

'Post-Freud' welfare reform and Lone parents' decision-making around work and family life¹

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Abstract

Welfare-to-work policy in the UK sees 'choice', in relation to lone parents' employment decisions increasingly defined in terms of powers of selection between options within active labour market programmes, with constraints on the option of non-market activity progressively tightened. In the past, lone parents with children below 16 years age maintained the right to decide whether to seek paid-work without risk of sanction. Since October 2008, lone parents whose youngest dependant child is above 12 years of age lost eligibility to Income Support (IS) on the grounds of being a lone parent. There are plans from 2010 to extend these measures to lone parents with children whose youngest child is above 7 years of age. In this paper, we examine the choice agenda in relation to welfare reform and lone parent employment. Large-scale survey data is used to estimate the extent to which economically inactive lone parents state they would presently like paid-work and if not, their main reported reasons for not looking for paid-work. This is undertaken in an effort to provide an overview of the extent to which policies promoting compulsory job search by dependant child age map onto lone parents' own stated decision-making regarding if and when to enter the labour market.

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1. Introduction

Welfare-to-work policy in the UK increasingly frames the notion of choice in relation to employment decisions in terms of consumer-type powers of selection between options within active labour market programmes. This approach sits alongside heightened constraints on the option of choosing non-market activity if you are a recipient of out of work benefits. In the past, lone parents with children below 16 years of age maintained the right to decide whether to seek paid-work without risk of sanction. Calling for additional levels of compulsory job-search activity, the 2007 Green Paper on Welfare Reform, 'In Work Better Off,' marked a critical juncture in policy, proposing a new social contract that strengthens lone parents' obligations to seek paid-work. Since October 2008, lone parents whose youngest dependant child is above 12 years of age have lost eligibility to Income Support (IS) on the grounds of being a lone parent if they are assessed as able to work and it can be demonstrated that they will be 'better off' in paid-work. From 2010, there are plans to extend these measures to lone parents with children whose youngest dependant child is above 7 years of age.

These reforms involve a shift of part of the current lone parents Income Support caseload onto Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), a benefit with greater conditionality, mandated job search, and powers of sanction. Such moves align with more recent policy proposals, some of which draw on the Gregg Review (2008), to simplify and reform out of work benefits so that claimants are addressed in terms of their readiness to enter paid work. Rather than a categorisation due to benefit category that has been used, the Government is currently moving towards a position whereby all claimants are allocated to one of three groups. These are a work ready group able to enter the labour market immediately; a work related activity group of claimants making progress towards entering employment, and a support group of those with little likelihood of entering employment due to sickness, disability, or current caring responsibility, such as caring for a very young child. Each group places different requirements on claimants in relation to paid work (DWP, 2008b; Convery, 2009: 10).

Increasing levels of paid-work remains a central objective to Government child poverty strategy. It would be unfair to suggest that New Labour have done little other

than tighten benefit eligibility conditions in order to encourage take up of employment. A sizeable component of welfare reform, such as the National Childcare Strategy, the introduction of a minimum wage, and the development and reform of the tax credit system, has arguably facilitated greater choice by making paid-work, an option previously less plausible for many lone parents, more feasible (Lewis, 2003; Bell et al, 2005). The quasi-marketisation of portions of service delivery, such as through the Multiple Provider Employment Zones (MPEZs), has also conferred a degree of autonomy on service users to select between providers or the types of support on offer. Although MPEZs reflect attempts to foster competition between providers, facilitating greater choice for service users is also seen as a way of empowering people to make decisions about their own strategies to obtain paid-work. Choice in welfare to work is therefore grounded in providing claimants with wider opportunities to take up paid work, and greater choice over how to engage with return to work providers. The choice not to participate in paid-work and continue to receive financial support through out of work benefits however is a choice New Labour is not willing to support for those viewed as able to work, and recent and proposed policies seek to extend the scope of this category.

In this paper, we examine the choice agenda in relation to welfare reform and lone parent employment. This is undertaken in light of current reforms that will impose greater restrictions on an element of decision-making for lone parents who, whether reflecting upon personal constraints, beliefs about good parenting, or wider preferences, decide to remain outside of the labour market at a given time. Large-scale survey data is used to estimate the extent to which economically inactive lone parents state they would presently like paid-work, and if not, their main reported reasons for not looking for paid-work. This is undertaken in an effort to provide an overview of the extent to which policies that promote compulsory job search by dependant child age map onto lone parents' own stated decision-making, regarding if and when to enter the labour market. Plans to heighten conditionality in light of the substantial proportion of lone parents we identify, whose stated position is currently not wanting to seek paid-work reinforces how New Labour's conception of choice is limited to a particular understanding of acceptable behaviour, grounded in the prioritisation of the formal economy. One concern for policy raised is that an involuntarily increase in the number of lone parents who face greater employment

barriers or are less work ready to seek paid work entering the labour market, because of current and proposed activation policies, is likely to have implications for employment retention and the economic stability of lone parent families.

2. The choice agenda and welfare reform

Largely eschewed during their first term, New Labour subsequently adopted choice as the means to ‘empower’ users and limit the control of producers. Choice and marketisation has featured substantially in discussions on public service reform, particularly with regard to how to encourage a more diverse range of providers and empower service users in health, social care, and education (Greener, 2008: 222; Needham, 2008: 182). The expansion of quasi-markets in employment services, as in other public services is held as a means to enhance efficiency and effectiveness through competition between providers. Choice meanwhile is presented as the means for helping to drive these efficiency and effectiveness gains and thereby building support for public provision of welfare services (Brown, 2007; Needham, 2008: 181). As a policy option, ‘choice’ is seen as a mechanism that holds out the promise to free politicians and the public from past frustrations and failures in public service delivery (Clarke et al, 2007: 246).

Implementing the choice agenda with respect to employment and social security however, is somewhat problematic. It contains within it an implicit message that is subversive of the prevailing welfare reform agenda. After all, if choice is central to empowering users and they are the best placed to choose how to benefit from public services, it raises questions as to whether, and if so which, claimants should have the option to *choose*, in their *self-defined interests*, to not participate in the labour market or activation programmes whilst maintaining their welfare entitlements?

Benefit entitlements in the absence of job search conditionality for the economically inactive have largely been confined to people who are assessed as presently unable to take up paid-work. The right to social security support has, nonetheless, increasingly been hedged around with conditions that stipulate individual ‘acceptable’ responsibilities linked to paid-work activity. Previous exemptions from the need to be actively seeking work, such as participation in caring activity, or sickness or disability

are thus subject to ongoing challenge and have been weakened as benefit eligibility criteria is tightened (Dwyer, 2004: 268; Dwyer, 2008).

Greener (2007: 259) argues that the version of choice New Labour has promoted is grounded in the extension of consumer rights, standards and expectations to the delivery of public services. This is combined with the notion of individualised responsibilities, with claimants required to accept their responsibility to be independent productive members of the labour market. New Labour's approach to 'citizenship' thus concerns itself with the exercise of welfare rights and provision of state support in relation to an individual's obligations (Giddens, 2002: 16; Clarke, 2005: 451), but provides little space for people to define for themselves what these obligations might, or should be. Instead the active responsible citizen is one chiefly defined in terms of their contribution to the labour market. Individual decisions regarding paid-work are further subjugated to macro-economic policy objectives, such as reducing welfare expenditure, and to public policy or political concerns about balancing the rights of those who fund their non-market activities through social transfers against those of the wider society who enable such rights through taxation.

It is from within these contexts that notable constraints operating on the expansion of choice in the field of welfare to work become visible. At the same time, fuller recognition of the value of non-market forms of work and the validity of choosing care could permit policy to better address the reality of life for many outside of, and marginal to the labour market. It could also enhance the capacity people have for self-determination in the balance between work and life, which low paid individuals may experience as unpredictable and unsatisfactory (Dean, 2007: 526; Williams, 2001).

Decisions about whether or not to engage in paid-work are not only related to structural constraints, such as childcare availability and the marginal financial value of employment. Important as these are for the opportunity to take up paid-work, particularly for low paid individuals, socially situated but personal notions of what constitutes responsible parenting affect the choices people make (Duncan & Irwin, 2004; Edwards et al, 2002). There may be considerable variation between lone parents on what is viewed to constitute 'good parenting' in relation to decisions regarding entering the labour market and the appropriate balance between paid-work

and family life (e.g. Duncan and Edwards, 1999). Current welfare to work policy, in demanding lone parent labour market activation by dependant child age, effectively constrains an aspect of the self-determination of what good parenting is enacted to entail.

We do not seek to disparage ‘choice’ as currently defined in policy as an objective, but to recognize its potential limitations and draw a contrast between the Government's promotion of market orientated choice and its resistance to choices around non-market based activities. About this, the Secretary for State for Work and Pensions has been quite clear there can be no choice not to work:

“We will provide better support, and expect more responsibility in return. Claimants should have the choice over how to get back to work, not whether they should go back to work” (James Purnell, former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, speech to the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion conference, June 2008).

“First, to end the idea there is a choice between claiming and working. Instead, the longer people claim, the more we will expect in return...work works, and it is only fair that we make sure a life on benefits is not an option” (James Purnell MP, former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Oral Statement, July 2008).

3. Lone parents and welfare to work reform post-Freud

In reviewing how the agenda of increasing choice has permeated recent welfare reform, rather than recount the full development of active labour market policy since 1997, we focus on the most recent developments surrounding lone parents and welfare to work. It is important to note however, that a range of policies have been developed under New Labour to ‘make work pay’, and move recipients of out of work benefits into employment. A key objective has been to enhance benefit claimants choices by improving the opportunities available to them to take up employment. Some of the reforms have specifically targeted lone parents, whilst others have been part of a broader policy thrust to move the unemployed and economically inactive

into the labour market.

Policies directed at lone parents have included: The New Deal for Lone Parents; Work Focused Interviews with Personal Advisers; the National Childcare Strategy, and the Working Tax Credit/ Child Tax Credit. Where available, lone parents have also been able to participate voluntarily in the Employment Zones (EZs) programme (Knijn et al, 2007: 645). Rolled out as pilots in thirteen areas of the country in 2000, and largely delivered by private sector organisations, EZs have enjoyed relatively good flexibility over how to move clients into paid work. The EZs are important to understanding current developments, given recent policy appears to build on many of the elements EZs pioneered within the UK. The EZs were initially targeted at the long-term unemployed who were mandated to participate, although from 2003, the opportunity to participate was extended to lone parent volunteers. In 2004, the EZs underwent further reform, with the introduction of Multiple Provider Employment Zones (MPEZ) in six areas. The aim here was to create greater competition between providers. The clients of the MPEZ were, initially, randomly allocated to a provider by a Jobcentre Plus adviser, but from 2007 clients have been permitted to select their provider (Rafferty and Wiggan, 2008: 31).

In the EZ programme, we can see the operation of consumerist rights and individual responsibilities. A quasi-market of return to work delivery organisation operates with users in some areas given the power to choose between providers according to how effective they are. Yet at the same time, many of the users are there not through choice (long-term unemployed and New Deal for Young People returnees), but through direction under the threat of sanction. As in other policy fields, the notion of choice has been collapsed into a market model of exchange, so that choice is principally concerned with operationalising (acceptable) options in response to signals concerning efficiency and effectiveness (Clarke et al, 2007: 248).

“I want to see a triple devolution. To our customers, to our providers and to communities. This starts at the level of the individual. People know what they need. People know what works best for them. We need to give them the ability to act on that knowledge. It is for this reason that where possible we should allow our customers the choice over which services they access, and which providers they go to. This allows

for competition between providers, to drive up standards of the programmes they offer. But it also means that our customers are able to choose the programme that is best for them." (James Purnell, former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, speech to the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion conference, June 2008).

The recommendations made by David Freud's review of welfare to work provision (Freud, 2007) show a debt to the contracting out approach taken in the Employment Zones, as well as to the growing international emphasis on personalisation and the implementation of contracted out programmes (Finn, 2009). The Freud review proposed a merger of the various New Deal schemes into a 'Flexible New Deal'. The proposal argued that, whilst claimants do have particular needs they also face common obstacles to employment irrespective of their age, disability, gender or parenthood, and a common platform would help spread best practice. The delivery of Flexible New Deal would, it was proposed, also build on previous experience of contestability to expand the use of the private and voluntary sector in the provision of welfare to work services, particularly for those most likely to face obstacles to participation in the labour market (DWP, 2007: 58).

The Green Paper, *No one written Off: reforming welfare to reward responsibility* (DWP, 2008a) and the White Paper, *Raising expectations and increasing support: reforming welfare for the future* (DWP, 2008b) confirmed Government intentions to introduce greater contestability in service provision and pilot the expansion of user choice over which service provider they use. Greater freedom to shape the services offered to clients are given to providers through a 'black box' approach, whereby Jobcentre Plus sets the desired outcomes but does not prescribe the methods delivery organisations may use in order to deliver the desired outcomes (DWP, 2008a: 119). The rights and standards that can be expected of the consumer are thus becoming embedded in the provision of welfare to work as they are in other policy fields, such as health and education. At the same time, conditionality is increasing to ensure recipients of all out of work benefits adhere to New Labour's notion of the responsible citizen, independent, and within the labour market. The 'work-first' model initially applied to the unemployed recipients of Jobseeker's Allowance and on a voluntary basis to disabled people and lone mothers with young children. Subsequent welfare reform shows a further shift towards mandated participation in

employment or work related activity for all but the most ‘deserving’ claimants.

In the July 2008 Green Paper, *No one Written Off: Reforming Welfare to Reward Responsibility* (DWP, 2008a) the Government outlined a plan to simplify the benefits system and strengthen conditionality for out of work benefits with the introduction of the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). In October 2008, the ESA replaced Incapacity Benefit and Income Support with Disability Premium, the main work benefits for sick and disabled people. Recipients of the ESA are subject to a new Work Capability Assessment to examine what work they can do, rather than what work they cannot do (DWP, 2008a). Those judged to be ready to engage in work related activity immediately, or as only temporarily inactive, are placed in the Work Related Activity Group (WRAG) of ESA to map out a route into the labour market and to engage in work related activity, or are moved to the Jobseeker’s Allowance regime to begin active job search activity. For claimants unable to move into employment in the long term, a higher rate of benefit is available and they are placed in the ‘Support Group’ with no requirement to engage in work related activity (DWP, 2008b: 69).

These developments were influenced by a review into the application of conditionality within the benefits system carried out for the DWP (Gregg, 2008). The review recommended that reform to the benefit system should ensure that all recipients of out of work benefits be placed on a clear path back to employment, according to current employment readiness, needs and/or responsibilities. To ensure that the ‘immediate’ work-focused regime of the Jobseeker’s Allowance was not diluted to incorporate clients likely to face multiple barriers to employment in the short term, Gregg proposed the development of three groups. The first, the ‘Work Ready’ group, would be for those available to work and judged able to return to work immediately, and would include rules and eligibility requirements based on active job search activity. The second; the ‘Progression to work’ group would be for those who should be able to take up work in the medium term provided they received sufficient appropriate support, and assistance and would be subject to conditionality linked to engaging in work related activity. The third would be a ‘No Conditionality’ group for those judged unlikely to be able to return to paid work long term or because in the short term they were engaging in activities that make work related activity

inappropriate, although they could participate in schemes voluntarily (Gregg, 2008: 47). Included in the 'Progression to Work' group should, Gregg proposed, be recipients of the New Employment and Support Allowance who do not qualify for the 'Support Group' following a Work Capability Assessment, lone parents whose children are aged between one and seven years old, and partners with children aged one to seven years old. The 'No Conditionality' group should include those in the ESA Support Group, lone parents and partners with children aged under one year, and Carers receiving Carer's Allowance (Gregg, 2008: 57).

The White Paper, *Raising Expectations and increasing support: reforming welfare for the future* restated Government agreement with the core of the Gregg proposals concerning the formation of three groups of benefit recipients and differing conditionality and support regimes for each (DWP, 2008b: 76). Unlike the Gregg review however, the White Paper does not propose to extend participation in work related activity to lone parents with children below three years of age. The requirement to join the Progression to work groups is targeted (at least initially) on lone parents with children aged between three and seven. For those with children aged under three the only requirement will remain, as now, to attend Work Focused Interviews. The door has been left open though, to the extension at a later date of a requirement to participate in the progression to work group to lone parents with children aged between one and three (DWP, 2008b: 123).

The direction of these proposals is not surprising given New Labour's often avowed commitment to the mantra of 'No Rights without Responsibilities'. A stance that reaffirms the adoption of a citizenship model, embedded in a discourse in which welfare rights exist as conditional entitlements that are dependent on duties engaged in and values adhered to (Dwyer, 2004: 277), rather than as social rights that are 'inalienable'. What is interesting about the post-Freud development of policy with its tightening of conditionality is that it is permeated by the notion that, engaging in paid employment will secure the independence of the individual and their family, and that participation in paid work is and should be, the priority for welfare reform (Blair, 2002; Brown 2007). Yet as Grover and Stewart (2002: 7) amongst others have pointed out, for those moving into low paid work the reality is often exchanging dependence on out of work benefits for dependence on in-work benefits in the form of

the Working Tax Credit and state financial support for childcare (HM Treasury: 2008). Given Government will continue to effectively exercise control over the minimum income of low wage families, it is difficult to conclude that lone parents in low paid employment have achieved independence. The question of whether lone parents should be free to choose not to take up paid work at a given time point in their lives is increasingly denied and the opportunity to engage in caring activity as a valued activity in its own right eroded. To what extent however, do the parents of young children, both lone parents and couple mothers; at their current life point want to engage in paid work? It is to this question that we now turn our attention.

4. Method

Data

In the remainder of this paper, we go on to consider whether current and proposed activation policies, based on age of youngest dependant child, fit with what lone parents actually say regarding whether or not they currently wish to seek work, in relation to the age of their youngest children. Lone parents orientations towards paid-work and labour market experiences have been explored through qualitative research, examining in detail the reasons lone parents give for seeking or not seeking paid work, and potential barriers to employment (e.g. Ford, 1996; Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Rowlingson and McKay, 2005; Millar, 2006). Information on the reasons people give for not seeking paid work is also collected across a number of nationally representative surveys. Although this latter source provides a less detailed picture than qualitative approaches, it can be used to present a broad nationally representative overview. To provide a sample of lone parents of suitable magnitude to conduct this analysis, we have pooled together two quarters of the UK Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) (Winter, 2006 and Winter, 2007). These years are selected as they sit before more recent reforms to compulsory activation. Although we combine years boosting sample size, the small sample size of lone fathers means that our analysis is chiefly restricted to lone motherhood.

Outcome Measures

The first outcome measures we use considers the extent to which people claiming Income Support on the grounds of lone parenthood state they are looking for paid-work, and if not, whether or not they state they would currently like a job. The QLFS collects detailed information on the self-reported reasons why people do not undertake paid-work, which is used to construct international definitions of employment, unemployment, and ‘economic inactivity’⁴. The questionnaire routing for respondents who state they are not currently in paid-work takes people through a series of questions regarding whether they were looking for work in the last 4 weeks. If they were not looking for work, respondents are asked whether ‘they would like to have a regular job at the moment, either a full- or part-time job’. This question routing is used to define our first measure.

Although people claiming IS on the grounds of their lone parent status are the target of recent and proposed changes to activation policy, it is likely that some lone parents in this group will not be required to seek paid-work for other reasons, such as poor health, and so be moved onto other benefits. Consequently, when considering the reasons lone parents state for not seeking paid-work, it is instructive to examine both family care reasons and wider reasons given, such as issues related to poor health. In the QLFS, respondents who have not sought paid-work during the 4-week reference period are questioned regarding the reasons why they are not seeking paid-work and up to eight reasons are recorded. If more than one reason is given, they are asked to state their main reason. Based on the above questions, we have grouped the main reasons reported for not looking for work into four categories:

- a) People who state they are not looking for paid-work, they **would not** like a job, and the main reason for not looking for work is that they are looking after their child(ren);
- b) People who state they are not looking for paid-work, but they **would** like a job, but the (main) reason they are not seeking paid-work is because they are looking after their family. Due to small sample sizes, this category includes

⁴ ILO Labour Force Framework, 13th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) in October 1982.

- both those looking after dependant children, and other family/household care reasons, such as caring for another adult;
- c) People who state their main reason for not looking for work is their sickness, illness or disability;
 - d) Other categories of economic inactivity⁵.

Despite these questions providing an overview of the extent to which ILO economically inactive lone parents state they would not presently like a job, they do not provide any detailed insight into the reasons *why* people at a given time state this. As Burchardt and Le Grand (2002) note, although some people may have the capability or opportunity to enter paid-work, they may actively choose not to do so at a given time, such as to give preference to family care activities of younger children. In other cases, a person stating that the main reason they would presently not like a job is that they are looking after their family might reflect the deliberation of constraints or personal difficulties that would be faced on attempting to combine paid-work and parenthood. Those looking for strong conclusions about whether our measures reflect ‘preferences’ (Hakim, 2000, 2004), ‘constraints’ (e.g. see; Crompton, 1998; Fagan, 2001; McCrae, 2003a, 2003b), or the extent to which people have the capability (see Sen, 1998) to enter paid-work are therefore likely to be disappointed - for present purposes, we treat such considerations as not directly observed⁶. Nonetheless, as we discuss below, it is conceivable that the increased mandated activation of lone parents who presently state they would not like a job is likely to raise job retention issues (albeit in different manners) regardless of whether such decision-making reflects choice or constraint. The overall picture provided by the current research consequently remains of substantive policy interest.

Characteristics

Our principle concern is to explore the above outcome measures in relation to age of youngest dependant child, grouped to reflect current and proposed policies on

⁵ We use the term ‘ILO economic activity’ to indicate we are referring to a statistical definition than a concept of ‘economic activity’ per se. This is to avoid implying questionable assumptions in the latter term about care and wider family work being non-economically productive (see).

⁶ We note however, that other studies do try to make inferences on such matters. For example, see Burchardt and Le Grand, 2002; Hakim, 2000.

compulsory job search activity. To provide further contextual information, in our multivariate analysis, we examine whether differences are observed in relation to levels of educational attainment, respondents age, the 'category' of lone parenthood (e.g. single never married, divorced/separated, or widowed), whether respondents have ever had a job in the past, self-reported incapacity, and Government Office Region. Child age categories are further used in the multivariate analysis that relate to stages of childrearing in relation to pre-primary school, primary, and secondary school children.

5. Findings

Overall, around eight out of ten lone parents claiming Income Support for reasons of lone parenthood had not looked for work in the last 4 weeks (83.9 %) (Table 1). Of these, nearly two-thirds (63.9 %) stated that they would currently not like either a part- or full-time job. Notable differences were apparent by age of youngest dependant child, with the number stating they would currently not like paid-work being highest for those with younger children. This was around two-thirds (67.3%) for lone parents with dependent children aged between 0 and 7 years. This fell to just over a half (55.4 %) for those with children between 7 and 12 years of age, and to around six out of ten (59%) lone parents with older dependant children. Given that the majority of lone parents are women, the equivalent figures for lone mothers were similar to those given for all lone parents (men and women). These findings suggest that the vast majority of people claiming IS on grounds of their lone parent status are not looking for paid-work, and that around half to two thirds of this group, depending on age of youngest dependant child, state that they would presently not like a job.

Table 2 goes on to break down the main reasons lone parents report for not seeking employment; presented for all economically inactive lone parents. Given there is no such thing as eligibility to Income Support on the grounds of 'coupled motherhood', this wider categorisation allows more meaningful comparisons to be drawn with economically inactive coupled mothers. Differences in levels of economic inactivity and the main reasons for not looking for paid work were again notable by age of youngest dependant child. Over half (56.4 %) of economically inactive lone mothers with a dependant child below seven years of age stated that they are not seeking paid-

work, they would not like paid-work, and the (main) reason for not seeking employment is that they were 'caring for their children'. The equivalent figure for those with children between 7 and 12 years of age was lower at around one third (35.2 %). This compared to around 69.3% and 42.2% of coupled mothers respectively. Economically inactive coupled mothers with younger children were therefore *more* likely than lone parents to state they were not seeking work due to looking after children and presently would not like a job.

Some other surveys provide similar questionnaire items but with slightly different response categories. The Family and Children's Survey (FACS) for example, offers the response 'do not want to spend more time apart from my children', as an independent reason for not looking for paid work, alongside availability or affordability of childcare. This wording arguably more directly approaches whether the desire not to work reflects active prioritisation of time for childrearing, although again, such prioritisation could reflect the deliberation of both preferences and constraints. Using the 2005 FACS, Hoxhallari et al (2007) report that 44 % of lone parents state this as a reason for not undertaking paid-work of 16 hours or more per week. The corresponding figures for people who reported childcare availability (15%) or affordability (7%) were considerably lower. These figures however were not broken down by child age.

In the current study, around a quarter of those with children below 7 years old and between 7 and 11 years old stated that although they were not seeking work, and the main reason was looking after the family/home, they would like a job (27% and 26.5% respectively). Although lone mothers outside the labour market with older children were less likely to report looking after their children as a reason for not seeking paid-work in comparison to those with younger children, a greater number reported personal sickness or disability as their main reason. A greater number of lone parents with older children, despite being in the target for mandatory job search

Table 1. Self-reported job search: ILO Economically Inactive lone parents

	Income Support claimants for reasons of lone parenthood (women only)	Income Support claimants for reasons of lone parenthood (men & women)	ILO Econ Inactive Lone Mothers	All ILO Econ Inactive Lone Parents (men & women)
% of working age population of group	38.0	36.9	37.4	36.7
Looked for work in last 4 weeks?				
Yes	15.7	16.1	3.3	3.3
No.	84.3	83.9	96.7	96.7
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	2109	2215	2245	2388
If not looked, would like a job (ft or pt)?				
Overall				
Yes	36.1	36.1	35.3	35.8
No	63.9	63.9	64.7	64.2
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	1754	1832	2153	2290
By Youngest Dependant Child				
0<7 yrs:				
Yes	32.6	32.7	33.0	33.1
No	67.5	67.3	67.0	67.0
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	1155	1185	1308	1353
7<12 yrs				
Yes	43.7	44.6	43.5	43.9
No	56.4	55.4	56.5	56.2
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	310	182	385	1353
12+ yrs				
Yes	40.7	41.0	35.9	37.7
No	59.3	59.0	64.1	62.3
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	289	187	480	548

Column, Percentages, Aged 18-60, excluding students (QLFS October-December, 2006 and 2007, weighted).

Table 2. ILO Economic inactivity and main reasons for not seeking paid work by youngest dependant child, Lone and Coupled Mothers

	0<7 yrs	7<12yrs	12+yrs	All
LONE MOTHERS				
Economic Activity				
Employed/Self-employed/Family Worker	40.0	63.0	70.7	54.9
Unemployed (ILO)	7.2	6.9	5.2	6.5
Economically Inactive	52.8	30.1	24.1	38.6
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	2649	1271	2116	6036
Economically Inactive: Main Reported Reason				
Not seeking, would like work- Reason: looking after family/ home	27.0	26.5	13.9	24.2
Not seeking, not like work- Reason: looking after children	56.4	35.2	20.4	45.6
Sickness or disabled (adult)	6.7	22.4	45.0	17.1
Other Reason	9.9	16.0	20.7	13.1
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	1370	377	498	2245
COUPLED MOTHERS				
Economic Activity				
Employed/Self-employed/Family Worker	63.5	78.3	81.5	72.2
Unemployed (ILO)	3.1	2.5	2.7	2.9
Economically Inactive	33.4	19.2	15.7	25.0
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	9226	3675	6475	19376
Economically Inactive: Main Reported Reason				
Not seeking, would like work- Reason: looking after family/ home	17.3	17.6	10.5	15.9
Not seeking, not like work- Reason: looking after children	69.3	42.2	27.9	56.9
Sickness or disability (adult)	4.9	15.4	27.3	11.0
Other Reason	8.6	24.8	34.3	16.2
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	2980	707	1033	4270

Column, Percentages, aged 18-60, excluding students (QLFS October-December, 2006 and 2007, weighted).

activity under current reforms, will therefore potentially be transferred onto other benefits due to their sickness/incapacity. Notably, rates of self-reported sickness or disability reasons amongst coupled mothers with older children were considerably lower compared to those amongst lone mothers.

Multivariate Analysis

The following multivariate analyses considers whether differences by dependant child age persist after controlling for other factors such as educational attainment. The models examine the characteristics of Income Support claimant and wider economically inactive lone parents in relation to the entire working age population, drawing comparisons to economically inactive coupled mothers. For this task, three separate logistic regression models were estimated (Table 4). The outcome variable for the first model (Model I) predicts members of the work age lone mother population who are claiming Income Support on grounds of lone parenthood, have not looked for work in the last for weeks, and state they would presently not like a job (1= yes). The second model estimated (Model II) predicts members of the working age lone mother population who are economically inactive (including IS claimants), not looking for paid-work who state they would presently *not* like a job; who state the main reason they are not looking for work is because they are caring for their children. In Model III, an equivalent model with identical outcome measure to model II is estimated for coupled mothers to facilitate comparisons.

All three models indicate that age of youngest dependent child is a significant predictor of both outcome measures, and remains so after controlling for other factors. At the same time, the findings indicate considerable heterogeneity in both lone and coupled mother populations. Compared to those with a degree level or above certificate (NVQ Key Skills Level 4 or 5), lone mothers with no qualifications were over 6.5 times more likely to be claiming Income Support and state that they were not looking for a job and would currently not like a job (Model I, OR= 6.80, $p < 0.01$). Having no or a comparatively low level of education attainment similarly predicted lone mothers who were economically inactive, not looking or wanting work, and who stated caring for their children as the main reason (Model II). Although the highest qualification level similarly predicted economically inactive coupled mothers who reported they did not want a job and the main reason for this was caring for their children, the difference in the odds ratio between those with no qualifications and those with NVQ level 4/5 certificates was substantial, but not as large (Model III, OR= 3.47, $p < 0.05$). Levels of educational attainment therefore appear to be a bigger predictor of such forms of economic inactivity for lone mothers than for coupled

mothers.

Table 4 Logistic regression: Reasons for ILO Economic Inactivity, Lone and Coupled Mothers

VARIABLES	I (Lone)		II (Lone)		III (Coupled)	
	O.R.	S.E.	O.R.	S.E.	O.R.	S.E.
Youngest Child <5 yrs	1.98**	0.21	2.87**	0.34	4.10**	0.31
Youngest Child 11+yrs	0.66**	0.084	0.49**	0.075	0.50**	0.049
Never Married	1.19	0.11	1.09	0.098		
Widower	0.70	0.19	1.58	0.38		
GNVQ Level 3	2.23**	0.42	1.91**	0.37	1.12	0.09
GNVQ Level 2	3.93**	0.66	3.69**	0.63	1.53**	0.10
GNVQ Level 1	4.18**	0.76	3.15**	0.60	1.93**	0.15
No Qualifications	6.80**	1.17	6.31**	1.12	3.47**	0.28
Health Problem Affects Kind/Amount of Work?	1.66**	0.15	0.97	0.10	0.95	0.08
Age	0.92**	0.029	0.90**	0.030	1.10**	0.03
Age Squared	1.01*	0.00046	1.01*	0.00049	1.00**	0.00035
Never Had a Job?	2.57**	0.29	2.51**	0.28	5.61**	0.49
North West (excl Mersey)	1.12	0.22	1.09	0.23	0.83	0.12
Merseyside	1.84*	0.46	1.93*	0.51	0.76	0.16
York& Humb	1.03	0.21	1.17	0.25	0.88	0.12
East Mid	1.24	0.27	1.25	0.28	0.75*	0.11
West Mids	1.26	0.26	1.20	0.25	0.91	0.13
Eastern	1.32	0.28	1.51	0.34	1.23	0.16
London	1.42	0.28	1.54*	0.32	1.30*	0.17
SouthE	0.83	0.17	0.97	0.21	1.18	0.15
SWest	1.11	0.24	1.20	0.28	0.94	0.13
Wales	1.15	0.25	1.19	0.28	0.67*	0.11
Scotland/ Northern Ireland	1.11	0.23	0.99	0.24	0.75*	0.11
Black Caribbean	0.59*	0.14	0.50*	0.13	0.40**	0.14
Black African/Other	0.76	0.14	0.87	0.17	0.32**	0.068
Indian	1.47	0.51	1.19	0.45	0.97	0.13
Pakistani/ Bangladeshi	1.31	0.32	1.57	0.38	2.36**	0.25
Other	1.04	0.23	0.62	0.15	0.84	0.096

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

ILO Economically Inactive. Base Category: Youngest child 5-11 yrs; divorced lone parent (excluded from coupled mother models); NVQ Level 4+; No reported health problem that affects kind/amount of work; North East; White. Working Age Population (18-60yrs)). Outcome Variables. Model I: 1=IS claimant on grounds of lone parenthood, not looking for work, who presently would not like a job; Model II: 1= 'ILO Economically Inactive lone mother, not looking for work , presently would not like a job, main stated reason: looking after the family; Model III: 1= 'ILO Economically Inactive Coupled Mother, not looking for work , presently would not like a job, main stated reason: looking after the family. Excluding students, QLFS Winter 2006-07, unweighted.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Lone parents' freedom to choose whether and when participation in paid-work is appropriate is increasingly circumscribed by welfare reform measures that seek to deliver on Government objectives to raise the employment rate of lone parents and decrease levels of child poverty. The wider choice agenda in welfare reform is primarily based around 'opening up' choice; by removing obstacles to paid work and consumerist notions of empowering benefit claimants by giving them greater influence over which return to work service provider they use. These are potentially useful developments that open up opportunities for claimants. At the same time, current policy arguably takes a narrower view of choice regarding whether and when to enter the labour market that based on current findings may be construed by lone parents, as for people who are the primary carers of dependant children generally. Combined with tighter conditionality, these choice mechanisms in policy largely serve to reinforce the Government's particular notion of what appropriate parenting and citizen behaviour entails. In doing so, welfare reform fails to engage with wider questions about the value and sustainability of attempting to encourage or push ever-greater numbers of lone parents into paid-work who might face significant constraints on their ability to participate in the labour market, or have other current self-defined priorities.

Our findings reinforce how the extent to which lone mothers state they would presently like a job is related to age of youngest dependant child. In this sense, the current policy of tapering obligations to seek paid-work by youngest child age is, to an extent, consistent with the manner in which childrearing influences lone parents' decision-making. At the same time, a substantial proportion of lone parents with children in the age categories which form the targeting of current and proposed policy state that they currently do not want a job, and that the main reason they are not looking for paid-work is that they are caring for their children. This was the case for around a third of lone parents claiming Income Support for reasons of lone parenthood whose youngest dependant child was between 12 and 18 years of age, and over half of lone parents whose youngest dependant child was between 7 and 12 years of age. Given we focus on the *main* reason reported, if anything our estimates are conservative. Our findings however do not say anything on the extent to which lone

parents with younger children may be receptive to measures as proposed for the work related activity group in relation to the Gregg Review proposals.

We do not attempt to quantify the extent to which verbal statements regarding not wanting a job for family reasons reflect free choice (e.g. where people have the feasible option or capability to take work but presently decide not to) or personal constraints (e.g. where entering paid work is currently infeasible, unreasonably difficult, or nearly impossible). Although likely taking into account opportunity structures and constraints, the responsibility to be a good parent and economically productive worker is worked through according to individual perceptions of what this means, as exemplified in qualitative studies (Duncan and Edwards, 2005). For some lone parents, current policy will consequently present a double bind between self-defined notions of being a good parent and responsible person, and state defined objectives of being an 'active' citizen in the labour market. This may particularly be the case for those who believe that the best action for the wellbeing of their children at a given time point is to stay at home to focus on childrearing, such as until their children are older. Welfare reform is gradually restricting the circumstances under which lone parents can make this choice, implicitly devaluing work outside of the formal labour market. At the same time, wider policy and rhetoric attempts to reinforce the duties of parents towards their children. For some lone parents at their current life point, based on their own perceptions of responsible parenting, these policy objectives may appear contradictory.

Where lone parents reasons stating they currently do not want a paid job reflects a realisation of significant barriers they face towards the labour market, increasing levels of mandated activation is likely to bring a greater number of lone parents into the labour market who are less 'work ready' than those who, in the past, were entering the New Deal gateway voluntarily. This may raise job retention issues; once in employment factors that act as barriers to labour market entry, such as inadequate childcare arrangement or poor child health, may act as 'stressors' on employment, triggering labour market exits (Johnson, 2002). Where this occurs, it is difficult to see how such outcomes necessarily improve the lives of lone parent families. Similarly, resistance to Government imposed norms regarding when it is appropriate to enter the labour market may also lead to increased levels of employment instability and cycling

between paid-work and out of work status. Safeguards against potential negative side effects, such as through greater attention to issues of job retention, employment advancement, and economic stability over labour market transitions in and out of paid-work may therefore be advantageous in tandem with current policy. These may be taken in order to help ensure sustained increases in lone parent employment rates and the wellbeing of lone parent families.

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