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Living and Feeling the Austere

ESTHER HITCHEN

Department of Geography, Durham University, Lower Mountjoy, South Road, Durham, DH1, 3LE, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper moves beyond conceptualisations of austerity as fiscal policy towards exploring the multiple ways austerity may be lived and felt in everyday life. Drawing on research with families affected by disability, this paper argues that austerity is felt as a series of atmospheres that envelop and condition times and spaces of the everyday. Austerity is made both affectively and materially present through these atmospheric intensities as they register and radiate between individual bodies and everyday objects. As they shape both day-to-day practices and future imaginaries, atmospheres of austerity generate numerous individualised experiences that result in multiple affective relations towards austerity. As a result, this paper holds together the following relations to austerity: anticipating austerity, adapting to austerity, 'getting on with life' and accepting austerity. These show that austerity is more than an economic policy; it is a phenomenon that is understood through individuals' lived and felt realities that are often experienced through fluctuating, non-coherent and sometimes conflicting affective relations that come to shape how people feel and act in the everyday. It is through a conceptualisation of austerity as lived that we might galvanise people against austerity by encouraging a more nuanced and multi-tonal counter politics that takes into account the multiple affective relations that are expressed through various domains of everyday life.

KEYWORDS: austerity, atmospheres, affect, multiplicity, everyday life, welfare reform, disability

INTRODUCTION

How is austerity made present in everyday life? In what ways is it felt and registered in sensing bodies? How does austerity shape capacities to feel and act? Such questions are vital to understanding the effects of austerity, yet have rarely been explored in academic debates. This article contributes to academic debate through exploring multiple ways austerity may be lived and felt in the everyday. This is a conscious movement away from austerity as an ideology – such as austerity as a 'dangerous' or 'zombie economic' idea ¹ – towards understanding austerity as something that is always more complex as it becomes manifested in different domains of everyday life. Grounding austerity in lived experience is able to grasp the multiplicities, complexities and contradictions that are central and 'ontologically necessary' ² to the manifestations of austerity in daily life. This paper is not an analysis of either 'for' or 'against' austerity, ³ but one where the phenomenon is made present and felt in multiple, sometimes paradoxical ways through numerous domains of the everyday. Everyday life as a site in which to locate the presence of austerity *matters*, as it moves austerity beyond something that is present only in government policy or as an ideology, towards exploring its

multiple manifestations. This analysis emphasises individualised experiences where people perform multiple relations to austerity in various space-times. This paper focuses on the impacts of government spending cuts since 2010, yet the multiple relations tell us much more than it's the 'economic-ness'.⁴ They show that austerity is always and already multiple as it is lived.

The problem at hand in this paper is how to research the presence of austerity in everyday life. Locating austerity within the ebb and flow of everyday life presents its own difficulties, particularly as austerity is not always made visible or present. Rather, it touches individuals' lives in often diffuse ways and with varying intensifications. Research here becomes about attempting to locate the *moments* in the everyday where austerity comes to the fore or is intensified. This is not straightforward, however, since austerity materialises in multiple forms and objects. Perhaps most significantly in the context of this paper, austerity is also something that is expressed *affectively*, as it is *felt* by individuals in multiple ways; austerity may be expressed through bodily affects of fear or anxiety, or even feelings of hope. Turning to the affective presence of austerity attunes to the multiple affective relations individuals may have when living with austerity. Consequently, we must ask, what conceptual vocabulary is able to grasp the multiple ways in which austerity is materialised in everyday matter and expressed through bodily intensities?

To attend to this question I will draw upon the interdisciplinary concept of *atmospheres*. This paper argues that austerity is felt as a series of atmospheres that envelop and condition the various space-times of the everyday. Affective atmospheres show how affective qualities of austerity can condition life by giving sites, episodes or encounters a particular feel.⁵ This paper will explore how atmospheric intensities of austerity are transferred into individual bodies and everyday objects that shape both day-to-day practices and future imaginaries. Not only does this attune to the vague, ambiguous, 'ill-defined' presence of austerity,⁶ but it also understands it as 'thoroughly materialist'.⁷ This paradoxical conceptualisation is central to exploring austerity as lived, since individuals experience austerity through fluctuating, non-coherent affective relations that come to shape how people feel and act in multiple space-times of the everyday.

Exploring austerity as lived through a series of atmospheres, then, requires research that is attentive to the mundane practices of individuals, as well as manifestations of austerity in their everyday lives. There is a vast array of evidence to suggest that austerity measures have been unevenly implemented and experienced in everyday life.⁸ This research focusses on individuals that have been disproportionately affected by governmental spending cuts, namely families experiencing disabilities. Experiences of individuals with disabilities feeling a disproportionate impact of austerity are widespread, particularly as a result of the former UK coalition government's welfare reforms.⁹ Empirical work in this paper involved carrying out in-depth interviews with eleven families in North Yorkshire who had children with disabilities.

The interviews centred on how austerity affected the family's children and their familial lives as a result, but discussions were broadened to multiple practices and domains of their everyday lives. Although academics researching everyday life are increasingly hesitant to use interviews (due to the move towards non-representational forms of research), Hitchens emphasises that we should not discount interviews because they superficially seem inappropriate.¹⁰ In fact, Bissell argues for a renewed interest in interviews, since speech as *action* can have various performative and affective

consequences that have previously been overlooked.¹¹ This research uses interviewing to attune to the affective presence of austerity and as a medium in which the atmospheres of austerity can radiate from particular space-times of the everyday into that of the interview itself.

The rest of this paper is dedicated to the lived experiences of austerity for the families affected by disability. In particular, this will focus on the affective atmospheres of austerity that envelop and condition various space-times of the everyday, as well as the multiple affective relations that shape capacities to feel and act. This paper will begin, however, by critically discussing recent academic contributions made to the concept of atmospheres.

THE PRESENCE OF AUSTERITY THROUGH ATMOSPHERES

An important starting point for considering the lived experience of austerity is Raymond Williams' concept of 'structure of feeling'. Structure of feeling is a way in which to explore the collective affective presence of austerity and how it is implicated in, and shapes, lived experience. For Williams, 'feeling' is chosen to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of 'world-view' or 'ideology'. Whilst Williams still emphasizes the importance of systematic beliefs, his work is concerned with 'meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt'.¹² For Anderson, this concept can take forward what is useful in the meanings and values of an 'age of' or 'culture of' something, indicating 'that collective moods have real effectivity and as such mediate how 'capacities to affect and be affected' emerge.'¹³ Structures of feeling indicate, then, how the collective affective qualities in an 'age of' austerity 'exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action'.¹⁴ Williams shows that a structure of feeling can condition how something like austerity appears, by organising the way in which it comes to be *felt* as part of the dynamics of everyday life.¹⁵ His work suggests that collective affective qualities of austerity can condition life by exerting pressure and setting limits on numerous parts of lived experience. In Williams' later work – in *Marxism and Literature* in particular – the term structure of feeling is equated with a social experience *in solution*: an experience that is produced through the interaction of a multiplicity of elements and one that is always already emergent.¹⁶ Not only does this indicate that social experiences in the 'age of' austerity are continually in process and involving both human and non-human actors, but it also highlights the meaningful knowledge produced by austerity as it is lived and felt in everyday life. As voiced by Williams: 'thought as felt and feeling as thought.'¹⁷

However, where this paper moves away from Raymond Williams, is the ambiguity at which collective moods or affects come to be taken up in everyday experience. Whilst structures of feeling enable us to consider how collective moods may shape capacities to feel and act in an 'age of' austerity, affective atmospheres emphasise the uncertainty at how these collective affects may be expressed in individuals. Structures of feeling 'press' and 'set limits' on encounters with austerity; again, this itself is important for considering how austerity is experienced, by showing the ways in which austerity can condition how social life is patterned and lived.¹⁸ However, affective atmospheres function somewhat differently that results in an uncertainty as to *how* subjects individualise or feel these collective affects of austerity. And it is this indistinctness of affective atmospheres that enables us to explore the *multiple* ways austerity may be lived and felt in everyday life.

Like structures of feeling, affective atmospheres are a collective form of affect that modify individual's possible field of actions, changing their capacities to feel and act in the everyday.¹⁹ This collective affective charge that emerges in particular spaces, however, may *or may not* generate particular events and actions.²⁰ These subsequent actions or events are undefinable *a priori* to the event itself, due to the ambiguity of *how* collective affects of austerity may be transferred into individual bodies. Thus, unlike structures of feeling, affective atmospheres of austerity have an openness to being taken up in experience in the process of registering collective affects in sensing bodies. For Angharad Closs-Stephens, these atmospheres become the 'background noise' of everyday life that erupt from time to time.²¹ Austerity as it is lived is not a continually felt presence, but becomes more intense at certain moments. Closs-Stephens' work suggests further that atmospheres – through these moments of 'eruption' – actually transfer collective affects into individual bodies. It is uncertain exactly *how* these affects will be registered in individuals, enabling the affective life of austerity to become multiple, ambiguous and potentially paradoxical.

Ben Anderson's work in *Encountering Affect* is significant for exploring the ambiguity of affective atmospheres (which enable us to consider the lived experience of austerity as multiple). Anderson highlights the paradox central to understanding affective atmospheres of austerity: '[A]tmospheres may be indistinct, their existence perpetually in question, their reality ambiguous. And yet at the same time subjects and objects are within atmospheres and we encounter particular things, other people or sites through them.'²² Anderson shows here that atmospheres remain 'diffuse, in the air, ethereal'²³ whilst at the same time envelop particular subjects, objects or 'things' in general that make them 'thoroughly materialist'.²⁴ The ambiguity of atmospheres enables the uncertain and diffuse presence of austerity to be taken seriously, and to be seen as *contributing to*, rather than undermining, how we understand austerity in everyday life. Furthermore, the materialist nature of atmospheres highlights the important function played by subjects and objects in making austerity present in everyday space-times. The affective relationships between these subjects and objects are vital to how we understand the presence of austerity in the everyday. For example, atmospheres, on the one hand, emanate from the ensemble of elements that make up the object; on the other hand, they require completion by the subject that apprehends them.²⁵ It is this 'in between' that generates a sense of 'life space' and vitality that is fundamental to understanding austerity as lived.²⁶ This vitality opens up possibilities for *multiple* lived experiences of austerity, particularly because the 'in between' space identifies both the material presence of austerity and the *interactions* between the elements through which the lived manifestations of austerity emerge. For example, subjects apprehending a particular object of austerity may, as a result, feel certain affective qualities that 'complete' the moment in which austerity is made present. Focussing on the spaces and interactions *between* the subjective and objective make the moments in which austerity emerges 'tentative, charged, overwhelming, and alive.'²⁷

The spatiality of atmospheres again draw our attention away from Raymond Williams' structure of feeling – that press and limit austere experiences in the everyday – towards how individuals, spaces or encounters can become enveloped by, or radiate, atmospheres of austerity. The process of envelopment or radiation transmits the affective qualities of austerity between different space-times, which, 'if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry of the subject.'²⁸ Yet, atmospheres can extend much further than the momentary subjective biochemical alteration. The atmospheric presence of austerity *stretches* across different space-times, seeping into various everyday encounters that create

‘variable disruptions in the rhythms and relations of which different forms of life consist.’²⁹ Derek McCormack, in his paper concerning atmospheres of emergency, argues that emergencies slow down or accelerate rhythms of everyday life whilst either fracturing or intensifying relations between things and bodies.³⁰ While atmospheres of austerity are felt somewhat differently to emergencies – as Closs Stephens’ emphasis on ‘background noise’ suggests – McCormack’s work indicates that the *moments* of intensification of austerity can change everyday rhythms. The eruption of austerity’s ‘background noise’ into the fore intensifies relations between things and bodies, and can slow down or accelerate day-to-day life. Bringing together affective atmospheres, austerity and everyday life, therefore, involves exploring the ways in which austerity’s affective (both collective and individualised) presence shapes, disrupts or even paralyses practices that make up the rhythms of everyday experience.

However, to rely simply on affective atmospheres as a conceptual reference to affect and indeed to atmospheres is to limit the scope in which austerity can be understood. Recent work exploring ‘mood’ has many resonances with the literature already explored in this paper. In fact, for David Wellberry, moods function like an atmosphere, in that they are a ‘total quality’ yet experienced as an ‘individual encounter’.³¹ Much of mood work has emphasised their atmospheric qualities³², emphasising the collective experience of moods as individuals become ‘caught up in feelings’ that are not their own.³³ Both Ahmed and Wellberry indicate here that, like affective atmospheres, the relationship between the collective and the individual is important to how moods function. Moods may be picked up by some, but also put down by others; Ahmed identifies this as a lack of attunement as bodies bring with them moods that are not registered by others.³⁴ Mood work, then, is a lens through which we can attend to the world of affect,³⁵ and in particular the affective presence of austerity. This work points towards the ambiguity of *how* collective moods and affective atmospheres of austerity are registered in sensing bodies. On the one hand we know that such moods and affects have communicative dimensions, as they become an ‘infectious’ force from the collective to the individual.³⁶ On the other hand, attuning to the fact individuals may be affected does not mean we know *how exactly* they will be affected.³⁷ As the affective experience of austerity within sensing bodies is uncertain, mood work also enables this paper not only to consider the *multiple* atmospheres of austerity, but also the multiple, potentially paradoxical, ways in which these atmospheres are taken up by individuals. Understanding both mood and affect as *atmosphere*, and exploring the ways in which they are taken up in everyday experience, makes it possible to explore austerity as already multiple as it is lived.

Bringing together structures of feeling, mood work and affective atmospheres enables this paper to have an interdisciplinary conceptual focus and generate austerity research that explores the multiple ways austerity may be lived and felt in everyday life. This moves austerity beyond a discursive fiscal policy and instead enables an attunement to the affective and day-to-day consequences of austerity in individuals’ lives. In particular, however, there is a distinct lack of attention to how austerity is felt as a series of affective atmospheres and how they shape day-to-day practices or future imaginaries as atmospheres become taken up in everyday experience. Locating austerity in everyday life can attune us to the multiple ways atmospheres of austerity may shape capacities to feel and act. Since austerity is lived as multiple realities, that are both diffuse and material, the atmospheric proves an important lens through which to examine the manifestations of austerity in everyday life.

The following sections will turn to empirical work based on interviews with eleven families who have children with disabilities. The point of departure is an exploration of numerous affective experiences

of governmental spending reductions felt by research participants. I will subsequently argue that these spending cuts generate an atmosphere of fear of reduced support that lead families to *anticipate* future austerity measures. As such, this paper will discuss how austerity as an atmosphere can be transferred into individual affective experiences and generate multiple relations to austerity, in which the following will be explored: adapting, 'getting on with life' and accepting. These relations show that austerity is lived through *multiple* affective relations to austerity that are fluctuating and sometimes conflicting, and come to shape how individuals feel and act in multiple space-times of the everyday.

EXPERIENCING THE REALITIES OF SPENDING CUTS

Firstly, it is important to explore the varying impacts of austerity measures that are felt by individuals and the ways in which they hold the potential to shape everyday practices and bodily intensities. Families throughout my fieldwork often lived and felt austerity through various reductions in government support for their disabled children. Nathalie (all names are pseudonyms), a twenty-four year old woman with Downs-Syndrome, experienced a large reduction in welfare provision to support her disability. Her mother, Rebecca, talks of their experiences of spending cuts:

"This year is the year where we really noticed that the austerity measures were cutting in. Because instead of her having her direct payment money and the taxi money, they said 'this is the amount of money you will have'. And I think it was about £7,100... That's the amount she will get and that had to not only pay for her [dance] fees it also had to pay for her taxi fare, and then if anything else, came out of that. So her [dance] fees are about £2,400; taxi fares each week are £280. So even if it was just three days that's still £210 for, I think its 32 weeks a year. So that was already more than she was going to get. So already it was a question of she could have two full days of taxi fares and we would have to do the other two full days. And then if there was any money left over that would be there to help pay for anyone to take her out. So it means that instead of having a direct payment and the taxi fare, and the course paid for, they said 'you only have this amount of money'. So I think I worked it out last year that it had come to about – all of those three things together – it had come to about £15,000 pounds. And this year they said, 'this is the amount you get, you don't get anymore'. So it was halved, immediately."

Nathalie's funding cut from approximately £15,000 to just over £7000 pounds from one day to next is an acute materialisation of the fiscal policy of austerity in everyday life, yet Nathalie's experience goes beyond simply reproducing the 'economic-ness' of austerity.³⁸ For Nathalie, the £15,000 was used, amongst others, for taxi fares, dance fees and respite care. The halving of this funding throws into question how Nathalie will be able to carry on her day-to-day activities. By emphasising 'if *there was any money left over*', Rebecca expresses her uncertainty about whether the remaining funding is enough to meet her daughter's various needs. Now regular to their everyday lives in austerity is determining what activities are *still* possible within particular space-times, and it is through these moments of negotiation that austerity's intensities are more acutely felt. Rebecca illustrates this:

'She [Natalie] notices that [austerity] because she can't go out, and we've had to say, 'you mustn't arrange things with people unless you've checked with us first.' And I've got to really keep an eye on how much money is left for her to use.'

The continual back-and-forth between daughter and parent – that is now needed to keep track of Nathalie's direct payments – means that the initial experience of receiving a £7000 funding cut is kept alive and *relived* in different space-times and with varying intensifications. For instance, the funding cut is less intensely felt at particular times, such as '*during the week when [Nathalie] was at college*' (Rebecca). Yet, during Nathalie's summer holidays the initial funding cut begins to surface more frequently in the everyday:

"So in the holidays we got people to take her out and go and do something to look forward to, I mean she doesn't mind going out with me, she likes going out with me. But it then meant it gave me some time... to visit my mum on my own, or see my friends on my own. Erm, so I'll notice that mainly during the summer holidays this year when she finishes at the end of June, and then she's got, sort of, the whole of June, July, August, September; so, it's like four months where she's got nothing."

Austerity here becomes felt as an *affective atmosphere*; as argued by Angharad Closs Stephens, such atmospheres of austerity are made continually present as 'background noise' in everyday life that erupts from time to time.³⁹ Atmospheres of austerity come to the foreground at various nodes of the everyday that make austerity more intensely felt, such as the back and forth between Nathalie and parent. Importantly, these affective atmospheres of austerity also register 'in and through sensing bodies' that in turn further bring austerity to the fore.⁴⁰ For example, these could be affects of frustration or disappointment – '*she does get upset*' (Rebecca) – during the times Nathalie is unable to get respite care that enables her to spend time with friends. Visceral experiences make austerity affectively present as they become expressed through the feelings and actions of living beings; I argue that bodies are an important medium through which austerity erupts from 'background noise' into the fore.

Yet, moving beyond Closs Stephens, I argue that it is not only through the process of *eruption* that the 'background noise' of austerity is brought to the fore in lived experience. Instead, we must look at the *precise nature* in which austerity is registered and sensed in bodies, as the specific affective experiences shape the particular *mode* in which austerity surfaces. An outburst of frustration or an argument may intensify austerity in a very different way to a process of negotiation between parent and daughter. It is these moments that disturb the background noise or ethereal haze of austerity that enable multiple affective relations towards austerity to materialise; these affective relations that are sensed in living bodies in turn allow austerity to come to the foreground in everyday life in very different *manners*. This will be further unpacked later in the paper.

THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE

For families experiencing multiple realities of austerity, such as spending cuts to welfare support, wage stagnation or a reduction in contractual work, austerity is often felt through an atmosphere of *absence*. The ethereal presence of absence comes in various forms, yet can shape capacities to feel and act in the everyday.⁴¹ This section will highlight how the atmosphere of absence extends austerity as lived far beyond fiscal concerns towards an array of material or immaterial experiences. Firstly, Caroline talks about her family's experiences of austerity within the domain of work:

“[W]hat’s really, really hard is my other half is self-employed – he’s got his own business. He works as a sculptor so he’s in the arts. Because there’s a lack of public money over the last couple of years since we’ve had the recession he found it very difficult. Things like commissions aren’t coming up because public money isn’t there for the arts. Also, even the commercial side of things it’s hard because the commercial work isn’t as broad, because people are making massive cut backs.”

Here, Caroline and family experience various entangled absences – of public money in the arts, of commissions and of commercial work – that have meaningful affective consequences. The atmosphere of absence enveloping the domain of work led Caroline to emphasise that she was ‘concerned about [money] all the time’, stating: ‘I don’t feel I’ve got the choice not to have to worry about it.’ Caroline’s visceral experience of worry (transferred from the atmosphere of absence) brings austerity into the foreground in a debilitating manner that begins to shut down capacities to feel and act. Caroline and family lose their ability to be spontaneous or carry out impromptu activities and instead are forced to make decisions based on whether their finances stretch far enough: ‘Before I didn’t have to think about it. So I do now. Now I’m full [sic] aware of, erm, what money is coming into the account and when it’s coming in and I’m checking things. I never used to have to be in that situation.’ The bodily experience of worry, therefore, restricts capacities to act by narrowing the feeling of freedom to spend money without fearing the consequences of spending more than one cannot afford.

The atmosphere of absence in austerity has also registered in other bodies. Nicola is a single mother and raises her two disabled sons with her daughter. As Nicola is out of work, and in social housing, her family relies heavily on welfare support. Kathryn, Nicola’s daughter, emphasises the worry generated by the absence of welfare support:

“I mean an autistic child is hard to feed on its own, but a dairy free and autistic it’s just impossible... And the price of food has gone through the roof, and you think how the hell are you supposed to feed him? I mean [Nicola] can’t have a job because there’s always something with one of the boys. How the hell does she support the family, feed the children on what the government offer?”

Kathryn’s fear that the reduction in government support would no longer meet their familial needs led her to state that ‘we go without a lot of things and that’s how we survive. Because we make sure they’ve [Adam and Tom] got it first because they’re a priority.’ Again, the atmosphere of absence shapes capacities to feel and act, as mother and daughter quite literally ‘go without’, due to the fear that Adam’s and Tom’s needs would otherwise not be met. These examples indicate that austerity in the everyday involves feeling, and being shaped by, multiple coexistent atmospheres of austerity that may pull individuals in different (potentially conflicting) affective directions. Attempting to negotiate these multiple and varying bodily capacities that may materialise in various space-times, therefore, becomes an important part of living with austerity.

ANTICIPATING AUSTERITY

The preceding two sections have been dedicated to the everyday experiences of government spending cuts, particularly to welfare support, and how they have been felt through various atmospheres. However, it is not only the actualised spending cuts that have real and meaningful

effects in everyday life. As experiences of spending cuts accumulate, so too does the atmosphere of fear amongst other families in similar situations (including between families with disabilities) that they too will lose government support. Atmospheres of fear can radiate between individuals and families throughout everyday encounters, which Clare and Annie make evident:

'The funding, I think it's less than 50% of applicants that get funding. It's gone down in the last couple of years, we know that for sure... It's definitely gone down because the college and other providers have said to us.' (Clare)

"But what I'm hearing from other people with disabilities is, because I'm in an Art group with some disabled people some not, a mixed group, is they're very stressed because they're all having to go for lengthy interviews and go over old territory again, you know, over and over again. And they're all fearful." (Annie)

During the time of our interview, Clare was in the process of applying for funding for her son to attend a specialist college. Yet, her previous encounters with college staff members and funding providers – who emphasised reductions in funding for specialist colleges –led her to *expect* a lack of support: *'Well we probably will get it turned down – it's probably more likely that we will get it turned down than we'll get it granted.'* Annie also highlights how encounters with other people with disabilities facing potential funding cuts can cause fear to envelop particular space-times, and subsequently radiate these affects from one individual to another. Such atmospheres of fear can condition the future imaginaries of individuals living with austerity, as bodies may be shaped to *anticipate* forthcoming reductions in spending. This is further indicated by Isobel: *'The amount of provision will just gradually go down because I just suspect that's what's going to happen from what I've heard as positions in local councils get axed and care workers and outreach workers and disability workers. I think that will reduce over time.'*

This is important, as this future imaginary of austerity can condition mundane practices of the everyday. During the moments in which austerity comes to the fore, being in a state of anticipation shapes bodily capacities and actions, as individuals come to expect themselves to be affected by austerity. The *precise manner* in which austerity is made present in the everyday as a result is greatly influenced by bodily states of anticipation. This can be further developed through Helen's encounter with a letter from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). She states:

"I think it's important to stress the anxiety that people have with all these changes and the pessimism that people have about these changes, and the fear and the lack of confidence in what is happening and is going to happen... It's in my mind most days I have to say. You do, you do think about it, you think, oh gosh. And every time a letter comes through the post from the Department of [sic] Work and Pensions you think oh God, what's this going to be? Are they suddenly going to say you can't have these benefits anymore?"

Helen here illustrates how the atmospheric fear of losing government support can create bodily states of anticipation, and in so doing conditions her everyday encounter with the DWP letter. The term 'Department for Work and Pensions' printed on the letter is enough to create bodily feelings of fear that this envelope may hold within it details of lost or reduced welfare support. Helen's state of

anticipation of receiving some form of spending cut means that particular affective experiences – here anxiety or fear – are quicker to rise to the surface, the very moment she sees the letter on the door mat. Helen’s encounter with the DWP letter also indicates the way in which austerity as lived goes beyond its ‘economic-ness’, as the fiscal policy becomes materialised into everyday objects that in themselves hold a vitality affect.⁴² Yet, Helen’s state of anticipation shows it is also the *interaction* between body and letter, between subject and object, that generates a new vitality, that can shape the *manner* in which austerity surfaces. Here, austerity surfaces as a shock in that it generates a rush of anxiety throughout the body, yet is paradoxically also expected. Austerity also surfaces here as something threatening; the encounter with the letter is (re)affirmation that Helen’s future imaginaries are mired with fears of imminent spending reductions: *‘I can hardly bear to think about the next step, but that’s what I have to look at at some point and what support – I’m quite pessimistic about it in reality. I don’t feel there’ll be much support for him to lead the life he wants to lead’.*

Helen’s encounter with the letter is also illustrative of the way in which austerity as a *mood* can become manifested in everyday experiences. As argued by Highmore and Taylor, “[m]ood is neither just the habitual, the constant or the sudden eruptions of affective intensity; it is rather the habitual world that can carry such eruption on its broad back.”⁴³ The presence of austerity holds the potential to erupt from habitual moments; it is precisely because such encounters can emerge from everyday practices that lived experiences of austerity have such affective force. Austerity’s affective presence in day-to-day objects and subjective practices highlights that the ‘background noise’ of austerity has the possibility to be felt *anywhere*. Yet, precisely how individuals are affected by austerity always remains indistinct *a priori* to the event itself. As a result, I again argue that the particular *manner* in which austerity surfaces from ‘background noise’ into the foreground is influenced by the multiple bodily intensities felt in living beings. For Helen, the sudden rush of anxiety that flows through her body every time she receives a letter from the DWP makes austerity surface through the paradoxical manner of ‘expected shock’.

ADAPTING TO AUSTERITY

As argued earlier, affective atmospheres of austerity can shape bodily capacities to feel and act; the following section develops this further by exploring the various ways in which austerity as lived involves *adapting* to the presence of austerity in everyday life. Whilst ‘adapting’ is a very broad term, I have interpreted it as the *adjustments* taking place in individual’s everyday lives as a result of austerity, and see it as another mode of relation to austerity. Whilst previous sections have also emphasised the altered capacities to feel and act as austerity is made present, this section differs through its particular attention to the future imaginaries attached to these adaptations. However, these future orientations, and the affective relations to them, are multiple; some individuals may fear an economically precarious future, yet others may also become paralysed by a future eventuality’s affective force.

Firstly, the cumulative affective presence of austerity – particularly due to losses of welfare support, wage stagnation and lack of employment – led participants to financially adapt. Often this was through budgeting strategies and having an acute awareness of *how* and *how much* money is being spent:

'I've had to change just how I spend money, or not spend money [laughing]' (Caroline)

"I just feel I need to know exactly how much is going out on [James'] care, how much is going out on his food bills, so I can sort of say, 'look he's only got this amount left' per week. And that's got to cover all of these social activities. He's got to learn as well that he hasn't got a limitless budget. You know, he's got his DLA and also his Employment and Support Allowance and that is it." (Hannah)

Hannah *feels the need* to be aware of where her son's money is being allocated, in order to establish a weekly budget. 'Feeling the need' to do something indicates an action carried out as a result of a pressure or compulsion from a particular force. This force can take multiple forms, yet here it is the particular orientation towards the future that drives the feeling of needing to budget. Hannah is not budgeting because she is 'affectively animated' by the hope of a more financially secure future, but instead is mobilised by the fear of the potentialities that may arise (indebtedness perhaps) if her spending exceeds more than she can afford.⁴⁴ The feeling of needing to budget *intensifies*, when this potential future is closer to actualisation. Annie, for example stated:

"[W]e were down to... our last fifty pounds in the savings account. And that shocked me. So I thought I can't go to the hairdressers, I can't buy the presents, that you know that you want to buy for nieces and nephews even. It does restrict what you can do quite a lot actually."

Being so close to zero pounds in the bank account led Annie to emphasise: *"I have to be really, really careful because I had a certain budget I had to stay within. I had to think really, really carefully what I could get with the money. And actually I was just saying to [Philip] before you came this morning, that's the first time in twenty-eight years of marriage that I've been so fearful about overspending."* The feeling of needing to budget for Annie was so intense due to the enormous affective force generated by the eventuality of running out of money. The intensity of fear felt by Annie is another example of the way in which austerity's affective presence can shut down bodily capacities to act, since it prevented her from being able to buy presents for family members or going to the hairdressers. The fear of overspending *paralysed* Annie's abilities to carry out everyday activities. This is somewhat different to the budgeting carried out by Caroline and Hannah; for them, the affective presence of austerity shaped capacities to act as a result of a particular orientation towards the future (greater economic insecurity), yet it did not *shut down* capacities in the same way as for Annie. Instead, it led Caroline and Hannah to actively adjust and keep an eye on their spending respectively. This raises the question as to whether the type of budgeting Annie carried out can really be considered an everyday *adaptation* as a result of the presence of austerity. *Adjusting* one's daily practices due to austerity is very different to being *paralysed* by the presence of austerity and the affective force of being so close to running out money.

These multiple relations to austerity can be further understood through a consideration of bodily thresholds and the *transformation* of bodily capacities when these thresholds are surpassed.⁴⁵ The affective presence of austerity in everyday life can generate subtle differences in the body, or 'micro cracks', that mark a threshold of lower resistance;⁴⁶ this can be seen in the experience of Caroline's and Hannah's budgeting, through their fear of spending more than they can afford. However, these 'micro cracks' begin to accumulate in the body as austerity is more intensely present, and can eventually surpass bodily thresholds that *transform* capacities to act. This is illustrated through

Annie's overwhelming fear of overspending; the intense affective presence of austerity, and subsequent 'micro cracks', transformed Annie's bodily capacities in that her day-to-day actions became *paralysed* by austerity. As voiced by Thrift, 'bodies can and do become overwhelmed. The unchosen and unforeseen exceed the ability of the body to contain and absorb.'⁴⁷ Paradoxically, therefore, individuals living with austerity may adjust their everyday practices, indicating an altered capacity to act; yet when bodily thresholds are surpassed, bodies may no longer be adapting to austerity, but becoming overwhelmed and paralysed as a result of its affective force.

'GETTING ON WITH LIFE'

For many research participants, however, the affective presence of austerity was also met by a desire to 'get on with life' and accept that fiscal austerity may be part of their future everyday lives. 'Getting on with life' was an attempt to suppress the future imaginaries of austerity and the subsequent affective consequences, like fear or anxiety, as well as the state of anticipating future spending reductions. This was often expressed through actively not thinking about the future:

'I would rather not think about it [the future], because it's almost like you deal with what you've got now and that's all you can really do. Because there's no point in worrying, she says, but you can only so much can't you?' (Caroline)

"I think the main thing for us is that we're not getting paid any more, living costs a lot more, and we're going to have to work longer and we're going to get less pension. And all those things combined, and then if you throw [James] into the mix it's not a great prospect is it? But I don't really dwell on it." (Isobel)

Previous sections have emphasised how the affective presence of austerity can shape, and sometimes shut down capacities to act in everyday activities, such as food shopping, or mundane practices like receiving a letter. However, paradoxically, 'getting on with life' is a way of retreating back to the day-to-day, and becomes a strategy of 'coping' with the affective force of the uncertain and the potentially threatening future imaginary of austerity. As argued by Bissell, the precise shape of affective emergence is unpredictable, yet there are ways affects might be 'kept in check' to prevent them from taking a firm hold of the body.⁴⁸ For Caroline, 'dealing' with the everyday is her way of keeping the affective consequences of potential future losses of support 'in check'. The emphasis that *'you can only [worry] so much'* highlights Caroline's attempt to prevent austerity's affects from harming the body. Isobel's emphasis on *'I don't really dwell on it'* illustrates the significance of suppressing both her future imaginaries and the day-to-day affective struggles of austerity, stating she would otherwise *'probably not sleep'*. 'Getting on with life', through suppressing harmful affects, enables participants to cope with the pathological effects of austerity and prevent them from shutting down capacities to feel and act.

Encouraging feelings of hopefulness to grow may also be a strategy to keep the harmful affects of austerity from taking over the body. Annie, for example, stated: *'I think you've got to keep hopeful and say, no, life is going forward and we will put things in structure.'* The sense of hopelessness here, as voiced by Ben Anderson,⁴⁹ opens a crack in the here and now through a contradictory statement that things will be 'as before, but different and better than before'.⁵⁰ Annie's emphasis on *'life is*

going forward’ keeps ‘openness open’,⁵¹ in that a future better than the present will always be possible. Yet, this is also to recognise that hope is to sense something missing – to perform ‘a disconnection that is immanent to the present.’⁵² Annie performs this disconnect, since to ‘keep hopeful’ means also to recognise that the presence of austerity is detached from future imaginaries of her desires. Remaining hopeful alongside the harmful affective consequences of austerity may be particularly productive for keeping the body ‘in check’, since ‘it is precisely this openness to processes of loss and disappearance, without falling into affirmation of the here and now, that enables an ethos of hope to risk disappointment because it is open to the emergence of something better’.⁵³

ACCEPTING AUSTERITY: MULTIPLE AFFECTIVE RELATIONS

Accepting austerity is another way in which research participants have expressed their wish to ‘get on with life’. This acceptance of austerity, however, comes in multiple affective forms, including as a result of the fatigued body or seeing austerity as a necessity. Firstly, the acceptance of austerity due to the feeling of fatigue was expressed by Annie. Annie described her experiences of her daughter (Kate) being reassessed as ‘fit for work’, even though she was still attending full-time residential college. This reassessment now requires Kate to actively seek work, despite the fact that Annie does not yet consider her fit for work:

“The outcome [of the reassessment] is that she’s being placed in the work-related activity group... it’s still another thing that she’s got to do on top. And to my mind I tried to appeal against it because she’s preparing, she’s making real progress in my mind towards employment in that she’s in a full-time college, but they said no, she’s still got to go. – Well at the moment I just say, oh yes, fine, but I have grave misgivings about this – I don’t think we’re quite there. I’m not saying it can’t be achieved but I don’t think it’s right that. And I said I thought it might be appropriate, let’s finish her course and then let’s look at what we can do in terms of part-time employment or voluntary work or whatever. But, no they say, you must come. Or again you appeal, but there’s a backlog of cases and we can’t tell you when it will be and I thought, it’s going to hang over us. So I said, oh we won’t appeal we’ll just, you know go ahead with it.”

Annie’s first appeal against the decision to place Kate in the work-related activity group was rejected, and although she was able to appeal again, the negative affects generated by a second appeal caused Annie and family to accept the decision. Annie’s emphasis that a second rejection of the verdict would ‘hang over’ the family indicates how the atmosphere surrounding an appeal registers in and through sensing bodies.⁵⁴ As voiced by Bissell, a stream of multiple events that generate frustration (or other affects) can serve to increase these negative affects over time.⁵⁵ The continual complications surrounding Kate’s reassessment can fatigue the body as the affects of appealing become more intense.

Bissell also emphasises that frequent exposure to such events can change the body’s disposition to become more or less tolerant of the situation. For Annie, the fatigued body brought about less tolerance of appealing and, subsequently, was less willing to appeal the second time, even though she felt her daughter was not fit for work. This wearing of the body – as a result of multiple and continual affective experiences of austerity – can change the body’s disposition to austerity that may make individuals less willing to contest, and instead accept, austerity itself.

However, acceptance comes in multiple affective forms, and some research participants accepted austerity with acquiescence. Some research participants emphasised the necessity of austerity, with particular focus on the 'failings' of the welfare system:

"I think unfortunately in our society, there are people, which I know sounds dreadful, they take advantage and they tell lies and they're creaming the system... I think the trouble is we have too many people that are trying to claim benefits that shouldn't claim benefits. I'm not pointing fingers at people or anything but there are certain parts of society aren't there that, you know, people that have loads and loads and loads of children so that's a drain on society." (Emma)

"I always think that I would make more use of it had I got the money they got, because I do just see that it can be wasted quite a lot... Almost inevitably they smoke, you see it and then at the same time they're moaning that the benefits bill, their benefits are in real terms going down. And then you think, yeah but I want you to have apples and oranges but I'm not so sure about the fags...[T]hey all smoke, they all have Sky TV, they all get drunk a lot. That's a wide generalisation, but you do see it and they all have holidays." (Jessica)

Emma's emphasis that certain individuals are 'creaming the system' by claiming benefits is performative of the government discourse (often performed by Chancellor George Osborne and Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Iain Duncan-Smith) that people relying on welfare support are 'sleeping off a life on benefits'.⁵⁶ Through implying that there are individuals lying to gain benefits, Emma suggests that claiming benefits is a matter of *choice*, and therefore attributing benefit claimants with 'shirking work'⁵⁷ and lacking 'personal responsibility'.⁵⁸ Jessica further discursively constructs the welfare system as 'failing' through suggesting that individuals often waste their benefit support on cigarettes, alcohol and Sky Television. Interestingly, however, both Emma and Jessica distance themselves, and their need for welfare support, from the practices of 'shirker' bodies. This distancing of benefit claimants' own experiences from those supposedly 'creaming the system' may be symptomatic of what Lisa McKenzie, amongst others, characterise as the 'benefit scrounger' myth, in which people reliant on welfare support are 'using taxpayers' hard earned money to live the life of 'Riley', which often includes taking drugs, drinking alcohol and generally having a great time.'⁵⁹ Emma and Jessica's multiple performances of their own need for benefit support alongside their distancing from 'undeserving' claimants highlights the contradictory practices that are part of living with austerity, as individuals receiving welfare support may construct an imaginary 'other' threatening the welfare system and their position within it. This process of distancing is affectively charged by radiating feelings that welfare support is given to both 'deserving' and 'undeserving' individuals. Such performances of austerity are an affective tool with which to accept austerity with acquiescence, as austerity becomes a necessity in order to 'clean up' the welfare system.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to capture the complexity and multiplicity that is central to living with austerity in everyday life. Key to this argument has been individuals' multiple affective relations to austerity that have been varying and sometimes contradictory. These multiple relations are significant, since they tell us much more than the 'economic-ness' of austerity; they show that austerity is lived through fluctuating, non-coherent, and sometimes paradoxical affective relations

that come to shape how individuals feel and act in multiple space-times of the everyday. However, these numerous individualised experiences have political implications at the collective level. Whilst austerity is felt as a series of atmospheric affects and moods, there is ambiguity at which they become registered in sensing bodies. This suggests that people's capacities to feel and act as a result of these atmospheres are varied and multiple. Nonetheless, shared experiences of austerity can and do occur; this paper has shown that the affective presence of austerity can radiate from one body to another through everyday encounters. Yet, the multiple individualised bodily intensities indicate that austerity is always already multiple as it is lived.

This leads to the question of whether the multiple experiences of austerity may actually hinder a meaningful contestation to the fiscal policy of austerity. Varied bodily intensities generate different capacities to feel and act. These various capacities may result in different abilities to contest the fiscal policies themselves. Some people living with austerity may have the capacity to speak out against it, or attend anti-austerity protests, whilst others may be too fatigued (like Annie's and Kate's experience) to carry on contesting, or others may simply wish to 'get by'. Individuals' desire to 'get on with life' is illustrative of the latter example. Attempts to 'get on with life' can provide an 'affective cushion'⁶⁰ against the harmful affects of austerity, and in doing so prevent these affects from taking hold of the body. Yet, such attempts to mitigate the affective symptoms of austerity leave both the policy of fiscal austerity and the political objectives that motivate austerity measures unexamined. Austerity as a fiscal policy and its multiple, arguably uneven, consequences in various domains of everyday life may not be questioned in day-to-day attempts to 'get by'. Instead, a collective attempt to 'get on with life' may unintentionally contribute to an acceptance of fiscal austerity that hampers capacities to provide meaningful contestation to the discourses of austerity as a 'common sense' solution to sovereign debt.

This paper, however, has gone beyond analysing austerity as a fiscal policy towards something that is felt through atmospheric and visceral intensities. I have argued that austerity is felt as a series of affective atmospheres that envelop and condition the various space-times of the everyday. As austerity is not a continually visible presence in individuals' lives, these atmospheres become the 'background noise' of everyday life that come to the fore at various moments. These encounters bring austerity into the present through its felt intensifications and often surface through the registering of affective experiences in sensing bodies. However, this surfacing of austerity comes in multiple modes; the *precise nature* in which austerity is registered and sensed in bodies shapes the *manner* in which austerity is brought to the fore. As suggested by the work of Anderson, affective atmospheres of austerity require 'completion' by the subject apprehending or experiencing them.⁶¹ An outburst of frustration may bring austerity to the fore in a completely different manner to a negotiation between parent and daughter. We must, therefore, not only look at the moments or encounters that make austerity present, but also the manner in which austerity surfaces.

Finally, understanding austerity as a series of atmospheres may have political implications to how we might stimulate a critical response to austerity. For Margaretta Jolly, it is through collective mood (which functions as an atmosphere) that minority movements can represent more than its members.⁶² Since atmospheres have communicative dimensions from the collective to the individual,⁶³ collective moods and affects can be constructed and drawn upon to not only register in individuals already aligned with the anti-austerity movement; they can also become an 'infectious' force to

individuals who are not yet enveloped by an opposition to austerity. Moods such as empathy or sympathy for people (including those cited throughout this paper) who have been negatively impacted by austerity measures can be seized by the anti-austerity movement and used to engage individuals outside the movement itself. Importantly, emphasising austerity as something that is *felt* may be a point of departure for others to imagine how austerity can be experienced. For example, imagining the anxiety felt by a mother that her son could receive a letter through the post holding within them details of lost welfare support; or imagining the paralysing fear of overspending in the supermarket because there is only fifty pounds left in the savings account. Seizing on such feelings through atmosphere may become an affective tool with which to develop a critical response to austerity, between individuals who are *and* who aren't in similar experiences, since affects can be shared between sensing bodies even if the experience tied to the affect is not. Anti-austerity protests in particular have attempted to generate certain collective affects, not only between fellow protesters, but beyond the spatial envelopment of the protest itself.⁶⁴ The radiation of such affects from one individual to another can provide validity to the lived experiences of austerity. Crucially, however, functioning through atmospheres enables anti-austerity protests to open up capacities to act by contesting austerity as a 'common sense' solution to sovereign debt, and instead affectively shaping future imaginaries that alternatives to austerity are possible.

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