

Maastricht University Press • Combating crises from below: Social responses to polycrisis in Europe

A Pragmatic Politics of the Present?

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Introduction

In the spring of 2014, I was conducting empirical research on the lives of single mothers in several English cities. During this time I met Sara. ‘This place has nothing’ she responded when I asked a group of women at a local support group at a Housing Organisation in Leeds their views on the city. Having lived in this area all of her life, Sara, 23, reflected on the changes she had seen the city go through –the gradual erosion of support mechanisms, the drying up of suitable employment opportunities and a prolonged lack of investment by the local council- and the impact that these changes had on her life trajectory through the years. ‘It was the same for me growing up’, she said, ‘there was nothing for us, youth centres all got closed down, no one cared. And then of course we went on the streets and got into all sort of trouble’. After a number of years undertaking low-paid work, Sara then trained as a hairdresser completing her level 2 qualification. A qualification which would in theory allow her to find more steady, better paying work. Shortly after gaining her qualification Sara became pregnant. ‘That’s when he [her ex-partner] began to get violent with me. It was a really scary time’. As a consequence of this abuse, Sara and her son moved into temporary accommodation, which is where she was living when I spoke with her. ‘It’s better now’, she told me, ‘I can breathe. But I do find it really hard with money and keeping on top of everything’. As a single parent, the changes to welfare reform hit hard, a struggle she’d felt year after year:

Every few months it gets worse. My housing benefit and child support keep going down. And don't get me started on how much it costs to heat the house and feed my kid. I've asked to move so many times because it's damp but they [the local council] keep telling me I'm on the waiting list and I'm not a priority.

With her son about to reach school age, Sara hoped she would be able to gain part-time employment. However, after hearing about other women’s lack of success in re-entering the labour market during the support group, she anticipated several issues she might face in the search for suitable work: appropriate long-term employment and the ability to care for her son at the same time.

Sara’s story opens a window through which we can glimpse the local urban realities of geometries of crisis from ‘below’. Living within a context of austerity in Leeds, a city in the north of England, her narrative charts the slow erosion and strangulation of support mechanisms and vital lifelines. With higher levels of poverty, deprivation and unemployment than the national average (Centre for Cities, 2015), years of welfare cuts have had a damaging effect. Her narrative also speaks to longer histories of neglect and erosion: the shutting of youth services, the lack of suitable employment opportunities and a social housing crisis. Despite the

importance of the intersections of class and location shaping her experience, notably here, it is being a single parent which particularly heightens her ability to navigate a more or less precarious route through difficult times. Her account also allows for an understanding of the complex ways in which she responds to these intersecting forms of crisis and the various affective responses that weave their way in and out: anger, frustration, sadness, worry, pessimism, but also, moments of hope and positivity.

This chapter focuses on a particular set of actors – working-class mothers in urban settings (Leeds, London and Brighton) – in order to tell the story about broader level crises in the UK. The overarching focus of this chapter centres on the financial crisis, the subsequent era of austerity and its impacts. Yet it is also concerned with particular dimensions or ‘planes’ of crisis, which have been exacerbated by the programme of austerity in the UK: employment and housing insecurity, regional disparity, partner protection (or lack of), experiences of class and ethnic prejudice and racism. It is by listening to the subjective experiences and emotional dispositions of women like Sara within such a context that we can identify and make sense of this interactive ‘geometry of crises within crises’. The particular social locations of these women in urban settings also allow for a deeper understanding of the ways in which such crises intersect with, and further affect daily life. As will be demonstrated below, differences and processes of differentiation (Crenshaw, 2011) – motherhood, location, class, race, and immigration status - impact how women can speak about, respond to and navigate within such crises. As I argue below, it is by being attuned to these social markers that we can gain further insight into the gendered realities of crisis from ‘below’.

Drawing on empirical research conducted during 2014 and 2015, this chapter demonstrates how forms of mood enacted by working-class mothers in response to intersecting crises, can be interpreted as constituting a *type* of ‘political project’. A project which, I argue, may in turn be theorized as an agentive social response to the geometry of crises that accompany and are intensified by the austerity programme in the UK. As elaborated on below, if mood is ‘made up of individual and collective feelings, organic and inorganic elements, as well as contingent, historical and slow changing conditions’ (Highmore and Bourne Taylor, 2014, p. 9) then mood can be understood as a social response. This response might not fit neatly within more traditional approaches to social movements and protest politics, but, as this chapter demonstrates, they can and should be understood as an embodiment of a *kind of* political project. As will be shown in the following pages, due to the particular experiences and social locations of the women in my study, this ‘political project’ is not necessarily spoken through an overtly feminist discourse of resistance and empowerment. Nor does it neatly equate to pre-existing social movement agendas and campaigns that are critical of debt and austerity. Rather, amidst the local urban realities of such crises, a pragmatic politics of coping, survival and simply not being ‘worn out’ exists in close proximity. If, as Lauren Berlant notes, political action can be understood as ‘the action of *not* being worn out by politics’ (2011, p. 262), then these women’s experiences represent a *kind of* potential constituency for social movements, and as a result, become highly relevant for social movement scholarship.

Overview

This chapter has four main parts. The first briefly discusses previous work that has focused on experience and engagement with converging processes of crisis ‘from below’. It is within this section, that the chapter draws specific attention to the application of mood and its usefulness for further unpacking the (gendered) politics of crisis. The following sections draw on interview data with 16 working-class mothers to explore how they respond to a geometry of intersecting crises – their everyday experiences, the moods and affects such circumstances generate, and how this causes them to act and be alert in the present and toward their (and their children’s) imagined future. This chapter concludes by speculating on the political opportunities that may follow from ‘mood work’ (Highmore and Bourne Taylor, 2014) that focuses attentively on the present and then briefly contemplates the relevance for broader-level social movements.

Lived Experience(s) and Mood

Since the implementation of UK austerity measures in 2010, there has been a series of important analyses unpacking the politics of austerity. Scholars have detailed the different, but often intersecting, material, psychological, and symbolic effects felt by people in the everyday. Such analyses have highlighted (directly or indirectly) the intersecting forms of crises that have been exacerbated by austerity measures: the rise in food poverty and hunger (Garthwaite, 2016), increased levels of debt (Ellis, 2017), increased pressure on household income and wages (O’Hara, 2017; Hall, 2019), and changes to employment (O’Hara, 2014; Cooper and Whyte, 2017). Analyses also highlight the role that difference – of gender, class, age, location, motherhood, ethnicity, citizenship, and disability – plays in shaping experiences in multivariant ways (Raynor, 2016; Dabrowski, 2020). As has been widely documented, it is women (particularly disadvantaged groups of women) who have been disproportionately affected by austerity policies and discourses (see for example, Cracknel and Keen, 2016, Women’s Budget Group, 2016).

Attention has also become focused on how people are making sense of, speaking about and responding to such impacts within this context of crisis and constraint. Stressing the inherent contradictions, intricacies and ambivalences within their narratives, the sociological literature has unpacked the ways in which discourses are legitimated, reinforced, countered, and resisted; through processes of blame, othering, distinction-making, distancing and collective action (Dhaliwal and Forkert, 2015; Stanley, 2016; Shildrick, 2018). Research has explored how those who are made abject by the symbolic and institutional violence of intersecting forms of crises - single mothers, people who are reliant on welfare, migrants, and those with disabilities or health conditions - navigate a range of violent impacts; increased racism, fear, humiliation, degradation and concern about the growing mistreatment from both the public and institutions of the state (Shildrick et al., 2012; Patrick, 2014; Dhaliwal and Forkert, 2015; Raynor, 2016; Cooper and Whyte, 2017; Dabrowski, 2020).

Ruth Patrick (2014) for example argued that her out-of-work participants challenged the idea of welfare as a lifestyle choice, commonly employing strong negative language to describe the reality of life on benefits. Yet,

at the same time, her participants often gave anecdotes and examples of ‘other’ benefit claimants who saw benefits as a ‘lifestyle choice’; who claimed fraudulently, or received more than that to which they should be entitled. Documenting a similar process, Shildrick et al. (2012) note, that the use of ‘them’ and ‘us’, ‘we’ and ‘them’, is perhaps part of an attempt by some to distance themselves from the stigma and shame associated with welfare ‘dependency’ and poverty by deflecting it onto other people.

Furthering such work, scholarship has exposed how those made ‘abject’ not only take part in a process of distancing and othering but that they also produce values that counter the predominance of moralistic narratives of economic productivity and aspiration. The literature from Sukhwant Dhaliwal and Kirsten Forkert (2015) on ethnic minority British citizens and recent migrants, and Ruth Raynor’s (2016) research with a group of working-class women highlight this behaviour. Dhaliwal and Forkert (2015) note that the tendency of both recent migrants and people from established ethnic minorities to make this distinction between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’, or ‘good’ and ‘bad’ migrants and citizens is a central feature of their own bid for recognition and legitimacy. However, they also found that people produce values that counter the predominance of moralistic narratives – they resist a dominant discourse that seeks to intensify hostility towards migrants and instead assert other values, such as compassion and solidarity. Likewise, Raynor (2016) explained how in her research, forms of stigmatisation and discrimination played out in nuanced and complex ways. For example, within women’s narratives, instances of ‘micro-othering’ circulated alongside persistent expressions of ‘micro-care’.

Less consideration has however been paid toward the affective registers and moods such experiences can produce. And in turn, how a focus on mood might allow us to understand austerity and forms of intersecting crises in more detail. Mood, in a generalised sense, Ben Highmore and Jenny Bourne Taylor (2014, p. 9) explain, ‘allows us to attend to the world of affect, to the world of sensation and the senses, and to the world of perception, simultaneously’. Mood then, according to these scholars, permits an understanding of ‘how the social and cultural world is lived as qualities and forms, as senses and feeling. It is how the world enlivens us and flattens us’ (ibid). They advance this argument by outlining ‘mood’ as ‘an orchestration of many factors’. A mood is thus individual and collective, organic and inorganic, made up of ‘contingent, historical and slow changing conditions’ (ibid). Moods then are irreducibly social, in that they exist within collectives. They are *social feelings*, which can create *social responses*.

Discussing such a process, Jakob Mukherjee (2020) emphasises how mood can discipline bodies by regulating feelings, shown for example via the production of everyday, low-intensity moods such as the anxious boredom that characterises the contemporary office workspace (also see Highmore, 2017). Moods can also produce ‘empowering’ as opposed to ‘disempowering’ affects (Gilbert, 2004). Of relevance to the study of social movements and crisis, protests and other forms of collective action produce and rely upon ‘empowering’ affects. Yet, mood also allows for a consideration of the ways in which activity not understood as formally political can produce disobedient and rebellious moods, feelings and bodies (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 4).

With respect to the crisis of austerity, scholars have thus demonstrated how different affective registers and moods – guilt and resentment, paranoia, optimism, pessimism, resignation and defeat – work to produce, legitimise, sustain, justify and/or disable neoliberal capitalism. Concerned with the contradiction between ideals of the past and lived experiences of the present, Lauren Berlant (2011, p. 1) argues that ‘cruel optimism’ – a state where an attachment to an imagination of a better future both keeps a subject going and locks that subject into a present that may be harmful, restrictive or constraining – is a characteristic of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Inspired by this work, and that of Sara Ahmed (2004), Kirsten Forkert (2017, p. 11) examines how austerity can be understood as a ‘public mood’. Forkert draws on different case studies; such as Twitter reactions to representations of the unemployed; an interview with an immigration advisor and a campaign to save a local library in South London, to highlight that mood has a diffuse, ubiquitous quality. It is this quality, she argues, which ‘gives it its ideological power’. Through such analyses, she details how shared emotions produce harsh moral judgements and scapegoating, but also animate forms of resistance and so-called ‘counter-moods’. Capturing the complex matrix of moods active within a context of crises has strong relevance for social movement scholarship. Mood describes how ‘both the exercise of power by authorities and elites and the construction of counter-power by subjugated groups can operate through a framework beyond language and signification’ (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 3).

Drawing also on Berlant’s concept of ‘cruel optimism’, Rebecca Coleman (2015) proposes a notion of ‘hopeful pessimism’ as a productive means of understanding the affective qualities and atmospheres of austerity. She does so by exploring the politics of pessimism and hopelessness about the future. Studying second-hand survey data that details the impact austerity has had on single parents (and families) at the sharp end of the cuts and the affective registers that accompany such experiences, Coleman argues that it is single mothers who are more likely to feel the mood of pessimism. Importantly, within this pessimistic mood, Coleman notes that particular feelings are evident – misery, collective responsibility, confidence, sacrifice, trust and guilt. Noticing how such feelings make women feel stuck, numb or stagnant, but also alert to and active within the present, Coleman argues that pessimism can be both ‘flattening and enlivening’. The productive aspect of what she refers to as ‘hopeful pessimism’ is the way it acknowledges ‘being worn out by debt and austerity and a resistance to this wearing out’ (p. 100).

Coleman (2015) and Forkert (2017) then, in their different articulations, and attuned to different social actors, senses and feelings, allow us to understand the politics of the present; a context which is not felt or experienced the same by all. This chapter thus adds a novel dimension to such considerations. It is by listening to the complex and multi-layered subjective experiences and emotional dispositions of working-class mothers in urban UK settings, I argue, that a pragmatic politics of the present emerges. Mood thus allows us to consider these women’s productive responses as being both ‘enlivening and flattening’ – generating a feeling of being worn down, *but* not being worn out. It is this concern, with how broader political and socio-economic shifts interact and converge with experiences and responses from ‘below’, that this chapter will now focus attention on.

Researching ‘Geometries of Crisis’

The arguments made in this chapter are the outcome of a series of observations, in-depth interviews and group discussions with 16 working-class mothers living in Leeds (North of England), London (UK’s capital) and Brighton (on the South coast of England) between February 2014 and June 2015. These geographical areas were chosen due to the different impact austerity has had on each city, which is linked to discussions of their wider political, economic and social context. Nine of these women were on Income Support, three on Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), two worked part-time, one full-time, and one volunteered at a local organisation. These women were aged between 20 and 35. These considerations are part of a wider project which understands the gendered impact of austerity by exploring the symbiotic relationship between how austerity is produced and legitimised by the state, and articulated and experienced by a diverse group of women in their everyday lives (Dabrowski, 2020). This project relied on political discourse analysis and a series of observations, in-depth interviews and group discussions with 61 women. The sample encompassed mothers; disabled women; those working in full-time and part-time employment; those studying in Higher Education; women who were unemployed; and those who were partially or wholly reliant on welfare support.

As context, Leeds is a large post-industrial city in the north of England that has now developed into a national centre for financial and business services. London, the UK’s capital, is known as one of the world’s leading financial centres for international business and commerce. Brighton is a seaside resort on the south coast of England which has evolved from a low-wage traditional coastal and manufacturing-based economy, into a city driven by the tourism, culture, creative industries and digital media sectors (Centre for Cities, 2015). During the time of research, despite being in a stronger position than most other northern cities, unemployment in Leeds was higher than the national average (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2014). There had also been a drop in the real value of average earnings for employees in this city: 19 per cent. This was compared to the UK average of 13 per cent (ONS, 2014). Wages in Brighton and London were higher than this average figure. In Leeds, 14–29 per cent of people earned less than the living wage, in comparison with Brighton (16 per cent) and London (18 per cent) (ONS, 2015). Leeds also had a larger majority of JSA claimants and a larger percentage of claimants who had been unemployed for more than a year (ONS, 2014).

Despite higher levels of employment and earnings during this period, Brighton’s housing affordability ratio declined. In 2004, the average cost of a house in this city was nine times the average income, and by 2014 this had risen to 12 (Centre for Cities, 2015, p. 21). Brighton, alongside London, saw house prices rise by more than 10 per cent in a single year — more than twice the national average. Overall, London experienced the greatest increase in its affordability ratio. By 2014, the average house was almost 16 times average earnings, up from 9.5 in 2004. The average house price in London (£501,500) was almost three times higher than that in Leeds (£174,500), which had a 1.6 per cent growth (Centre for Cities, 2015, p. 22). Both London and Brighton saw few houses built in 2004–13 (in Brighton for instance, only 6,260 new homes were built) (Centre for Cities, 2015).

London and Leeds have some of the largest levels of inequality in the UK. At the time of the research, around 20 per cent of the population in Leeds lived in areas ranked in the top 10 per cent of the most deprived, nationally (Centre for Cities, 2015). It is these neighbourhoods that experience severe and persistent deprivation, even during periods of growth. The financial impact of welfare reforms has hit hardest in these areas due to their high concentration of welfare claimants. The Leeds district had the third largest absolute loss attributable to welfare reform: a £232 million loss (£460 per head per annum). Some London boroughs (alongside other older industrial areas, largely in the northeast and northwest) have however been most affected by the welfare reforms (Beatty and Fothergill, 2013). This is primarily because Housing Benefit reforms and the Household Benefit cap greatly impact London boroughs. For example, the Household Benefit cap impacts overwhelmingly on London; all 20 worst-affected local authorities in Britain are London boroughs. The benefit cap mostly comes into play for households that have been claiming large sums in Housing Benefit, claimants in London are therefore hard hit due to the exceptionally high rent levels in the capital. The reforms to Housing Benefit have also had a substantial impact in Brighton due to the city's large private rented sector and higher rent levels (*ibid*). By contrast, Britain's older industrial areas, hit hard by many of the other welfare changes, are less acutely affected by the Local Housing Allowance reforms (and subsequently the 'bedroom tax') because a higher proportion of their low-income households live in the social rented sector or in lower-price owner-occupied property (*ibid*). In sum, these three locations have special relevance for studying social responses to the crises of austerity: these cities have been differently affected by the cuts to public spending and therefore enable a more complex understanding of the different ways in which austerity and forms of intersecting crises impact women's lives.

Everyday Experience(s) of Intersecting Crises

I met Marie, 28, in a Café in North London. Explaining her experiences within the current context, her story allows for an understanding of the multiple forms of crises – welfare reform, employment and housing - that intersect and thus impact her daily life. Working part-time in the Café of a public library in North London, Marie experienced the trend to casualisation having had her hours decrease in the last year. According to the TUC (2015), there has been a persistent and worrying trend towards the normalization of less secure, part-time work. By 2014, more than 1.7 million workers were in some form of temporary work. This trend forced Marie to accept reduced working hours as well as lower wages. This resulted in a significant increase in the precariousness of her situation. As the sole carer of her 8-year-old son, she spoke about the constant strain she felt on her day-to-day finances - being on a low income and renting privately through a housing association made things very hard.

Multiple caps and cuts to her Working Tax Credits and Housing Benefit squeezed her even further. With £30 per month on average to spend on household shopping, Marie said that she was often worried and anxious about not being able to keep up with her son's needs. Disturbed night's sleep had become a regular occurrence for Marie in recent months, with time spent thinking about how long she could 'keep on top of it all'.

Nevertheless, as she was not wholly reliant on state support, she was still ‘able to breathe’. However, Marie was adamant that if her circumstances were to change, for example, if she lost her job, having to rely on welfare as her only source of income would be a great struggle.

Lauren’s experience of intersecting forms of crisis can also be understood through employment, and welfare reform. Lauren, 33, had ended up in what Tracey Shildrick et al. (2012) call the ‘low pay, no pay cycle’ — a cycle of having low-paying temporary work and then being reliant on welfare. Having been made redundant from a part-time job in retail in Leeds, Lauren was now again claiming JSA. Being a single mother, she found it more difficult to take precarious jobs due to family commitments. An independent inquiry coordinated by The Fawcett Society in 2015 raised serious concerns about how single parents (92 per cent of whom are women) were being treated by the welfare system. It found that Jobcentre staff and work programme providers were not aware of the flexibilities that single parents were entitled to, such as being able to restrict their availability for work to fit around school hours. The Jobcentre had recently sanctioned Lauren for six weeks (two weeks longer than expected) after having missed an appointment to care for her son. During that time, Lauren had to wait for her ‘hardship money’ of £50, which took four weeks. Despite the government repeatedly downplaying and denying the harshness of its sanctioning regime, it has been estimated that over 1 million sanctions are now imposed on claimants each year. There has been a large rise in sanctions against single parents — in 2014 an increase from under 200 sanctions a month to 5,000 a month, resulting in their day-to-day living being most severely affected (The Fawcett Society, 2015).

Changes to Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit, the introduction of the ‘bedroom tax’, as well as soaring rents, have had a huge impact on housing security in the UK. Those on lower incomes and with dependent children suffered considerably more from this housing crisis: the financial pressures on households led some women to struggle to pay rent and to fall into arrears or even face eviction. Many women who were renting wanted to move to social housing, but the shortage of this form of housing meant that they had remained on the waiting list for some time. The housing crisis was directly affecting Marta and her family. Having moved to Brighton in 2007 from Romania as a student, Marta began working in a hotel in the southeast of England. Meeting her husband in 2010, she became pregnant in 2011 and subsequently left her job as a hotel supervisor. Moving back to Brighton, she rented a room from a private landlord with the knowledge that it was a short-term contract. However, he assured her that they would be able to renew the contract after the initial six-month period. Nonetheless, three weeks after giving birth, Marta received notice that she was being evicted.

Having appealed to the landlord about her situation, he agreed to let her rent another room in the same house but for an increased price — £750 instead of £650. Living solely on her husband’s income (he worked as an assistant manager at a discount store), this rent increase significantly affected their monthly budget. Marta hoped the situation would get better once they moved from private rented accommodation to social housing. However, having been on the waiting list for almost two years and with a shortage in social housing in the Brighton area, Marta was unsure when or if this might come to fruition. Figures from the Sussex Community

Foundation have shown that the lack of available social housing has since worsened; Sussex has 5 per cent less social housing than the average for England as a whole (2019, p. 51).

Yet it was those women who relied on Housing Benefit and who were single parents that felt the greatest impact of the housing crisis. It was not only the capping of Housing Benefit coupled with the surge in rent that was discussed but also the planned changes in the way payments from the government to the recipient would be administered. For the first time, Housing Benefit would be paid to the recipient, who would then be expected to pay their landlord directly. Among the primary concerns was the shift to a single monthly payment. Women were apprehensive about the effect of a larger monthly lump sum, as they tended to budget from week to week. Since having her daughter, Lucy, a 21-year-old woman from Brighton, had had her Housing Benefit lowered by £75 per month. Coupled with the decrease in her Income Support, Lucy was worried about how this might affect her current housing situation if she got into arrears or if her rent continued to increase. Explaining how she felt, she said; 'I survive but I'm not living. I manage, but it's not easy'. Other women also felt such anxiety, especially those living in London. Since the capital has become increasingly unaffordable for people on low incomes or who rely solely on benefits, some women feared that they would have to move out of the area. This is not an unfounded worry. With a shortage of social housing in London (and other major cities), many homeless families are being offered homes hundreds of miles away from where they are currently residing. According to a Freedom of Information request by Huffington Post UK in 2018, at least 50,000 homeless households have been forced to move out of their communities since 2014 to other areas because of this dire shortage of affordable homes (Demianyk, 2018).

Cuts to Housing Benefit also had an impact on family structure. Having experienced cuts to other benefits they received, the 'bedroom tax'; made an enormous difference to some women's standard of living. The policy, which came into force in April 2013, introduced financial penalties for anyone of working-age living in rented social housing who was in receipt of Housing Benefit and deemed to be 'over-occupying' — according to a set of criteria set out by the government. The new rules meant that 'each single adult or couple should occupy one room while two children under 16 of the same gender were expected to share a bedroom and two siblings under 10 of different sexes must share' (O'Hara, 2014, p. 76). Priya, a 35-year-old single mother living in Brighton and reliant on state support, found that of all the changes in recent years, this change had affected her the most. Priya moved to Brighton in 2005 with her son, after experiencing domestic abuse from her partner. Having recently suffered a breakdown, Priya was getting treatment and counselling for severe depression and anxiety. Since her son, who until recently lived with Priya on a full-time basis, left home to attend a private school in Kent (paid for by his father), his room became temporarily unoccupied. Priya had been told that she would have to pay the bedroom tax on this room since her son was no longer living at her flat permanently. Not being able to cope with the reduction (according to Mary O'Hara (2014), an average of 14 per cent of a person's benefits would be taken away), Priya explained that she was thinking of moving to a one-bedroom flat. However, this would mean that her son would not have a bedroom when he stayed with her at weekends, and would not be able to move back in if he wanted to live with her permanently again.

This section has documented how and where accounts of varieties of crises as lived come into view, and their complex and multiple gendered effects. Due to these women's particular situations and social locations, some crises spoke louder at particular moments. The housing crisis, for example, tended to impact those women who were living in Brighton and London, more so than in Leeds. This is due to these cities having higher rent levels and a larger private rented sector. Unemployment and welfare reform tended to have a greater impact on women living in Leeds. The city has a larger majority of JSA claimants and a larger percentage of claimants who had been unemployed for more than a year (ONS, 2014). Therefore, despite these women's experiences being made more precarious in general due to caring responsibilities, here it is the intersections of geographical location and (a lack of) partner protection that make the greatest impact. This demonstrates the importance of an intersectional understanding of the study of 'geometries of crisis'. One which allows us to see how and where inequality is exacerbated and further reinforced by these intersections, through a focus on the commonalities and divergences in their lived experiences.

Responses to the Crises

Women experiencing the intersecting forms of crises linked to austerity not only drew attention to the precarity of their own present circumstance, but the considerable effect that this was having on the population in general. In other words, people linked their individual troubles to a larger structure of shared social/collective experience or mood. Describing this current mood, Sara said, 'people are suffering, depression went up, everyone's depressed, all miserable, completely sick in themselves, you can see it'. Similarly, Leoni, a 28-year-old single mother of 4 from London who was solely reliant on state support observed;

everything is about money; every April things just go up. Money, money, money. That's all you hear. I was speaking to someone yesterday about this and it's just depressing, no one is excited or happy anymore, everyone is just so depressed.

These women's narratives demonstrate that living in and with austerity makes these women feel flat and 'worn down'. They feel depressed, miserable and 'sick in themselves'. Looking toward the future women spoke in similar terms. Leoni described the future as gloomy saying, 'it's tight now, it's going to get tighter and tighter ... it's going to be bad ... the future will be very nasty, very dark'. Despite struggling to elaborate on exactly what would be 'bad', 'nasty' and 'dark', she finished by saying, 'you have to hold onto what you've got. Hold on to what you've got because it's going to get worse'.

Yet, despite feeling worn down by austerity's impacts women explained that they had to spend a considerable amount of effort trying to 'get by' and 'keep on top of everything'. Lucy, for example, went discount shopping, she bought in bulk and froze food so that she could have 'an all right meal every night of the week'. These she said, were just some of the many tactics she, and other women at the sharp end of this context, actively employed. 'Living cheap' she noted, took up a substantial amount of labour power, planning, time and effort. Her experience thus created a state of alertness, a need to be ready for, actively work on, and survive the

present. Pessimism and worry, therefore, engendered an agentive social response to crisis by these women: the feeling of being worn down meant an active attempt to *not be worn out*. In this sense, pessimism and worry are not simply straightforward states; but become more complex, existing as Michael E. Gardiner notes, ‘in a state of dynamic flux and constitutive ambivalence’ (in Coleman, 2015, p. 93).

Scarlett, a 23-year-old single mother of two from Leeds, spoke of being in this ‘state of dynamic flux’ (ibid). Everyday care responsibilities, and being reliant on welfare often made her feel like ‘pulling her hair out’, unsure of whether she was ‘coming or going’. Explaining she said:

I often pace my road, up and down, back and forth, with two kids in a double pram because I’ve been that angry that I’ve paid all my bills and there’s nothing left and we can’t go to the cinemas or we can’t go swimming ... I can’t keep up with everything.

Pacing then led to resignation, a feeling of despondency and ‘numbness’ toward her current situation. At the same time, such experiences in the present often elicited feelings of frustration, anger and injustice toward political elites and those in positions of authority. For Scarlett, and the other women whom I interviewed, David Cameron, British Prime Minister at the time of these interviews, bore the brunt of this anger and sense of wrongdoing. Women described the PM as being ‘out of touch’ and ‘privileged’, with Scarlett labelling him as ‘a greedy beggar who walks around in a posh suit’. Ensnared within a geometry of crises linked to austerity, these women frequently felt ignored, negatively stereotyped and blamed for the state of the country. As Scarlett noted, ‘We get looked down at, I get looked down at all the time for being a single mum at 23 on my own. As if this [the cuts] is all because of me needing help.’ Continuing, talking back to political rhetoric, she said:

You’re sitting here doing it to us and blaming us for it. How can you blame us for something you are putting in place, for the things you are doing? You’re the ones doing it, so you’re to blame for the mess we are in. We don’t have the authority to go make these rules.

Woven throughout Scarlett’s narrative is the issue of blame and authority. For Scarlett, it is apparent that people who lack the authority to make decisions are being blamed for the results of these decisions. Infused with anger and feelings of unfairness, Scarlett mentions many times how blame is manifested unjustly. Dialoguing directly with the dominant government rhetoric, women would then speak back to the idea of their reliance on benefits as being a lifestyle choice. Despite both David Cameron and George Osborne repeatedly returning to this idea in an attempt to justify welfare reform and cuts to benefits, it was often asked by the women interviewed, ‘Who would choose this?’ (also see Shildrick et al., 2012; Patrick, 2017). This was then followed up with, ‘We don’t do it for the love of it.’ As Scarlett put it:

They’ve never lived on benefits; they have no idea what it’s like. They think I’m sitting back and enjoying it ... enjoy what? I don’t have two pennies to rub together after my bills, shopping and whatever else.

What am I enjoying out of that? I had to take out of my mouth to put trainers on my kids last week ... what am I benefiting out of that?

The women whom I interviewed also spoke of the negative experiences that they had encountered from the general public in recent years. This is because, in seeking to legitimize and gain consensus for the programme of austerity and welfare reform, successive Conservative governments have repeatedly stereotyped and stigmatized certain groups of people for diminishing social resources inside the population, since 2010. Migrants, single mothers, people with disabilities and recipients of welfare have all been demonized and misrepresented; frequently portrayed in political terms as economically unproductive, depleting or undeserving of welfare, and in need of confinement, regulation or moral reform (Allen et al., 2015; Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Tyler, 2015; Shildrick, 2018). Media platforms have worked to reinforce such an idea, with reality television shows such as *Benefits Street* (2014) being used as ‘proof’ of the need for such drastic reform. Tracey Jensen (2014) calls this ‘anti-welfare common sense’, where political figures and the media tell stories of problematic behaviour of figures which they argue are supported by the excessive welfare state. These examples, Tracey Shildrick (2018, p. 8) notes, ‘are often carefully timed and deployed in unison to ensure the message is received and to invoke public outrage towards the welfare state and those in receipt of out-of-work benefits’. Shildrick (2018, p. 4) calls this ‘poverty propaganda’ which she argues works to stigmatize and label those experiencing poverty and related disadvantages as feckless, lazy and work-shy, and cause confusion about the root causes of inequality.

When describing their experiences in this context of hostility, women’s narratives were emotionally charged, and there were multiple references to fear and to concerns about the growing ‘mood of hatred’ and lack of empathy towards them. Due to such experiences, women actively tried to distance themselves from these figures of ‘disgust’ using the resources and capital that were available to them. Marta discussed the increased mood of hostility she had experienced in recent years. Although she had lived in the UK since 2008, she felt more and more uncomfortable when speaking Romanian on the street. She said that this was because of the increased stigma surrounding certain migrants (especially those from Romania) expressed in political rhetoric and tabloid and television media. Marta actively negotiated this mood of hostility by now speaking only English in public spaces. She explained:

I’m afraid to talk on the street in my own language with my daughter. She knows English and Romanian. I mean, I heard in some towns it’s like that, if they hear you talking a different language they [long pause] ... I would like to speak my language to my daughter; she knows better my language than English, but we are more and more afraid, we just speak English.

Marta was aware of the negativity directed towards migrants when she said, ‘I mean, I heard in some towns it is like that, if they hear you talking a different language they [long pause] ...’. The long pause here indicates Marta is thinking about something that is known but cannot be named. There has been a sharp rise in xenophobic attacks recorded by police in England and Wales following the EU referendum in June 2016.

Embassies of eastern European countries reported a rise in alleged hate crimes in the two months following the Brexit vote (Weaver and Laville, 2016). Reports by charitable organizations and media outlets have noted how victims of these crimes have experienced verbal and physical abuse, which in some cases has resulted in death. Therefore, citing being afraid to speak Romanian to her daughter in public, Marta's decision to speak only English aims to avoid any conflict and abuse in the future.

In addition to being a source of stress and insecurity, the external social mood of hostility experienced by the mothers in my research also engendered instances of critical reflection. Although emerging in different ways and dependent upon their position within the context of crises, some women discussing their experiences of class and 'raced' prejudice, made fractures within the well-worn austerity discourse. Women, for example, complicated anti-immigration and anti-welfare rhetoric, considering the ways in which communities and groups were being pitted against each other in political rhetoric and news media. Despite having previously blamed certain groups for the lack of resources, Scarlett then went on to say, 'groups are fighting for the same things, thinking they have it better, but literally everyone is depressed in themselves'. Ruth Raynor (2016) calls this process 'tangled cycles of micro-othering and micro-care', in which women blame others for the lack of resources, but simultaneously are alert to the fallacy that some benefit more than others.

Mood, anticipation and alertness

As well as navigating and surviving the present, some women spoke about the need to actively anticipate a pessimistic and uncertain future. Yet because of the impact of intersecting forms of crises, this became very difficult. For example, Marie had heard rumours from her colleagues that the library was losing some of its funding and as a result, her hours were going to be reduced. Having completed a diploma in Business Management whilst being pregnant with her son, Marie wanted to take her certification further and work toward a teaching qualification. This, she thought, would enable her to get a better paying job with more stability in the future. However, as a single parent who was solely responsible for her son's welfare and the household income, she felt that it was a gamble to take on further study at this time. Her future thus becomes concealed by the uncertainty of the present: her need to plan in, or for the present halts future projects. As Marie noted:

I can do teaching if I keep studying but it's a lot of work. I've considered it, but I'm working and I have to pay for everything. Can I afford to do another added thing that might make me better off at some point? I know people say it's an investment but there's no room for that at the moment. I only get one day off in the week and my son needs me. Maybe it's small-minded of me but I don't know.

Skilling up, therefore, requires an investment of Marie's time - time which was spent investing in and caring for her son, as well as trying to maintain their lifestyle within a period of intense uncertainty and instability. Without a partner to offset economic losses or shoulder the brunt of parental duties during the long transition period, trying to trade up or accrue extra capital brought with it too much potential insecurity and risk.

Investing in caring outweighed and therefore closed down any potential future investment in herself. Marie thus becomes stuck in a progressively uncertain context. This closes down certain possibilities to invest in, or navigate the future since the present becomes equally unstable and necessary to navigate through. Hence, Marie's experience of the austerity crises was characterized by a temporary insecurity regarding the care she could provide her son in the long term.

Despite the difficulties that Marie and other women faced imagining their future due to their experiences in the present, their future did not become irrelevant, hopeless or worn out. The future is acutely felt by women who are responsible for others – in this case, children. Leoni, who up until this point, had directed much of her attention in the present, thought about the long-term in the context of her children. She said:

Can you imagine when my kids go to get a bag of chips when they're older? A can of coke used to be 30p, now it's 99p ... chips will be a fiver. Remember when a Big Mac used to be a Big Mac? (Laughs). A Big Mac used to be big, now it's like a cheeseburger with an extra bit of bread (laughs). Can you imagine the size of a Big Mac when my kids get older?

Framing her discussion around everyday consumption practices, Leoni describes the shrinking size of the Big Mac and the increasing cost of a bag of chips, indirectly suggesting a tougher future. Other women shared this kind of perspective– they expected their children's future to be 'harder'. Marie anticipated financial hardship for her son stating; 'we have all these things that have made things easier, like we don't have to wash nappies anymore and stuff like that, but their life is going to be harder financially'. For Leoni and Marie, despite their children's futures being discussed through different objects – food consumption and financial hardship – these women anticipated their children's futures through negative affective registers. This illustrates how 'mood work' can be a *type of* political project - Leoni and Marie are drawing attention, not only to the precarity of the present but to a challenging future. It is important to note the ambiguity and ambivalence of this politics, but nonetheless, there is an attention to a future that will not be better and one which therefore requires change.

One of the ways in which women actively responded to the need for change was to make small investments in their children's future, with the use of savings accounts and paying into life insurance policies. This was in the 'hope' that their future would thus 'become better'. Although it is important to note that this is not something brought about by the context of austerity, those who discussed such tactics, described how their present situation made them feel the increased need to take such action, illustrating a form of agency in the face of insecurity. For Leoni, taking out life insurance was necessary, as she said 'with all this stuff going on'. Likewise, Lucy had recently opened a savings account for her daughter. She explained that if she had any money spare at the end of the month, she would deposit it in this account. Yet with the constant changes to welfare reform, both Leoni and Lucy worried about whether they would be able to keep these strategies going. As Lucy insisted: 'let's just hope things don't change again for now anyway because I won't be able to put anything aside if they do'. Therefore, despite these women's agentive responses in the present being fuelled by both a sense of worry for, and hope towards their children's imagined future, Leoni and Lucy are both reliant

on systems that propagate their insecurity. Their agentic responses, therefore, become heavily mediated by the resources and forms of capital they have available to them in the present – income, savings, and eligibility for welfare support. It is therefore important to understand how such constraints influence women’s social responses to intersecting forms of crises in the day-to-day. Yet, despite being different from responses that exist within more established social movements’ agendas and campaigns, these women’s responses present within this chapter nevertheless can, and should, be recognised as such.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how a group of working-class mothers have responded to a ‘geometry of intersecting crises’ within the context of UK austerity. More specifically, it looked at specific dimensions or ‘planes’ of crisis linked to a broader programme of austerity in the UK: housing and employment insecurity, regional disparity, (lack of) partner protection, class and racial prejudice and racism. In doing so, it has highlighted how urgently theories of crises need to be grounded in people’s intimate lives and their locally lived realities. Such an approach yields many insights, such as an in-depth awareness of how the insecurities generated by large-scale crises are shaped by political and socio-economic gendered differences. By listening attentively to these women’s subjective experiences, this chapter exposed how these mothers encounter a variety of emotional dispositions - worry, sadness, fear and hope – as a result. Since these are not straightforward states, these feelings are experienced as both ‘flattening and enlivening’ (Coleman, 2015). Worry, as noted above, can leave women feeling numb, but, at the same time, can lead them to be intensely active in the present: women feel worn down *but* not worn out. It is in these complex, dynamic and agentic responses where a pragmatic politics of coping, survival and simply not being ‘worn out’ emerges.

As was demonstrated above, due to these women’s particular experiences and social locations this does not equate to a critical movement, spoken through a feminist discourse of resistance and empowerment. Yet, if political action can be understood as ‘the action of *not* being worn out by politics’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 262), then, this pragmatic politics of living in the present can therefore be understood as a *kind of* political project. One which allows us to think about how these women are being worn out by intersecting forms of crises *and* what it means for them to resist this wearing out in the day-to-day. Such an understanding could then generate a so-called ‘counter’ or ‘alternate-mood’ (Forkert, 2017). One which could challenge the idea that the casualties of crises are themselves to blame, by highlighting how many experiences and emotions are shared: many mothers feel worn down, *but* through this pragmatic politics of the present, *do not* become so. It is by sharing and listening to these responses, within such a context, that alternatives to forms of crisis can therefore be built ‘from below’.

An analysis of mood as a social response to forms of intersecting crises is therefore highly relevant for and of use to social movement scholarship. As this chapter has demonstrated, despite working-class mothers’ responses not being purposefully understood as being oriented toward established social movements’ agendas and campaigns, their ‘mood work’ – as both ‘enlivening’ and ‘flattening’ – can and should be understood as

forms of social action that exist and are working in close proximity. Therefore, the forms of ‘mood work’ and types of political projects discussed within this chapter can be seen to represent a *kind of* potential constituency for social movements.

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