

A reply to Fairness, generosity and conditionality in the welfare system: the case of UK disability benefits by Johnson and Nettle: Inequality and existential threat

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Word count

Main text: 1519

References: 244

Johnson and Nettle (2020) deliver a cogent argument about the acceptance of policy changes to disability allowance in the UK. Their principal claim is that suggestions of vulnerability to fraud, made by ministers and key politicians, triggered psychological dispositions to vigilant and conditional cooperation. These suggestions were made without any social or personal context thereby increasing precautionary vigilance. The authors make clear that policy based on these psychological dispositions is error prone because the proper domain for those mechanisms is small-scale tribal society, not the governance of a nation. Moreover, it is likely that predictions of the level of cheating drawn from these mechanisms are inaccurate.

It is not the case that all welfare systems are, or have been, based on vigilant conditionality, according to Johnson and Nettle. Some systems are more trusting, and the authors speculate that this might be due to a number of other psychological dispositions such as perceived social similarity, which is associated with greater generosity. The source of any resource to be shared also appears important, with earned resources more prone to vigilant conditionality. Finally, the reasons for the need are also important, with some causes making the recipient more deserving of support.

Johnson and Nettle initially focus upon the detail of policy changes and argue that these changes may seem sensible to a social primate reflexively applying tribal scale psychology. This is a commentary upon policy makers. But later they shift their attention to a broader constituency, those to whom policy makers are appealing and those campaigning to change policy. In concluding comments, the authors state that their thesis could be coupled with a broader account of societal change, that might offer a richer interpretation of change, and it is to this idea that the current commentary is addressed.

Inglehart and Norris assert that for most of history we have lived under existential threat from disease, scarcity and war which "encourages an authoritarian xenophobic reaction in which people close ranks behind strong leaders, with strong in-group solidarity, rejection of outsiders, and rigid conformity to group norms" ((Inglehart & Norris, 2017) p.443). Their hypothesis is that humans behave differently when these existential threats are removed, becoming open to new ideas and perceiving less out-group threat.

Many human populations have moved out of subsistence and live with the expectation of longevity. This has been caused by a transition to industrial and now technological societies, in tandem with changes to education; a process Inglehart and Norris term *modernization*. Modernized societies are more thoroughly interconnected, facilitating collaborative opportunities to accrue economic wealth, and thus well-being understood as the ability to thrive. Interconnectedness and its link to safety is associated with more tolerant attitudes and changes in a number of social norms. This process has suffered interruptions leading to attitudinal transitions.

World War II was a major interruption, returning many to existential insecurity. But the engineered post-war recovery saw a return to modernization and more rapid change than during the pre-war period. Changes included increased prosperity and the construction of welfare systems that enabled risk to be buffered within peace time. The post-war populations increasingly embraced environmental politics, freedom of expression, equality across the sexes, and tolerance of homosexual, disabled and foreign people (Inglehart & Norris, 2017). Interconnectedness grew again. However, Inglehart and Norris also claim that not all members of post-war societies were tolerant. Older generations who had grown up during insecurity enabled populist and authoritarian political parties to gain a foothold; these citizens reacted against new and emerging cultural norms whilst feeling left behind by economic change. The implication is that one's level of tolerance for others is hard to shift and set at an early age. That foothold has been increasingly strengthened by a rapid increase in economic inequality over the last 50 years in the USA and UK (Piketty & Saez, 2014), which is another interruption for

many but not all. Economic inequality equates to an uneven distribution of existential risk, with marked relative inequality driving real morbidity and mortality effects (Marmot, Allen, Boyce, Goldblatt, & Morrison, 2020). This has impacted upon younger members of society and affected social attitudes. Meanwhile, in Scandinavia, where income inequality is far lower and has been maintained at that level for nearly 100 years, populist politics are less prevalent (Inglehart & Norris, 2017).

The extension of Johnson and Nettle, that they seed, is to hypothesize that vigilance and conditionality will be sensitive to inequality. Visibly uneven access to resource, where people are aware of their relative standing, will make people more guarded in their cooperative ventures, as they seek to attenuate risk in potentially cooperative situations (Cardenas, 2003; Nishi, Shirado, Rand, & Christakis, 2015). Put another way, a key aspect of poverty in unequal societies is uncertainty about resource in the medium and long term. Cash flow is inconsistent, but other people are both competitive and inconsistent as they have to respond to the same contingencies. Intertemporal discount functions become steeper for those who are relatively poorer (Griskevicius, Tybur, Delton, & Robertson, 2011) making it hard to stabilize reciprocal interactions over time (Stevens & Hauser, 2004). Inequality can create fertile ground for vigilant conditionality as it segregates society and reduces interconnection.

Johnson and Nettle recommend that a sense of social similarity could be engendered by campaigners trying to reverse the changes to disability benefits. They suggest that referencing the likelihood that a large proportion of society will need disability support in the future might yield unity. Thus, if you predict your own future vulnerability you might be more willing to support a generous investment now. But if economic inequality leaves those at the poor end of the distribution unwilling to take bets on the future then this seems unlikely. Envisaging a future self with difficulties will not resolve the problems of a current self. Moreover, those making policy have a higher likelihood of access to private resources in future times of need and are more likely to live longer with a good quality of life (Marmot et al., 2020); the investment has less to do with them.

Johnson and Nettle make their social similarity recommendation whilst mentioning the effect of war upon shared identity and collectivism. This might operate in three, non-exclusive ways. First, war could lead to cooperation at a large scale via out-group existential threat. Second, the economic effects of war significantly level income inequality (Piketty & Saez, 2014) altering competitive dynamics internal to society. Third, during World War II citizens in the UK were brought together to collectively contribute to the war effort. Whilst this last would allow familiarity to develop, as implied by Johnson and Nettle, it is perhaps the act of making things together, of having to coordinate activity that is more important (Knoblich, Butterfill, & Sebanz, 2011). Sennett has argued that collaboration in the pursuit of making something is a skill that requires effortful honing (Sennett, 2012). According to Sennett, this form of collaboration enables deep cooperation within society by entraining us to the difficulties of coordination and the communicative mechanisms for resolving them. It is a pragmatic approach to cooperation, rather than an ideal one relying upon sentiment. Collaboration of this sort is being lost as we modernize, moving ever deeper into a society where only a small minority of people are able to work in the dominant technologies, where fewer and fewer people are actively engaged in skilled manufacturing, and more and more have to work in precarious and transient economic niches in the service economy (Inglehart & Norris, 2017). This can only exacerbate inequality. Some activists are aware of this and are recommending a radical overhaul to fundamental economic structures, for example those advocating the Green New Deal in the UK¹.

The inequality that makes cooperation harder to stabilize continues to increase. This may account for the uptick in cheating under the new policy (Johnson and Nettle, 2020).

¹ See this website for an introduction: <https://greennewdealgroup.org/>

This does not mean that the policy encouraged fraud, but rather the socioeconomic structures that stimulated policy makers to think in vigilant and conditional terms have delivered the very threats such psychology is designed to spot. This is a vicious circle: reducing benefits to those who are genuinely in need will only increase inequalities whilst reducing cooperation.

I have not discussed the causes of inequality, but I have hoped to emphasize how it fragments society and makes us less cooperative. From this perspective the vigilant conditionality of the policy makers is rational – they are perhaps right to predict cheating and they might claim it would have been worse still if they had not acted. But the inevitable outcome of excluding more people from support will be an increase in inequality as those people fail to thrive. Failure to thrive has inevitable economic oncosts for unemployment support and health care, and so ultimately such policy making robs Peter to pay Paul. But it is a slow-motion crime that is hard to notice in the here and now. And this tells us that policy makers are also limited by their economic time horizons and in their ability to cognitively empathize with the lives of others.

Author notes

The author declares no conflict of interests. This reply was written without funding.

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