

Beyond the script: on the inclusion of film within a discursive analysis and the immaculate construction of Daniel Blake

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### *Abstract*

Modern UK welfare reforms, such as employment and support allowance (ESA), aim to provide financial support to individuals unable to work due to disability or chronic health conditions. As part of a media framing analysis, which explores the ways in which these welfare reforms have been reported by the UK press, Ken Loach's 2016 film *I, Daniel Blake* was identified by the research team as an important discursive resource. Through a novel multimodal discourse analysis (which contains 'spoilers' for the film), we examine the 'immaculate construction' of fictional ESA claimant Daniel Blake and consider the implications for 'real life' ESA claimants. We suggest that, whilst presenting a compassionate narrative which highlights the dehumanisation experienced by ESA claimants, the film raises questions that may further problematise notions of who (and who is not) able to be considered as 'genuinely' deserving of welfare.

### *Introduction*

One of the largest challenges faced by healthcare systems in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the increasing prevalence of chronic health conditions (Murray, 2012). Vickers (2005) characterises chronic conditions as being physical, emotional or cognitive in manifestation: ongoing conditions that may or may not be treatable. The encompassing nature of this definition is reflected in examples of potential chronic conditions: for example heart diseases, diabetes, bowel diseases, renal diseases or central nervous system disorders could all be considered chronic conditions. The number of individuals living in England with two or more long term conditions (meeting the

definition of ‘comorbidities’) was expected to reach 2.9 million by 2018 (Department of Health, 2014).

Individuals living with chronic conditions are more likely to be out-of-work than other groups (Holland et al., 2016). Often framed as a ‘response’ to these statistics, many countries have introduced policy instruments for promoting the employment of individuals with chronic conditions, assessing working capability and re-evaluating the personal costs incurred due to illness or disability (Gjersø, 2016). Within the UK, these changes have manifested as two major welfare reforms: the introduction of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) in 2008 (2.3 million claimants as of November 2017; Department for Work and Pensions [DWP]), replacing Incapacity Benefit for individuals who are unable to work due to sickness or disability, and Personal Independence Payments (PIP) in 2012 (1.7 million claimants; April 2018, DWP).

Access to both PIP and ESA rest on processes of assessment and conditionality: state set conditions which must be met by individuals in order to continue to claim welfare. One such process of assessment is the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) which is used to determine an individual’s eligibility for ESA. Potential ESA claimants are assessed against a checklist of physical and mental functionality, initially by questionnaire prior to a ‘medical test’ conducted by private healthcare company (ATOS between the years 2008 and 2014 and Maximus from 2014 onwards).

Embodying, as it does, the new processes of assessment required in order to access welfare, the WCA has been subject to increasing levels of public and academic criticism (Gjersø, 2016). The

initial focus of media and public dissatisfaction was on the medical test. The test is perceived as being too technically driven with little human interaction; claimants reporting feelings of a lack of respect and empathetic understanding (Harrington, 2010). Using aggregate routine population survey data for 149 local authorities within England, Barr et al., (2016) found that for each additional 10,000 people reassessed an association exists with 6 additional suicides, 2700 cases of reported mental health issues and the prescribing of an additional 7020 antidepressant items. These associations were independent of baseline measures in the area, and followed (rather than preceded) the process of reassessment. However due to the nature of aggregate data, it cannot be determined that those who experienced adverse mental health outcomes were the *same* individuals who had undergone the WCA reassessment (Barr et al., 2016). Nonetheless, when combined with the findings of McManus et al. (2016) it is possible to grasp how potentially vulnerable those, as a group, who claim ESA can be: two thirds (66.4%) of people in receipt of ESA had thought about taking their life, with 43.2% having made a suicide attempt.

### *Wider project*

The first author's PhD aims to explore the experiences of those living with chronic conditions within the wider context of UK welfare reforms. By taking a pluralistic (or “dual focus”; Willig, 2017) approach to data sets (Frost, 2011), we look to examine the effect that societal knowledge about welfare claimants may have on subjective experiences: combining phenomenological and discursive methodologies to understand the phenomenon of ‘welfare’ from multiple perspectives. One of the first studies undertaken sought to understand the way in which these welfare reforms have been reported within UK media; what cultural landscape has been ‘made available’ for those claiming welfare due to chronic health conditions?

## *Methods*

As our initial research question looks at the effects of language; Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) was selected as our method of analysis. FDA enables a tracing of the genealogy of ideas – how things we consider to be common-sense, or knowledge, come to be (Willig, 2013). We conducted a media framing analysis (MFA; Giles & Shaw, 2009), looking at how the ESA benefit was initially introduced and its subsequent reforms. MFA is a procedure for conducting analyses of primarily news media texts. MFA draws on elements of existing framing research from communication research while incorporating features of relevance to psychology, such as narrative and characterisation (Giles & Shaw, 2009). In an effort to ‘illuminate’ what data was included in our analysis, we combined the use of PRISMA reporting guidelines (Liberati et al, 2009), traditionally used in the process of systematic reviews, as a screening procedure within the MFA. Searches for UK news media articles around three time periods significant within the history of ESA were done via LexisNexis databases. The PRISMA process allows the inclusion of “additional records”; material relevant to the research question, but that be unobtainable through the developed search strategy. Full findings from this MFA will be published at a later stage; this article concentrates on an analysis of an “additional record” identified through the MFA’s screening process: *I, Daniel Blake*.

Coincidentally (or perhaps not) within one of the time periods covered within the MFA, Ken Loach’s film *I, Daniel Blake* was released. *I, Daniel Blake* tells the story of the titular widowed carpenter’s journey through the ESA system. Dan befriends Katie and her children Dylan and Daisy; a family who have been relocated to Newcastle-upon-Tyne from London due to a lack of

available council houses. Through the experiences of these main characters we explore the consequences of modern approaches to welfare: Jobcentre sanctions are received and bustling food banks become relied upon. Within the MFA's data corpus, *I, Daniel Blake* became a significant discursive object: regularly used as a 'shortcut' to combat dominant narratives around welfare claimants. We felt it important to include the film within the media framing analysis, albeit with a slightly more specific research question: what discursive implications did the popularity of *I, Daniel Blake* have for 'real life' ESA claimants?

Despite the innovations imagined by Ian Parker and the Bolton Network (1999), film has remained an underexplored data source for discourse analysts. As suggested by Durmaz (1999), this may be due to the difficulties of *presenting* the data: unlike drawings or a painting, it is not possible to put 'the text' (i.e. a film) on a page. Discourse analysis' focus on more traditional sites of meaning, such as interviews or "naturalistic data sets", have done much to 'establish' qualitative research as a rigorous method within the discipline of psychology. Perhaps, were discursive approaches to routinely include film and less 'accepted' media as data, this would have been perceived as a 'step too far' for the psychology departments of the 1990s as an embarrassing hindrance in their battles for a place within the scientific hierarchy.

However discourse, under Foucauldian terms, is understood as social knowledge (Willig, 2013). As such, we thought it reasonable to include analysis of any texts that may contribute towards the constructions of what is socially 'known'. We were encouraged by the sense of opportunity and potential present in modern qualitative psychology research, particularly emboldened by the inclusions of radio (Carr, Goodman & Jowett, 2018) and televised debates (Goodman & Carr,

2017) as data, we began to consider how to approach *I, Daniel Blake* as a text. A concentration solely on the language spoken in a film seems to wilfully disregard the production choices made in the creation of a film; a decision that would make for an easier, but incomplete, analysis. Instead we drew upon a method of multimodal discourse analysis (MMDA; Kress, 2011). In MMDA the materially diverse textual ‘threads’ (gesture, speech, image, music) are brought together into one textual/semiotic whole. This drawing together is conceptualised as a ‘weaving’ of threads, with this ‘weaving’ implies a weaver who provides a sense of coherence to the text. Within the production of a film the weavers would be many. For *I, Daniel Blake*, we consider our primary weavers as being director Ken Loach and screenwriter Paul Laverty. In order to add further structure to our foray into film analysis, we drew upon the design aspects of mise-en-scène to assist in an identification of salient visual choices and modifications of space (Monaco, 2009). Lighting, composition, acting, set design and filmstock were all examined for discursive meaning, enabling us to weave together a new text: this analysis.

### *Findings*

We begin our analysis by examining the ‘immaculate construction’ of the character Daniel Blake. Dan is a responsible and caring individual, both to his community (shown through his exasperation with his neighbours’ rubbish and anger at a nonchalant owner of a defecating dog), friends (particularly the quasi-paternal role he takes up in relation to Katie) and family (having cared for his wife before her death). The construction of Dan is extremely precise, bringing about a character who is hard to ‘fault’.

The audience never sees Dan smoke, drink or gamble: he has no ‘vices’. When invited to the pub by an ex-colleague, Dan declines, justifying his choice through a responsible approach to his health:

*DAN: Thanks Joe... got to keep off the sauce  
(Lavery, 2016)*

In doing so, this orientation moves Dan away from what is ‘known’ about welfare claimants: that, through belief, in the “just world hypothesis” claimants are in need of support because of a fault of their own (Goodman & Carr, 2017). Instead Dan is positioned within a construction of ‘responsibility’: where his decisions, made in relation to his wellbeing and work, are informed by his health. Dan’s responsible actions, such as adhering to the advice of his doctor (or absence of *irresponsible* actions, shown by his avoidance of alcohol) are not ‘rewarded’. Instead Dan finds himself entangled within a tension between medical advice (not to return to work) and the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) who find him ‘fit for work’.

Alongside these narrative choices, the casting of Dan (played by Dave Johns) has a significant impact on the character’s construction. Dave is a stand-up comedian from Byker, Newcastle-upon-Tyne (UK) and prior to *I, Daniel Blake* was considered ‘unknown’ as an actor. Talking about this casting choice, director Ken Loach draws upon the traditions of stand-up comedy, that of a man or woman “rooted in working-class experience” (Lavery, 2016). Made explicit is the ontological significance of comedic timing: “their timing is absolutely implicit in who they are” (Lavery, 2016). Despite the subject matter of the film, there are elements of dark humour throughout, the effect of which is amplified through the comedic abilities of Dave Johns. An



authenticity sought by Loach is partially realised through the background of Dan's character, made 'real' through auditory and linguistic semiotics, namely his accent (situating him from Newcastle) and good-natured, cynical, spirit (the type of humour used). These aspects of Dan's character are established in the opening scenes of the film: against the 'blank slate' of a black screen the audience listens to Dan's Work Capability Assessment. Before we have seen Dan (within the film; notwithstanding the socialist realism styled film posters), these characteristics have been established through Dave Johns' delivery of the dark comedic script, as Dan's experiences buffet against the, almost immediately, 'Kafkaesque' responses of his assessor:

*DAN: Listen... I've had a major heart attack and nearly fell off a scaffolding... I want to get back to work too... now, will you please ask me about my heart and forget about my arse which works like a dream (Lavery, 2016)*

Other early scenes add to the construction of Dan's character. One such example is made through a rare, diegetic (i.e. the source of sound is visible) use of music. The distinctive tune of "Sailing By" followed by the sounds of names and sounds of the shipping forecast make use of the aesthetic resonance evoked by the forecast. First broadcast by the Meteorological Office in 1911, the shipping forecast has developed a peculiar status within British culture. Far beyond the likely anticipated audience, the shipping forecast has become ingrained in British culture and a "signifier of Englishness" (Carolan, 2011): a semiotic shortcut to the 'fuzzily' defined, but oft used, notions of English identity.



*Image 1: Scene 6, Dan's flat (night).*

*"I, Daniel Blake"/Sixteen Films/Ken Loach*

As seen in image 1, we see a lighting arrangement that through the deployment of established film lighting conventions (the practical light of the desk lamp remaining in frame), allows for sense of time to be established: that this broadcast of the shipping forecast is 'live' and happening in the present of a late night/early morning. This, combined with the intimate feel of the short scene, in which Dan woodworks silently, suggests the chance recording of a nightly ritual. In doing so the film's weavers position Dan firmly within this discourse of English identity. This positioning is echoed by Dan's name: a consideration that was "very very important" for the script's writer Paul Laverty (Buder, 2017). For Laverty, the surname Blake is "quintessentially English" (Buder, 2017), presumably drawing upon the lineage of William Blake; that of 'Jerusalem' arranged to music and fervently beloved as "the second national anthem of England" (Ferber, 2000).

These constructs cumulatively establish Dan as a ‘cultured everyman’: English working class, ‘refined’ of taste. However the film is keen to ‘protect’ Dan from the actions made available by those discourses that may, in the perceptions of the audience, follow from conservative constructions of ‘Englishness’. Within a globalised world, there does exist the potential ‘danger’ of asserting a national identity: the opening up of isolationist discourses and practices (Robins, 2005). Dan escapes these ideological positionings. He is well liked and respected by his younger neighbours, China and Piper, who treat him as a friend. As shown in image 2, this respect and fondness is mutual. Dan’s amazement at China’s business links with “Stanley from Guangzhou” (Lavery, 2016) and their video-telephonic conversation suggests a marvel with the modern world which goes far beyond the potential actions made available by isolationist discourses.



*Image 2: Scene 16, China’s flat (night).*

*“I, Daniel Blake”/Sixteen Films/Ken Loach*

Having explored the level of considerations made by the weavers of the text in order to construct the near faultless character of Dan, it is important to consider *why* Dan is constructed in such, almost martyr-like, terms. It is possible to conceive of how, if ‘pushed’ too far or perhaps directed in more ‘dramatic’ style, that these constructions would have become unbelievable (such as the contested concept of the “Mary Sue”: an idealised fictional character (Chander & Sunder, 2007)). Within the writing, direction and making of the film, a balance appears to have been intended for: in providing a counter-discourse to prevailing discourses around welfare claimants, but achieved through a character that is constructed in a palatable and agreeable manner. The reasons for this careful construction reveal the subjectivities of the intended *audience*, as well as the power relations between those that the characters ‘represent’ and those anticipated to watch.



*Image 3: Scene 14, city centre.*

“*I, Daniel Blake*”/Sixteen Films/Ken Loach

Loach makes regular use of deep focus shots, from a static camera. In doing so the ‘importance’ of the audience is enforced (Stam, 1999). Such shots establish the viewer as omniscient, observing an “objective point of view” (Stam, 1999). We are seeing a lived experience: Dan’s lived experiences of welfare in modern Britain. The emphasis is on documenting this experience in an almost ‘apolitical’ manner. The effect of which is eroded by the auteur status of Ken Loach; whereby he is positioned firmly within a leftist political and cultural discourse: synonymous with the genre of ‘social realism’, which can be characterised as seeking to ‘expose’ the consequences of prevailing ways of organising society (Stafford, 2017). With Loach’s dedication to shooting on film (thereby making use of the film’s ‘grainy’ quality as a semiotic shortcut to gritty realism) *I, Daniel Blake* initially appears to continue this tradition. However, we suggest that *I, Daniel Blake* can be better understood through Deleuze’s (1989) conceptualisation of “neo-realism”. Neo-realism produces shots that dwell on its characters’ subjectivities, physicality and presence outside of dramatic narrative. As seen in image 3, the audience often views Dan walking through Newcastle, one of a crowd of people ‘going about’ their daily lives. Such positioning visually reinforces the construction of Dan as an ‘everyman’ through his physical presence, but also suggests a commonality to Dan’s experiences: how many ‘Dans’ may be amongst us?

Unlike *Cathy Come Home* (Garnett & Loach, 1966), a realist drama that sought to highlight Britain’s homelessness crisis, the audience is not directed to statistics or specific governmental policies. Within *I, Daniel Blake* individuals seen as culpable are identified by the film’s

characters. During the Jobcentre graffiti scene specific members of government are *named* by the “Scotsman”. The Scotsman speaks to the effects of welfare reforms: the UK’s income inequality remains “rhetorically absent” repressed within a historical construction (Billig, 1999a). The deployment of the Scotsman seems to be in the tradition of the “Greek chorus” (Weiner, 1980). Plays of ancient Greek theatre tended to include a chorus of 12 to 50 individuals whose function was to collectively comment on the dramatic action: to bring the passions of the characters into sharp focus, so that the audience can consciously accept, or reject, the ideas presented (Weiner, 1980; Brecht, 1964). Within this scene we, the audience, are observing this action at a distance. Members of the public stop and watch as Dan makes his statement via spray can. Our view is occasionally obscured by passing buses and other comings and goings of city life, reminding us of our positioning as a passing member of the public: we are Dan’s (and the Scotsman’s) audience.



*Image 4: Scene 38, outside the Jobcentre.*

“*I, Daniel Blake*”/Sixteen Films/Ken Loach

Understanding the cumulative effect of these choices reveals subjectivities that are expected by the weavers of the film to be held by the audience. The intended audience is likely not from this ‘world’ of welfare and as such that class structures are integral for understanding the divide between the characters and the anticipated or expected audience. The ‘us’ and ‘them’ of class relations based on commodities, practices and lifestyles imagined by other social classes, rather than known through lived experience (Day, Rickett and Woolhouse, 2017). Other social classes only have socially constructed knowledge available to them about Dan’s world. Through the setting and decors of *I, Daniel Blake* the film first confirms these understandings before attempting to subvert the *practices* assumed to follow from such constructions of class.

Considering this assumptive lack of lived experience goes some way to understand why the construction of Dan is done so precisely. In order to combat the ‘truths’ established by prevailing neoliberal discourses around responsibility, choice and “worklessness”, a character was required whose motivations and behaviours would be beyond reproach. Such a construction is therefore both a site of resistance *and* a testament to the dominating effects of these discourses.

However actions can be taken that would prevent future ‘Dans’: our anger is to be directed solely at the DWP. Throughout the film the DWP remains impenetrable and unseen. Both the audience and Dan interact with those who ‘represent’, in a removed manner, the DWP: job centre staff, ‘healthcare professionals’, security staff, the CV workshop manager and call centre staff are conduits for messages from the DWP. The DWP themselves, especially the Decision Maker (who remains intangible even to the call centre staff), remain absent; hidden behind the ideology

of professionalism through the methods of technology. Contrasting against the loss of time, space, place and selves experienced by Dan, and other characters; the DWP's ability to remain unobtainable yet omnipotent represents a performative display of power.

### *Discussion*

This multimodal analysis has examined how through the careful construction of Dan, created not just through script but all the mise-en-scène decisions made, the intention of the film's weavers can be understood as a 'call to action'. This call rests on a number of assumptions which position the assumed audience as middle class, who will lack a direct lived knowledge of welfare. In order to discursively counter socially constructed knowledge about those who claim ESA, the narrative focus on the impact of ESA systems requires that Dan be immaculately constructed. Such positions are less available for those characters experiencing the consequences of other austerity informed policies. Due to practical reasons, we were unable to include our analysis of the wider effects of austerity included within the film: China and Piper's 'entrepreneurship' is shown as a result of unreliable available work; the 'reality' of zero hour contracts, whilst Katie's uncontrollable hunger at the foodbank is linked to her subsequent 'descent' (as thematically constructed within the film) into sex work.

Through considerations of the different forms of compassion it is possible to see how these constructions 'lead' the audience to a source of blame: the opaqueness and unknowability of the DWP position the department as the film's antagonist. Yet power is not understood as purely politically obtained: instead power is available to those watching, and it is the film makers' intention that this power is used to gain "administrative justice" for those 'Dans' that walk



amongst us in our towns and cities (O’Brein, 2018). However such compassions rest on the notions of an ‘ideal’ welfare claimant. In confronting the problems of the ESA and welfare processes, counter-discourses presented by *I, Daniel Blake* also legitimise a *certain type* of welfare claimant. ‘Daniel Blake’ becomes a semiotic reference point that threatens to cement criteria about who is a genuine claimant. Indeed, much of the news media contained within the project’s wider media framing analysis concentrates on the effect of the film, whilst also attempting to find the ‘real’ Daniel Blake.

What recourses are available for claimants who do not match such a perfect construction? Dan’s condition neatly fits within a narrative of biographical disruption (Bury, 1982). An illness event (Dan’s heart attack) disrupts the structures of everyday life, forcing him to re-establish capability within this context. As heard in Dan’s closing statement (and communicated implicitly through the declarative, legal-like, statement of “I, Daniel Blake”), Dan sees himself as a *citizen*. This role, for Dan, seems to have been earned through previous years of work and financial contributions to the country. This conceptualisation of citizenship constructs welfare as an earned support that should be available for those who are citizens. Access to welfare is less related to the conditionalities of the benefit system, but rather the conditions required for ‘citizenship’.

Although not fully explored within the film, these citizenship conditions seem to be tied to periods of previous employment and a sense of neighbourly responsibilities. Can the counter-discourses within *I, Daniel Blake* ‘protect’ all ESA claimants or do individuals need to ‘share’ the characteristics of an ideal welfare claimant? Are these characteristics interrelated with Dan’s gender, class status, age, ethnicity or cultural background? What of those experiencing

conditions that cannot be understood or communicated through a simple narrative? Or conditions without physically presenting symptoms?

The work of Ken Loach and Paul Laverty goes a significant way in highlighting the problems of dehumanisation seemingly experienced by ESA claimants. However, in doing so, the film raises these questions that may further problematise constructions of who (and who is not) able to be considered as ‘genuinely’ deserving of welfare. This analysis has uniquely examined the production choices made in the creation of a film. Only through moving *beyond* what was said, interpreting the cumulative effects of lighting, sound, camera shots etc., we were enabled to understand how these discursive constructions were achieved. We believe this multimodal approach to analysis shows *how* the stories and narratives we consume can inform how we make sense of contested phenomena, such as welfare. The next stages of this PhD will examine if such discourses constrain or facilitate how individuals feel they can talk about their *own* experiences of welfare and chronic conditions.

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