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Uncertain subjects: Shaping disabled women's lives through income support policy

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Abstract

This article provides a critical reading of one aspect of the “third mobilization of transinstitutionalization” (Haley & Jones, 2018), focused on how power is exercised through the B.C. government income support program (or the ambiguously-named B.C. Benefits), shaping the embodied lives of women living with chronic physical and mental impairments. I research and write as a woman living with a disabling chronic illness whose explicit focus is power: how it is enacted and what it produces in the everyday lives of women with disabling chronic conditions living on income support. I too have been the recipient of disability income support. Thus, my accounts are ‘interested.’ My writing seeks to create a disruptive reading that destabilizes common-sense notions about disabled women securing provincial income support benefits, in particular in British Columbia (B.C.), interviewed as part of my doctoral research. Despite public claims by the B.C. government to foster the independence, community participation, and citizenship of disabled people in B.C., the intersection of government policy and practices and how they are read and taken up by disabled women discipline them in ways that produce profound uncertainty in their lives, such that these women become uncertain subjects (Kimpson, 2015).

Keywords: Power, disability, policy, uncertainty, women, income support

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Sally A. Kimpson, RN, PhD

Politics is also down there, in the strategic field of small things. (Cruikshank, 1999, p. 124)

I research and write as a woman living with a disabling chronic illness whose explicit focus is power: how it is enacted and what it produces in the everyday lives of women with disabling chronic conditions living on income support. I too have been the recipient of disability income support. Thus, my accounts are ‘interested.’ My writing seeks to create a disruptive reading that destabilizes common-sense notions about disabled women securing provincial income support benefits, in particular in British Columbia (B.C.), interviewed as part of my doctoral research. Despite public claims by the B.C. government to foster the independence, community participation, and citizenship of disabled people in B.C., the intersection of government policy and practices and how they are read and taken up by disabled women discipline them in ways that produce profound uncertainty in their lives, such that these women become uncertain subjects¹ (Kimpson, 2015).

This article provides a critical reading of one aspect of the “third mobilization of transinstitutionalization” (Haley & Jones, 2018), focused on how power is exercised through the B.C. government income support program (or the ambiguously-named B.C. Benefits), shaping the embodied lives of women living with chronic physical and mental impairments. I believe it is important to clarify how “woman” is understood for the purposes of the research. My research did

¹ ‘Uncertain subjects’ (Kimpson, 2015) constitutes part of the title I created for my dissertation. The double entendre refers in part to the research finding that the lives of the participants (and arguably most disabled people receiving provincial income support) are characterized by deep uncertainty, not the least being embodied uncertainty arising from living with unpredictable, fluctuating impairments. The term ‘subjects’ draws from Foucault’s thinking about the effects of power—that is, disabled women are both *subject to* and *subjects of* exercises of power (in this case income support policy), producing uncertainty (among other effects, discussed here), which is also a central subject of my doctoral research.

not specifically encompass less visible categories of women, such as those who dis/identify with traditional gender boundaries, which may make embodied experiences of income support policy more complicated. I focused the research empirically on the lives of the women who volunteered to participate; none mentioned gender identity and how it might intersect with income support policy. As one of the participants was previously known to me, I was aware she is bisexual. But she didn't talk about that aspect of her life, and I did not theorize how it might alter the effects of institutional power in her life. All of the women were single, had university degrees (two with graduate degrees), and three of the participants had single-parented their children, who were not living with them at the time of the interviews.

This postconventional (Shildrick, 2012; Mitchell & Snyder, 2015) research is located methodologically at the contested juxtaposition of three fields—feminism, poststructuralism, and critical disability studies—and uses Foucault's late work on power as a resource for thinking, including his ideas about governmentality and biopower. One of my research purposes was to expose “a thoroughgoing governmentality at the heart of policy initiatives ... that indicate they are never as positively progressive as they claim or may seem” (Shildrick, 2012, p. 38). What is unique about this study is its application of Foucault's concepts from the ground up—i.e., how the everyday lives and embodied practices of disabled women are shaped by income support policy, rather than how governmentality is typically applied in policy studies to critique policies *as written*, a primarily top-down approach.

Imbricated with my own experiential knowledge of income support programs, each of the previously mentioned fields suggests methodological, empirical, and interpretive readings that enabled me to produce different knowledge, differently, about disabled women's lives. Using verbatim narrative accounts from in-depth interviews focused on how each of the four participants

live their lives, take care of themselves, and make sense of and respond to the government policy and practices to which they are subject reveals everyday, embodied practices of the self that constitute their subjectivities as disabled women. Together with critically interpretive reflections, these accounts reveal/expose/make visible the lives of the participants in response to exercises of power in ways that unseat, unsettle, and disrupt taken-for-granted understandings of those who are disabled, female, and poor.

I interviewed four women twice, three with invisible impairments, including one living with a chronic mental health condition, and one visibly impaired woman. I use the term ‘disabled women’ to refer to the participants and other women living with impairments who are subject to disabling policies. In this article, I share critical reflections on the disciplinary processes at work in participants’ lives revealed through interpretation/analysis centred around the question, “How do each of the women organize/live their lives in response to what they believe is possible or not, particularly in relation to those governing structures to which they are subject, and with what effects?” More specifically I used the following questions to make sense of the interview data:

What do these women know/believe about ministry policy, and the regulations? How do these interpretations organize/guide their actions? And with what effects? Similarly, how does each woman’s reading of her embodied experience and/or mental state govern her actions? And how do these bodily readings (and actions) intersect/collide with those she makes of ministry policy? Again, with what effects?

What was revealed were the troubling effects of exercises of power in the women’s everyday lives. Throughout this article I will provide brief but pertinent examples to illustrate these effects, rather than present multiple lengthy verbatim excerpts from the interview data. Critically, my aim here is

to describe the disciplinary processes with which the women in the study find themselves engaged, and what these produce in their everyday lives, revealed during the interpretation of the data.

In this paper, I seek to bring to light and clarify some of the ways that the B.C. Benefits program ‘works’ in the everyday lives of disabled women. I do this “by presenting ‘inconvenient facts’ reflecting the disjunction between how such programs represent themselves and their objectives and strategic effects” (Dean, 2010, p. 87). Indeed, by contesting or even attempting to reconfigure how we think about governance, “we call into question the very fabric of our forms of life” (p. 80), and if these women’s lives are any indication, this fabric is at best hanging by threads.

From my own experience with income support programs, I know that there is rarely a direct, straightforward relationship between government policy (and programs) and the actions of those whose lives are governed by these policies. Indeed, citizens subject to neoliberal regimes are encouraged to be active in ways that governments can engage our “self-activating capacities as individuals” (Rose, 1996, p. 165), thus shaping our social commitments to self and others, in this way governing “at a distance” (p. 165). Yet this “new regime of the self” (p. 165) often excludes women such as the study participants, who are economically, socially, and politically marginalized, and to some extent “controlled by older, harsher [and more direct] ways” (p. 166) of disciplining citizens. Disciplinary practices engendered in income support programs produce barriers for disabled women in terms of self-advocacy, “[forcing] them into...disabling relations with the state, which mean they have to struggle harder and longer” (Chouinard & Crooks, 2005, p. 29) to acquire supports and information. In spite of this the women participate as actively as they can in their own unique versions of the “free exercise of personal choice” (Rose, 1996, p. 165), engendering a life of “responsible selfhood” (p. 168) while responding to the effects produced by governing at a distance, including unintended consequences.

Disability studies and social policy literature are replete with writings about the effect of neoliberal regimes and the erosion of social welfare in Western democracies, in particular the tightening of eligibility criteria and reduction in supports for disabled people (Bach & Rioux, 1996; Rice & Prince, 2000; Krogh & Johnson, 2006; McColl & Jongbloed, 2006; Lightman, et al, 2009; Prince, 2009). Not the least of these are the “pronounced and multiple” (Brodie, 1996, p. 126) impacts of restructuring on the lives of women, in particular how citizenship has been redefined within the neoliberal order. Those women living on the margins, like disabled women, “who experience a variety of barriers to participation in the paid labour force” have had their social and economic well-being “undermined by significant reductions in ... supports available” (Teghtsoonian, 2003, p. 30) as part of neoliberal governing agendas.

As part of the fabric of the participants’ lives, patterns become established in response to their persistent readings of how government operates. These readings make sense to the women given their inclinations, experiences, aspirations, and desires—all aspects constitutive of their subjectivities —and are idiosyncratic and particular to each woman. More importantly, their understandings may not consistently position them well. Paradoxically, patterns may differ but there are commonalities. This is not a nod to humanism in an otherwise postconventional work; each woman’s life is unique and each participant differs from the others. Yet similar effects are produced in lives structured by income support policy in ways that tie them together, despite being isolated from each other. In this way exercises of power work through them uniquely, while producing common ground that serves as a possible field from which each chooses to act. Differing patterns expose the myriad ways policy is lived in the everyday. The women are perpetually being organized and/or organizing themselves, shaping their lives in troubling ways, but they never get completely ‘organized’ due to the messiness and unpredictability of their everyday lives.

What ministry policy and regulations prescribe and what the women do in response are not seamless; between each is a gap, a chasm of possibilities. Inhabiting this space (and time) are the women's readings, which mediate between policy and their actions. Multiple factors are at play in these readings: ministry policy and regulations, possible actions and imagined consequences, and the women's own subjectivity, desires, and aspirations, including their fluctuating embodied and mental states. In this sense "power works through, and not against, subjectivity" (Rose, 1996, p. 151). Indeed, contemporary practices of government "have come to rely upon the agency of the governed themselves" (Dean, 2010, p. 82). Foucault's (1982) idea that "to govern is to structure the possible field of action of others" (p. 790) comes into play, especially if we consider that the women as subjects "capable of action" (p. 789) or agency are being acted upon by policies that structure how they *themselves* act upon their own readings of what actions are possible.

What I am referring to here is how *bio-power* is exercised in these women's lives, producing particular kinds of selves/subjectivities. Bio-power signifies a constructive approach for managing populations by concentrating power on life, particularly on individual bodies, making them docile (or more to the point, useful) in such ways that they can be "subjected, used, transformed, and improved" (Foucault, 1991, p. 136). Gastaldo (1997) reminds us that bio-power is "not a set of mechanisms that guarantee control of citizens by the state" but rather "a subtle, constant and ubiquitous power over life" linking "individual bodies to the social body" (p. 115), ideally as individuals participating in and constituting society.

Drawing from their own knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and capacities, each of the participants has acquired an ability, or "*habitus*" (Burkitt, 2002, p. 225), to enact the best ways to care for herself, her body, and her life in ways that make sense given the exercise of bio-power to which she is subject. Each woman chooses "particular forms of practical actions ... appropriate to the situation" (p. 225)

she finds herself in and applies them as best she can, assuming responsibility for her well-being. In these ways each woman becomes “the doctor of oneself” (Foucault, 1997, p. 235), enacting “a discourse of ability and health” (Anderson, 2005, p. 255) that currently governs disabled (and non-disabled) people’s lives in contemporary society. What this belies is how compromised, under-resourced and ill-equipped these disabled women are to be the wholly “autonomous, independent, and self-reliant” (Nettleton, 1997, p. 212) neoliberal subjects required for the ‘healthy’ functioning of an advanced liberal democracy such as in the province of B.C.

Who is this “self” being shaped through neoliberal government exercises of power? Nikolas Rose (1996) tells us

The self is to be a subjective being, it is to aspire to autonomy, it is to strive for personal fulfillment...it is to interpret its reality and destiny as a matter of individual responsibility, it is to find meaning in existence by shaping its life through acts of choice.
(p. 151)

Using a variety of “technologies of the self” (Foucault, 1997, p. 225), primarily through their own means (in highly straitened economic circumstances), sometimes with the help of others (particularly in the situation of the one visibly disabled participant who receives help with personal care and activities of daily living), the women perform “a certain number of operations on their bodies, and souls, thoughts, conduct and ways of being” (p. 225). Each strives toward her own embodied version of well-being, seeking to meet everyday needs and desires—again constituting a terrain upon which it is possible for her to act.

It is also a territory upon which governments act and exercise “a form of power [bio-power] that produces and relies upon [the active participation] of subjects rather than absolute subjugation”

(Cruikshank, 1999, p. 41). Citizens are invested “with a set of goals and self-understandings [giving them] an investment in participating voluntarily in programs ... and institutions set up to ‘help’” (p. 41). Experts (and their knowledge) and agencies, including physicians, therapists, community-based volunteer social services and ministry workers constitute “the ensemble” that Foucault (1992) suggests enables “the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power” (p. 102), both *voluntary and coercive*, in the lives of the disabled women, acting on their actions “rather than procuring their apathy” (Cruikshank, 1999, p. 38).

Cruikshank (1999) reminds us that women receiving state-administered income support “are not excluded or controlled by [exercises of] power so much as constituted and put into action by power” (p. 41). Each of the women participates in her (own) governance by subscribing to, taking up, and strategically acting upon her own unique interpretations/readings of policy and what each believes to be possible/allowed, given the policies and their fluctuating embodiment. Strategic moves/actions by participants produce troubling effects in their lives as the following sections describe, revealing how these women are governed indirectly, by participating willingly or otherwise in their own governance.

No good subjects of resistance

In my own experience I often found income support policies opaque; I never knew whether my take on them would achieve my goals. I had become used to second-guessing before acting, and then waiting (in fear of retribution) to see if I had guessed right, never really knowing what exactly might constitute a correct guess, even when the outcome favoured me. This kind of uncertainty made it more difficult for me to know/read actual policies—for example, those governing returning to school. I knew that to some extent this decision would be mediated by my vocational rehab

consultant, but I had no idea what kind of influence I might have with her, or she with program administrators. In a nod to compliance, I told her what I thought the program administrators might like to hear but went ahead with the risky (and perhaps resistant) decision to register for full-time graduate studies, and (strategically) not actively inform them until I was asked, thus taking a chance.

My own experience enabled me to see how the women in my study, like myself, both comply with and resist the rules strategically. Given this, I subscribe to the view that “acquiescence and rebellion are not antithetical but can take place in the same breath” (Cruikshank, 1999, p. 41). Despite overwhelming evidence that their everyday lives are characterized by relentlessly responding to material (poverty, impaired bodies/minds) constraints, by complying and resisting strategically disabled women enact whatever agency they find available. If “agency is spoken into existence at any [given] moment” (Davies, 1991, p. 52) then by “speaking back” (as one participant does when a case manager attempts to convince her to move to assisted living), typically seen as a form of resistance, the women position themselves strategically so that they can actually get some of the things they need. If it holds that “[e]very power relationship implies ... a strategy of struggle” (Foucault, 1982, p. 794) then a life in which every move must be strategized is a life under siege, a life of struggle.

In response to their interpretation of what is possible in the face of opaque policy—and only discovered when they either stumble into clarity inadvertently, or mistakenly exceed the rules—these women make strategic decisions about what to do or not given their readings of the possibilities, including possible consequences. A woman may possess keen knowledge and accurate understandings of government policy and what is required; her first inclination might be to comply with the rules. But for strategic reasons she may not entirely do so, in which case she is simultaneously resisting. For example, one participant (pseudonym Marion) strategically manages

the allowable earnings exemption in a way that (she believes) does not attract undue attention by the ministry to her situation, for fear of jeopardizing her benefits. Instead of earning the full exemption allowed (\$400 monthly at the time of the interviews, now annualized at \$12,000 yearly for those with the Persons with Disabilities Designation) when employed at her very part-time position at a non-profit organization teaching chronic illness self-management, Marion limits herself to \$200 monthly. Marion tells me:

I'm still leery right now about making the extra income per month, because I would like to make more. But I know for a fact that if you make \$400 a month, which I could frankly use for paying for these medical things that they're not paying for now—you know like physio and massage and podiatry and everything else. The reality of it is that if you start making that money every month—I think they are going to lean on you hard to be doing that more often, getting off the [benefit]. And there's no way I could do that and live, you know, with my expenses. I mean I don't even know how you would pay rent. I could not live in my own place if I was not living here in subsidized housing because the rent alone, never mind groceries would be what?—it would be more than my [benefit] cheque a month.

In subtle ways, as this excerpt from the data illustrates, complying/resisting is contingent on each woman's judgment of what is at stake in any possible response. How then are we to understand resistance as exercised by the participants?

Although Foucault (1990) suggests that “where there is power, there is resistance” (p. 95), Gordon (1980) questions whether it is for

people to reject or refuse, or on the other hand in some manner to consent to, acquiesce in, or accept the subjection of themselves or of others ... it becomes apparent that the binary division between resistance and non-resistance is an unreal one ... account must be taken of resistances whose strategy is one of evasion or defence ... there is no good subject of resistance. (p. 257)

Gordon signals the indivisible nature of resistance and compliance and suggests unconventional strategies as kinds of resistance, signalling that resistance (and compliance) take unique, idiosyncratic, individual, contingent shapes. Sometimes the women read situations as being much safer to follow the rules. But in another participant's case (pseudonym Evelyn), for example, the rules do not fit for her or meet her needs around housing (she is variously couch-surfing, living in her car, or in boarding rooms), without potentially risky contact with ministry officials each time she moves, in particular regarding completing forms to receive the shelter allowance. But complying wholly constitutes a risk to Evelyn's well-being as she has to stay in unsuitable housing longer than she can tolerate given her environmental sensitivities, and using significantly limited energy to comply with administrative requirements to receive the housing allowance. Beneficiaries are required to have a fixed address and therefore cannot change their housing situation easily, nor can they be couch-surfing or sleeping in a car as Evelyn has done. They also cannot move to another region of the province without informing the ministry. Evelyn moved briefly to the B.C. Interior, and for ministry purposes retained her previous address, but the landlord informed the ministry that she no longer resided there, and Evelyn was forced to explain herself to ministry officials. She defended herself by saying she was unaware of the regulations about having a fixed address, and was fortunately not penalized.

Work without choice, fear and distrust, dependency

Exercises of power shaping the women's everyday lives persistently constellate around the “work” of being disabled and unrelenting fear of losing benefits, complicated by tangible distrust of government (imbricated with distrust *by* government that beneficiaries will not comply with the regulations), and the production of dependency.

With respect to the (unpaid) work of being disabled, all four women expend an inordinate amount of time, effort, and energy securing supports or otherwise responding to government, including Marion’s dogged resistance to the intrusion of the state potentially undermining her relative independence. Disabled people are deeply familiar with this dynamic of expending already-depleted energy to secure benefits and supports, which constitutes a kind of “work without choice” (Krogh & Johnson, 2006, p. 170). The unpaid work of living with disability is necessary to navigate social programs, receive support from various systems, including health care services, non-profit, and community-based agencies, and ensure care for self. In some instances this work requires “immediate attention without consideration of negative personal health or lifestyle consequences” (p. 170). This kind of immediacy was particularly evident when one of the women faced an imminent tribunal hearing to challenge a recent negative decision regarding her eligibility for full benefits.

The hard work of surviving permeates and structures the women’s everyday lives in ways that leave little energy for regeneration and recreation, yet the women also demonstrate creativity, resourcefulness, and generosity, given the structural poverty with which they live. The participant I called Jocelyne creatively engages in caring for her body with limited resources in ways that align with her alternative beliefs about well-being, and expresses a strong desire to help others spiritually. Another participant—with the pseudonym Galya—is resourceful in finding effective alternatives to

prescribed antidepressants. Marion, who is visibly disabled, has useful contacts in the health authority and ministry, which she enlists to support her desire to remain independent, and Evelyn creatively engages her imagination and limited resources to find organic food, alternative treatments (bartering), and environmentally safe housing. Despite these edifying activities, surviving for each of the women is a full-time job—the unpaid and externally unrewarding work of being disabled and poor—engaged in with deeply limited (and limiting) physical and social resources.

Another aspect of the work of being disabled (and receiving disability benefits) arises out of the challenges of knowing for certain what is allowed (and/or provided by government); not knowing means the women spend considerable time and energy attempting to discover this information, or second-guessing. When they do find out what they are eligible for, they have to exert effort to obtain it (complete forms, get medical approval, wait for a decision). Also, they never know whether eligibility for additional supports will continue or if they will have to repeat the same application process yearly. In this case, the possibility of accessing much-needed additional supports creates uncertainty and another layer of work they can ill afford.

The time and effort required to second-guess government also uses energy that each woman needs to contribute to her well-being. Yet, securing supports like nutritional supplements reflects a kind of agency, with two possible effects: the women experience a sense of empowerment (if they are successful) because they actually receive supports that they might not have otherwise (and cannot independently afford), while enabling a minimal kind of community participation (as supplicants). Conversely, securing supports requires energy seriously compromised due to fatigue accompanying chronic conditions. The effect of government policy then is primarily *disabling*; work securing supports exacerbates the disability that government intends to remediate or compensate for.

Be afraid, be very afraid

The threat of disallowing eligibility for benefits is a coercive exercise by the B.C. government. The previous Disability Benefits Program Act (1996–2001) (British Columbia, 1996) designated people with disabilities as ‘permanently disabled,’ which created a kind of stability in terms of their eligibility. With the newly-elected government (2001) the Minister of Human Resources announced plans to move the ministry from “a culture of entitlement to a culture of employment and self-sufficiency” (Coell, 2002, no page). This was to be accomplished by means of a “new income assistance system that supports individuals and families in achieving their social and economic potential [emphasizing] self-reliance and participation” (British Columbia, 2002, p. 5). To enact this, the government rescinded the existing act (and permanent disability status) and instituted the new Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Act, which moved people with disabilities back into the general welfare system, a move viewed as regressive by disability activists (and scholars) (see Kneebone & Grynishak, 2011). The B.C. Coalition of People with Disabilities (now Disability Alliance of B.C.) argued that permanent disability status was crucial “given the diverse nature of disability” (British Columbia Coalition of People with Disabilities, 2001, p. 2) as “sporadic or cyclical, recurrent or permanent” (p. 2), and without permanent status the “fear of losing disability benefits will discourage [beneficiaries] from seeking work” (p. 2).

With disability status being provisional, uncertainty and fear in the women’s lives is produced. This untrustworthy move by government confirms the women’s judgment of it as capricious and unreliable. With the new act the government removed what little certainty people with permanent (or prolonged, severe) conditions had, shaping decisions to engage in gainful employment. Activists suggest this was designed to ‘scare’ or otherwise coerce/manipulate disabled people into the paid labour force or employment training. None of the women in the study responded

by seeking work or training, demonstrating that this move by government clearly produces unintended effects, deepening their economic dependency. Fear of losing benefits produces constant vigilance, resulting in complex embodied reactions. Immobilization and depression were experienced by all participants, particularly Galya, who lives with a chronic mental health condition. Not surprisingly, fear of losing benefits was also a key finding in research focused on women nationally receiving CPP-D benefits (Kimpson & Doe, 1999).

Women also know their eligibility is at risk in encounters with ministry officials, during which they are particularly vulnerable. When required to expose themselves during these encounters, or textually by completing forms, they risk revealing personal information that might produce unpredictable, problematic consequences either in the present, during the next encounter with officials, or further into the future (or in between). They never know if/when/how that information might be used bureaucratically in ways that will disrupt already precarious lives. In response, the women have learned (some more effectively than others) to act strategically by managing personal information as best they can, only answering questions asked and not volunteering any further information, an instance of simultaneously complying and resisting.

An encounter with a ministry worker reveals Evelyn's approach: Evelyn has a general awareness of policy regarding additional income—she is “supposed to” declare income, implying punishment if not complied with. Despite not knowing what the consequences might be for not declaring the additional income, Evelyn willingly receives extra money from her mother and takes her chances. When the ministry's annual review of her accounts reveals this “gift” of \$500 monthly, Evelyn pleads ignorance and to her surprise she is not penalized. Once the worker gives Evelyn some latitude, treating it as a case of ignorance, Evelyn engages in a strategy that works to

her advantage. She does not reveal to the worker that she knows about the general reporting policy and thus colludes in the worker's estimation that Evelyn did not understand the rules with respect to declaring income. However, the worker does not further illuminate Evelyn as to the allowable amount she can receive as a gift, nor does Evelyn ask, possibly signalling that she might be considering receiving further gifts and inadvertently inviting more surveillance. In fact, when she exclaims, "It's so crazy," Evelyn points to how difficult it is for clients to know the policies in detail when they keep changing and ministry workers do not reliably inform clients of what they are authorized to do or have.

The women are also frightened of contact with officials because they never know if they will be listened to/heard, understood, or respected. Information they believe crucial to survival or at least improving their well-being is often not forthcoming, or employs bureaucratic language difficult to understand or decipher. Also, contact is to be avoided at all costs because the women never know if ministry officials will arbitrarily disallow benefits. This form of self-regulation, which arguably keeps them from asking for services (that might be costly to government) creates narrow lives and compromises well-being. The women also reveal that their knowledge of rules/policy by which they are governed is partial, leaving them feeling insecure, uncertain, and fearful in encounters with ministry officials, and distrusting of government.

Yet distrust is a two-way street. A technique of government designed to demonstrate fiscal responsibility is surveillance of those receiving benefits—i.e., as mentioned above, yearly review of beneficiaries' bank accounts. More importantly, this technique implies distrust of beneficiaries on the part of government. The women are aware of being controlled in this way and read the government as not trusting them to follow the rules. They understand one of the primary functions of government is to set the regulations and through different forms of surveillance ensure the rules

are followed. But they experience this done in capricious, exacting, and occasionally punitive ways. For example, both Evelyn and Marion are indefinitely repaying the B.C. government small (but unaffordable) sums monthly for mistakes made, or in Galya's case for the student loan repaid on her behalf by the ministry when she became disabled as a student.

Dependency: An unintended consequence

Pervasive fear, distrust, and dependency are closely commingled with embodiment. Both fear and mistrust have the potential to immobilize the women (emotionally and physically); the fear of losing supports reinforces their economic dependency. Living in unreliable bodies and unstable health means they are unable to depend on their bodies for economic stability or security and thus become ever more dependent on income support.

A stated value of the B.C. government with respect to disabled people is "independence," according to the former Minister of Housing and Social Development (Coleman, 2009):

we want to ensure low income earners and people dealing with addictions, mental illnesses and disabilities have access to supports when and where they need them most so they can become independent and participate more fully in their communities. (p. 3)

According to the B.C. Auditor General the goal of the new legislation introduced in 2001 was "to promote greater independence for people with disabilities, security of income, enhanced well-being and participation in community" (Strelieff, 2004, p. 1). However, exercises of power in these women's lives produce what is clearly an unintended consequence, that is, a particularly pervasive and insidious kind of dependence, an inconvenient fact (Dean, 2010) revealing the disjuncture between ministry objectives and the women's lives.

When the women experience arbitrary changes to the amount and kind of supports and services they receive, government enactment of disability benefits policy seems discretionary from the women's viewpoint, directly affecting each woman's well-being, including her potential to be independent. For example, in the interests of austerity, B.C. markedly decreased the number of subsidized physiotherapy, chiropractic, and massage treatments allowed and delisted (from subsidy) much-needed medications.

Like many disabled people, both Galya and Evelyn are leery of re-entering the paid workforce (and Marion of earning more than she does) for fear of losing their benefits (including medical benefits), even in the face of substantial increases in allowable employment earnings. To do so would be highly risky. The imagined neoliberal path out of poverty (workfare) intersects in complicated ways with government's stated intention to foster the independence of disabled people. Although independence is a key aspiration of many disabled people, the version espoused by the B.C. government discursively implies economic independence (from government). Nonetheless, by allowing some earned income while retaining benefits, the B.C. government is subscribing to what some activists and scholars consider 'disability-positive' policy.

Yet this policy has unintended consequences: Marion's persistent distrust of government makes earning the maximum allowable earned income in part-time employment a risky venture for her. Compliance and resistance co-exist in her reading of the ministry as untrustworthy; she decides to earn the minimal amount allowed in order (she believes) to reduce ministry surveillance and possible review (and denial) of eligibility for benefits. This is a stark example of how economic dependency is produced. Here the government program to allow earned income to a maximum (without clawing back the disability benefit)—designed to “operationalize the self-governing capacities of the governed in the pursuit of governmental objectives” (Dean, 2010, p. 83)—goes

awry. Marion's desire to improve her economic situation is undermined by legitimate mistrust shaping her reading of risk, and any traditional economic means (get a better job, more pay) she may engage in are effaced.

The dynamics of power relations at work in these women's lives are complicated and pervasive. Each of the women relies on government to provide crucial supports and believes strongly that the provincial government *should* be looking after her better than it does, given that B.C. Benefits are the 'last resort' for those with disabling chronic conditions that prevent paid employment. Each opts into a system she believes is going to support her *well* but discovers this is not entirely the case. This gives the participants cause to distrust that the ministry will look after them in the ways it claims it will, let alone as well as it ought to (for example, by providing a living wage). Economic dependence combined with distrust constitutes a double bind—the women do not just opt in, they are hooked in by necessity—and in the face of capricious ministry practices, cannot take anything for granted, despite wanting (and needing) better benefits with less onerous bureaucratic processes.

Constantly vigilant, they pay very close attention to what the ministry does or allows; vigilance is necessary as they strategize in the most effective ways they know to ensure benefits continue. Persistently paying attention means the women are attuned to where to look and find resources (and better information) otherwise not immediately evident; they know what to look (and look out) for. In many ways they are (politically) astute subjects, perhaps not as docile as the ministry might assume.

Second-guessing is a persistent practice in/of everyday life. Ministry officials may make certain rules and responsibilities clear to beneficiaries but often neglect to specify the exemptions/exceptions to the rules, or provide rationale for or information regarding changes; these

are often discovered inadvertently. Here government exercises power, capriciously producing fear, uncertainty, and distrust in beneficiaries' lives; these women depend on the disability benefit and related programs/supports to survive, forcing them to expend energy and time discerning what the ministry intends or allows with embodied effects, not the least being fatigue and increased anxiety.

What might appear on the surface to be a causal relationship with respect to exacerbated symptoms related to somewhat coercive bureaucratic processes is more complicated than it first appears. Freund (1982) describes a "specific relationship between civilized social control, social domination and the ability of the body-mind system to efficiently and effectively manage its internal affairs" (p. 10). In particular, he refers to "'civilized' forms of control that sustain relationships of domination" (p. 21) and links these to health effects. These forms of control include "those that inhibit the presentation of self or invalidate the individual, and those that regulate time, bodily expression and social information in such a way as to render individuals powerless" (p. 21). By providing limited information to individuals (and groups), the ministry exercises a form of social control that produces particular effects. Freund calls them "informational troubles" (p. 118) related to "uncertainty about information important to one's security [that] creates physiological consequences in the individual, which may, in the long run, adversely affect the person's health" (p. 118). Asymmetrical access to information generic to hierarchical structures such as government generates informational troubles, an instrument of social control that extends beyond knowledge monopoly to include the use of opaque language. Freund (1982) asserts that bureaucratic language is often strategically ambiguous, allowing "those in power the maximum flexibility, the avoidance of definite commitments, and the veiling of the coercive or unpleasant nature of certain decisions" (p. 122). What it produces in these disabled women's lives is anxiety, distrust, and uncertainty.

The participants' experience of economic dependence reveals itself in unsettling ways. From their efforts to manage living in structural poverty the women know their monthly benefit is inadequate, producing a view of government as negative, unsupportive, and untrustworthy. They believe that government does not value them enough to provide sufficient income, nor to be more open/transparent, provide pertinent information, or to ensure reliability in terms of services and supports.

Distrust of government persists despite evidence to the contrary (occasional flexible workers/officials). Ironically, the untrustworthiness of government is an operating assumption that the women believe they have to take up to in order to survive. By positioning themselves on the defensive, always struggling, always expending depleted energy just to get by, they reduce their exposure to unnecessary risk. They cannot take anything for granted; second-guessing is part of paying close attention to government tactics to ensure they are not punished arbitrarily or have their benefits disallowed.

A more insidious source of distrust of government, and the ministry in particular, has to do with the women's fundamental belief that they ought to be taken care of better than they are, and that government is in the business of fostering their well-being, if ministry publications are to be believed. Each participant is suspicious of any claims by government that it will do what it says it will do or even of the values it publicly espouses. The distrust in this case seems critical (and precarious) because it arises within a situation in which the women are reliant (and economically dependent) on the ministry. These disabled women have no alternative. In this sense government has a tight grip on them, a kind of stranglehold on their lives; it provides for the women minimally in the face of no other options (these are 'last resort' benefits after all). Even in the context of palpable distrust of government, they have to respond in the ways they do in order to survive. In this sense

they are enlisted in the stranglehold and cannot see ways to break free of it without losing their health, their well-being, their lives. Again, this is not entirely a one-way exercise of power by government. What the women believe about government as being unreliable, untrustworthy, and uncaring and how they respond are also constitutive of this stranglehold over their lives.

Uncertain subjects

Terms such as empowerment, agency, activity and resistance, as much as dependency, passivity and subordination, are key aspects of our contemporary vocabulary of rule and are constituted in relation to definite regimes of government and power relations. In order to work, governing often concerns the formation of the subjectivities through which it can work [or be seen to be working]. (Dean, 2010, p. 87)

Uncertainty is multi-faceted, embodied, unrelenting, and constituted as a particularly unsettling aspect of participants' subjectivity; these disabled women (and their lives) are uncertain subjects. Uncertainty is not just germane to actions taken by the ministry or how the women read these actions; it is also central to what on any given day they decide is possible given their fluctuating impairments.

Cruikshank (1999) asserts that governing is concerned with the production of certain kinds of subjectivity taken up by citizens in the context of ubiquitous power relations, raising two important and related questions: Firstly, what kind of subjectivity does the ministry intend to produce? Secondly, given what the women reveal about their lives, what gets produced? If independence, income security, enhanced well-being, and a more robust participation in community—active citizenship—are official objectives, then the production of uncertain subjects is an unintended consequence. The idea that “subjectivity is both enabled and constrained by relations of power” (p. 2) is powerfully evident in these women's lives.

A different understanding of uncertainty is also potentially revealed if we accept the notion that these women (and their lives) are under siege. In response to being under siege, by engaging in resistance/compliance strategies the women are disadvantaged by never really knowing whether they are making the right moves. They never know if their readings of any given policy or what is possible are accurate, inconsequential, or risky. When they act on those readings they are uncertain if their strategies are effective *until they have enacted them*. Ironically, uncertainty is again reinforced after the women enact strategies effectively because they may not know what actions (or non-actions) actually worked. They also live with considerable uncertainty as to the longevity and durability of their strategies, producing the energy-draining activity of always second-guessing.

With so much uncertainty permeating their everyday lives the women exercise resistance to exposing themselves to greater uncertainty, but can never be certain these tactics are successful. Their reading of government as untrustworthy, although it augments the uncertainty with which they live, to some degree serves their purposes: it potentially protects them from a naïve reading that might jeopardize their claim to benefits and expose them to the kind of uncertainty they fear most—losing benefits and the safety net they rely on to survive, such as it is.

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