

Austerity and Everyday Relationships in Low-to-Middle Income Families in the UK

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Relationships in Austerity

- “Good quality relationships are important to everyone, particularly when times are tough. Relationships can give us the resilience to weather storms and bounce back and thrive. However, economic recession can put immense pressure on relationships and undermine relationship quality and stability, as financial difficulties, debt, unemployment, and job instability mount up.” (Kneale et al, 2014, 3 [Relate])

Relationships, Facilitating/Holding Environments and Psychosocial Geographies

- Borrowing from ideas from the British object relations school, we can think about relationships, with intimate and imagined others, as the environment within which we find ways of going on being
 - “the need for relationship is primary” (Gomez 1997, 2)
- The building of ‘secure personal geographies’: “sense of solid, shared world and stable sense of ourselves within that world leads to psychic and physical survival” (Pile 1996, 12)
- **Donald Winnicott’s facilitating or holding environment**

Holding Environments

- Holding and facilitating: in which we can ‘go on being’ and develop ‘coherence and continuity’ (Gomez 1997, 89)
 - Care, being held in mind, attuned, being seen, consistent and reliable, secure
 - ‘total environmental provision’ (Winnicott 1960, 43)
- Three dimensions of the holding environment (Applegate 1997):
 - material: money, housing, food, clothing
 - interpersonal: personal communities, professionals, social position
 - intrapsychic: inner lives
- Good enough environments taken for granted
- Main function is to reduce ‘impingements’
 - a bad environment “disturbs the continuity of the going on being of the individual”
 - living becomes reactive, “coping as a substitute for being” (Winnicott, 1949, in Phillips, 2007, 94)

Extending Holding Environments

- “One can discern a series — the mother's body, the mother’s arms, the parental relationship, the home, the family including cousins and near relations, the school, the locality with its police stations, the county with its laws” (Winnicott 1956, 310)
- “Within Winnicott’s terms there is in fact no end to the period of absolute dependence, it is simply that the dependence base is widened to include the extended family, the wider experiences society, the resourceful environment” (Wasdell 1979, 4)

Everyday Relationships in Austerity

- Budget recommendations, second-hand clothes, money-off vouchers, or babysitting favours travel frequently within these relationships
 - “but it’s nice to know you know if somebody comes to you and say oh I’m having this problem or you know anything like that I’ve usually know somebody [laughs] who can help or who’s in that business or who you know once went there or can borrow a snorkel off or you know there’s usually something like that ... that’s what it’s all about I think and if we’re going back to you know money worries and things then borrowing from each other or I think people are a lot less embarrassed about saying can I borrow your travel cot next weekend or something than they were than before” (Rachel)

Everyday Relationships in Austerity

- So too do ideas of being in it together, of empathy and shared emotions, of working out dilemmas collectively, of common values
- Each of my participants drew on ideas of community and solidarity, real and imagined, to ease their experience of austerity
 - “the main way it’s more friends and it’s more hearing some of their stories and you think actually do you know what I’m not on me [own], I’m not, so it’s not necessarily supporting us in respect of turning up with a food parcel it’s more when you’re talking to them and spend time with them you think yeah you know you’re struggling just as much as I am you’re having to think about things and it’s sometimes reassuring to hear that it’s kind of...” (Lisa)
 - “they display some sort of empathy and understanding and erm I find them in tune if you like ... ahh my colleague at work yeah he’s quite he’s quite tuned in he’s, he’s a good one ... they have their feet on the ground put it that way” (Mark)
- Imagined family futures also acted as a resource for getting by
 - difficult choices about priorities in the present were validated by hopes for a different future, either for the family as a whole or, particularly, for children, whose educational, creative, or social needs were prioritised in the hope that their futures wouldn't be jeopardised

Everyday Relationships in Austerity

- But acts like buying differently or making new choices created dissonance and conflict, in participants themselves and with their partners and their families
 - Moments of crisis brought conflicting values to the fore, often rooted in diverse family histories of money
 - “it's, the problem is me husband isn't [careful], and I'm too easily persuaded so I'll try, I'll start with good intentions, but then he'll go well what about this, alright I'm like okay, so I've said you know next year maybes we can give the holiday a miss and go in two years time, well no I want a holiday every year, so and I know I'll be persuaded just for an easy life” (Lisa)
- Other conflicts arose within wider family and friendship networks as the demands of 'just about managing' focused energy on the most immediate family, at the expense of parents, grandparents, aunts, and old friends who no longer received spare care or cash

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- Frustrations emerged with friends and family whose different values or lack of empathy were revealed by the experiences of austerity
 - “I did have a group of friends from school and we were very close together, erm, we’ve sort of, you know the people you thought we will always be there for each other, and when Ken lost his job in 2009 I felt that they just dropped me” (Linda)
 - “you know she’s just so, so out of touch that I’m, I get angry, I really do get worked up I come back home from those that bits of time and think look I’ve just given an afternoon to help this woman... she’s just sitting there and erm pampered to death and err care workers do everything, well they and I do everything and erm sitting in a house gifted to her, pension gifted to her, goes on and on and on, and erm I sit there without a penny of earnings at all and she hasn’t got a clue” (Mark)
- Others drew attention to the loss of relationships to austerity-related attrition
 - “the thought of sitting down for an hour and a half and talking on the phone it’s just by the time I get to sit down it’s, I’m too tired and I just think ahhh, I’ll just sit here” (Lisa)
 - “I think a lot of it you know before, er a couple of years ago, if somebody had said right we're going out to Newcastle, we’re gonna have cocktails or something if somebody before had said ohh I’m not really sure I can afford it, the others would rag them a bit, oh come onnn, you’ll be alright, sell that on eBay, or something like that, you know, but now okay, I understand, because I’m not sure I can afford it either, but you know that is a perfectly valid, it’s not even an excuse now and in fact a lot of the time a lot of people’ll go, do you know what, I’m struggling as well” (Rachel)

Everyday Relationships, Holding Environments and Austerity

- Austerity as *impingement*: pressures on the material, interpersonal, and intrapsychic
- Erosion spaces of kinship, community, state and society that have previously provided a *caretaking* or *holding* function (Layton et al 2006; Peltz 2006; Applegate 2013)
- Value and complexity of holding environments revealed, no longer taken for granted
 - Different relationships are used for in different circumstances to meet changing needs in austerity (for support, company, empathy)
 - Increased needs (for support, loans, favours) means difficult relationships have to be tolerated
- Austerity highlights the 'in tune' and the 'out of touch' and puts differences between family and friends in much starker relief
 - Need to be known, held, understood
- Need to be 'in it together'
- Desire to build/hold on to secure future



FEELING THE SQUEEZE: THINKING PSYCHOSOCIALLY ABOUT LOW-TO-MIDDLE INCOME FAMILIES IN AUSTERITY

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In her first statement as Prime Minister, Theresa May sympathised with those 'ordinary' families who 'just about manage', with mortgages, the cost of living, and job insecurity, recognising these families' struggle for control over their lives. In this way, the 'jams' became the new 'squeezed middle'. There is no doubt that 'jams' and the 'squeezed middle' are rhetorical devices, but this doesn't mean we can dismiss them – or the experiences of the low-to-middle income families they represent. Organisations such as **The Policy Exchange** and the **Resolution Foundation** suggest that between a third and a half of all working households fit their differing definitions of this group. Whilst this might suggest that it is a category too large to be of any analytic purpose, it also suggests that the experiences described affect many of us in our everyday lives. The recurrence of devices to name this group is not just political rhetoric; it reflects an attempt to recognise an experience of contemporary life in Britain marked by a particular set of relations, emotions and imaginations. And, unlike the rhetorical devices of the 1980s and 1990s, these categories are not about aspiration, but about a squeeze.

At the heart of all the descriptions of this category is the sense that these are families who are hard working, managing, doing their best. There is clearly a moral dimension to this: these families are deserving and sensible. But if we put this dimension to one side for a moment, we can think about what it might mean, day in day out, to hold in mind competing demands for our time, our money, our energy. What the act of 'just about managing' – the 'just about' is very important – might involve, emotionally and materially.

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