In recent years, there have been marked changes in the ordering of inequalities and social difference. Despite this, there is continued ambivalence in what the general public think about inequality and public policy responses to it. To temper inequalities of outcome and opportunity, social policy must effectively engage with and respond to this ambivalence. In this regard, sociological enquiry into public perceptions of inequality can provide insight into processes shaping the nature of public dissent, consent and institutional legitimacy surrounding inequality.

If social policymaking is shaped and constrained by public attitudes and policy preferences, this presents a number of important questions for sociology and social policy as academic disciplines and applied fields. How are the causes and consequences of inequality understood and justified by the general public? Why is it that extensive concerns about inequalities sit alongside distaste for redistribution and more punitive attitudes to certain forms of welfare? What role do public perceptions of inequality play in shaping the collective identity and orientation of social citizens? How do socio-economic inequalities relate to people’s beliefs about moral belonging? What bearing does this have on the progressive potential and direction of social and public policy?

To answer these questions, this half-day colloquium is organised by the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds in partnership with the Leeds Inequalities Research Network. The event brings together a range of speakers to explore the ambivalent nature of public attitudes towards poverty, inequality, welfare and redistribution. This includes examination of everyday experiences and understandings of inequality and what bearing this has on the identity and policy preferences of individuals across the income distribution. In light of the evidence presented, the colloquium closes with a collective panel discussion to consider what challenges and opportunities this presents for progressive social and public policy in both the short and long term.

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Nostalgia narratives? Pejorative attitudes to welfare in historical perspective

*Professor John Hudson, University of York*

Jensen and Tyler (2015) have powerfully argued that 'anti-welfare commonsense', fuelled by negative political and media discourse stressing welfare dependency and deception, has buttressed support for social security reform in recent years. Along with many other academics they point to the hardening of public attitudes towards welfare state provision and how notions of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving poor' have been reintroduced into popular debates. We identify four distinct threads within this scholarship. First, there is an argument that public attitudes have shifted from an earlier post-war welfare imaginary and settlement to
an anti-welfare consensus. Second, this hardening includes a growing prevalence of 'othering'. The third thread is the broadening of this moral and disciplinary gaze to include groups, such as disabled people, who until recently were not subject to the same amount of stigma as other types of benefit recipients. Fourth, is the impact of pejorative welfare discourses on the self-identity and attitudes of disadvantaged groups. While a growing body of evidence makes it increasingly difficult to argue against suggestions that there is a hostile body of anti-welfare sentiment in the UK, what is often implicit in the analysis of pejorative contemporary attitudes to welfare is the view that there was once a 'golden age' of the welfare state when public support was more fully behind a strong set of social security benefits provided as a social right of citizenship. Whether this was the case is a moot point however. Few studies have tried to piece together the attitudes to welfare of the general public during the consensus era. We attempt to undertake such a task here, drawing on ad hoc attitudes surveys and polling data in particular. Specifically, we focus on how notions of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving poor' play out in this data, pointing to some key continuities found in contemporary and historical public attitudes to welfare.

The poor ‘sociological imagination’ of unequal citizens

Dr Daniel Edmiston, University of Leeds

Historically, attitudinal research has tended to explain either support for or resistance to redistribution and welfare through self-interested rationalities. Whilst there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that there are clear material underpinnings to welfare attitudes, less is known about the dynamic and inter-subjective mechanisms that underpin this relationship. With this in mind, this paper examines the processes underlying materialist explanations of attitudinal divergence by exploring how lived experiences of inequality affect knowledge accumulation, and in turn attitude (trans-) formation towards welfare and inequality. The findings suggest that affluent individuals are less likely to acknowledge systemic features shaping socio-economic life. As a result, they exhibit a relatively poor sociological imagination that is deployed in distinct and patterned ways to make sense of, and at times justify, economic (re-) structuring. By contrast, those living in relative deprivation are more likely to advance accounts of intergroup relations and social location that emphasise the structuration of (dis) advantage. In light of the findings, a number of conclusions are drawn about future prospects for welfare provision and redistribution amidst rising structural inequality.

Public perceptions of inequality and social structure

Professor Sarah Irwin, University of Leeds

Lay perceptions of social structure, inequality and economic distribution have a particular salience in the era of widening inequalities, which has characterised Britain since the 1980s. Research into subjective beliefs about inequality has generated explanatory puzzles relating to people’s apparent tendency to under-estimate the extent of inequalities, to see themselves as being situated 'near the middle' irrespective of their objective position, and/or to hold an a-social view of the underpinnings of socio-economic inequalities. In the presentation I will
discuss new qualitative data on people’s perceptions of inequality and of how they see themselves to be positioned, with a particular focus on context, biographical experience and social change. The qualitative and temporal analysis suggests that people are much more sophisticated analysts of social process, and of their own situatedness within a wider social structure, than often thought. This has implications for sociological understanding and also holds relevance for renewing political options for intervention.

**Why do people put up with inequality?**

*Dr Wendy Bottero, University of Manchester*

The most frequent answer to the question of 'why people put up with inequality' has been that inequality is reproduced through processes of symbolic legitimation, misrecognition and naturalisation which produce consent, or at least acquiescence, for social arrangements. This model tends to result in a comparative neglect of 'everyday' critique and 'ordinary' expressions of grievance, and gives a voluntaristic account of the stability of unequal relations as resting in processes of ignorance and consent. Here I examine alternative explanations of persisting relations of power and inequality, which argues that the key issue rests not in questions of symbolic legitimation but rather in how power relations are constituted as constraining collective practices. The central question then becomes not whether power relations are recognised (or not), but rather how the constraining nature of collective practices becomes susceptible to renegotiation and transformation.