



Emotions of austerity: Care and commitment in public service delivery in the North East of England



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ABSTRACT

In the context of an austerity agenda, constructed through the deployment of aversive emotions, we offer a more-than-rational understanding of uneven austerity politics for organisations providing public services with marginalised groups. The article highlights how emotions are at the heart of the experiences of those delivering services in the North East of England. It considers the emotional toll of changes under austerity on the professional lives of participants, but also those impacts which relate to wider interpretations of loyalty and care beyond individual participants. Due to the nature of occupational roles which involve an ethos and practice of commitment, and through relations with decision makers, colleagues, service users and community over time, participants are engaged in a range of emotional work. We explore how recent experiences have highlighted a continued and in some cases accelerated undermining of their work and communities of which they are, in different ways, a part. However, they are also seen as generative of a set of significant emotionally charged responses to such challenges, which variously challenge and conform to the dominant discourse of austerity.

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1. Introduction

Since the global crisis of 2007/8, the relationship between austerity and emotion has been considered in a variety of ways. These have ranged from cultural theorists focussing on the 'affective orchestration of the crisis' (Helms et al., 2010), to those drawing on economic theory to characterise the policies of austerity as 'morality plays' (Blyth, 2013). Elsewhere, scholars have focussed on quantifiable consequences in relation to health, emotional well-being and social bonds (Basu and Stuckler, 2012; Clarke and Newman, 2012). Others have focussed on people/places most adversely affected, including research at the national scale, such as psychological work on the politics of trauma in Greece (Davou and Dermertzis, 2013), but also in more specific contexts, through for example, qualitative studies of emotional suffering for youth support workers in the UK (Colley, 2012).

While such studies conceptualise the emotional quite differently, all view it as a crucial dimension of austere times. In a similar vein to Horton and Kraftl (2009) and Hardill and Mills (2013), who complicate the separation between policy studies and research on emotions, we bridge these lines of enquiry through a focus on the politics of emotions in relation to both the operationalization and experience of austerity for those providing public services in the North East of England. For Pain (2009: 18), the point of drawing attention to emotions is that they are always part reflection and part productive of power relations that are 'fundamental to the layout of society'. Other scholars (Thien, 2005; Tolia-Kelly, 2006) also situate the study of emotions within specific arrangements of power, recognising their inter-subjective and potentially exclusionary character. In this paper we attempt to apply such an understanding of emotions to the experiences of those in caring occupations in a context of uneven cut backs, underpinned by a discourse of 'necessary' austerity.

As a way of introducing the intersections between politics and emotions, as well as providing context for changes being witnessed by those working on the front line of public service delivery in North East England, we first draw attention to the role of emotions as constitutive of UK austerity politics. We then consider the

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importance of emotions within community orientated occupations under austerity, drawing upon a recent study in a part of the UK which is amongst the most adversely affected by the recession and public spending cuts. Through the accounts of practitioners working in fields across sectors which have an ethos of care and commitment, we highlight the significance of both immediate workplace based experiences and broader psycho-social connections, before considering expressions of emotionally charged resourcefulness amongst our research participants.

2. Emotion, politics and austerity

In sharp contrast to the call for 'compassionate' Conservatism by David Cameron when he became leader of the Conservative Party (Cameron, 2005a), the Conservative led Coalition Government since 2010 has been rather more tough-talking (Jensen, 2012). Austerity measures adopted in the UK have explicitly focused on deficit reduction through a reconfiguration of the state, cutting public spending (including substantial welfare reform) and reductions to public sector employment, thus 'further entrenching the neoliberal model' (Hall et al., 2013: 4). This approach continues apace, through an insistence that excessive public expenditure is the root cause of contemporary economic woes. International evidence of the social and health related damage done by such changes is clear (Basu and Stuckler, 2012), as is that which indicates that austerity is not economically effective (Krugman, 2013). Yet austerity has been popularly accepted as the new 'virtuous common sense' of fiscal responsibility (Blyth, 2013). Between 2011 and 2012, the proportion of the UK population saying the cuts were necessary rose from 55% to 60% (Moore, 2013). Arguably, this is the result of an absence of convincing counter-arguments, but also the manner in which the idea of 'pain now, gain later' has hit a collective emotional nerve.

Public attitudes are subject to manipulation and the language of austerity, resurrected during the latest crisis (Cameron, 2009a), seeks to persuade and legitimate policy measures through an activation of emotions. In this sense, austerity can be viewed as the construction of a threat and as a means of regulating behaviour. Despite reasoned evidence to the contrary (Dolphin, 2011), the government appears to be fighting a battle of 'hearts and minds' through a quasi-religious discourse (Forkert, 2014) in which reductions in welfare expenditure are necessary to redeem the country's guilt about apparent profligacy through the years in which New Labour were in government (1997–2010). In their latest 'long term economic plan' the Conservative Party (2014) continue to reinforce this cardinal virtue of prudence, against the recklessness of the previous government, as central to national recovery. Through a stirring of emotions the state has managed to convince that a failure of the market has been a failure of excessive state spending.

Ritualised language, such as 'we're all in this together' first tabled by Cameron in 2005 (Cameron, 2005b), but often repeated in the aftermath of the crisis (Cameron, 2008, 2009b, 2010, 2011), as well as 'making tough decisions in tough times' (Montgomerie, 2012) and 'in the national interest' (HM Government, 2013) are powerful semiotic tools repeatedly used for convincing that there is no alternative. Emphasising common strife, common cause and shared responsibility, these mantra present a strong and responsible government which, despite difficult conditions and limited choices, is making sensible and 'fair' decisions which 'share the pain' (Clarke and Newman, 2012). This discourse has been deployed to justify the necessity as well as the benefits of a range of policy choices. This includes welfare reform (Duncan-Smith, 2014), the privatisation of public services (see Localism Act (2012) and Health and Social Care Act (2012)), and restrictions on government

spending at national and local levels, ensuring that local councils 'keep doing their bit to tackle the inherited budget deficit' (Pickles, 2012).

What remains unquestioned is the inevitability of the cuts, their speed, consequences for economic recovery, disproportionate social impact (Reeves et al., 2013) and implications for the public provision of welfare. As Hochschild (1979), who pioneered ideas of 'emotional labour/emotional work' argues, political elites (as well as social groups) look to define the rules which govern the emotional tone of a situation (the *framing rules*) and the appropriate emotions to be felt in specific situations (the *feeling rules*). These rules are according to Hochschild (1979: 566) 'the bottom side to ideology' – varying ideological stances come with different sets of framing and feeling rules. However, the induction of a desirable set of responses is also contingent and for some may well result in a sense of vindication vis-à-vis their own judgements of marginal social groups, or for others the characterisation of austerity as an unpleasant necessity.

The 'crackdown' on the UK welfare system since 2010 has been enforced through the stirring of resentment but also guilt and shame (Probyn, 2005), directed against 'workless families' (Jensen, 2012), described by Cameron (2012) as 'the real shame' and the disabled (Watson et al., 2011) separated out from 'hard working families' and described as 'parked' on benefits (Osborne, 2013). Collective responsibility is pitched against individual responsibility and resentment fostered through the idea that individuals have been asked to provide for welfare, which is recast as fostering a 'shameless' dependency. Through such techniques emotional responses to austerity are controlled (Gilbert, 2011) and policy approaches narrowed (Helms et al., 2010).

On the other side of this is the experience of shaming for those targeted as culpable. In our research, amongst those working with groups subject to increased scrutiny, there was a sense of disbelief at the level of harassment. As with other recent research in the region (Garthwaite, 2013), we see here both the demonization of vulnerable groups as a justification of change, but also the emotional damage caused by these changes. For those already dealing with challenging conditions, the impact is acutely felt. As an experienced disability support group representative made clear in relation to benefit eligibility, this is new emotional territory. For those encountering austerity through direct engagement with those most clearly affected, persuasion about the logic of cuts might not be so straightforward (Bennett, 2013).

It is extremely worrying and frightening and of course the various tests that there are for people on their ability to work, there's a huge percentage of those have been won on appeal, but in that period that person has gone through all that worry and anxiety and feeling of, in some cases, worthlessness. And so all this uncertainty and all this, I would say, villainisation of people who either have a disability or people, because of their disability, are having to claim benefits. I've not seen it to this extent I don't think since I came into the voluntary sector. (Chair, Disability Support Group)

3. Working between care and cuts

There is then a blurring between Aristotelian *logos* (appeal to reasoned argument) and *pathos* (appeal to emotional connections) in the rhetoric and results of austerity measures, problematising what Emirbayer and Goldberg (2005) call the 'pernicious dichotomy' of reason and emotion. If the realm of emotions is so significant, there is a need to further engage with these more-than-rational dimensions as encountered and understood by those who have a clear perspective of the changing funding landscape and

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