

James Morrison

Author of *The Workless: Stigma, Unpaid Labour and the Myth of Economic Inactivity*

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James Morrison is associate professor in journalism studies at University of Stirling, a former national newspaper journalist and a specialist in qualitative research into media representations and lived experiences of economic and intersectional disadvantage.

What inspired you to write *The Workless* and what questions were you hoping to answer?

I was inspired (if that's the right word) by the return of a steady drumbeat of what I would term 'scrounger discourse' during the months immediately following the end of the pandemic. One of my previous books, *Scroungers*, focused on the demonization of out-of-work benefit recipients as 'shirkers' and 'scroungers' in media and political discourse during the period of sustained benefit cuts (disingenuously dubbed 'welfare reform') under the 2010–15 coalition government. What struck me during the COVID-19 period is that, for the first time I could remember, there seemed to be a small but significant shift in public portrayals of unemployed people, in particular – not least because many people were literally unable to work and, as a result, ended up involuntarily furloughed and forced into claiming benefits. For a time, the rhetoric seemed to soften, and there was talk again – at long last – of 'safety nets' and 'social contracts', and the Conservative government even (temporarily) increased the level of Universal Credit payments. But, once COVID-19 had abated, it didn't take long for the national conversation to revert to type, albeit with the focus of anti-welfare hysteria shifting away from unemployed people per se towards the supposedly soaring rates of people who remained out of work, post-pandemic, for other reasons.

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Although the spotlight was increasingly cast on younger people facing mental health issues, and the seemingly growing number being diagnosed with neurodivergent conditions, in truth there was also a spike in 'inactivity' driven by the growth of waiting times for NHS treatment delayed or cancelled during COVID-19 – as emphasised in research by the Resolution Foundation and others. Added to all this, and just to further complicate things, there was also the apparent increase in the number of older workers opting for early retirement – a phenomenon for a time known as the 'great resignation'. All in all, there were multiple layers to explore, and it felt to me as if the time had come to revisit the framing of out-of-work benefit recipients again – not just through the prism of misrepresentation (the main focus of *Scroungers*) but also underrepresentation. In turning my attention to the febrile 'economic inactivity' debate, I was also partly inspired by human experiences about which I already knew – including from people very close to me who have faced long-running challenges around disability, mental ill health and the benefits system, as well as the moving stories relayed by my wife (a mental health social worker). Although underrepresentation of benefit recipients is always a problem – myths about the feckless unemployed persisted during the coalition years in large part because we so rarely heard their stories, in their words – it is arguably a particularly acute issue for those classed as 'economically inactive' because if we don't hear their voices we can't begin to understand how active, and hard-working, many of them actually are.

Your book questions the idea of 'economic inactivity'. Why do you think this term is misleading?

The term 'economic inactivity' isn't intended to be pejorative, but I would argue that it has ended up becoming so – not least because it labels large numbers of people in a way that suggests they are idle, despite the fact that many of them are actually highly active and working very hard.

People are categorized as 'economically inactive' if they are out of work and not actively seeking it. This distinguishes them from unemployed people, who are seen as 'jobseekers' (and, indeed, must be demonstrably seeking work in order to qualify for benefits). I have two main problems with the term 'inactive'. The first is the simple point that it suggests people have no agency and are not contributing to society. The second is that it applies a definition of 'activity' that is based on only the most literal and conventional idea of what 'work' is: i.e. waged labour. Many of the 9-million plus working-aged people currently classed as economically inactive are actually caregivers and/or volunteers, and of these a huge number work long hours – for no pay and little or no recognition.

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In fact, this makes them very significant economic (and, more importantly, social) contributors, not least because they are helping to plug gaping holes in our social care system, by doing a huge amount of physically, mentally and emotionally demanding work that, by rights, the state (or someone) should be paying them for! Many so-called 'inactive' people are therefore effectively part of a shadow workforce.

Another key point is that the 'inactive' people who are managing more complex disabilities and/or health conditions actually have to work incredibly hard, day to day, just to get by. Over the past 20 years or so, Britain's benefits system has become increasingly punitive and bureaucratic, and people out of work due to disability and/or mental or physical ill health have been repeatedly pushed through onerous and degrading (re)assessments to 'prove' they are unable to engage in conventional paid employment – all of which is hard work in itself! Then there are the routine day-to-day challenges many people face around looking after their own personal care, cooking, shopping and getting about, often with little or no meaningful social care support. It is this additional, but fundamental, 24/7 hard graft – ignored and invisible in public debates about the 'economically inactive' – that I define in the book as 'disabled labour'.

Finally, the term 'economic inactivity' is also misleading because it defines 'activity' purely in terms of work, rather than other forms of economic contribution: for example, spending. In reality, most 'inactive' people are living on social security benefits, and therefore have very low incomes, so they are not in a position to save or invest, as they barely receive enough to pay for basic day-to-day essentials. However, although they have very little money, anything they do have they spend – making them very significant net contributors to their local economies.

What are some of the biggest misunderstandings about people who are not in paid work?

The biggest misunderstanding is that people not in paid work are lazy non-contributors who sit around watching television or playing video games all day – living off the backs of hardworking taxpayers. Over the years, myths about the supposed generosity of benefits paid to the idle jobless – and non-contributing 'inactives' – have repeatedly been reheated by right-wing media outlets and politicians to scapegoat working-aged people who are out of work, and this often happens at times when resources are scarce and other people are struggling. If 'working people' are facing a 'cost-of-living crisis' (to use the terms of the moment), it suits politicians looking to distract attention from their own failure to alleviate these pressures to stoke resentments towards those who receive taxpayer-funded incomes while they are out of work. Myths persist despite the fact that the conditions unemployed and 'inactive' benefit recipients have to meet to even qualify for benefits have repeatedly been tightened, and made more punitive, under recent governments, and the levels of out-of-work benefits paid in the UK today are historically low.

One of the central themes of the book is unpaid labour. Why is unpaid work so often overlooked, despite its enormous social and economic value?

I think unpaid labour is undervalued, and often unrecognized, precisely because it so often happens invisibly – at least to many of us. Because unpaid workers generally labour away behind closed doors, caring for friends or relatives (as well as themselves), we literally don't see this work, unless we happen to be related to, or friends with, someone who is in this position. The bar for accessing homecare support through the social care system has continually been raised in recent decades, and in England especially there is now a worsening postcode lottery from one local authority area to another. In practice, this means that, while an individual might tick all the boxes in one locality, ten miles down the road they'd have faced additional criteria set by a different council as a way of rationing their social care provision – a legacy of 15-plus years of relentless cuts in local government grant funding. As a result, more and more people are forced to plug these gaps through their own labours, with many having to give up paid work in order to do so. But, once people's labours are no longer captured or reflected in the tax system – and they only 'appear', if at all, as a cost to the public purse, through any benefits and allowances they receive – they end up in the worst of all worlds. On the one hand, this renders their efforts and contributions invisible; on the other, it stigmatizes them, because the only 'story' that emerges about them is one that casts them as just another burden on the rest of us.

How does the media shape public attitudes towards unemployment and people who are out of work?

Although the press itself has much less of an agenda-setting influence on public attitudes than in the past – not least because fewer of us now buy or read newspapers than ever before – the 'media' in its most diffuse sense, continues to make a huge contribution to the content and tenor of public debate. There's also a lot of evidence to suggest that, even if the wider public is less likely to take its cues from the legacy press than in the past, political parties and governments remain acutely sensitive to how their policies are depicted in the papers – especially around contested, and oft-misunderstood, issues like unemployment and 'economic inactivity'. Ongoing research by academics concerned with what we used to call 'media effects' – by the Glasgow Media Group and others – continues to show that language and imagery promoted by the news media, and amplified on social media, has a significant impact on public perceptions of, and attitudes towards, issues like 'welfare' and immigration and those they affect. There's also plenty of evidence emerging that the recent turn towards more overtly stigmatising rhetoric led by populist right-wing actors is intensifying the level of discrimination, even hatred, faced by marginalized groups.

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In essence, the relationship between media portrayals and public perceptions has always been more complex, and reciprocal, than has often been imagined – the media has never ‘beamed’ attitudes into people’s heads – but today it is much more multidirectional, and nuanced, than ever before. However, we should never underestimate the power of the media, in the broadest sense, to shape national conversations.

The book examines the relationship between work, identity and self-worth. Why do you think paid employment has become such a dominant measure of personal value?

A simple answer would be that, to quote Oscar Wilde's adage, we’ve come to know the price of everything but the value of nothing. I would argue that the neoliberal economic settlement that kicked in from the late 1970s/early 1980s had the long-term effect of skewing our individual and collective notions of the meaning(s) of value, contribution and, indeed, work towards much more materialistic conceptions of all three. In other words, forms of value, contribution and work that had historically been more recognized, even celebrated – volunteerism, communitarianism and both intra- and inter-familial caregiving – have gradually been downgraded in importance because they don’t generate profit or (taxable) income. As long as we live in a society that defines ‘effort’ and ‘achievement’ solely in terms of whether they produce profits and showy displays of consumption – to the disproportionate benefit of a privileged few – those of us unable to live off inherited wealth or unearned capital risk remaining locked in a system that views paid labour as the dominant measure of personal value.

How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way we think about work and unemployment?

I think in several ways. The most obvious was the dawn of the idea of ‘hybrid’ working, which – to a greater or lesser extent, depending on one’s line of work – will, I hope, remain a feature of the workplace for good now. If deployed properly, this can give individuals more flexibility around challenges like childcare, caregiving and other external commitments, and (for many) reduce the time, energy and costs involved in needlessly commuting to work physically every day. The other big change, I think, was that COVID prompted a number of people to start to (re)consider the role and purpose work played in their lives, and what shape their ongoing relationship with it might take in the future. For many people who found themselves confined to quarters with dependants they already cared for – whether children or elderly or disabled relatives – the period of lockdowns will have been intense and exhausting.

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But for those approaching the later years of their working lives – especially if relatively affluent and/or mortgage free – it offered an unanticipated opportunity to reassess how dominant a time commitment they absolutely needed, or were prepared, to continue investing in ‘going out to work’ from thereon in. Although my book is most concerned with correcting narratives about more stereotypical ‘inactive’ people – those who are out of work due to disability, illness and/or caregiving – I also found myself empathizing strongly with some of those who had taken rational ‘lifestyle choices’, where they could afford to, to step away from the hamster wheel. After all, life is short.

If policymakers could take one lesson from *The Workless*, what would you want it to be?

If there is one lesson I’d like them to take it is to start seeing – and treating – people who are classified as ‘economically inactive’ as human beings, each with their own personal stories and unique sets of circumstances. Only by meaningfully incorporating this approach into policy will they start to improve people’s lives – and, in the case of the many ‘inactives’ who would like nothing better than to be in paid work, enable them to (re)engage with the labour market. Rather than being motivated by a short-term obsession with driving down the ‘welfare’ bill – by repeating the tradition of pursuing quick and brutal benefit cuts – governments need to adopt longer-term thinking, by investing properly in the NHS (to reduce waiting lists), social care and childcare (to free up the time of caregivers) and, yes, social security (to make life more affordable and dignified for those who will never be able to work). The book is being published at a point when we have a new prime minister taking office, Andy Burnham, and the initial rhetorical mood music has been fairly promising around improving access to mental health support and introducing more bespoke, people-centred approaches to job coaching – rather than putting the cart before the horse by demanding up-front cuts. As ever, though, we will have to wait to see what his government does, rather than judging it by what it says.

The book brings together perspectives from sociology, politics, media studies and economics. Why was an interdisciplinary approach important for tackling this subject?

An interdisciplinary approach was important to me from the outset, because I felt there was a gap in the research around the intersection – or, rather, tension – between media and political discourses (the focus of much of the media studies and political communication literature in this area) and the lived experiences of people who are the subject of these portrayals.

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My previous research had shown how the personal stories of people who are out of work and on benefits themselves are seldom included in media and political narratives – and, on the occasions they are, are often distorted to emphasise negatives, such as the size of a family claiming benefits and/or the supposed generosity of their entitlements

I was conscious that ‘economic inactivity’ is also a more complex issue than unemployment per se, so I felt that speaking to people from a range of age groups and with a variety of experiences of ‘inactivity’ would help bring to life the complexity of their lives and challenges, and the intersectional nature of the inequalities many of them face. By adopting this more ‘triangulated’ approach – looking at media and political narratives, but also individuals’ stories and experiences of stigma – I found myself venturing further into the realms of sociology. And the sociological dimension developed further the more deeply I became immersed in my analysis, as I started to recognize the relevance of key theoretical concepts to the stories and reflections people shared with me. The book started out a study of a contemporaneous moral panic – a concept about which I’ve written many times – but, as it evolved, it became much more about stigma and symbolic annihilation (i.e. how ‘inactive’ people are both demonized and ‘denied’ as contributors).

What can the media, education and public debate do to reduce the stigma around unemployment and unpaid work?

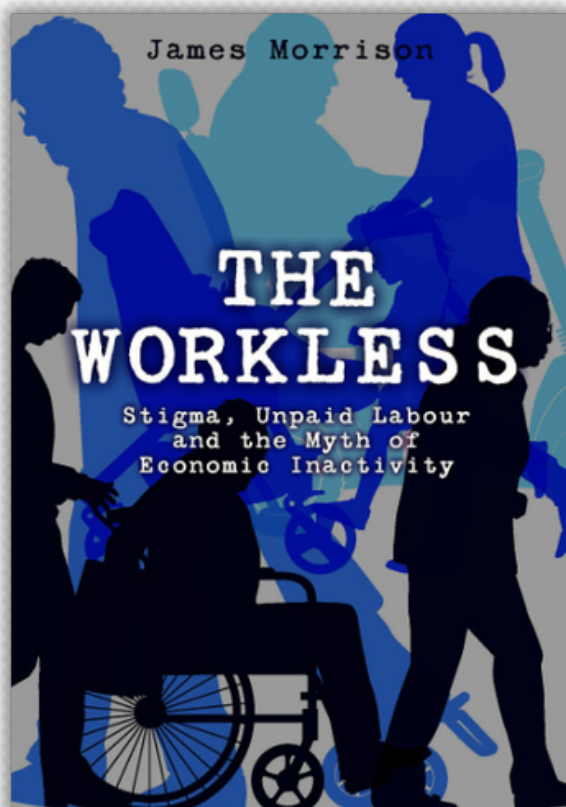
I would like all journalists to be given some basic training on the complexities of different forms of ‘worklessness’ or ‘economic inactivity’, as well as the nature of the social security (‘welfare’) system and how it works (or, for many people, doesn’t). I am currently working on proposals to design and deliver some training on these areas for early-career journalists, potentially in collaboration with a leading industry body – so, if I get the opportunity, I’d like to take a lead on this myself. My research also shows that levels of vitriol directed against ‘inactive’ benefit recipients online are often extreme – and, arguably, border on hate speech – so I would like the scope of the Equality Act 2010 to be widened to add experience of poverty and/or social security benefits to the list of legally ‘protected characteristics’, as well as social class (which I believe is currently under consideration). While we wait for this, though, conscientious media owners could take a lead – by adopting tougher, more proactive policies for moderating comments posted beneath their articles, and by incorporating an explicit prohibition against anti-welfare/poverty hate speech in their community rules or guidelines. It would also be good to see schoolchildren introduced to these issues through the National Curriculum – perhaps adding them as topics to existing teaching around citizenship, human rights, equality and diversity.

What do you hope readers will take away after reading *The Workless*?

I hope readers will take away a more nuanced understanding of the various forms so-called 'economic inactivity' can take – i.e. a less stereotypical view than is generally promoted by politicians and the media – and an appreciation of the very significant and hard-working contributions many people inaccurately labelled in this way actually make to society.

Looking ahead, what changes do you think will have the biggest impact on the future of work?

Undoubtedly, the rise of artificial intelligence is going to be hugely significant – and, in many ways, already is. My hope is that more forward-thinking governments quickly move away from the current mix of wide-eyed AI evangelism and resigned acceptance of the inevitability of mass job losses across multiple sectors, to start to fashion a way for the technology to work for society as a whole, by which I mean all citizens (and 'workers') rather than wealthy tech barons and those fortunate enough to remain in forms of employment that can't so easily be automated. In an ideal world, many of the most menial tasks – physical and administrative – would end up being performed by AI, thus reducing the need for people to work quite as hard, or quite as much, as most of them currently do (often for too little reward). For this to come about, however, we will need a proper, multinational conversation about the control and ownership of AI, paired with a serious discussion about giving everyone a universal basic income.



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By James Morrison