

# **Poor Work: Experiences and Aspirations**

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**DECLARATION**

I declare that the work in this dissertation is my own and it has not already been accepted in substance for any degree, and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any other degree.

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## **Abstract**

People who are working but who nevertheless experience poverty make up an increasing share of the total number of people in poverty in the UK. This research aimed to explore the characteristics of in-work poverty in the context of recent labour market and welfare changes. In particular, it aimed to access the experiences, opinions and aspirations of those experiencing 'poor work', with the intention of making recommendations for further research and for policy and practice development at a national and local level.

The research was rooted in a context of ongoing community regeneration efforts within a specific community and was based on a Participatory Action Research Approach. Interviews were conducted with six participants from within this community who were known to have long-term experience of poor work. These interviews were used to plot and explore detailed employment biographies across multiple decades. Data from these interviews was used to develop a 'phenomenology' of poor work. Finally, a focus group was used to validate the phenomenology and to explore aspirations for improved working conditions.

The findings demonstrated the multiple factors associated with poor work, including low pay, inflexibility to family and caring responsibilities, insecurity and dehumanising workplace experiences. Participants' described their experiences in terms of a lack of autonomy, agency and control. Social capital was found to be crucial in both finding work and in coping with periods of poverty whilst in work and between work.

Recommendations were made for policy approaches aimed at tackling aspects of poor work experiences, particularly by taking seriously the role of social capital in finding and keeping work. The potential role of cooperative approaches in delivering autonomy, agency and control for workers was explored. Finally, specific recommendations were made for the implementation of some of these suggestions at a community level.

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## Introduction

...the best route out of poverty is through employment. (Welsh Government, 2012)

The existence of people who are in work but nevertheless are still experiencing poverty is not a new phenomenon in the UK. In 2004 Glennester et al. published a study of the changing nature of poverty over the previous hundred year period. They noted that Seebohm Rowntree's ground breaking research of 1899 entitled 'Poverty, a study of town life', found that over half the poor of the time were 'in regular work but at low wages' and that, 'although unemployment is now more important than a century ago in explaining poverty...the biggest group in poverty remains households with someone in work' (Glennester *et al.*, 2004:48).

In fact, in-work poverty is becoming more of a factor in UK life. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 2012 'Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion' report found that in 2009/10 6.1 million (4 million working-age adults, 2.1million children) were living in low-income, working households, and that this figure represented an increase of 'more than one-fifth in ten years' (Aldridge *et al.*, 2012:25). This led one of the report's authors, Tom MaInnes, to state that "...it is in-work poverty that is becoming the modern face of hardship." (MaInnes, 2012 cited in Ramesh, 2012).

Despite the significance of in-work poverty the issue has received limited profile in the media, with the focus tending to be on the coalition government's welfare cuts (with the implicit assumption that these are impacting on out of work benefit entitlements). Changes in welfare are indeed a key factor in experiences of in-work poverty. For example the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that 'seven million working families will lose money under Coalition plans to cut the value of benefits payments' (Kirkup, 2013). But what about the work itself? What are its characteristics and how does it relate to wider issues of welfare and human wellbeing? Beresford *et al.* (1999) found that those actually experiencing poverty have had little voice in conversations regarding their circumstances and related policy responses. So what do those experiencing in-work poverty have to say about the phenomenon themselves?



The aim of this research is to listen to, and understand, the experiences, opinions and aspirations of those experiencing in-work poverty, and to use the resulting insights to develop effective approaches to tackling the issues. Chapter one uses a review of the current literature to develop a picture of in-work poverty, how it is experienced, how it relates to the labour market, and how it relates to government welfare policy. Chapter two outlines the methodological approach to the research. Chapter three presents and discusses the findings. Chapter four finishes by drawing conclusions and making recommendations for action.

## **Chapter One: The development of poor work: a literature review**

### ***1.1 In-work poverty - Experiences***

#### ***1.1.1 In-work poverty in Wales and the UK – what is it and how many people are impacted?***

In-work poverty describes circumstances in which ‘a household containing one or more adults doing paid work has an income below the level recognised by government as defining ‘poverty’ (Bevan Foundation, 2006:1). The meaning of poverty is contested (Smith & Middleton, 2007) and, as will be seen, is currently the subject of debate amongst UK policy makers and researchers. However, a widely accepted definition is provided by the European Union Poverty Programme: ‘the poor will be taken to mean persons, families and groups of persons whose resources (material, cultural and social) are so limited as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life in the Member State in which they live’ (Smith & Middleton, 2007:27). This particular definition is based on a relative concept of poverty. In the UK the minimum income has commonly been defined as 60 per cent of the national median income, thus those with incomes below this figure have been defined as being in poverty (Alcock, 2006).

Despite an emphasis from both the UK and Welsh governments on work being the best route out of poverty, the number of children in the UK belonging to working families in poverty had risen from 1.7 million in 2003/04 to 2.2 million in 2006/07. This represents 56 per cent of all the children in poverty (Kenway, 2010:11). 47% of Wales’s working-age poor were in working households in 2010 (Winckler, 2010:46). Winckler identifies two key factors contributing to in-work poverty. The first of these is low pay. ‘Two thirds of low-income households comprise of low-paid workers’ (Winckler, 2010:50). The second factor is working hours. There has been a trend in the labour market away from full time work, with part-time work now accounting for a quarter of all employment (Winckler, 2010). Indeed, there is evidence that the recent decrease in the UK unemployment rate (which has bucked expectations during a period of recession) is in part due to an increase in part time work (Guardian,

2012a). In September 2012 ‘the number of people in part-time work rose by 134,000 to 8.12 million, the highest level since 1992...This figure includes 1.42 million people – a record number – who would like to work full-time but are unable to find such employment.’ (BBC, 2012)

In-work poverty exists at the interplay between low pay and low hours and is increasing in a country where 43 per cent of both male and female part time workers earn £7 an hour or less (Winckler, 2010). In 2006 the Bevan Foundation (2006) discovered that 330,000 workers in Wales were on low pay when defined as less than £6.50 an hour. The low pay threshold of £6.50 used here is higher than the national minimum wage in 2006 (which, according to Direct Advice (2011) was set at £5.35) but, even allowing for inflation, is significantly lower than the figure of £8.38 identified by Davis et al (2012:32) as necessary for a single person working full time to access a minimum standard of living in 2012. Once the added cost of children, childcare and other factors are considered, this minimum income standard (MIS) increases significantly, as can be seen in the table below.

*Gross earnings required to meet MIS, April 2012 (Davis et al., 2012:32)*

	<b>Single, working age</b>	<b>1-earner couple, 2 children, no childcare</b>	<b>2-earner couple, 2 children, with childcare</b>	<b>Lone parent, 1 child, with childcare</b>
MIS (including rent, childcare* and Council Tax), weekly	262.25	537.19	685.04	502.80
Gross earnings required, weekly	314.19	668.95	704.37	457.61
Hourly wage rate	8.38	17.84	9.39	12.20
Amount above the NMW, hourly	2.30	11.76	3.31	6.12
Annual earnings required	16,383	34,881	36,728	23,861

Note \* Childcare, where specified

If for no other reason than it contradicts the simple idea that work is the route out of poverty, in-work poverty must be treated very seriously. (Kenway, 2010:11)

### **1.1.2 In-work poverty – contributing factors**

Goulden (2010) also identified the work associated with in-work poverty as being low paid, generally part time and usually temporary. He found this work to be characterised by shift-work, anti-social hours, less generous sick pay, holiday pay and pensions' (Goulden, 2010:8). Temporary jobs could be defined under various categories including seasonal, casual and agency. Training opportunities were found to be limited in these jobs, ensuring many low paid workers are trapped in a low-pay/no-pay cycle. The recent British Social Attitudes Survey shows that one in five workers reported taking a pay cut in the past three years and that the proportion of workers stating that it is 'very true' that their jobs are secure has fallen from 32% in 2004 to 23% in 2010.' (Park *et al.*, 2012).

The Bevan Foundation (2006) explored factors relating low pay to poverty and discovered that in many cases housing costs played a major defining role in whether or not a low-paid household experienced poverty, accounting for many cases where households should be working enough hours to avoid poverty but do not (high housing costs) and many cases where households should not be working enough hours to avoid poverty but do (low housing costs). Crisp *et al.* (2009:5) also identified childcare costs as a key factor impacting on in-work poverty. High childcare costs can leave less money for other essential items and can even prevent individuals from being able to take low-paid work at all. As will be seen from the findings, changing family circumstances can introduce a range of factors, which impact on experiences of in-work poverty.

In recent years, high inflation rates for some essential items, cuts in some entitlements and new spending needs...are likely to have created shortfalls for many families that will be hard to make good through increased earnings...The net result is that having children has a much greater impact on a household's ability to make ends meet than it did four years ago. (David *et al.*, 2012:43)

### **1.1.3 In-work poverty - mechanisms for coping**

Those suffering from in-work poverty use a range of methods to cope with their circumstances, some of which have implications for quality of life and wellbeing. For example, Crisp *et al.* (2009) found evidence of the following approaches: working longer hours to make ends meet (half of low paid households (in Wales) work enough hours to avoid poverty (Bevan Foundation, 2006)), combining multiple jobs, and topping up income through informal economic activity. The Bevan Foundation (2006) found evidence that families were forced to keep housing costs low by sharing accommodation. There is evidence then that in-work poverty can contribute to poor work-life balance, cramped accommodation and other factors which impact on home and family life.

Gilchrist (2004) emphasises the role that friends, family and neighbours play in providing emotional and material support for those suffering poverty, stating that 'community networks supply practical assistance with a variety of tasks...they operate as a collective mechanism for sharing risk and resources in situations of scarcity and uncertainty.' (Williams and Windebank, 1995, 2000, Stack, 1974, and Werbner, 1988, cited in Gilchrist 2004:7). Putnam (2000) emphasises the role this 'social capital' also plays in providing access to work and to improved opportunities within work (e.g. for bonuses or progression). However, Gilchrist identifies three types of social capital. Of these, 'Linking' social capital is distinctive in that it describes links '...beyond peer boundaries... enabling people to...reach resources outside their normal circles' (Gilchrist, 2004:6). It seems unlikely that those experiencing in-work poverty will access 'better' work through their social contacts unless some of these contacts constitute linking social capital. The significance of social capital in relation to in-work poverty will emerge as a key theme within this research.

### **1.1.4 In-work poverty and socio-economic inequality**

The prevalence of in-work poverty has been accompanied by an increase in socio-economic inequality in the UK. In 1997 'the best-off one-thousandth (0.1 per

cent)...received an income 61 times what the 90 per cent at the bottom received; by 2007 this ratio had risen to 95 times' (Dorling, 2012:1). By the beginning of 2012 chief executives of companies on the London Stock Exchange could expect to receive 145 times the average pay of their employees (Dorling, 2012). This increase in economic inequality has located the UK as the sixth most unequal country amongst 23 developed nations (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). Workers at the bottom of the labour market are seeing their wages fall in real terms as the wages of their senior managers continue to increase. This rapid increase in inequality is undermining social capital and has been shown to be a key factor in a range of social problems including poor mental and physical health, educational attainment and social mobility. (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010; Putnam, 2000).

## **1.2 *In-work poverty and the labour market***

### **1.2.1 *In-work poverty and its relationship to unemployment***

The issue of people moving repeatedly between work and unemployment is an endemic problem in the UK and has risen by 60 per cent since 2006, mostly as a result of the recession. (Goulden, 2010:1)

In their research into the dynamics of poverty over time, Smith and Middleton (2007) identified that persistent poverty over an extended period is relatively rare. Some experience poverty as a transient, one-off experience but many experience recurrent episodes of poverty across extended periods of time. Indeed, over a six to eight year period about a third of the population of the UK was found to have experienced poverty at least once – 'twice as much as the average point-in-time poverty rate' (Smith & Middleton, 2007:2). Recurrent episodes of poverty were related to the fact that income rarely rose enough to lift people far above the poverty threshold, thus leaving them at risk of re-entering poverty (Smith & Middleton 2007).

Shildrick *et al.* (2010) relate this churning in and out of poverty to existence at the bottom end of the labour market. Rather than work enabling people to escape from poverty, they found that the replacement of better-quality jobs in the local economy with low-skilled, low-paid and insecure employment (the causes of which are

explored later) has led to a predominant experience of recurring poverty. This was characterised by a moving in and out of low-paying jobs. Goulden (2010) found that some cycling in and out of work in this manner never managed to rise above the poverty level. Poor provision of support between times of employment and unemployment led to failures in benefit take-up and the consequent accumulation of debt, which contributed to experiences of poverty even during times of work.

Young adults shared a long-term employment history comprised of churning, non-progressive movement around low-level jobs, training places and 'the dole'. (Shildrick et al., 2010:8-9)

Craine (1997) studied young peoples' experiences of this churning process and found that participants' could be categorised into three groups. Most young people involved in the study experienced either a 'cyclical transition' or a 'protracted transition' (Craine, 1997:137-138). Both types were characterised by rapid movement between unemployment, underemployment, government schemes, and work in the informal economy. The two types of transition were distinguishable by their ultimate outcome, with protracted transitions leading to some form of stable employment and cyclical transitions leading to ultimate disillusionment with the labour market and a move into 'alternative careers' (Craine, 1997:145). As will be affirmed later, these churning processes are a major factor for those experiencing in-work poverty, although the findings of this research will suggest that some people continue to experience churning processes throughout a majority of their working lives without ever either 'giving up' on the labour market or finding secure jobs.

### **1.2.2 *In-work poverty, globalisation and labour market change***

Harris (1988) describes three factors associated with globalisation that came together in the 1970s to exert a major influence on the UK economy. These are: the growth of a huge reserve of labour in developing countries, employed on low wages and under poor terms of employment; the de-skilling of jobs associated with the division and subdivision of production processes; and the development of transport and communications techniques that have allowed corporations to plan their production on a worldwide basis. By providing access to cheap, accessible labour,

these changes encouraged and facilitated the relocation of the manufacturing elements of many businesses to developing countries. This led to a process of deindustrialisation within the UK after almost three decades of relative prosperity and growth following the Second World War.

Winckler (2010) describes drastic changes that have taken place in the Welsh labour market since the late 1970s, partly as a result of these global influences. These changes were characterised by rapid increases in unemployment, with one in seven of Wales's jobs disappearing between 1979 and 1984. Winckler suggests that male unemployment has 'never recovered'. This long-term decline in the UK's manufacturing industry is associated with a parallel growth in service sector jobs (Allen & Massey, 1998). This shift in labour market characteristics continues today. Blyton and Jenkins (2011) describe the experiences of those made redundant following the recent closure of the Burberry garment factory in South Wales. Workers found themselves 'adrift' in a labour market in which secure, well-paid manufacturing jobs had been replaced by part-time, variable hours service sector jobs, which were less favourable in terms of income and work-life balance.

Today, **involuntary** part-time working, underemployment and variability in working patterns are increasing features of mature labour markets and Wales is no exception. (Author's emphasis) (Blyton & Jenkins 2011:5)

This new low pay landscape has been influenced by significant changes in the nature of production. Deindustrialisation has been accompanied by a move from a Fordist structure of production, characterised by mass production of particular models on long assembly lines, towards a neo-Fordist structure focused on the 'development of flexible specialization.' (Harris, 1988:33). Characteristic of this change is a new emphasis from employers on flexibility in terms of technology, suppliers and workforce (Allen & Massey, 1988) as an approach to managing the risks associated with peaks and troughs in customer demand (Blyton & Jenkins, 2011) and in order to compete in a globalised economy. For employees this involves part-time hours, shift-work and a range of temporary contracts. In this sense 'workforce flexibility is employer driven and benefits the employer not the worker' (Blyton & Jenkins, 2011:13).



The years from 1945 to about 1975 should be characterised as an era of security and stability, or the **era of statutory regulation**, whereas from the mid-1970s until the late 1990s there was an **era of market regulation**, in which greater insecurity came with the pursuit of flexibility. (Author's emphasis) (Standing, 1999:47)

Ultimately, Standing (1999) believes, this new emphasis on labour market flexibility is about control and has been accompanied by a shift in power towards the employer and away from the worker. A key contributor towards this shift has been the threat of job loss through rationalisation, enabling management to impose changes in working practices (Massey & Meegan, 1982). Byrne (2005) discusses this phenomenon in terms of the 'reserve army of labour', this being the mass of workers seeking work but currently unemployed. His contention is that this reserve army is in fact an essential aspect of the current capitalist system, providing, as it does, two functions. 'It exists in order to enable expansion of production without increase in unit labour costs. It exists in order to discipline employed workers through the threat of substitution' (Byrne, 2005:42). Rather than social exclusion being a result of individual or group behaviour, then, it is a necessary feature of a capitalist system orientated towards a flexible labour market (Byrne 2005). As will be seen later, this focus on the needs of post-industrial capitalism has also meant the subordination of social policy towards the goal of labour market flexibility.

In post-democratic societies, corporate interests dominate the political system. (Byrne, 2005:31)

The impact of globalisation in the UK, then, includes: high unemployment; a labour market characterised by insecure, part time, low paid jobs; a shift of power from employee to employer; and the aligning of government behind an agenda of increased labour market flexibility. The resulting disempowerment of workers will emerge as a key theme later and will be explored in detail from the research participants' perspective in terms of worker autonomy, agency and control.

### ***1.2.3 Globalisation and workplace experiences***

Ritzer (2000) has described in detail the processes of rationalisation that have taken place in the workplace in recent decades, motivated by a need to compete in a

globalised labour market through increased efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. These express themselves in a desire to minimise human performance to a series of quantifiable tasks that are easily controllable by management. The individual's freedom to choose a means to an end is removed and '...by making few, if any, judgements, people begin to resemble human robots or computers...' (Ritzer, 2000:25) These processes of rationalisation push down the quality of jobs by denying the chance for workers to express their human skills and abilities. Work towards the lower end of the labour market is thus increasingly dehumanising and unsatisfying and mirrors the wider new power dynamics characterising employer/worker relationships. As will be explored later, these factors relating to the quality and 'humanity' of working experiences can be extremely important to workers who, as one might expect, desire to spend their days in meaningful and satisfying activity. To assume otherwise would seem to involve identifying those at the bottom of the labour market as less than human. The quote from Henry Ford (below) provides evidence that this type of thinking does indeed exist and that it has been to justify dehumanising working conditions.

Repetitive labour – the doing of one thing over and over again and always in the same way – is a terrifying prospect to a certain kind of mind. It is terrifying to me. I could not possibly do the same thing day in and day out, but to other minds, perhaps I might say to the majority of minds, repetitive operations hold no terrors. In fact, to some types of mind thought is absolutely appalling. To them the ideal job is one where creative instinct need not be expressed. (Henry Ford, cited in Ritzer, 2000:111)

An example of the dehumanising aspects of some poor work was provided by the Financial Times recently in their description of working conditions at an Amazon warehouse (O'Connor, 2013). Staff were expected to walk up to fourteen miles a day to retrieve stock, with many suffering from blisters due to the provision of inappropriate footwear. Each worker was supplied with a handheld computer that 'gave them a real-time indication of whether they were running behind or ahead of their target and by how much.' (O'Connor, 2013). Managers were regularly texting these devices to tell staff to speed up and were also warning workers not to waste time by talking to colleagues. (O'Connor, 2013).

"You're sort of like a robot, but in human form," said the Amazon manager. "It's human automation, if you like." (O'Connor, 2013)

"The feedback we're getting is it's like being in a slave camp..." (Garner 2013, cited in O'Connor, 2013)

In-work poverty is not just about low-income then. Instead, the bottom end of the labour market is characterised by part-time, insecure, poor quality (sometimes dehumanising), low paid work. Brown and Scase (1991) have coined the term 'poor work' to capture the multi-faceted nature of this contemporary experience.

Poor work is the big story in any flexible labour market. (Byrne, 2005:72)

### **1.3 Poor work and government policy**

#### **1.3.1 Poor work and welfare**

Government welfare policy exists in a dynamic relationship with economic policies and related changes in the labour market. In recent decades government policy has tended to focus on unemployment as a supply-side problem, assuming that worklessness is related to a lack of skills or motivation, not a lack of jobs, with the primary goal therefore being to increase employment levels amongst the workless. Crisp *et al.* (2009) demonstrate that, in recent years, New Labour and Conservative approaches have been similar in this respect. This supply-side focus has led to policy approaches focused on compelling the workless to work. It has also, significantly, failed to foster many policy approaches aimed at stimulating demand for labour. This approach is attributable to a philosophy that 'market capitalism will work well and that the only role of the political systems of the collectivity is to ensure that the recalcitrance of the idle is overcome by appropriate discipline' (Byrne, 2005:34).

Grover (2008) describes this supply-side focus in terms of a shift from Keynesian to neo-liberal thinking under the Conservative Government of the late 70s, 80s and early 90s. He associates this period with 'a concerted attack on entry-level wages...and changes to the social security system that saw levels of benefits eroded and the authoritarianism of the benefit regime increased' (Grover, 2008:9). This authoritarian and coercive approach to welfare, according to Paz-Fuchs (2008), replaces the traditional assumption of the equal status of every citizen with a

contractual approach, which makes equality of status contingent on certain behaviour in relation to the labour market. The result, rather than increased social inclusion, is systematic and structural exclusion. Standing (1999) links this new authoritarianism with a resurrected distinction between the 'deserving poor' and the 'undeserving poor', descriptions that gained increased traction through renewed discussions regarding the existence of an 'underclass' in the UK (Lister, 1996) and which provide language that on the one hand captures the two tier society created by social exclusion, whilst on the other hand locating the responsibility firmly with the excluded.

New Labour continued the supply-side focus to welfare provision (or 'welfare to work'), demonstrated through their 'Making Work Pay' strategy. This policy approach combined the formation of a National Minimum Wage (NMW) (the first of its kind in the UK) with the provision of in-work relief (consisting of Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit and Childcare Tax Credit) (Grover, 2005). Davis *et al.* (2012) provide evidence that families on low incomes 'have become heavily dependent' on this kind of government support to top up wages. Indeed, the Bevan Foundation (2006) discovered that the number of working families in receipt of tax credits in Wales doubled between 2001 and 2006. Despite evidence that this approach did indeed leave certain working groups better off, the strategy continued to place the needs of employers as central. Both Blyton and Jenkins (2011) and Grover (2005) describe the provision of wage supplementation as a direct subsidy to employers, enabling them to keep wages down and thus 'institutionalising low pay' (Grover, 2005:11). Indeed Paz-Fuchs (2008:2) identifies the active increase in the flexibility of the labour market as a key aim of the welfare to work programme. This approach has left huge numbers of working people on low pay vulnerable to tax credit cuts.

Social policies, especially social security and labour market policy, have become dominated by productivist, rather than welfarist concerns. In this context low wages per se are not seen as being problematic as they merely represent another cost of production which needs to be constrained within global markets. (Grover 2005:11)

From some perspectives, then, welfare to work policy approaches can be viewed as supporting the increasing flexibility of the labour market through an authoritarian approach to benefit provision (used to coerce people into low paid work) and the

subsidising of low pay through in-work benefits provision, thus supporting social exclusion as a structural feature of the labour market. Standing (1999) discusses the policy emphasis on compulsion to work in terms of control and choice. He contends that loss of self-control over work in the face of coercive welfare policy and employer power is at the heart of the 'social malaise, the unhappiness of humanity.' (Standing, 1999:44). Evidence that this is indeed a defining characteristic of experiences at the bottom of the labour market will be presented and discussed later.

### ***1.3.2 Current coalition party welfare and economic policy***

So what of the current Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government's approach to welfare and economic policy? The evidence so far points to a continued commitment to market flexibility through de-regulation, coercion to work through strategic use of welfare policy, and a weakening of a commitment to 'making work pay.' This marks a continuation of the neo-liberal paradigm which emerged in the late 1970s, following the collapse of the post-war Keynesian consensus. Indeed George Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, explicitly associated himself with neo-liberal values when he committed himself to a 'smaller government' during his speech to the conservative conference in 2012, focusing this reduction on both cuts to welfare provision (£10 billion of welfare savings by the first full year of the next parliament) and economic deregulation (Osborne, 2012). His commitment to deregulation was expressed through support for proposals by Michael Fallon (Minister of State for Business and Enterprise) to 'do away with' 3,000 regulations that hamper business in a 'bonfire of regulations' (Hennessy, 2012). The most recent example of this deregulation involves the introduction of a policy which will enable employers to offer shares worth between £2,000 and £50,000 in exchange for a loss of employee rights related to unfair dismissal, redundancy and requests for flexible working (Wintour, 2012). Aspects of this policy may appear promising in relation to the issues of disempowerment discussed earlier, in that it seems to offer increased organisational power to workers (albeit in exchange for traditional rights). This will be discussed later.

So what about low pay under the coalition government? Once again George Osborne's Conservative conference speech provided an interesting insight when he asked 'How can we justify giving flats to young people who have never worked, when working people twice their age are still living with their parents because they can't afford their first home?' (Osborne, 2012). The presence of those who can't afford a reasonable standard of living, despite working, was diagnosed as a problem with the welfare system, rather than with low-paying work. It is this interpretation that has led to the introduction of 'universal credit', which will constitute vast changes to the provision of welfare in the UK. A key intention of the policy is to simplify the benefits system by bringing 30 separate benefits into a single payment. The approach is also intended to promote 'behaviour change' by incentivising work (Czerniawski, 2011). However, rather than promoting increased wages for working people 'the key mechanism for making work pay will be a single taper to withdraw support as earnings rise and a new approach to earnings disregards.' (Department of Work and Pensions, 2012). In practice this means that low-paid workers will be able to keep more of their benefits for longer as their income from wages increases leaving them better off than those not in work. Thus, rather than 'making work pay', welfare provision will continue to subsidise low pay.

In fact there is no mention of low pay in George Osborne's speech or in the DWP documents outlining Universal Credit (Department for Work and Pensions, 2012). There is also no mention of the contribution low-pay makes to in-work poverty in the work of the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) (the think tank created by Iain Duncan-Smith that provides much of the thinking behind Conservative welfare policies). Instead, they have been central in a drive by the Conservative government to redefine poverty away from a focus on income (Gentleman, 2012). Justified by a desire to move away from measures that are deemed arbitrary (e.g. defining poverty according to national median income) and to include measures of 'quality of life' (Social Justice Policy Group, 2006) the CSJ have instead defined five 'pathways to poverty'. These include family breakdown, educational failure, economic dependence, indebtedness and addictions. (Social Justice Policy Group, 2006). This change in focus, according to Lister and Bennett (2010), 'represents a behavioural and cultural analysis which attributes the underlying causes of poverty to the failings of individuals rather than to socio-economic structural factors' locating concepts of

poverty once again in the realm of deserving and undeserving. This agenda has been pushed forward publicly in recent months through the active promotion of a 'striver vs skiver' narrative which has aimed to create a dichotomy between the 'hard working' and the unemployed. This re-packaging of the 'deserving vs undeserving' rhetoric, according to Angel (2013) 'increasingly frames the debate about social security and the welfare state' and, as will be seen, is influencing the perception of the poor towards themselves and each other, and of the rest of society towards the poor.

The CSJ recognises that 'dependency on out-of-work benefits has been replaced by dependency on tax credits' (Lister & Bennett, 2010). Rather than developing policies aimed at tackling low pay and underemployment, there are now clear efforts underway to associate the working poor with the 'undeserving' or 'skivers' in order to justify increasingly coercive welfare policies. Employment ministers have recently made clear their wish to 'target the working poor by asking 1 million in-work recipients of tax credits to do more to boost their earnings' (Wintour, 2013). Policies are now being explored that will give Job Centre staff new powers to withdraw universal credit if claimants are not deemed to be doing enough to increase their income (Wintour, 2013). A recent statement from the DWP stated that "The Welfare Reform Act enables us to place a wide range of mandatory requirements on this group (e.g. work search, work availability and work preparation requirements)" (DWP, cited in Wintour, 2013). Thus the working poor are increasingly being absorbed into the same coercive welfare approaches as the non-working poor, while low paying employers escape questions regarding the impact of their unequal pay levels.

There is a contradiction at the heart of Conservative policy. On the one hand there is an acknowledgement that in-work poverty is increasingly a problem. However, the drive towards a flexible and globally competitive labour market will not allow talk of a need for increased wages, and instead demands ongoing deregulation. In order to facilitate this, poverty is being redefined in a manner that distances it from traditional income based definitions towards an emphasis on the responsibility of the individual. This increasingly extends to the poor in work, as well as the unemployed poor. This approach is supported by the promotion of a deserving vs undeserving poor

narrative, thus creating a situation in which unemployment and underemployment are increasingly stigmatised within society.

### **1.3.3 The role of social attitudes**

Evidence suggests that the coalition government's approach, outlined above, has coincided with changes in the way society perceives unemployment, welfare and benefits. The 2012 British Social Attitudes survey found that 'people are more sceptical about whether benefit recipients deserve the help they receive than during the last recession in the early 1990s.' (Park *et al.*, 2012:1). The increase in these negative views towards the role of welfare in supporting the poor largely took place during Labour's period in government. However, Park *et al.* (2012:12) point out that 'the view now shared by half the population – that current welfare benefits encourage dependence – clearly also chimes with the rationale claimed by the Coalition for its welfare reforms.' Interestingly, despite this, much higher levels (37%) felt that 'rewarding those who work or look for work' should be a first or second highest priority. This suggests that there is some way to go before the general public perceive the working poor as 'undeserving' alongside the non-working poor. There may, then, be levels of support amongst the public for policy approaches to increasing pay and conditions for those currently working in low-paid, low-quality jobs.

Research conducted in deprived neighbourhoods by Crisp *et al.* (2009) found that some of those in employment held negative perceptions about their workless neighbours. This is backed up by Shildrick *et al.* (2010) who found that participants in their research emphasised the role of individual culpability in relation to poverty. There is evidence here that poor people themselves are internalising the deserving vs undeserving rhetoric (as will be seen, this is supported by findings from this research). However, the British Social Attitudes Survey found that those who are socio-economically more advantaged 'are least likely to endorse the government's role as the main provider of welfare.' (Park *et al.*, 2012:15). Interestingly, since the recession there has been a drop in the number of those in routine occupations who believe that 'people would "stand on their own two feet" if benefits were less



generous' (Park *et al.*, 2012:16), evidence perhaps that those at the lower end of the labour market are becoming more aware of the demand-side nature of contemporary unemployment. It seems that attitudes towards welfare are polarising in line with increasing levels of socio-economic inequality.

### **1.3.4 Welsh Government policy**

Growth and sustainable jobs are at the heart of the programme for Government and jobs and the economy are the Welsh Government's over-riding priorities. (Welsh Government, 2012:13)

Whilst the power to oversee welfare policy is not currently devolved, Welsh Government rhetoric regarding poverty is noticeably different from that of the current UK government. Whilst still broadly set within a neo-liberal framework, the Welsh Government's 'Tackling Poverty Action Plan' identifies the lack of good quality jobs as a key aspect of in-work poverty and this leads to a commitment to demand-side approaches which aim to stimulate the creation of nearly 10,000 new jobs. Within the document there are policies aimed at encouraging businesses to commit to 'good employment practices, such as flexible working arrangements to encourage the creation of jobs that are accessible for parents and other carers.' (Welsh Government, 2012:16). However, as with Conservative ministers' approach to the concept of a living wage (which is discussed below), businesses are to be encouraged to take up these positive employment practices *voluntarily*. Neither the UK coalition government or the Welsh Government seems to perceive a role for the state in legislating for these practices.

## **1.4 Responses to poor work**

One potential policy response to in-work poverty is the promotion of a living wage. In contrast to social policies such as the 'Making Work Pay' strategy, the concept of a living wage aims to 'restrict the capitalist enterprise' (Grover, 2005:11). It is calculated according to the basic cost of living in the UK and is currently set at £8.55 in London and £7.45 in the rest of the UK (£1.26 higher than the current national

minimum wage of £6.19) (Living Wage Foundation, 2013). In October 2012 research by KPMG found that 4.82 million workers (one in five) 'are likely to have inadequate standards of living because they are being paid less than the living wage. (The Guardian, 2012b). High profile campaigns such as Citizens UK's Living Wage Campaign (Citizens UK, 2012) have led to rapidly increasing support for a living wage, with vocal support from the Conservative Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, and the Labour Party leader, Ed Miliband. Prime Minister David Cameron supports the concept in principle but only as a voluntary option, stating that "we are not proposing to require it of businesses. Requiring people to pay it would reduce the flexibility businesses have and could ultimately be a bad thing for jobs." (Cameron 2012, cited in Mulholland & Wintour, 2012).

Despite the success of campaign groups like Citizens UK, the strength of organised labour to campaign and fight for policy change has been undermined significantly, with union membership falling in recent years, particularly in the private sector (Brownlie, 2012). Some see potential in alternative grassroots approaches, which have been shown to be effective in re-balancing power back towards workers, enabling them to improve their own working conditions. Ryder (n.d.) believes worker cooperatives could provide an alternative route to workplace democracy to the traditional adversarial approach of the unions. Cato (2004) sees worker cooperatives, in which workers own and run a company with the aim of retaining the 'rewards of their own labour and that of their families' (Birchall 1997:228), as an indigenous response to failed externally enforced free-market approaches to regeneration in the South Wales valleys. She believes that cooperative principles (identified by Birchall (1997:221) as 'voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, member economic participation, autonomy/independence, education/training, co-operation among co-ops and concern for community') are better suited to a Welsh culture that values 'self-reliance and mutual support' (Cato 2004:226). Interestingly, the Welsh Government has recently established an independent commission which will make recommendations on growing and developing the co-operative and mutual economy in Wales (Hart, 2012). There may, then, be significant future governmental support for this approach, which will be a key aspect of the recommendations from this research.

Cooperative businesses that prioritize making a living above making a profit and that involve their workers in workplace decisions or are even wholly owned by their workers would be a far better 'fit' with the local culture than the individualist entrepreneurial model propagated by government agencies. (Cato, 2004:227)

## **1.5 Conclusion and research aims**

Globalisation and the consequent de-industrialisation of the UK has led to an increasingly flexible labour market characterised by low paid, insecure, part time, low-quality work. Government policy has been increasingly orientated towards supporting this flexibility through deregulation, the subsidising of low pay, the coercive use of welfare policy and the stigmatising of the working and unemployed poor. As Beresford *et al.* (1992:24) state, 'one key group has been conspicuous by its absence so far in poverty discussion and policy development – people with experience of poverty themselves...They have rarely been included in discussions about the key focuses of dominant debates...'

The aim of this research is to take seriously the views and concerns of those experiencing poor work. How do they describe and define their experiences, what are their aspirations for their working lives, and how might poor work be turned into 'good work'?

Good work adds meaning to life; bad work leads to demoralisation for people and their communities (Cato, 2004:xv)

## **Chapter two: Methodology**

### ***2.1 Theoretical underpinning***

#### ***2.1.1 The qualitative approach and General Systems Theory***

The fundamental aim of this research has been to gain a new, deeper and more detailed understanding of experiences of poor work by accessing the seldom heard voices of those experiencing the circumstances under investigation and to use this information to inform useful action aimed at changing these circumstances. The most effective methods to achieve these goals can be located in a qualitative approach to research. Creswell (2007:36) describes qualitative research as ‘a situated activity that locates the observer in the world...attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them’. A qualitative approach enables the centrality of participants’ subjective experiences whilst also accommodating the interpretation and reflexivity of the researcher.

There has been a particular concern here to understand individual experiences of poor work within the wider social, economic and political structures that influence these experiences. For this reason the research has been influenced by General Systems Theory, an approach based on the belief that ‘The only hope of understanding any particular thing is by placing it in the appropriate system context and following the processes by which it acts.’ (Greenwood & Levin, 2007:58). Aspects of the system context, in this case, have been explored in the literature review, while the adoption of a qualitative approach to research design has aimed to explore the experiences of individuals within this system

#### ***2.1.2 Participatory Action Research***

...the acting out of power becomes the best way of creating knowledge, which in turn reinforces power. (Stoecker, 2009:398)

Participatory Action Research (PAR) 'rests on processes of collaborative knowledge development and action design involving local stakeholders as full partners in a mutual learning process.' (Greenwood & Levin, 2007:1). As a broad theory PAR emphasises the participation of local community members and the importance of action as an outcome of research. Stoecker (2009:397) claims that 'knowledge is generally produced by only a small group of researchers, educators and other credentialed professionals who exert substantial control over the production process.' This makes much generated knowledge irrelevant to lived experiences, particularly for those experiencing social exclusion. Stoecker sees Participatory Action Research as an approach capable of including the excluded in the task of developing knowledge, and of developing action based on this knowledge. The intention of using a Participatory Action Research model here has been twofold – to enable the inclusion of those experiencing poor work in research into poor work, and to ensure that this research leads to action aimed at supporting improved experiences. For this approach to be successful it was essential to understand the context of the research, to successfully engage participants from within this context, and to consider the kind of actions that might be recommended and implemented.

## ***2.2 Context, participation and action***

### ***2.2.1 Research context***

The design and implementation of the fieldwork was heavily influenced by my own working and living circumstances, particularly in terms of the access these have afforded to participants with experiences relevant to the research topic. I have been employed as a Community Development Worker on the Welsh Government's Communities First scheme for over six years, working in the community of Ely and Caerau in West Cardiff. I have lived in Caerau for over five of those years.

Ely and Caerau were identified for inclusion in the Communities First programme due to high levels of multiple deprivation, with relatively high percentages of the population experiencing unemployment and/or low income. Ely and Caerau have

proud histories, with Ely being built immediately after the first world war according to 'garden city' principles, and Caerau being built after the second world war to provide good quality housing for those returning from the war and those still living in inner city slums. However, the community's more recent history is one of de-industrialisation and the consequent loss of thousands of jobs. Local major employers that have left the area since the early 1970s include Ely Paper Mill, Chivers jam and pickle factory, Ely Hospital, two brickworks, Ely Brewery and a fizzy drinks factory. Many local people worked for these companies or had family members who worked for them. They are perceived locally to have been good quality, secure jobs that were rooted in the local community.

Ely Paper Mill was founded in 1865 and was a reliable source of income for the local economy and provided jobs for many Ely residents...The Mill closed in 1999 resulting in a loss of 460 jobs. The site was subsequently knocked down and flattened, removing all trace of the Mill's history. (Dewey, 2012)

"The Paper Mill was a big part of the community in Ely. Anything they didn't need or have use for was given to local people. They would then use the paper to make tablecloths or use it to draw on. People could find all kinds of uses for paper." (Ex-employee of Ely Paper Mill, cited in Dewey, 2012)

Over the past six years significant efforts have been made towards the regeneration of Ely and Caerau through the Communities First programme. Community development approaches have been used to generate a large and active network of community members and groups whose efforts are co-ordinated through a thriving timebank scheme (an alternative currency which pays residents for their contributions to community projects). Projects have been developed aimed at tackling local unemployment through training and support into employment opportunities. The recent creation of 'ACE – Action in Caerau and Ely' has provided a community owned and managed development trust with a remit to explore and develop social enterprise activity.

### **2.2.2 Potential action**

Stoecker (2009) emphasises the importance of a 'social change strategy' in effective Participatory Action Research and it was indeed important to define the kinds of

action which the research hopes to support in order to develop effective research processes. Broadly, it is hoped that this research will make policy recommendations aimed at improving the lot of those experiencing poor work whilst support ongoing community regeneration efforts in Ely and Caerau, particularly through the work of ACE. Within this wider aim there are a number of potential types of action which might be supported by the research:

- A key aim has been to present and promote the views of people who have experienced poor work. It is hoped, in this sense, that the findings will make a useful contribution to the current body of research.
- It was hoped that participants would develop an increased understanding of their own experiences of poor work and the external influences on these experiences through participation in the research process. Freire (1970) describes this 'ongoing dynamic of research, critical education and community action' (Ledwith, 1997:71) as 'conscientisation'. The ethical implications of this approach will be explored later.
- It was hoped that policy recommendations might be made to ACE regarding their employment practices and their approach to social enterprise development in Ely and Caerau.
- There is the potential to use this initial research to seek resources for further research or for the development of pilot employment projects.

Ely and Caerau have provided a useful opportunity to explore the impact of de-industrialisation on individual experiences of work. My own relationships with colleagues, volunteers, project beneficiaries, neighbours and friends allowed access to a large pool of potential willing research participants. These prior relationships meant that participants perceived me as 'an insider', someone who understands them and is sympathetic to their circumstances. As will be seen, this allowed for a relatively comprehensive exploration of poor work through in depth discussion. Current community regeneration activity in the area has provided a context in which this research might influence ongoing action, enabling participants' contributions to be located in a wider Participatory Action Research process.

## **2.3 Research design**

### **2.3.1 Multiple method research**

In order to effectively engage participants in a process of research and action it was important to both explore previous experiences of poor work in some depth *and* to facilitate a creative process of imagining aspirations for future working experiences. Multiple methods were combined with the aim of achieving this including 'narrative research', 'phenomenology' and 'grounded theory research'.

### **2.3.2 Narrative research**

The first stage of the research process was concerned with exploring experiences of poor work in some depth. According to Creswell (2007:54-55), 'Narrative research is best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals' and can be used to create a 'written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected.' For this reason it was decided that individual interviews would be used to plot chronological employment biographies. The second half of each interview would then be used to reflect on each job within the employment history in terms of the positive and negative experiences of the participant, allowing in depth discussions to take place regarding multiple experiences of work.

### **2.3.3 Phenomenological Research**

It was important to use the data gathered through the individual interviews to develop a coherent understanding of shared experiences of poor work (rather than settling for a series of individual accounts which, although interesting in their own right, provide no description of common characteristics which could be used to propose action for change.) Creswell (2007:58) explains that 'Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon...The basic



purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence'. This approach was used in phase two of the research process and, in this case, involved the analysis of the interview data and the formation of a 'phenomenology of poor work', a description of the common themes and factors that emerged during the interviews. Creswell (2007) proposes the need to explore two aspects of a phenomenon with participants, the textural ('what have you experienced?') and the structural ('what contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences?'). This insight influenced the design of the first stage interviews, as will be seen, as it was considered that both factors were important in understanding poor work, with the structural aspect allowing exploration of issues raised in the literature review and focusing discussions on actionable outcomes.

#### **2.3.4 Grounded Theory research**

The final stage of the research process was motivated by the desire to propose a 'theory of good work', based on participants' aspirations for their working lives, which would form the basis of action. The approach taken was influenced by 'Grounded Theory Research' which is motivated by a concern that 'theories should be "grounded" in data from the field, especially in the actions, interactions, and social processes of people' (Creswell, 2007:63). An exploration of previous experiences of poor work through individual interviews during the first phase of the research created a context in which aspirations for 'good' work could be usefully explored. It was decided that a focus group involving all the interview participants would be the best approach for exploring this 'theory of good work'. This is because, as Morgan (1997:2) states 'the hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group.' Exploring aspirations is essentially a creative process of exploring what might be. It was felt that the group interaction inherent in a focus group would be best suited to promoting this type of reflection.

## **2.4 Fieldwork**

### **2.4.1 Research sample**

The participants in the study need to be carefully chosen to be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon in question. (Creswell, 2007:62)

Rather than selecting a random group of participants, or offering an open invitation for involvement to a large list of contacts, a process of 'purposive sampling' was used (Morgan, 1997:35). This was made possible by the large network of individuals known to me in Ely and Caerau. Individuals invited to participate shared two pre-defined characteristics. Firstly, they were known to have had some experience of 'poor work'. This ensured that they were in a position to share information about experiences relevant to the research topic. Secondly, it was decided that all participants would be male. Time and resource limitations permitted only a small sample and it was felt that the involvement of male and female participants would introduce an even wider range of factors than was already likely. The flight of key employers from the community of Ely and Caerau has, on the most part, been associated with traditionally 'male' manufacturing work, and it is the subsequent experiences of male workers that is the focus of this research. Six participants were recruited. Whilst this is a relatively small sample, it was felt that time limitations would not allow the kind of in depth exploration necessary to explore the complex interplay of poor work factors with more participants. Interviews were long and detailed and provided a large amount of data for analysis. Limiting the number of participants kept this process manageable in the given timescales.

### **2.4.2 Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with each of the six participants. These took place at the Communities First offices. The location was chosen for ease of access (it was accessible on foot for all interviewees) and because it was familiar to most participants, helping to ensure they were at ease. A brief introduction was

given before each interview outlining the aims of the research, how the interview would be conducted and giving an indication of the kind of questions that could be expected. The interviews themselves were divided into two halves. The first half used a pre-prepared template to plot a chronological 'employment biography' containing key details of the participants employment history. Talking the interviewee through their working history in chronological order acted as a useful introduction to the topic and helped to ensure that key experiences weren't left out from subsequent discussions. (All six employment biographies are presented in appendix one).

The second half of the interview used a number of prompt questions (see appendix two) to discuss key experiences in each of the jobs described in the employment biography. Prompt questions were aimed at collecting both textural and structural information (Creswell, 2007). Each interview lasted between one and one and a half hours and was recorded using a laptop and microphone. Employment biographies were typed up afterwards and notes were made of key themes. Key areas of interest were transcribed from the recordings.

Participants proved very willing to discuss their working histories and experiences in detail. This was partly related to the established nature of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee but was also because participants perceived the opportunity of sharing their experiences, and of being listened to, as rare and significant.

*"How did you feel about talking about these things?" – Interviewer*

*"I thought it was alright. It's nice to know that people's taking the time to, just to understand the ways of life basically...cos no-one bothers to listen...it's very limited I reckon, the people that sit there and listen..." - Jim*

### **2.4.3 Phenomenology**

Once all six interviews were completed interview notes, recordings and employment biographies were analysed for 'significant statements...sentences or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon'. (Creswell, 2007:61). These significant statements were then grouped into common themes that emerged across interviews. These themes were prepared in note form ready to present to participants at the beginning of the focus group (see appendix three).

#### **2.4.4 Focus group**

The final element of the fieldwork was to consist of a single focus group with all six interview participants. The aim was twofold – firstly to present the poor work phenomenology back to the group and to seek comments and agreement of the content, thus providing a form of validation for the findings of the interview stage. Secondly, to use the exploration of poor work experiences achieved through the individual interviews to collectively develop a theory of 'good' work. The focus group began with a simple introduction explaining the purpose of the process and giving a brief explanation of what to expect from the discussion. The phenomenology was presented to the group verbally as 'key findings' from the interview phase (this took approximately ten minutes). Feedback was requested regarding whether participants believed the summary captured their views and experiences. Following a discussion regarding these findings a 'funnel-based' approach was used to facilitate group conversation around 'work aspirations', allowing the first stage of the discussion to take place in a free, unstructured, participant-led manner (Morgan, 1997:41) before pre-prepared prompt questions were used later in the process to ensure key themes were covered before the end of the discussion (appendix three).

As with the interviews, the focus group was carried out in the Communities First offices. The session lasted one and a half hours and was recorded using a laptop and microphone. Again, key sections of the discussion were transcribed from the recording ready for analysis.

#### **2.4.5 Problems and resolutions**

Participants' employment biographies covered periods ranging from 23 to 36 years and although most were able to provide a reasonably comprehensive account of their job history, there were a small handful of occasions when interviewees struggled to remember details. Usually these 'hazy' periods covered approximately two years of an employment biography and were characterised by the kind of rapid churning between short term jobs described in the literature review. These periods were usually described in broad terms:

*"So what happened then?" - Interviewer*

*"Erm, that's kind of it...been doing bits and bobs." - Mike*

Efforts were made to unpack these periods using prompt questions (e.g. 'Can you perhaps tell me a bit more about that period?') If this approach failed to access more detailed information then prompt questions were used to explore the general experiences and feelings of these periods (e.g. 'How did you feel about work during this period?')

It became clear after the second interview that whilst participants were providing detailed information about a range of factors, they were giving significantly less information related to pay and income. It was important to explore these issues as a key factor of poor work. For this reason the prompt questions were adjusted slightly to actively seek more detailed reflections on these issues from subsequent participants using open questions. Some of these questions aimed to explore why pay was mentioned less than other factors by discussing participants priorities and key concerns (e.g. 'what aspects are most important for you in a job?')

Unfortunately only three of the participants attended the focus group due to various personal circumstances. However, the discussion was extremely useful in validating the initial findings from the individual interviews (as discussed under 'analysis') and

the lower number of participants allowed for a more in depth discussion of key issues. This led to a particularly interesting and detailed discussion regarding the structural aspects of poor work and participants' political and social views, more of which later.

## **2.5 Analysis**

The commitment to a Participatory Action Research approach extended to a desire to involve participants in the analysis and validation of data. This was achieved through a cyclical approach involving initial researcher analysis of data from interviews, the presentation of this analysis back to participants for comment and further discussion, and, finally, further researcher analysis incorporating new data and insights.

Initially the data from the first phase interviews was used to produce a list of key emerging themes (a type of phenomenology, as described earlier). Interview sections were then grouped under these theme headings alongside interviewer notes. The key emerging themes were then prepared as a verbal presentation which was given at the beginning of the focus group. This provided a succinct introduction back into the key topics. However, it was also used to seek feedback on the initial analysis. Prompt questions were used to explore whether this basic phenomenology captured key aspects of the participants' experiences of poor work. All three participants recognised elements of the description as accurately capturing aspects of their working experiences, providing a form of validation for the initial first phase interview findings. The consequent conversation provided an opportunity for the group to identify the key themes that particularly 'resonated' with their own experiences.

*"Um, yes, I think that's a fair description of, um, the working life that I've been involved in. There's quite a few of the comments you've made there are, um, relevant and they are, um, yep, well basically they are correct." – Adrian*

*"It rang a bell with me, a few of the things you said." – Danny*

*“Yea I can relate to quite a few of those, yea, definitely.” - Leighton*

This discussion aided a sense of collective common experience which in turn supported further in depth conversation throughout the rest of the focus group.

In order to complete the process, data from the focus group was analysed for new themes. Finally, all data from the initial interview stage, the phenomenological work, and the focus group, was grouped under the full range of key themes. These key themes were grouped under overarching topics and formed the basis of the findings

## **2.6 Ethical considerations**

The University of Glamorgan’s ‘General Ethical Guidelines for Research and Consultancy’ and the Economic and Social Research Council’s ‘Framework for Research Ethics’ were used as guides throughout the design and implementation of the research process (University of Glamorgan (2008) and Economic and Social Research Council (2012)). The University of Glamorgan highlight four central concerns when considering the ethical implications of research design: ‘to treat people fairly; to respect the autonomy of individuals; to act with integrity; and to seek the best results by avoiding or minimising harm and by using resources as beneficially as possible.’ (University of Glamorgan, 2008:4)

Participant autonomy was preserved and promoted through the establishment of ‘informed consent’ (University of Glamorgan, 2008:7). This involved providing clear information at the beginning of initial interviews and the focus group before inviting questions and seeking verbal consent to continue with the process. The topic of, and motivation for, the research were described. The research process was explained, including the expectations on the participants in terms of activities and timescales. An explanation of how the data would be used, and who would see it, was offered. This was a chance to outline the proposed actions and some of the intended community benefits of the research. Potential personal benefits of participating in the research were also highlighted. These included the opportunity to

contribute to community regeneration, and payment of 'timecredits' for participation through the community timebank. Interviewees were also offered copies of the final report on completion of the research process.

The Economic and Social Research Council (2012:9) identify the need to take particular care in contexts where research 'might induce psychological stress, anxiety or humiliation'. Given the self-esteem and mental health issues associated with long term unemployment and underemployment it was important to mitigate against such anxiety and stress. The potential for sensitive topics to be introduced during interviews was discussed with each participant before hand (with examples provided). This allowed individuals to express concerns relating to specific subjects before the interviews started. Clear guidance was given on how to respond if certain topics of conversation caused anxiety, and participants were informed that they were entitled to refuse to answer questions, to end interviews, or to leave the focus group at their own discretion.

All data (including recordings of interviews and field notes) was saved on password protected computers. Participant names were changed during the write up of the final report to ensure confidentiality. Similarly, care was taken not to divulge personal, attributable, information from individual interviews during the focus group to ensure confidentiality was maintained amongst participants.

Finally, it was felt that the intended process and outcome of 'conscientisation' (described in the 'Potential Action' section) introduced particular ethical concerns. If participants, through the process of dialogue with each other and the researcher, were to successfully gain new insights into their own situation in regards to 'poor work' how might resulting frustrations be felt and expressed? As will be discussed in terms of reflexivity, it was important that I didn't impose my own political views or interpretations of events. Rather, it was my job to use open questions to facilitate a conversation that would allow participants to develop their own conclusions. Interestingly the focus group did prove to be a forum for the exploration of political views and appeared to prompt some new insights amongst participants (as will be discussed later in the findings). As it turned out, these conversations took place within a wider shared conviction in the value of being in work. Almost any kind of



work was considered more desirable than unemployment, which was associated with past experiences of depression and low self-worth. This meant that, despite frustrations with experiences of work, these were not extreme enough to make unemployment an attractive alternative.

## **2.7 Reflexive considerations**

The particular role that I inhabit in Ely and Caerau (that of community development worker), and the inherent motivations within this research process towards change and action, have required a serious consideration of researcher reflexivity. Greenaway (2010) describes reflexivity as 'critical reflection in relation to a particular study which helps the researcher to explore, learn and understand what they bring to their research and how they influence it.' It has been important, then, to unpack the multiple roles that I currently play in relation to the community of Ely and Caerau and to the participants in this research process. Research participants have included active community members who I have supported professionally, acquaintances, friends and neighbours. This 'closeness' to the community, and to participants, has provided significant opportunities for access to in depth data. However, it has also introduced the potential for my own opinions, feelings and aspirations to influence my approach and the outcomes of my research. Traditional rationalist and objectivist theories of research would perceive this as a weakness. However, according to Steier (1991:4), reflexivity rejects this exclusion of personality 'in the form of personal passion, or emotion, or even intuition.' The approach opts, instead, to unpack and explore these personal influences in a manner that acknowledges (rather than denies) them, and ensures their influence is understood.

The important factor in understanding my influence as researcher is my *motivation* for living and working in Ely and Caerau. I live here, engaged in this form of work, from a commitment to a form of Christian Socialism. This is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, I subscribe to an essentially Marxist interpretation of the workings of the market and of society (Marx & Engels, 1888). This means that I believe the capitalist system has tended to work for the benefit of the wealthy by

exploiting the labour of the poor. This belief influences my perception of the range of factors influencing experiences of poor work.

Secondly, my understanding of my Christian Socialism encourages solidarity with the poor through a conscious 'living alongside' as equals. Holman (1990:21), in discussing the social divisions between the poor and the wealthy, states that 'the creed of socialism cannot accept such divisions...It follows that individuals can practice socialism by sharing. The deprived cannot locate themselves near the privileged. But socialists with the advantage of choice can decide to reside alongside those in greater need than themselves and so be in a position to share their homes, their possessions, their money, their holidays, with those who have less.' There are resonances here with constructionist researchers who 'by (their) attention to reflexivity, attempt to *de-privilege the research class*... even as (they) continue to participate in it.' (Steier,1991:8).

Thirdly, I have not been interested in the generation of knowledge as an end in itself. Like Green (1993), who's socialism inspired her to carry out research amongst striking miners, 'I cannot claim to be objective or detached from the subject-matter of my research – as a socialist my personal and academic endeavours are inextricably linked with struggles for a fundamentally new and egalitarian society' (Green, 1993:108). My primary motivation for this research has been to generate local approaches to change amongst the research participants and the wider community (as discussed earlier).

In acknowledging these influences I have attempted to take a particular approach to this research that ensures a level of objectivity. If my primary motivation is to ensure that people experiencing poor work are able to have their say and to influence related policy and action, then it would be a fundamental betrayal of this desire to impose my own political, social or religious views through the research process. Therefore, as discussed earlier, I have been careful not to share my personal political views with participants. This proved to be hard, particularly as it turned out that participants often did not share my views regarding the causes of poor work and were, in fact (as will be seen later) more likely to take personal responsibility for their circumstances than to see wider structural influences as play. My approach has

been to attempt to stay true to the overall aim of presenting the voices of those experiencing poor work. Whilst it has at times been a challenge to hold back my own opinions, this approach has actually ensured my own integrity to my underlying values and beliefs.

## Chapter Three: Findings

This section presents the findings from the interviews and the focus group. It starts with a broad summary of participants' experiences of poor work, followed by three key themes – 'value and worth', 'social capital and relationships' and 'autonomy, agency and control'. In keeping with a key aim of the research, it is important that those experiencing the phenomenon of poor work are not just able to speak but to express themselves in their own way and in their own words. For this reason extensive quotes have been used, interspersed with commentary and observations. Quotes have been, as far as possible, transcribed word for word.

### ***3.1 Participants' experiences of poor work***

#### ***3.1.1 Short term jobs and experiences of churning***

The six employment biographies covered a total period of approximately 174 years. Of these 174 years, 91 years were spent in formal, declared employment. The remaining 83 years were spent on a mixture of training schemes, full time caring responsibilities and unemployment. The six participants worked a total of 68 jobs throughout their combined employment histories, this meant that the average length of service in any one job was 1.3 years. 46 of the 68 jobs lasted for less than a year. Participants described a number of periods of rapid 'churning' of the kind described by Shildrick *et al.* (2010) and Goulden (2010) (described in the literature review). These lasted for up to two years and usually consisted of a mix of very short term 'formal' jobs, 'informal' or 'grey market' activity and unemployment. Participants often could not recollect individual jobs within these periods so, for the sake of the statistical analysis, they were estimated to include three jobs. In reality this is likely to be an underestimate, meaning that the average number of jobs was probably considerably higher than estimated and the average length of a job considerably less than 1.3 years.

*“A couple of years in and out of jobs again...just doing a job for a month or two...bored of it...went on to the next job...all low wage again.” – Leighton*

Unlike the participants in Craine’s (1997) research, discussed earlier, participants did not either move into secure employment or become disillusioned with the labour market. Instead (as will be seen) they maintained a commitment to work throughout two or three decades whilst experiencing continued job insecurity and related periods of churning.

Interestingly, despite Winckler’s (2010) claim that an excess of part time jobs is a key factor in in-work poverty, the majority of jobs held by participants were full time, with only 13 of the 68 jobs being described as part time. There is evidence here that the characteristics of poor work described in the literature review are impacting on full time work significantly too.

### **3.1.2 Income and poverty**

Participants described the majority of their work in terms such as ‘low paid’ and ‘minimum wage’.

*“So the pay wasn’t brilliant?” - Interviewer*

*“No, it was just basic. I’ve pretty much been on...you know all my jobs have always just been sort of basic.” - Mike*

*“...absolutely rubbish pay...it was barely enough to get by on...it was working out better not working there, being on the dole.” – Leighton*

Four of the participants gave accounts of periods in work when pay was so low they would have been better off “on the dole”. As discussed later, it was a commitment to the inherent value of work over unemployment that kept them in work at these times.

Despite periods of unemployment and low paid work, participants were reluctant to describe their experiences in terms of poverty.

*“Has there ever been a point across this whole history when you’ve felt like you’ve been basically struggling with poverty?” – Interviewer*

*“I’ve never thought about it like that but yes...technically yes.” – Adrian*

*“I wouldn’t say poverty, I’d just say, you know, we’ve got to the fourth week of the month and we’ve not had any money.” – Danny*

This supports Shildrick *et al*’s, (2010) findings that people experiencing poverty themselves can internalise the logic of personal culpability and perceive poverty as a problem of ‘the other’.

### **3.1.3 The deterioration of job quality across time**

Participants told stories that demonstrated the decline in working conditions over the course of their employment biographies and over the course of specific jobs within those biographies. These stories corroborated descriptions of poor work and provided evidence of the increased role of flexibility in the labour market and other factors related to globalisation and industrial decline explored in the literature review. Having worked for a major supermarket full time for eight years, Robert found himself the victim of efforts by the store to lower costs by removing long-term employee rights to night shift allowances. He was among 27 staff who were made redundant, the majority of whom were offered new part time flexible (mostly evening) contracts without night allowances. Robert calculated that he could not manage on the new wage that was being offered, so he refused to make efforts to acquire a new job and was not offered one. He has subsequently been unemployed for the last year and is yet to return to work.

*“Yea...I went in, you know...I’d said to them, it was a 24 hour position I was, sort of like, frog-marched in to apply for, because they had a visitor from personnel from above them, they wanted to make it look like everybody still, you know, were happy and over the moon with (the company), so I was sort of marched in with the manager to this sort of like, you know, ‘right, now sell yourself to me’ with this woman, which I didn’t even want to do any way cos 24 hours, without the night rate, was no good to me.” – Robert*

*“Essentially you decided you were better off claiming Job Seekers’?” - Interviewer*

*“Yea, which was a pity, really like, you know...and the job suited me as well cos the hours were alright, you know, for me, they were fine for me.” – Robert*

Danny lost his job at a cheese factory when the workplace was “computerized”.

*“Um, they spent 2 million quid getting, it was all computerized, because, I think, what had happened, some of the big stores had sent cheese back because it had rust in it, and, they tested it and found sweat and...” - Danny*

*“So when they computerized it, how many jobs were lost?” - Interviewer*

*“Um, there used to be thirty per shift and it went down to three.” - Danny*

Sometimes the experience of finding oneself in a dwindling sector had long-term consequences for employment. For example, following three years of low paid work with supermarkets, and motivated by a desire for ‘a career’, Adrian took out a loan in order to study for a BSc in Design for Disability. Although this didn’t lead to work in the disability sector (as desired) it did allow access to better paid and more interesting work in gas network design. Unfortunately though, he found himself entering this sector just as it slumped. As a result he worked for three different companies over 7 years, he experienced lower pay with each consecutive employer and was made redundant from each (after 2-2.5 years). He has been unemployed for the three years since the last of these jobs.

Of the total 68 jobs worked by participants throughout the employment biographies, 22 were lost due to redundancy, sacking or the end of a short-term contract.

## **3.2 Key theme 1 - Value and worth**

### **3.2.1 The perceived value of work**

Five of the six participants started work at a young age, having been encouraged to take on work by parents either while still at school or immediately afterwards. All these participants were living at home during these early working experiences, with rent, food, bills etc paid for by parents. This meant income was 'disposable' and was generally used on leisure activities. As a result, initial working life was seen as a positive experience providing freedom and opportunities to socialise with friends.

Participants usually associated later periods of unemployment with poor mental health.

*"When did you start thinking you wanted to get back into work?" - Interviewer*

*"When I started getting really depressed...I got quite depressed through that time as well...I was in the rut of not doing anything, watching Jeremy Kyle every day." – Leighton*

Positive early experiences of work combined with negative experiences of unemployment to ensure that all participants have spent their adult lives committed to work. Work is perceived to have value, and to add value to one's life, in and of itself. As Danny stated, when asked how he feels about work generally, "it's what you do, isn't it, it's got to be done, hasn't it?"

*"So you're happier when you're in work basically?" - Interviewer*

*"Yea, and it gave me a target and a drive, if you know what I mean, it was like 'right pull your socks up you've got to do it like.' You know. Whereas, without that set thing to do, I'm a bit...well I am lost to be honest." - Robert*

Consequently participants made significant efforts over the years to acquire work.

*"...I was looking for work. I remember one time I was that desperate I walked to Penarth Road, from one end to the other, asking people for jobs, and I think I was lucky enough to get two replies back saying, nothing like." - Jim*

Despite significant lengths of time out of work, and in low paid work, participants have maintained their work ethic over periods of twenty to thirty years. If one was forced to describe them in terms of 'skivers' or 'strivers' then it would difficult not to



identify them as persistent strivers, albeit with periods of disillusionment caused by long-term job insecurity and low incomes.

### **3.2.2 Pay and the value of a job**

Participants perceived a connection between a person's pay and their worth, and felt that, in Leighton's words, "as long as you feel like you're getting paid what you're worth, it's OK like." In reality, expectations and aspirations for pay were modest. It was considered enough to "just be comfortable" and "not to have to worry" (Danny). After a lengthy discussion during the focus group participants identified a household annual income of £20,000 as "borderline...not comfortable but just about manageable." (Andrew). They agreed that, if the job was one in which they'd be happy in other ways, then they would be happy to do it on this income. Whilst this figure is significantly more than the income from a full time minimum wage job (£12,875) it is less favourable when compared to minimum income standards discussed earlier. Davis *et al.* (2012) identify a minimum income standard for a single person in 2012 as £19,820 and a minimum income standard for a one-earner couple with two children and no childcare costs as £39,091. The income necessary for a two earner couple with two children and childcare costs was calculated at £47,146. Only one participant currently has no dependent children. Two participants have one dependent child, two currently have two dependent children and one currently has six dependent children. For all but one of them, then, £20,000 would amount to significantly less than the minimum income standard.

### **3.2.3 The value of other factors of work relative to pay**

In actual fact, pay was usually not the first factor that participants chose to discuss when asked about their work. There were a number of other aspects that were considered to be of at least equal value. In discussing his priorities and concerns regarding his working life Leighton identified a range of factors which he prioritised over pay. Firstly, as discussed earlier, he values the mental health and self-worth

that he believes he receives through working, and he is willing to accept a lower income just for the benefits of being in work.

*“To be honest, financially, I’d be better off just packing the job in, and me and Sam just claiming benefits.” – Leighton*

*“But you wouldn’t do that at the moment? - Interviewer*

*“No, and the reason why is I know what I was like during that massive long period (of unemployment) and I wouldn’t want to go back there. I want that self-worth. I want to feel like I’m doing something...cos financially we’d be so much better off, it’s unbelievable.” – Leighton*

He particularly appreciated the new responsibilities and challenges associated with opportunities for progression, and he valued the increased sense of self-worth which came with an increase in status.

*“Does the increase in status and responsibility make up for the lack of money?” - Interviewer*

*“Yes, definitely I’d say, definitely.” – Leighton*

Interestingly, in contrast to Leighton, Robert turned down opportunities for progression into supervisory roles (with small increases in pay) because he felt that the authority that came with the new role would undermine his relationship with colleagues. As will be discussed later, relationships with colleagues were considered important by participants and in this case Robert prioritised this factor over a potential increase in pay.

*“Did you get the chance to progress at all in the job?” - Interviewer*

*“...they asked me to like, get involved, in sort of like, you know, erm...’oooh, you’d make a good supervisor’ and that, ‘you speak to everybody bla bla bla’. But I wasn’t really, for the small amount of pay extra, if you know what I mean, I’d have rather be able to speak to both sides than end up in no man’s land, you know.” - Robert*

A number of participants talked more broadly about the importance of work that is ‘enjoyable’.

*“The pay got worse actually...but I still enjoyed the job so it didn't really matter...” – Leighton*

Four of the participants talked about their attraction to work that they perceived as having a ‘social value’ of some kind. For Leighton, his new role as a carer in the community had provided a sense of self-worth through helping someone in need.

*“...it's like, meeting the people I meet, listening to their stories...it's knowing I'm doing something good for them, like...that's really good...it's like the guy, before I came here, we've only just taken him on and, like, he's already asking me to take him shopping and all that cos he feels really confident around me...and like, he hasn't been out of his flat for ages cos he hasn't really had that confidence...and now he wants me to take him out shopping...so I've done something good, like.” – Leighton*

However, this desire to have an opportunity to contribute to society can be satisfied in settings not traditionally connected to caring activities. For example, Jim described the satisfaction he got from being asked to train people with disabilities while in a retail job:

*“...(the company) were taking on people with disabilities from, like, Shaw Trust...I was showing these people with learning difficulties some, who wants to get back into work, showing them what to do, like...and like, this guy who, I started working with him, he got quite attached to me, like, and he was looking up to me doing this and this and this, like, I thought, this is OK, like, cos he got mental health problems and stuff.” - Jim*

Despite the importance of these other factors for participants they acknowledged that certain higher levels of pay might encourage them to take on work which was weak in terms of some of these other factors. Robert just didn't perceive the small amount of extra income from moving into a supervisory role as worth the potential sacrifice in working relationships but stated that if the pay rise had been “significantly more” he “may have been lured” into the post. Adrian talked about this in terms of being “compensated” financially for taking on jobs that were unattractive in other aspects.

*“Yes, the converse is, yes, you'd have to be compensated to do a job you didn't like, so you'd have to be getting something additional out of it, rather than just the work. So for example, yes, if you were doing 25 and you could afford your yearly trip to, um, the states, or something that you would see the benefits from, then that might swing it.” – Adrian*

Participants, then, made sometimes quite complicated trade-offs between pay (which was deemed important pragmatically for financial survival) and a range of other factors which were also deemed important in working life, including relationships with colleagues, opportunities for progression, the chance to work in a job that was enjoyable and contributed to self-esteem, and the chance to do something with 'social value'. These factors were usually described in more animated terms than those used during discussions related to pay. Participants were keen to emphasise their preference for this kind of enjoyable, challenging work that promoted relationships and self-esteem in contrast to their worst experiences of work which were characterised by monotony and routine (as will be discussed later).

*"What would be your top priority in terms of a job?" - Interviewer*

*"I think it would be more social rather than...it would be a mix of social and wages...wages are still important because you've got to live...you'd like to take holidays and all the rest that goes along with that." – Adrian*

*"Flexibility, pay, self-worth really, isn't it?" - Danny*

### **3.3 Key theme 2 - Social capital and relationships**

#### **3.3.1 The importance of relationships in work**

All participants saw relationships in the workplace as important. They were seen as making work more enjoyable but, also, a sense of camaraderie was perceived to contribute to coping mechanisms in work.

*"I was working with a good bunch of lads there as well, most of them...that helped as well like...everyone pulled together, it was a good team, like, so if someone was struggling, someone else would jump straight in and help them..." – Leighton*

As mentioned earlier, Robert was willing to turn down a promotion and pay rise in order to preserve positive working relationships with colleagues.

Participants saw it as very important that workers have the chance to develop and sustain working relationships and talked about this in the context of a wider desire for autonomy and agency in the workplace that will be discussed later. The focus group discussed the Financial Times' article on the Amazon warehouse (referred to in the literature review (O'Connor, 2013)). They were particularly concerned about the control the management exercised over social contact between colleagues in the workplace, and saw this as part of a wider process of de-humanisation discussed later and explored in the literature review.

*"That's more than a slave camp, cos a slave camp you still could talk but, um, so that's even more mechanised...um, even in a slave camp you would be allowed communication with the other slaves! But now you're not even a slave camp, just a mechanism. So you're lower again because you're just a human piece of machinery." – Adrian*

Despite the importance of in work relationships and camaraderie, there was a sense of disillusionment amongst some participants regarding the traditional institutions of organised labour. In Jim's case, this was because he felt unsupported when he turned to his union for help during a work dispute.

*"...when I tried approaching the union about my sackings, no-one was prepared to sit by me, to represent me, like, so I had to take a member of staff in...I was paying them £6 a week union fees and they weren't prepared to come to help, like..." – Jim*

Robert had been a union member in previous jobs but left when he started working for a major supermarket because he believed that "they don't recognize the union...you sign up that 'we're such a good employer you don't need a union'..." Both examples demonstrate a perception that collectivity through a traditional union structure is not always able to provide the security and support needed in the workplace. This may be an example of the grassroots reality of the weakening of the unions' power (Standing, 1999) and the decrease in union membership (Brownlie, 2012) discussed in the literature review.

### **3.3.2 Social capital as a route into work**

Of the 68 jobs worked by participants at least 28 were found through personal contacts, usually family, friends or previous colleagues.

*“My uncle was a contract manager for another cleaning firm, he got me a job at Marks and Spencer’s Culverhouse on the trollies like...” - Jim*

*“My neighbours who live, like, opposite, they sort of run Carpet Right, the older brother and the younger brother, and they asked me to do the one day up there, they were short, and I done the one day, and they offered me a full time position...” - Mike*

*“One of the blokes who was in the management side in Ely, he’d moved stores to Barry...he knew that they needed people...” – Robert*

This supports Putnam’s (2000) findings on the importance of social capital in finding work. Participants recognised that this was the most common way that they and their peers found jobs. This was perceived as being a bit unfair, but a fact of life.

*“Some had a leg up off of family and that, like, you know, dad or brother got em into places...it’s usually who you know, isn’t it, not what you know or what you can do...” - Robert*

In contrast to this only one participant described support from a formal, government sponsored support service as contributing to finding a job. In fact, experiences of this kind of support were described in very negative terms

*“The six month I was unemployed, I was going down to the Job Centre, like, you had to do work focused interviews, and they say ‘fill in a form to say what jobs you been finding throughout the week’ and I wasn’t getting anywhere. I was going over the Job Centre, clicking ‘local areas’ on the computer and it was coming up with London and stuff like that. So I thought, ‘bugger this’ like, I filled in my CV, I updated it on the computer, printed it off, and I thought ‘I’ll just take ‘em all down the industrial estates on Western Avenue.’ – Jim*

### **3.3.3 The role of social capital in managing periods of poverty**

During times of particular financial hardship participants found themselves dependent on the support of family and friends. One participant couldn't afford to heat his home so spent an extended period living with his mother so he wouldn't have to heat his own house.

*"I was struggling to pay bills...I wasn't getting enough money for food so I had to go over my mother's house and she was cooking me tea." – Jim*

A key factor in whether or not a household experienced poverty during periods of unemployment or low pay was whether a partner was working.

*"And the pay was OK?" – Interviewer*

*"Yea, it wasn't too bad at all, (partner) was working as well, she was...." – Robert*

*"So would you have survived on just your wage?" - Interviewer*

*"Um, it would have been a lot harder, like, because (partner) was doing pretty much full time herself." – Robert*

Mike differed from other participants in that his partner was in full time employment throughout the majority of his employment biography. In addition to this, his parents owned and ran a number of businesses and were able to support Mike's family financially when necessary. His experience is in stark contrast to other participants, three of whom were caring for disabled partners who were unable to work. As a result of these factors, Mike was the only participant who stated that he and his family had never struggled financially, despite his employment biography being characterized by low paying jobs and periods of unemployment.

Social networks also offered access to informal, undeclared work in the grey-market economy. These jobs were usually offered on an ad hoc, day-by-day basis by friends and family members and were taken to supplement income from out of work benefits or from low-paying formal work. These kind of 'jobs' were described by

three participants and were often associated with periods of intense churning as described earlier. They were a key factor in managing times of poverty.

*“So tell me about the other bits and pieces of work you had before...” - Interviewer*

*“You mean the off the books...” – Mike*

*“Yes.” - Interviewer*

*“Anything really, whatever jobs were going. I worked on different, several different, sort of doing scrap, with my mates who own scrap vans, erm, I’ve worked for my parents when they’ve needed the odd day here and there.” - Mike*

*“So is this basically cash in hand, by the day sort of stuff?” - Interviewer*

*“Yea.” - Mike*

*“And how did that work, did they just maybe knock for you some days and not others?” - Interviewer*

*“Yea, if they needed somebody, if they had a big job on and they needed the help then, yea, I’d have a ring and one of em would say ‘do you want to come out and help for the day?’ and I’d go out and help.” - Mike*

These jobs were characterised by insecurity, low pay and poor conditions, especially as they operated outside of the normal structures that ensure minimum rights for employees. They also involved considerable risks. Danny described his experiences of potato picking for a ‘ganger’. The pay was between £15 and £30 per day. The work was exhausting and ‘employees’ were periodically forced to hide from government authorities who were looking to make arrests for benefit fraud.

### **3.3.4 The impact of work on family life and caring responsibilities**

Flexibility around family life and caring demands was a matter of concern. However, it emerged that the level of importance assigned to flexibility changed significantly across the period of an employment history. As mentioned already, early



experiences of work took place when participants were still living with parents, meaning that responsibility for paying bills, rent etc and for ensuring the wellbeing of dependents was minimal or non-existent. This meant that participants were willing to take on inflexible and anti-social hours.

*“Did you get a bit tired, getting up at 3?” - Interviewer*

*“Getting up early in the morning? But I was young at the time as well, so...I didn't have kids and stuff at the time, so it weren't so bad, like.” - Mike*

As would be expected, flexibility around family life became a significant factor once long-term relationships were formed, and particularly when children arrived on the scene.

*“...but my missus said to me she was happy, in her own way, that (company) finished me because when I was working nights we were hardly spending any time together at all, like, so I was finishing work, like, maybe 8:00 in the morning and then...” – Jim*

*“Did you feel that you spent time with your daughter when this was going on?” – Interviewer*

*“No” - Jim*

*“Was that cos of the shifts?” - Interviewer*

*“Yea...the night shift did put quite a lot of strain on my relationship cos, um, my missus saying I wasn't spending enough time with her cos I was always asleep.” – Jim*

Most participants found it difficult to manage the demands of work with their family and caring responsibilities at times. In Leighton's case he ended up leaving a job that up until that point he had found both fulfilling and secure. This was immediately followed by a period of unemployment.

*“I left that job because I went through a divorce and I had custody of the three children...I was going to end up getting sacked, or resigned...what I was doing, I was into the house, going into work, getting my boxes to go to work, going and taking the kids to school, I was ending up being late for calls and all that, so I was trying to juggle the three kids and a full time job, so it just wasn't happening. So I resigned from there...” - Leighton*

Three of the participants had long term caring responsibilities for disabled partners. A key factor here was the uncertainty related to the partners' condition. On some days the symptoms might be manageable for the partner without support, but a sudden deterioration might require around the clock care. The challenges of finding work that fits around these demands were huge. For Adrian this is the key reason he is currently unemployed.

*"The wife was the official carer but she's been having depression for quite a while, so I helped her and helped care for my daughter...what with me being not too well as well...unfortunately my daughter passed away...I am caring for my wife at the moment, she's working part time...being cared for, so it's how she's feeling, so I've got to be flexible, which is where a lot of firms that are there, just, they want you there 9 to 5, know they can rely on you, so, erm, a couple of interviews, nowhere close." – Adrian*

*"...some days she's fine, she can walk about, although she does push it. Other days she won't get out of bed, she's in so much pain..." - Danny*

As well as the natural trajectory of changes in family life impacting on the need for work flexibility, three participants had experienced sudden, unexpected family crises which transformed their circumstances and demanded immediate flexibility from work. For example, Leighton had three older children who were relatively dependent (i.e. able to take themselves to and from school etc) when a family crisis put him and his partner in the role of carer for a family member's three children. This changed circumstances dramatically in a way that required significant flexibility from his employer.

*"See, it's strange, I'd just got into a position where, working full time didn't bother us no more because my youngest one now is 12, after school she just walks down her nan's anyway, so working full time was fine for us, but then, where we've got the three younger kids again now it's, the one, she's only just turned 3, so, it's changed everything again like." – Leighton*

Whether or not participants were able to stay in jobs after these crises depended a lot on the flexibility of their employer. In Leighton's case he was able to stay in the job part time.

*“My company’s being amazing at the moment. I’m only doing sixteen hours but they said, it’s like, they said if you want to do all the hours in two days, do the two days and have the rest of the week off...so they’ve been really flexible they have.” – Leighton*

*“...If they weren’t like that, and they weren’t flexible?” - Interviewer*

*“Yea, I would have left, definitely...only obviously cos of the circumstances we’re going through at the moment, I would have definitely left like.” - Leighton*

This can be contrasted with Adrian’s experience of working soon after the death of his daughter. He found that the employer was not sympathetic or flexible to his particular needs and so he resigned from the job after two weeks.

*“Why didn’t this work out?” – Interviewer*

*“Pressures at home, state of mind.” – Adrian*

*“Were they flexible around these things?” - Interviewer*

*“...they are a business orientated organisation...they are all down to targets, they’re all down to workload, they’re all down to...so that is quite a stressful environment...erm...the offices are open plan and noisy...so.” - Adrian*

### **3.4 Key theme 3 – Autonomy and agency**

#### **3.4.1 Dehumanising work – autonomy and agency**

As discussed earlier, despite the importance of pay on a pragmatic level, participants were keen to emphasise the equal importance of work that supports self-worth and positive relationships and that is enjoyable and stimulating. They contrasted this kind of work with their worst experiences of work, which were usually either actually on a production line or were described in terms similar to production line work.

*“It was just so mundane...my first job in the factory, I had two pieces of cable, I had to strip the ends off it...doing that all day long...the second day I was on a drill, it was like, picking a*

*piece of plastic up, sticking it on a drill, putting a hole in it, putting it in the basket, doing that for 8 hours a day...it drove me mad...just boredom...imagine going from the army, all that excitement, to doing that.” – Leighton*

A key factor in this work was the tedious, repetitive nature of the work, which it was felt has consequences for a worker’s self-worth and mental health.

*“Well there are a lot of people doing that job have breakdowns.” – Adrian*

*“Why do you think that is?” - Interviewer*

*“Because it is so monotonous.” – Adrian*

However, participants often discussed these experiences in terms of the control and rigidity of the employer and the consequent lack of autonomy and opportunity for creativity for the worker.

*“I was bored in (supermarket)...(it) is very production orientated, you’ve got so much to do, and, like a lot of jobs...they were starting to take it a bit...they were getting a bit busier, they were getting, erm, a bit more rigid with what they wanted...they’ve always been ‘you’ve got to do it this way, this is our way.’” - Adrian*

Similarly, when participants described their vision of ‘good’ work, it was often in terms of the opportunities for autonomy, agency and freedom:

*“What did you like about it?” (being a postman) - Interviewer*

*“Just being out, on my own, not having nobody...literally nobody on your back at all, you’d just get your bag, off you go, do your round, once you finished you go home then.” - Mike*

*“I enjoyed it, I did, cos you’d have a good variety of work, you’d never know, you know, from one day to the next, what you’d be doing, like...Richie the carpenter, who I worked with over there, um, he could see I had a little bit of an aptitude so, he was leaving me do more and more, like, that sort of thing you know...you’d actually, sort of like, you’d learn a little bit, get a bit of experience rather than, ‘oooh I can line these things up on a shelf nice and square and tidy’, if you know what I mean.” – Robert*

Danny described a Japanese management approach which he'd read about that emphasised the inclusion of employees in decision-making processes within a company. This was seen as positive amongst the other focus group participants because it values the employee and treats them as a human rather than just an element in a production line.

*"They'd have, they'd listen to the workers. Instead of going in, doing your 1500 door knobs a day, and then going, they'd actually listen for ideas, they'd have group sessions, it was a more touchy feely thing." – Danny*

*"So why would that be a better experience as a worker?" - Interviewer*

*"Cos you've got an input haven't you, you've got a say...well you're doing the same job it's just probably, instead of being a faceless number on a production line you're a..." - Danny*

This approach was discussed in relation to their own experiences working in supermarkets and in production lines. Although it was perceived as a desirable approach it was felt that it would be impossible to implement in, for example, the case of a shelf-stacker because, as Adrian stated, "there are people being paid to actually design that, so, their job is to design that and your job is just to put it in the place they say it's got to be put, and it's got to be out in the same place in every store in the country."

Participants were aware, then, of the impacts of workplace rationalisation described by Ritzer (2000) and discussed earlier in the literature review. They have experienced these settings as hierarchical and disempowering and as removing autonomy and agency from working experiences. As has been seen, these factors are considered as being of equal importance to issues of pay.

### **3.4.2 At the Job Centre – autonomy and agency**

Participants reported very negative experiences of visits to the Job Centre, and not only because the support provided didn't generally lead to work (as discussed

above). They described feelings of being judged and of being stereotyped as 'workshy'.

*"...I went to sign on, a while back, and straight away the bloke was like 'well what have you done to find work?' I said I've been doing this, I've been doing that, he was like 'Oh, well what about this one then?' and I said 'well, I've got to pay my rent, my council tax, this, that, the other.' 'Well, we've all got bills to pay, you can't expect the tax payer to pay for you.' I think this bloke had literally got to his desk and hadn't looked at the files or anything, then I've come along and he's just assumed, you know, that I've left me can of beer round the corner and you've been doing this for 15 years or whatever." – Robert*

There is a hint here of the rhetoric of 'striver vs skiver' discussed earlier in the literature review, with the implication that Robert 'expects the tax payer to pay for him'. Robert felt that, despite the job advisor knowing nothing of his employment history and long-term commitment to work, he was assumed to be work-shy.

More than this, participants experienced 'support' from the Job Centre as coercive inasmuch as it failed to accommodate the choices and preferences of service users.

*"Um, the benefits agency, they are just looking to shovel you in to anything so you're off their book and their members. So whether that job is correct for you or not doesn't matter to them in the slightest." – Adrian*

These experiences support the link made by Standing (1999) between the 'authoritarianism of the benefit regime' (Grover 2008:9) and the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. Interestingly participants described these experiences at the Job Centre in terms similar to the ones they used for describing the de-humanising nature of production line work.

*(in relation to attendance at the Job Centre) "It is a bit like a production line." – Danny*

*"It's a production line for them, so the way they feel, um, and their rules, they're not designed to help you." – Adrian*

### 3.4.3 Choosing work

Job security was important to participants and periods of rapid churning between work and unemployment were often associated with financial hardship and a negative impact on mental health. However, surprisingly, some participants discussed early periods of churning in positive terms, emphasising that the surplus of jobs at the time provided freedom to leave unsatisfactory work in the knowledge that other opportunities were immediately available. In these cases, rapid churning was almost an expression of freedom (or agency) and control over working experiences.

*“The difference is, back then, I would just, like, I would leave the job even without having another job to walk into...I wouldn't dare leave this job now without knowing I could walk into something else.” – Leighton*

Participants agreed strongly that this freedom to leave jobs is no longer a factor in current experiences of the labour market.

*“... there's definitely a lot less scope for jobs, and, a lot less about so that you can be stuck in a job that you can't leave because there's not an alternative.” – Adrian*

Participants associated this situation with a lack of jobs and particularly with a lack of what they considered to be 'good quality' jobs.

*“I have been looking for work but you could go on the job site now, and it's absolutely pathetic, like. You put it within 15 miles of here and there's not a lot comes up at all.” – Robert*

*“And the sort of stuff that does come up, what's it like? - Interviewer*

*“Um, low paid retail, if you know what I mean. Which, like, I was in retail before but I was always getting that bonus which made it worth my while like, you know. Obviously now without those bonuses...” – Robert*

The jobs that were available were deemed to all be of a similar type, undermining choice even further.

*“What sort of jobs are out there?” - Interviewer*

*"It mainly advertises...you'd get like. To be honest, on there you get, like, shit-loads of crappy cleaning jobs and stuff on there, don't you, advertised all the time, like, it's all there seems to be like." - Mike*

Participants were only too conscious of the current nature of the labour market and the service sector jobs they described as being available were of a similar nature to those available to the redundant Burberry workers described earlier (Blyton & Jenkins, 2011). It was felt that the current situation has put employers in a "definite stronger position" (Adrian). Combined with the authoritarian and coercive approach of Job Centre services, as discussed above, this dearth of good quality jobs left participants with very little choice in, or control over, the work they took. Currently only one of the six participants is in work.

*"...the ideal situation to me is the Star Trek situation, where everybody's got enough to eat, they can get by, if they want to work...that's the ideal situation." - Danny*

*"So work would be a choice?" - Interviewer*

*"Yes." – Danny*

*"Would you choose to work?" – Interviewer*

*"Yes, I would." - Danny*

*"Why?" - Interviewer*

*"Because I think sitting at home all day isn't the right thing to do, you need something to, to occupy you anyway." - Danny*

#### **3.4.4 Personal responsibility and wider structural influences**

*"If you're really really really that bothered about it you can always do something about it can't you?" - Mike*



Despite participants feeling they had a lack of choice and control over aspects related to their working lives there was a tendency to take personal responsibility for the negative experiences within employment biographies.

*“As I’ve said to you before now I’ve always, because I’m a virgo or whatever I’m forever staring in my naval anyway, wondering what I’ve done wrong, and there were a lot of things I could have done differently in my life...” – Danny*

Leighton ‘owned’ a narrative which attributed years of ‘churning’ at the lower end of the labour market to his struggles to “adjust to civilian life” after leaving the army whilst Mike blamed an employment history characterised by low-paid work on his failures at school.

*“It was my own fault, don’t get me wrong, I totally fucked it all up myself but, something I done and got to live with now haven’t I.” – Mike*

Despite this, on occasions participants had vague notions that their experiences might be related to wider societal circumstances. This usually involved relating their stories of redundancy to ‘the recession’.

*“Why did you finish there, did it close down?” - Interviewer*

*“No, it’s still going...it was sort of when the...all this crap happened over here and we had the...what’s it called? Erm...I can’t think of the word now I’m looking for...when we had all this thing going on over here and everyone sort of lost their jobs and...” - Mike*

*“Recession?” - Interviewer*

*“The recession, when the recession hit it was when I was made redundant.” – Mike*

The individual interviews provided evidence of a general acceptance of a neo-liberal logic inasmuch as participants were generally sympathetic to the profit motive and felt that companies were justified in prioritizing profit first and foremost. If they suffered as a result, for example when companies laid staff off or replaced them with machines, well that wasn’t really the employers’ fault, it was just ‘bad luck’.

*“Do the companies have a responsibility?” – Interviewer*

*“Yes, to a degree, but then I imagine they’re out just to make money aren’t they?...I know if I was running a company it would be sort of like...obviously you’ve got to put the money first haven’t you, if you’re running a company.” – Leighton*

Three participants (Danny, Jim and Adrian) perceived immigration as having a negative impact on their opportunities for satisfactory work. Jim recounted a story of being asked to help train up five Polish employees whilst employed in a retail job. At the end of the week he was made redundant and replaced with his newly inducted colleagues.

*“They terminated my contract...they said they weren’t taking my contract any further, even though I was working for them for 6 months, and then next thing I know they’ve got five Polish people doing the job I was doing all week...cos they were working with me all week, I was showing them what to do, like.” - Jim*

Interestingly, during the focus group, deeper insights emerged about the structural influences on working experiences. In discussing the issue of immigration Jim, Danny and Adrian related their views to wider issues of globalisation and the global movement of labour.

*“...All the jobs have gone abroad, or most of them, most of the jobs have gone abroad.” – Danny*

*“Or there’s the abroad come in, and taken away the jobs to allow people to progress up, and then, the lower ones coming in, so there’s less and less of the progression within companies because you have the influx of people, um, to take away certain level of jobs, so, going from the cheap to the intermediate jobs and, so, a lot of those have disappeared...” – Andrew*

As the conversation developed, these issues of globalisation and immigration were linked to the profit motive of capitalism and the need to minimise costs.

*“You’ve either got people coming in and doing the jobs for cheaper than, you know. Or, they’ve gone abroad, and it’s the same in America and everywhere else. And that’s down to the corporations finding the cheapest place possible. Mexico or anywhere else like that, where they can get it made for half the price.” – Danny*

*“Which is profit and, um, capital, compared against the social aspect of employment. And it’s all gone profit profit profit rather than profit and social.” – Adrian*

Ultimately participants agreed that we are in a period of capitalism which seems ‘harsher’ than it once was. Social concerns need to be balanced with a need or desire to make profit, and that balance, they believe, has tipped too far towards profit.

*“But there’s profit, and then there’s social profit, and, um, so, if you treat your people right, pay your people right, and make a fair profit, or treat your people wrong and make a greater profit, that’s where things broke down.” – Adrian*

*“This is it, it’s a different corporate philosophy isn’t it?...It is what they can get, what they can make, the bottom line, don’t really matter, they don’t care.” - Danny*

Once again the participants expressed a sense of powerlessness in the face of these processes. In fact, Danny explicitly related these experiences to a wider political powerlessness and he illustrated his point with this anecdote:

*“...apparently a load of disabled people went to all the local MP’s offices last week, all over the country, um, I mentioned that ATOS thing, it was on the ATOS face page, loads of pictures. It wasn’t in one newspaper, not one, it wasn’t even mentioned, and yet hundreds and hundreds of disabled people had staggered out and wheeled themselves and whatever. Last year they chained themselves in London, across the streets, it was only in the paper for a day. So you’ve got things like that happening.” -Danny*

*“So is that part of a wider thing where people are struggling to influence things? – Interviewer*

*“Yes, I think so, yes. Before, people weren’t bothered but nowadays they’re more inclined to demonstrate or whatever.” – Danny*

*“But they’re not listened to?” - Interviewer*

*“They’re not heard, they’re not listened to, they haven’t got a voice, you know...I think it’s the one per cent grabbing the money and everybody else is suffering for it.” – Danny*

Ultimately then, although the individual interviews were characterised by a focus on personal culpability and a general willingness to accept the implications of a capitalist system as inevitable, the focus group stimulated a basic critique of contemporary capitalism and globalisation. These factors, which were seen as prioritizing financial profit over 'social profit', were perceived to exert a downward pressure on job quality. Workers' experiences of powerlessness under these influences were related to a wider political powerlessness. As was mentioned in the methodology (in the discussion regarding ethical considerations) this group development of a tentative critique of capitalism through dialogue could perhaps be understood to be the beginnings of a tentative form of conscientisation.

## Chapter Four: Conclusions and recommendations

### 4.1 Conclusions

Research participants described working experiences characterised by many of the key factors of 'poor work' identified in the literature review including: low pay, job insecurity and periods of rapid churning between jobs and between work and unemployment. Despite this participants maintained a commitment to work, often expending significant energy and effort in seeking it out. A range of factors related to work were considered important. Pay was significant in enabling participants to 'get by' or 'be comfortable' but aspirations were modest, and significantly below key benchmarks such as the Minimum Income Standard (Davis *et al.*, 2012). Other desirable factors including positive working relationships, increased status or responsibility, positive mental health, doing something enjoyable and doing something with perceived social value, tended to predominate. It was felt that jobs not offering some of these attributes should be compensated through higher pay.

Social capital - the family, friendship and community networks available to participants - was crucial to coping in work, to managing periods of financial hardship, and to finding work. However, the social networks available to participants tended to provide access to further poor work or to even more precarious informal/grey market work rather than expanding options through 'linking' social capital. This supports Putnam (2000) and Gilchrist's (2004) descriptions of the role of social capital in finding work and coping with poverty described in the literature review. Despite the key role of relationships, sometimes expressed in terms reminiscent of solidarity, there was some disillusionment expressed with unions, which were perceived to have failed when most needed. Participants struggled to manage the tensions between their work and their caring and family demands, particularly at times of unexpected crisis, when their ability to stay in work depended on the willingness (or otherwise) of employers to be flexible.

A sense of powerlessness was a defining feature of participants' working lives, which were characterised by a lack of autonomy and agency. Coercive experiences in the

Job Centre, a lack of choice and opportunity in the current job market, and dehumanising workplace experiences, left participants with little choice over whether they worked, what they did for work, and how they carried out their work. This lack of autonomy and agency over working experiences was described by participants in terms of production line processes, both as a direct description of the kind of rationalised work discussed by Ritzer (2000) but also as a kind of metaphor for a broader sense of dehumanisation linked to powerlessness. Standing (1999:44) describes this 'loss or surrender of self-control over work' as being 'at the heart of the social malaise, the unhappiness of humanity.' Despite these feelings of powerlessness, during individual interviews participants emphasised personal culpability for work-life experiences. The focus group supported a more critical conversation which identified globalisation and an imbalance between the need for financial profit and 'social profit' (perceived to be inherent within contemporary capitalism) as key factors in this disempowerment.

Despite a relatively small sample size there is evidence that the findings and conclusions can be generalised for a proportion of the population beyond the immediate participants of the research. Firstly, there was the ease with which I was able to find participants with relevant experiences of poor work from a network of contacts within Ely and Caerau. Secondly it emerged that participants shared a significant number of common experiences, aspirations and opinions within this broad notion of poor work. These common experiences formed the themes explored in the findings. Finally, the experiences described by participants resonated closely with the descriptions of poor work contained in the literature review, linking participant experiences to wider societal trends. There can be confidence, then, that the findings from this research can be used to make relevant policy and practice recommendations.

The forces at play behind the experiences of poor work described here are huge, complicated and have been developing and shifting over decades. Any approach to tackling these issues needs to take seriously the scale and complexity of this challenge. Recommendations will be made for interventions at a structural level before an exploration of potential local expressions of these recommendations.

## **4.2 Structural recommendations**

### **4.2.1 Promotion of social capital**

Despite the important role social capital can and does play in mitigating against poor work, approaches to welfare are increasingly in danger of undermining community cohesion and damaging the networks of support available to the poor. Toynbee (2012) describes the new, lower levels of benefit payments as a betrayal of Beveridge's original intention to provide 'above survival' levels of social security support. Welfare payments, she claims, have been de-coupled from subsistence levels, leaving families struggling to afford food and fuel. She describes this new life as one 'with no break, no treat, no movie ever, no drink...' (Toynbee, 2013). The problem here is that low welfare payments are excluding recipients from the kind of leisure activities through which social capital has traditionally been developed and sustained. In addition, the introduction of the 'striver vs skiver' rhetoric is, arguably, actually intended to undermine relationships between those in work and those who are unemployed or underemployed, creating suspicion between claimants and non-claimants and demolishing already minimal levels of linking social capital that exists across status boundaries.

Recommendations – The role of social capital in supporting people into work, and sustaining them in that work, should be recognised and supported. This means refraining from the stigmatising and divisive approaches currently adopted towards welfare. Welfare payments should support a basic standard of living that allows for the sustaining of key relationships. Divisive rhetoric which undermines social capital should be dropped. Into-work support should include group approaches that build social capital, including new innovations aimed particularly at building linking social capital, perhaps through providing mentors that bridge status boundaries (these could be organised through workplace volunteering schemes). These approaches should be seen as part of a wider attempt to tackle the socio-economic inequality described by Dorling (2012) and its resulting damage to social capital (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010).

#### **4.2.2 Improvement of working conditions**

As discussed earlier, a current agenda of the coalition government is the coercion of individuals into work through low benefit payments that ensure low-paid work is preferable to unemployment. The motivation here, as discussed in the literature review, is to decrease welfare budgets and support the continued flexibility of the labour market. There is no concern for the quality of jobs available for those on the receiving end of this process. For any improvement to take place in the working conditions of those at the bottom of the labour market, a balance needs to be struck between the needs of employers for flexibility and the needs of workers to experience 'good work'. (In the words of participants, there needs to be a re-balance between the need for 'financial profit' and the need for 'social profit').

Recommendations - This change is likely to involve a willingness to regulate some of the more excessive behaviours of employers. Firstly this would involve the preservation of basic working standards already legally enshrined, including the ones aimed at upholding employee rights related to unfair dismissal, redundancy and flexible working (ones which Osborne hopes to remove in exchange for share offers, as discussed already (Wintour, 2012)). Secondly, new regulations should be explored where appropriate. For example, given the moral support expressed for the living wage across all political parties (discussed earlier), this should replace the National Minimum Wage in law (thus solving the problems caused by a minimum wage which has fallen in value to 2004 levels (Toynbee, 2013)). Improvements should also be incentivised through the procurement policies of public bodies. This approach could involve prioritising contracts with providers that protect certain employee rights within their policies, and could be used to support some of the wider aims discussed here such as the promotion of social capital. For example, social clauses could be built into service contracts which aim to favour companies that provide a reasonable level of flexibility to family and caring demands, or that provide regular breaks and informal environments where employees can socialise, or that offer opportunities for socially valuable working experiences.



### **4.2.3 Promotion of autonomy and agency**

Ultimately there needs to be a shift of power from employer towards employee, with an accompanying increase in autonomy and agency for workers. This is crucial if workers are to be liberated from 'poor work' into situations in which their humanity is respected and they are able to regain control over key aspects of their lives. It is possible to see autonomy and agency as being located in the realm of the individual, but these factors need to be seen in the context of the concern for relationships and the strong role of social capital discussed throughout this research. Participants expressed a desire for autonomy and agency in the context of strong relationships of mutual support. Participants, then, seem to be seeking an autonomy and collectivity that are mutually supporting. This desire challenges the traditional 'left'/'right' divide and may be a factor in the disillusionment with the traditional ('adversarial' (Ryder, n.d.)) union approaches described earlier.

Recommendations - Cooperative approaches to the organisation of labour should be considered as a possible route towards the realisation of this vision. Where successful, worker cooperatives combine 'autonomy with co-operation' through 'democratic member control' (Birchall, 1997:221). This approach explicitly re-imagines the relationship between profit and worker, emphasising the humanity of the worker as desired by the participants of this research and in a manner described by a worker from the Mondragon cooperative in the Basque Country:

"...we are the owners of our enterprises, and we are the participants in their management...Our humanity comes first. We want to have successful and profitable businesses and see them grow, but they are subordinate to us, not the other way around."  
(Mikel Lezamiz, Mondragon's Communications Director, cited in Osmond, J, 2012:7)

There are significant successful examples of this approach in the UK including, for example, Tower Colliery (O'Sullivan, 2001) and the John Lewis Partnership (Bradley & Taylor, 1992). There is currently also interest in, and support for, these approaches from both the UK and Welsh governments. As mentioned earlier, the Welsh Government has recently established a commission which will advise on growing the cooperative and mutual economy in Wales. The coalition government, for their part, supported the proposed buy-out of 632 Lloyds Banking Group

branches by the Cooperative Bank in response to the recent taxpayer bailout of Lloyds. Unfortunately the Cooperative Bank pulled out of the deal in April 2013 (Treanor, 2013). Support to enable a cooperative approach to become a prominent feature of the UK economy could include tax incentives and/or a relaxing of certain regulations for businesses adopting a cooperative approach (this would be similar to Osborne's proposed share offer (Wintour, 2012) but would emphasise meaningful control and ownership of company structures by workers). Start-up funding and/or low-interest loans could be used to seed new cooperative businesses. Training schemes aimed at growing the skills necessary to launch new cooperative enterprises could be subsidised, and partnership work with universities could aim to integrate relevant training into business and economics courses.

The death of Margaret Thatcher in April 2013 sparked a national debate which quickly polarised into traditional 'left' and 'right' camps. The 'right' emphasised the role Thatcher played in 'liberating' the country from the collectivist unions, freeing up the individual 'entrepreneur'. The left's response was either minimal (e.g. from the mainstream centre-left politicians) or emphasised the need to return to a pre-80s golden era of union power. Even if it is desirable to go back to these arrangements, it seems unlikely this will ever be possible (a fact which has led to a crisis in credibility for the left, which appears to be unable to offer realistic alternatives to the current system). A cooperative approach is a pragmatic one in that it works within the capitalist system, whilst delivering genuine empowerment for workers through collective action that nevertheless values the autonomy of the individual. In this sense it offers the opportunity of engaging proactively with our current circumstances with some hope of genuine change.

### ***4.3 Local recommendations***

Finally, ACE (Action in Caerau and Ely) is in a position to make attempts at implementing some of these recommendations at a local level. They should take the following approach:

- ACE should build on the success of its project supporting local people into work by extending opportunities for the development of linking social capital. This could be achieved by recruiting mentors from across status boundaries as suggested above (e.g. through workplace volunteering schemes).
- ACE should publicly adopt the living wage and should encourage other partner organisations to do likewise.
- The organisation should develop procurement policies of the kind discussed above that promote good employment practices. These should extend to companies engaged as potential local employers through the 'back to work' service, ensuring that local employment opportunities promoted by ACE are of a reasonable quality.
- ACE has recently recruited a new Enterprise Co-ordinator, and will be exploring opportunities for local social enterprise development. The organisation should explore cooperative models with the intention of adopting these approaches once viable enterprises are identified. Key staff and community members should receive training in cooperative principles and practices. It is hoped that this research might develop into a proposal which attracts support to pilot such an enterprise, thus locating the research within an ongoing Participatory Action process.

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## Appendix two: Semi-structured interview plan

### Introduction/information for participants

*This information will be provided verbally at an initial meeting or during an initial telephone conversation, rather than in written form. This is because the interviews will be taking place with acquaintances/friends rather than strangers. A written report would seem unusually formal to participants and may undermine the comfortable/ trusting relationship that exists due to a pre-established relationship, and which will enable the disclosure of useful information during the research process.*

### Background:

- Ely & Caerau has lost many of its local employers in the last 30-40 years
- Many of these employers offered good quality, secure, reasonably paid work
- I hope to explore what kind of work has replaced this
- The government currently has lots to say about work, unemployment, the efforts people should make to find work, and how much support should be available for the unemployed and those on low-paid work. I hope to explore some of these issues from the perspective of those experiencing them.

### Aim:

- To explore 6 people's experiences of work and unemployment
- Interested in discovering what characterizes 'good' experiences of work and what characterizes 'poor' experiences of work
- What factors are important to those being employed?
- What would characterize good work in the eyes of workers?

### How will the information be used?

- To ensure people experiencing these new kinds of work are heard
- To influence ACE's employment policies
- To plan further work aimed at creating good quality local employment opportunities
- To seek funding for further research and project work.

### Research process:

- Six 1.5 hour interviews with individuals exploring their experiences of work (as above)
- My own interpretation of the information gathered through these interviews (common themes etc)
- A focus group with the same six individuals aimed at discussing 'what would make 'good' work?'
- My interpretation and write up

### Confidentiality:

- Names will be changed in the final report
- Details of individuals' jobs, pay etc will not be disclosed during the focus group
- All participants will receive feedback and a copy of the final report (may be worth asking what format participants would like to receive this in?)

### Interview plan

1. Introduction to research, process and what can be expected (see above)

2. 'Please could you talk me through your employment history, from your first job, up until now. Please include who you were working for, the hours you worked, what the job involved, and a rough estimate of your pay/salary, your family circumstances at the time. Please also include any periods of unemployment. Rough estimates of dates and timescales would be useful.'
3. Record these experiences as a timeline using post-it notes and A3 paper.
4. Work back along the timeline discussing experiences within each job, using two broad questions. Describe your experiences in this job? (Textural) Why do you think your experiences were like this? (Structural)
5. Potential prompt questions:
  - Textural
    - Did you struggle financially during this period?
    - What were the underlying factors of this struggle? (low pay, high housing costs, high living costs, family expenses, childcare?)
    - How did you experience these struggles? (stress, mental health? etc)
    - How did you manage these struggles? (Work extra hours, top up from other sources?)
    - How did this job make you feel? Why?
    - Did you get satisfaction from this job? Why?
    - Did you feel you had the freedom/opportunity to influence your experience of this job? Why? How?
    - What about your work/life balance in this job?
    - Did you feel secure in this job? Why? Why not?
    - Have you often found yourself relying on tax credits and benefits to top up your income?
    - What is your priority in terms of a job? (flexibility around family life? Income? Security? Interest or value?)
  - Structural
    - Why do you think you were treated like this?
    - Who's fault do you think that is?
  - General useful questions
    - Which was your best experience of work? Why?
    - Which was your worst experience of work? Why?
6. Record interview using dictaphone. Take key notes (on A3 employment timeline?)
7. Thanks and explain next steps

Items needed:

- Dictaphone
- A3 paper (several sheets)
- Post-it notes
- Pens

## Appendix three: Focus group plan

### Introduction

- Thank you for giving your time for the initial interview and for attending today to participate in this focus group.
- Introductions – each participant to give their name

### Aim:

- To feed back some of the themes that have emerged from the interviews for your comments and for discussion.
- A key question is 'does this description capture your experiences of work and your concerns relating to work?'
- To use a group discussion amongst people with similar experiences to explore how work could and should be.

### How will it work?

- I will spend a bit of time summing up some of the key themes from the interview
- We will discuss these themes. I will ask occasional questions to keep the conversation going.
- I will then move us on to talking about your aspirations for work.
- I will be recording the discussion
- The focus group should take about 1.5 hours

### Ground rules:

- Only one person to speak at a time
- Mobile phones set to silent if possible
- Everyone should have a chance to participate
- Everyone's views and opinions are valid and valuable
- You have the right to refrain from answering questions
- You have the right to leave at any time during the focus group

### Consent:

- Does anyone have any questions?
- Is everyone happy to proceed?

### Focus group plan

#### Description of key themes from the interviews (phenomenology):

- Most people were able to remember most of their employment histories
- All participants have generally wanted to work and have made significant efforts to find, and to stay in, work.
- All participants have experienced unemployment at different times and most associated some of these periods with depression.
- Most jobs were found through personal contacts (friends or family) or through personal effort, rather than through help from the Job Centre or similar.
- People mentioned a number of negative experiences at the Job Centre (judgementalism, lack of decent job opportunities, lack of choice in which jobs you could apply for)
- This relates to a key theme – the desire for control and choice in your working life (self-determination)



- Much of the work experienced by participants was relatively low paying (some commented that they would have been better off on the dole).
- People found various ways of coping with low pay – some did overtime when possible, some relied on parents for financial or other support, some took on informal work etc.
- Most people didn't aspire to huge levels of pay, just enough to live comfortably.
- Interestingly most participants were willing to make sacrifices in relation to pay for the sake of other aspects – e.g. for a job they enjoyed or found interesting, to maintain positive relationships with colleagues etc
- The work that people really disliked was boring and tedious – this tended to be factory/production line work
- Again, people liked work where they felt they had some control over their experience and some choice in how they spent their time. They also liked work that was interesting or challenging.
- The kind of work people liked depended on their personality – some liked being with other people, serving customers etc. Others liked opportunities to be on their own.
- Most people liked the idea of doing something that they felt had social value – that involved 'helping people' in some way.
- Almost everyone had periods where work flexibility to family life was important. Some found employers to be flexible, some did not. Some had to leave jobs for this reason.
- Some of you mentioned the fact that towards the beginning of your working life there were more jobs around, so you were able to leave jobs you weren't happy with and expect to walk into other work. People said they wouldn't risk this now. Again this relates to the key themes of choice and control (power).
- Those of you with experiences of the unions didn't feel that you'd had effective support from them.
- Quite a few participants found themselves in sectors that were 'on the way down' damaged by recession etc. This sometimes led to multiple experiences of redundancy. Some of these experiences were extremely negative and were dealt with very badly by employers. Again, these experiences were characterized by a lack of control over the outcome.

#### Summary of findings:

- While pay is important, most people are more likely to be concerned with doing something they enjoy or feel has value.
- Enjoyment of a job is related to whether it's interesting, whether it suits your personality type and whether you get on with colleagues. However, it is also related to whether you feel in control of your experience, whether you have real choice over whether you work, what you do for work and how you work.
- At the moment the choice of available jobs is poor. There is increased pressure from the government to take on any work (whether or not it is desirable to you). The unions are weakened and failing to influence working conditions in these kinds of jobs. All these factors undermine choice, control and self-determination of workers, and the experience/quality of work.
- As a result, people's descriptions of the kind of work they'd like to do often involve self-employment, setting up their own work and working outdoors.

#### Prompt questions:

- Do you recognize these findings?
- Are there any you don't agree with?
- Are there any you are surprised by?

- Do you agree that pay isn't the most important factor?
- What is reasonable pay?
  
- Should people have to take on work that they don't want to do?
- Do people have a right to fulfilling or enjoyable work?
- What level of pay would encourage you to take on work you really didn't like?
  
- Is choice and control over your working life and working experiences important?
- What might this choice and control look like? How might it be experienced?
  
- In light of all this can you, together, come up with a description of the ideal job?