"I feel like it's just going to get worse"

Young people, marginality and neoliberal personhoods in austere times

Dr Daniela Sime & Dr Rebecca Reynolds

School of Social Work & Social Policy, University of Strathclyde

Abstract

Austerity has had a disproportionate impact on young people across Europe. They are especially disadvantaged, compared to other age groups, and youth poverty is now acute in most European countries. This chapter discusses the particularities of young people's lived experience of austerity in deprived neighbourhoods in Glasgow, the city with the highest rates of deprivation in Scotland. Drawing on data from focus groups with 38 young people aged 14–23, we explore young people's positioning as an underclass, who experience everyday humiliations and degradations through austerity policies targeting them and the areas in which they live. We argue that young people are integrating aspects of an austerity 'logic' into their sense of self, taking responsibility for their own actions and role as citizens. Their experiences of austerity are mediated through their relationships to the places they live in, as well as new forms of neoliberal personhood.

Introduction

Austerity has had a disproportionate impact on young people across Europe. Youth poverty is now acute, especially since the economic recession began in 2008. Young people are especially disadvantaged, compared to other age groups (Fahmy, 2015). In the UK, welfare reforms and cuts to service provision (Ortiz 2011; Hopwood 2012), alongside high levels of youth unemployment and insecure work (Boyd 2014), combine to make young lives precarious, particularly for those growing up in deprived neighbourhoods, which have been the hardest hit (Beatty and Fothergill 2013). There has been limited research on how young people experience poverty and associated stigma in austerity (Blackman and Rogers, 2017), especially in the new context of increasing neoliberal governance which emphasises the role of employment and puts the main responsibility on young people as the makers of their own success. The ideal neoliberal subject is thus the 'enterprising self' (Kelly, 2006), who can easily adapt to the needs of an unstable labour market and require little or no support from the state. Like in the past, young people are expected to move into adulthood and secure qualifications, employment and housing, however, with an increasing rollback of services and cuts to welfare, pathways are not linear anymore. The transitions that young people are engaged in as they move to adulthood are marked by new risks and uncertainties, framed over the last two decades by on-going reforms implemented under the pretext of austerity. The social problems are re-positioned beyond a liberal welfare governmentality where the enterprising self is presented as the solution to the risks associated with industrial modernity.

This chapter discusses the particularities of young people's lived experience of austerity in deprived neighbourhoods in Glasgow, the city with the highest rates of deprivation in Scotland. Drawing on data from focus groups with 38 young people aged 14-23 living in some of these areas, we explore young people's positioning as an underclass (Standing, 2011), who experience everyday humiliations and degradations through austerity policies targeting them and the areas in which they live. We argue that young people are integrating aspects of an austerity 'logic' into their sense of self, taking responsibility for their own actions and role as citizens, and this comes with a heavy emotional load and impact on their well-being. However, they are also aware that disinvestment in their local surroundings and themselves as individuals are clear signs of a neoliberal approach which reduces opportunities and deepens inequalities. In closely attending to the lived experience of young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, we show how their experience of austerity is mediated through their relationship to place, as well as new forms of neoliberal personhood.

Austerity, poor places and young people

Austerity urbanism (Peck, 2012: 627) comes as a result of "falling revenues and increasing need"– cities have their revenue-raising powers and their budgets restricted. Services are being reorganised or cut and the public workforce is being reduced. Cities are places particularly reliant on services, and homes to populations most vulnerable to political vilification, such as minorities and people experiencing poverty. As a result, they are experiencing austerity at its most extreme. The unintended consequences of austerity-driven service changes and cuts are impacting on poorer places and certain groups of people disproportionately (Hastings et al., 2015). This happens not only because of increased levels of need, but also because the impacts of service reductions accumulate more quickly in poorer areas and better-off service users have a greater capacity to insulate themselves.

More recent engagements with the importance of place in experiences of poverty (Mckenzie 2015; Crossley 2017) highlight how it is essential to understand the wider social contexts which create and reinforce spatial inequalities, while at the same time seeking to understand the experience of living in disadvantaged places. For this reason, it is important to investigate how austerity measures are impacting disadvantaged places, and why and how this may be driven by discursive practices which stigmatise certain places and groups. Lombard (2015: 649) notes that, with austerity policies, there has been a "hardening of attitudes towards urban poverty and its spatial manifestations". Clearly, it is not just disproportionate economic impacts of austerity on poor places and their residents, but also the increasing stigma to which both are subjected. Austerity policies have come with changing public attitudes towards poverty and 'poor' places. In critiquing the neighbourhood effects thesis, these authors focus overwhelmingly on how discourses reflect and reproduce marginalisation. Less attention is paid to the ways in which space and place are contested, lived and variably experienced by different people (Massey, 1994). This chapter draws on recent empirical evidence produced with young people living in some of these stigmatised neighbourhoods to explore the impacts of structural, economic and political changes under austerity on young people and the neighbourhoods in which they live.In this way, we hope to highlight how structural factors underpin many of the difficulties which people living in so-called poor places face, and which are being exacerbated by current austerity measures.

The ongoing period of austerity has seen increasing numbers of young people entering insecure work through the gig economy and 'zero hours' contracts, as well as low paid work.

In 2018, youth unemployment was at 9%, the 7th lowest in the EU, and lower than 11.5% for the UK overall and over 15% for Europe. The level of youth unemployment has reduced from 52,000 in 2014 to 28,000 in 2018, a substantial decrease of 46% over the four years. Behind headline falls in youth unemployment rates, low paid precarious employment proliferates and there is a marked increase in welfare conditionality, with a push to get people into insecure forms of work and which makes it difficult for young people to claim benefits. Youth employment suffers thus from many of the problems associated with insecure, low paid work. Austerity has seen "the rapid embedding of labour market trends which had started to emerge pre-recession such as underemployment, self-employment, youth unemployment and insecure forms of working" (Boyd 2014:1). While young people may be involved in the labour market, the jobs young people do are increasingly typified by irregular and insecure contracts, including 'zero hour' contracts, part-time work with two or more employers or self-employment. Youth underemployment is also a result of a systematic shift in constructing graduate routes as main indicators of transitional success (Macdonald, 2011) and a reduction over the last decade of apprenticeships and vocational routes available, leading to an oversupply of qualified workers. Achieving the markers of successful transitions to the labour market becomes thus increasingly illusive - with extended periods of poorly paid, precarious work for many.

Neoliberal personhoods and the enterprising selves

Neoliberalism is often defined as a radical form of capitalism, which aims to restrict state interventions and mechanisms of support focussing on structural inequalities and aims instead to promote market values. Hilgers (2011: 352) argues that neoliberalism puts "an extreme emphasis on individual responsibility, flexibility, a belief that growth leads to development, and a promotion of freedom as a means to self-realisation". However, this projected freedom for self-realisation ignores the economic and social conditions which make some individuals better placed than others to succeed. Consequently, neoliberalism has given rise to the discourse of the 'enterprising self' (Rose, 1998) and the focus on the technologies of self-government, whereby individuals are expected to 'try harder', 'work smarter' and be 'more agile' and adaptable. These new subjectivities expected in marketised societies centre responsibilisation (Garthwaite, 2017) and the 'individualising the future' (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017), where young people are directed to view themselves as 'entrepreneurs' of their own lives, makers of their own success. They must propel themselves through continuous re-skilling and re-training, on-going personal and professional

development, lifestyle and consumer choices (Holdsworth, 2015). In this context, young people are encouraged to see themselves as their own investors- a 'collection of assets' which must be nurtured, trained and promoted by one's self. When plans fail, young people are encouraged to internalise blame for any failures (educational, work-related, personal) rather than examine inherent inequalities and social structures which may lead to their exclusion.

Linked to the shift towards neoliberal personhoods and enterprising selves, young people are shamed and stigmatised publicly if they fail to comply to state-endorsed expectations of success. Media portrayals of young people as 'feral', 'scroungers', 'chavs', 'criminals' or 'welfare cheats' help perpetuate this symbolic and institutional violence which target the youth. This stigma is often generated from the top, by political classes, and used to justify austerity measures, such as cuts to welfare provision, housing and in-work and out-of-work benefits. The language of austerity often presents cuts to welfare services and support as unavoidable, necessary and equally distributed. In reality, young people are most likely to be disproportionately impacted, especially when they find themselves on the margins due to a combination of factors, such as class, ethnicity, gender, migrant/non-migrant status.

Methodology

Getting By was a study carried out by the authors between April and October 2017 in the city of Glasgow. The city has some of the highest levels of poverty in Scotland, with almost half of its people living in the 15% most deprived areas in Scotland, according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). SIMD ranks small areas (called 'data zones') from most deprived (ranked 1) to least deprived (ranked 6,976) (Scottish Government, 2019). At the time of the study, youth unemployment rates were at 16.6%, with about 27,000 unemployed young people in the city. We carried out six focus groups with young people identified through local organisations. In total, we spoke to 38 young people. Young people were aged 15 to 23 and included 18 female and 20 male participants. Of these, some were still in education, while others had left school and were looking for work or working. Among our participants, we had young people who lived in state care, asylum-seeking and refugees, and some who were supported by organisations because of their difficult socio-economic circumstances. We recognised these groups were more likely to experience austerity and purposefully sought their participation. In the meetings, we asked young people about their experiences of the places they lived in; their understandings of and feelings regarding austerity and how it impacted them; and explored their barriers to accessing local services.

We used visual mapping to stimulate discussions about place, asking young people to map their local area, identifying places that were important to them, places they were they felt safe/unsafe, and to make comparisons to other locations. The focus groups took place within organisations we recruited for the project, to ensure young people could talk at ease. All young people were recruited through an ethical process of offering information about the project and asking them to opt in, if they wished. To supplement data from the young people, we also interviewed employees of local services and support organisations working with young people. We spoke to six service managers, representing youth support organisations, a youth theatre, sports and music clubs. These interviews are not drawn upon in this chapter, but provided useful contextual information. Pseudonyms are used throughout, to protect the participants' privacy.

Young people's experiences of austerity

Everyday poverty struggles and the enterprising self

The economic challenges facing the communities in Glasgow had disrupted traditional pathways to employment for young people leaving school, which had clearly created new everyday risks for this group (Blackman and Rogers, 2017). They described everyday struggles, from having to borrow money or lend to others, to going without essential items, while also seeing other people suffer around them:

> *Like, me and my wee brother, we kind of had to fend for ourselves and I was, like, 3 years old and I was going into shops and I was trying to steal, like, food and sweets and that.* (John, 16)

> *My neighbour, always asking if I can spare anything, even if it's just bread.* (Shaun, 22)

Participants had all been affected by the economic recession and the decades of disinvestment in apprenticeships, local jobs and public services. Many commented on the difficulties of finding jobs when less jobs were available and the challenge of securing jobs with no work experience:

> *You can't get a job without experience of working in that kind of place, but how are we supposed to get experience if we can't get a job?* (Mark, 18)

With this lack of money, it'd be harder to find a job. Like when you are looking for a job, you are asked "what have you been doing … all year?", you need to say "I've been doing this stuff, this stuff", so it [is] harder. (Myriam, 22)

For those who did not manage to secure work, the stigma of being unemployed and depending on welfare loomed over them, combined with a sense of feeling worthless. Many commented on the risk of being seen as 'workshy' or relying on benefits, which meant that some chose to not claim benefits they were entitled to. The experience of not finding paid work or being 'stuck' in poor quality jobs young people frustrated and pessimistic about their options in future. For Mohammed, working was not a choice, but necessity, as he felt his family could not survive without his income:

I'm the oldest in the house, other than my mum. And so I have to kind of work enough that I can pay for like half (…) half the rent, half the food, that kind of thing (…) So, basically if I was to move out like next week, it would be hard. I reckon I'll stay there until I'm, like, either getting married or something. Probably something like that (Mohammed, 20)

While Mohammed felt stuck, Dylan was living with his parents and a younger brother and felt the pressure of having to move out and live independently:

My mum and dad are nagging and stuff. But it's made me aware of what I need to do, like get jobs. Like, I need to step up in work, to get a job, to get a house, to pay for things. (Dylan, 22)

While the two accounts express different reasons for engaging in employment in terms of necessity and obligation (Mohammed) versus expectations of growing up (Dylan), both have a sense of transitioning and moving on to adulthood, where roles change and so do aspirations and plans for desirable versus possible transitions (Brown, 2011). The pressure of having to provide for the family meant that many of the young people had abandoned education early or delayed education plans. While Mohammed was juggling work and studying for a Law degree hoping to become a solicitor, others talked about higher education as the 'back up' plan, which will potentially always remain an option. Richard had left a place at college where he was studying architecture and design to take up a full time job. He went on to explain how one needs to take a job if available, as having a degree does not guarantee

career success and he had the immediate pressure of having to contribute to household costs:

> *Education is always a backup plan. Just in case what you've went for didn't work. That's how I see education. As in, for some people it can take you up to three or four jobs to get your real, actual job that you wanted for your life. So I think life is not about waiting for the right time 'cause you would be sitting there, waiting for the job, but you won't get it. It's always about trying different things. Whatever you feel happy with, and you should do something you like.*

Common in young people's narratives was the normalising of everyday struggle on a low income and the emergence of the enterprising self narrative (Kelly, 2006; Garthwaite, 2017). Young people often said that it was up to them to 'try harder', do more, become better citizens and be more agile in their education, work and personal life. Although many acknowledged that austerity had hit the areas where they lived harder, there was an implicit belief that it was up to individuals to navigate an austere job market and strive for personal success. Ideals of success become thus aligned with employment, shaped also by government narratives of employment as desirable and expected, a sign of successful citizenship and responsibility (Raco, 2009).

Austerity and stigmatised places

Young people had strong views on their local areas, the range of services they accessed, and wider issues associated with local poverty, disadvantage and stigma. When it came to austerity as an overarching policy context, however, they hesitated to make the link between local poverty issues and wider austerity measures. While at times they were critical of disinvestment in areas and dilapidated public places, at other times they blamed the local gangs for vandalising places and not showing any concern for neighbourhoods. Yet, others, like Caitlin, explained how persistent disadvantage can push young people into crime and mental ill health:

> *I lived on my own when I had my flat, but [the area] was like full of, like, poverty and crime and dodgy people. There's a lot of people, like people my age that are involved in selling drugs and like crime and stealing things, and it's because they all get sanctioned on their benefits when they're late for meetings…or have mental health problems and no one to help…So none of them have any money. (Caitlin, 23)*

Cuts to local services meant that young people struggled to find safe public parks or youth clubs. Access to support services, such as unemployment support and mental health counsellors, was delayed by complicated appointment systems and waiting lists. As discussed above, a stigmatising discourse of austerity in the media, and increasingly hardened attitudes towards 'poor people' and 'poor places' (Lombard, 2015) have emerged at the same time as the political project of restructuring the state. Young people were not immune to these discursive constructions. They were aware of the spoilt identities of the places they lived in and the likely associations people would make between criminality, dilapidation and their areas.

> R1: It's embarrassing, people think that you might be one of them [vandals]. It has a huge impact, especially on like friendships as well, 'cause your girlfriend can be like "Oh, I've been there, so ok, so much violence…'
>
> I: Right. Ok. So it can make you feel uncomfortable about.
>
> R1: Yes.
>
> R2: And some people are gonna be rude…saying "you live in a bad area", so they say something bad because you live like with drunk people...
>
> R3: And other people don't want to come and see you, because they are afraid.

Young people's accounts often started from considering their areas of bad fame and reputation and impact on individuals' chances of success in the job market, due to the postcode stigma or speaking with a local accent, to talking about local crime and addiction problems brought about by the recent welfare reforms and benefit cuts, which had disproportionately impacted young people.

> No one wants to employ someone with a really strong accent from a bad background, from a poor area, so it's harder to get jobs. (Mary, 19)

In Mary's account, speaking with a strong local accent may immediately associate one with poor education, criminality or poor taste, further markers of an underclass struggling with unemployment and area-based stigma. These classed perceptions of marginalisation were informed by individual experiences of exclusion, constantly applying and being rejected for jobs or simply not hearing back from potential employers.

Young people also said they had given up on Job Centres which were supposed to help because often they felt mistreated by staff in these places. Care-experienced young people discussed how there is a 'bigger picture' whereby young people are pushed into poverty by

their families struggling and austerity measures, they then lack timely support and a vicious circle commences:

> *It's all connected, because I think the benefits system is causing mental health problems. In people and families that wouldn't have had mental health problems…in mothers that wouldn't have to struggle every day to feed their kids, kids that had to look after themselves……because their parents have turned to drugs and alcohol because they can't cope. In people who are not fit to work, but they're being declared fit to work so they're going to commit suicide. And it's like a vicious circle.*
>
> *(Caitlin, age 23)*

The effects of austerity appear thus to be widespread. Austerity creates further stigmatisation of neighbourhoods which have continued to suffer from underinvestment. It impacts young people's families and friends in terms of well-being and leads to fractured relationships. Yet, while problems impact entire systems, solutions are presented as individualised, whereby young people are expected to find employment in a precarious market, live on very little and maintain healthy relationships and lifestyles. As we have seen, young people are sometimes infused by a sense of personal failure as a result, yet, at times, they see the structural inequalities and call the government to account.

Impact of poverty on relationships and the self

The experience of growing up in poverty and trying to get by on an everyday basis by juggling money, jobs and living places made young people feel that their family relationships and friendships were severely impacted by their sense of personal failure. The young people who were care-experienced often said that poverty was the root cause of them ending up in care, which then led to an on-going struggle. Ronnie explained how his family fell apart after his dad became unemployed due to the closure of a local factory and got involved in selling drugs, while Sandra ended up in care when her single mum was struggling to make ends meet:

> *My Dad was too busy going and selling his drugs and my Mum just couldn't cope, like, she could barely look after herself let alone 5 kids. So it was my sister, me and Leigh, that pulled together to look after the three younger ones* (Ronnie, 14).

> *My mum was, like, living on the poverty belt and struggling to pay the rent and the bills and, like, put food on the table. So I was being neglected* (Sandra, 19)*.*

Poverty is stressful and this stress transfers to individuals' relationships. Young people talked about breaking up with partners as they could not afford a home together and debt put unmanageable pressure on couples. Some were becoming angry at their powerlessness and engaging in arguments or fights with their closest ones over money. Delaying moving in with a partner was common, due to lack of income to secure a place or being unable to cover the associated costs, such as bills.

One of the groups significantly affected were those whose rents were put up by unscrupulous landlords or local authorities applying the Bedroom Tax rule:

> *They cut discretionary housing benefit when I lived there, because of the bedroom tax. So they basically, they changed the criteria so that discretionary housing benefit prioritised all the disabled people with extra rooms. And I was in a 2 bedroom flat, which I hadn't asked for, so they started charging me £70 a week for that room. I then lost my discretionary housing benefit so my rent jumped up from £240 to £360, plus £70 a week for a room. And I was only making about £700 a month, so I couldn't, so I'm still paying off debt for that. I'm so angry. (Caitlin, 23)*

These negative emotions and tense relationships brought by poverty were in addition to the diminishing hope and increasing feelings of desperation and low self-esteem. Young people talked about the humiliations they had to suffer and how these impacted on their sense of agency and self:

> *I'm pretty sure that most of my generation, especially the ones that are in care, are pretty angry about the way that they're treated and the way that the whole system's dehumanised them.* (Claudia, 22)

The emotional burden of poverty and the impact on their mental health were a constant in young people's accounts. Some commented how difficult it was to keep in touch with friends living in other areas if they could not afford to keep in touch- and how friends would stop visiting. Many said they lost friends as a result:

> *It affects your friendships, you can't go out, can't text, can't be anywhere. So you end up not seeing them, then they give up on you. (Myriam, 22)*

Family relationships were strained, friends and partners left and moved on, services of support were not available or when available, they often mistrusted young people and were telling them to 'try harder'. This raises a serious issue in relation to the long-term impacts of youth marginality and the continual perception of young people as deficient and unable to become successful at the making of their own pathways. The emotional labour of having to cope with family relationships and friendships under the added pressure of poverty left young people insecure about their ability to ever re-balance their mental and emotional state and move forward. For many, the hope of support for themselves or those like themselves was gone and the future looked bleak:

> *I feel like it's just going to get worse. The thing they're doing now with tax credits, I think that's going to mean that the people that are going to suffer most are innocent children that are going to go hungry because their parents don't know how to manage that they don't have enough money... (Caitlin, 23)*

The evidence shows that attempts to responsiblise individuals have ripple effects, as they also impact young people's familial and friendship networks. Young people felt marginalised and humiliated by practices of individualisation, but also isolated from friends and family members as a result of decisions they had no control over, such as housing and the areas they lived in. They also felt angry at the effect their economic situation had on their relationships and mental health, which made it difficult for them to imagine a better future.

Conclusion

The implementation of neoliberal values by the major UK political parties since the 1990s and the expansion of neoliberal approaches to service delivery and welfare reforms have had a profound effect on the most vulnerable and marginalised groups. Increasingly, structural inequalities and government problems are re-framed as residing in the willingness and capacity of several actors and authorities to emphasise the entrepreneurial self. Individuals are encouraged to think of themselves as being their own project, which can only be accomplished by individual strive and effort. Societal problems are thus reframed as pushed on to the individual to solve. The limitation associated with the emphasis on the enterprising Self has been critiqued by Stuart Hall (1988), who argues that the Thatcherist attempts to reposition the government's role were quite obviously focused on "restoring the prerogatives of ownership and profitability' and create the 'political conditions for capital to operate more

effectively" (p.4). Equally, research on austerity has tended to focus on its economic impacts, ignoring the everyday experiences of individuals who suffer its damaging consequences. Following others (Hall, 2019), we have shown that only by examining in depth individuals' everyday experiences of austerity, we can get a clearer picture of the devastating effects neoliberal austerity measures are having on individuals, their families and communities.

We have shown that young people are aware that they can not be made responsible for the lack of good quality jobs or them being 'stuck' instead of transitioning to desirable and expected roles. Yet, the responsibilisation agenda has infused their narratives and the evidence presented shows how young people internalise the narrative of the entrepreneurial Self and see themselves as either successful or less successful investors in the business of life. Dunn (2004) has argued that the successful adoption of a market economy "requires changing the very foundation of what it means to be a person" (2004:6). In the neoliberal governmentality, individuals are made to feel responsible for managing risks associated with precarious jobs, education pathways, health and well-being, housing, family and peer relationships. For young people who are not able to enterprise themselves, a range of services are on 'stand by' to intervene and encourage and support them to engineer their Selves in ways which become aligned with a market-driven economy and state expectations. Rather than helping young people who are disadvantaged by the neoliberal models, targeted interventions often compound their disadvantage, pushing them into more debt, poverty, stress and helplessness. Austerity and cuts have had an impact on communities and the effects trickle down through bedroom taxes, stress, unemployment, being in care, and with few services available and no safety nets, young people feel increasingly frustrated and marginalised. The intersections of place-based disadvantage, group marginalisation, class and individual challenging circumstances place young people in an impossible position in terms of their ability to have a meaningful and fulfilling life. Financial decisions continue to be made under the umbrella of austerity, the costs of the 2020 pandemic and Brexit and cuts to services and job losses continue to bite, without a substantial change in welfare policies and investment in tackling the root of social problems like poverty. This makes it likely that young people will remain increasingly vulnerable and at the mercy of the market-driven values and expectations.

Acknowledgements

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