity claims (as relevant for, for example, class, disadvantaged neighbourhoods or migrants as it is for gender) and privileging certain voices. There is ongoing debate about the extent to which a lived experience approach focuses attention on personal accounts of the here and now to the detriment of acknowledging how experience is inscribed by pre-existing discourses, influenced by wider social structures, and constructed socially (Scott, 1992).

We have also drawn attention to the ways in which concern with lived experience can be situated within an ethnographic approach, where it has been developed methodologically, particularly in relation to auto-ethnography (Ellis and Flaherty, 1992). This raises issues for social policy regarding the extent to which reference to 'lived experience' implies limiting study to the unique individuality of the self of the researcher, as perhaps the only way to access pre-verbalised urges, feelings and thoughts. Our contribution is to move through the potentially individualising tendency of 'lived experience' approaches to seek out instances of commonality, towards establishing 'structures of feeling' (Williams, 1961). We highlight instances of commonality in prevailing forms of experience in particular times and places. This typicality indicates, as C. Wright Mills (1940: 906) noted, the source of motive and action may not be the individual, but the situation, meaning that it is possible to establish 'constellations of motives', for example in relation to what it means to be out of work and claiming social security benefits. We argue that social policy might use this notion of 'lived experience' as a window into instances of the *shared typical*. Methodologically, one implication is that Qualitative Longitudinal Research is valuable, particularly where the use of in-depth

interviewing is augmented by observation, visual methods, diaries, autoethnography or performance.

Our conclusion is that the above deeper contemplation of 'lived experience' provides new interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological connections and developments. This can positively augment research, writing and engagement in policy making processes, not just to provide 'thick description' (Geertz, [1973] 2010), but as a basis for standpoint critique. In this way, appealing to lived experiences can have a sharp, critical edge. Methodologically, this can be associated with an empathetic immersion in the lives and concerns of people affected by and involved in policy processes and outcomes, including elite policy makers and influential context creators, managers and front-line workers as well as disempowered and oppressed groups. We have sought to establish ongoing interdisciplinary debate that begins with recognition that use of the notion of 'lived experience' is not self-evident and that building fuller understandings of what lived experience can involve or imply offers much potential.

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