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Sheila Quaid: *Mothering in an Age of Austerity*

**Introduction**

This chapter examines particularities and discursive process of neoliberal ideologies and how polarisations of 'mother' occur in austere times. Rushton in his chapter emphasises the changing nature and patterns of inequality that have emerged as a result of austerity. The cuts have had an overwhelming impact on families and in particular on women alone with children. This has been accompanied by a discursive shift to 'mother blaming' for behaviour of young people, ill mental health of families and poverty of children. Depth of blame culture towards 'mother' is evocative in this recent poem Made from Bits of Newspaper Headlines;

> *Childhood obesity to blame on working mothers.*
>
> *Working mothers link to school failure. Welfare reforms could force stay-at-home mothers to work.*
>
> *Working mothers' children unfit. Working mothers may cause break ups. Kids of working moms are more likely to get hurt. Working mothers 'less likely to cook healthy family recipes.' Companies 'not planning to hire working mums. Kids pay when mother's away.*
>
> *Who'd be a working mum in the UK?*
>
> In ***Boom***, Carolyn Jess-Cook (2017).

By exploring impacts on women and as mothers in this chapter, my aim is to reveal the furthering of gender inequalities as a result of recession and governmental response through tax and spending decisions. Through reviewing the depth of research and commentary on the gendered and unequal impact of austerity, this analysis testifies to particularity of experience for women as mothers. The arguments presented are drawn from journalistic sources, as well as quantitative and qualitative academic research. Research continues at a pace, in social

geography, sociology, social policy and economics to consider the case that austerity is a feminist issue. It seems clear that austerity requires a gendered and feminist response.

**Impact of the cuts**

Tax and welfare policies across the UK are affecting women and mothers in particular ways. Tracey McVeigh reported that 'economists are calling on the government to produce a Plan F to tackle the disproportionate burden being placed on women' (McVeigh, 2013), with single mothers losing most under current policies and welfare regimes (Rabindrakumar, 2013). Mums against Austerity (2017) highlight the evidence of cuts to domestic violence projects, and in addition, argue that cuts to the criminal justice system and housing affect mothers and their children in the most punitive manner. During the last 5 years many have sought to evidence the material penalty of the cuts and Stenning (2013) provides evidence of the direct hits on family life. In a north-east study entitled 'Feeling the Squeeze' (2017) she explored structure of feeling and emotionality of austerity in everyday life. The study reveals impact from:

- the freezing of child benefit rates and 'tapering' of access for higher income households (earning over £50,000) plus reductions in a variety of payments to new parents (such as the Child Trust Fund and the Health in Pregnancy Grant)
- the capping of housing benefits (as part of the overall benefit cap, see below), a reduction in Local Housing Allowance rates (which set the local levels of housing benefit) and benefit reduction for 'under-occupation' (the so-called 'bedroom tax')
- time limiting of employment and support allowance (ESA)- a reduction in both coverage and levels of tax credits (in advance of all tax credits being subsumed with Universal Credit, see below)the replacement of the Disability Living

Allowance (DLA) by Personal Independent Payments (PIPs) and a re-assessment of all recipients (expected to result in hundreds of thousands receiving reduced levels of benefit)

- the localisation of council tax benefit (i.e. to cash-strapped local authorities) and a reduction of council tax benefit budgets by 10%

- a benefit cap of £500 per week for a family or £350 per week for a single person

- the abolition of community care grants and crisis loans (with a suggestion but no statutory requirement that they be replaced by local schemes, devised by (cash-strapped) local authorities)

- the introduction of Universal Credit from Oct 2013; this will become the main means-tested social security benefit for people of working age, replacing Housing Benefit, Income Support, Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Jobseeker's Allowance, Working Tax Credit & Child Tax Credit- an increase in state pension age.

In *Lean Out* (2016) Dawn Foster suggested that 'in Britain today, women are paying the price for nearly a decade of austerity', and outlined cuts in particular to domestic violence projects and cuts resulting in deportations, evictions of mothers having particular consequence son their children. The Fawcett Society (2012) proved in their research that 85% of all the initial cuts affected women more than men. These include women with disabilities, health issues, mental ill health, black women, working class women and single mothers. The Child Poverty Commission published research which shows the existing and predicted continuing rise in absolute poverty from 2010 to 2020 as a result of the erosion of the welfare state. The political media reports regularly on the spending cuts with many highlighting the disproportional effect on women and burden being placed on mothers in

particular (McVeigh, 2013) and the independent body known as the Women's Budget Group report the impact of austerity policies on different types of family groups in UK which 'paints an alarming picture for the economic recovery of women in England' (Bennett, 2015). Mothers' choices between providing unpaid care for children at home and going into paid work are being severely curtailed as a result of austerity cuts. With current ideologies requiring that women need to be in paid work to relieve the state of their maintenance, the choice to care for children is restricted and, with the ideology of privatisation and care being provided by the market, the only option for most working parents is privatised childcare which is priced at such a high level that income is reduced significantly. The attempts by government to underwrite a minimum level of nursery care have not guaranteed its provision. In addition, the widening of health inequalities, demonstrated by numerous surveys, is described by Bambra (2015) as a neoliberal epidemic. Greer (Greer, 2017) highlights the growing health inequalities in the North East of England and suggests that extensive welfare reforms are producing new level of ill health.

**History Repeating Itself**

The rolling out of neoliberalism and the introduction of austerity policies have been sustained and justified by a 21st century version of the 'deserving v. undeserving' poor ideology. During the nineteenth century, poor and working-class people in the UK were divided on these lines by a punitive Poor Law (1834) which carried its own ideological agenda. Discursive phrases such as 'Heaven helps those who help themselves' linked hard work and the protestant ethic with ideas of God and Godliness. Political individualism was expressed in Victorian suppositions that 'whatever is done for men or a class, to a certain extent takes away the stimulus and necessity of doing for themselves', sentiments that underpin many

social policies today (Smiles, 1859) Much was said about the 'ignorant working classes' and the blame for conditions was laid firmly at the door of the poor themselves:

> The condition of a class of people whose misery, ignorance, and vice, amidst all the immense wealth and great knowledge of "the first city in the world", is, to say the very least, a national disgrace to us (Mayhew, 1851 unpaginated).

The deserving poor were those who were poor through no fault of their own, either because of illness, accident or age, or because there was no work available for them (perhaps because of a factory closure for example). The undeserving poor were those who were poor because of laziness or personal problems like drunkenness. Victorians were very concerned with how they could help the deserving poor without encouraging laziness in the undeserving poor (Woodhorn Colliery Museum, undated). These ideas are returning in 21st century Britain within the new philosophies of neoliberalism's austerity policies. Austerity's impacts are being experienced differently depending on whether employed, unemployed, male, female, and migrant, citizen, parent, non-parent and the focus on women as mothers reveals particularity of positioning of mothers in the midst of this process. During the last decade, enormous ideological change and economic restructuring evoke further considerations of the role and socio-positioning of women, generally and mothers in particular. Evidence suggests that women are taking the brunt of austerity policies and taking an unequal hit for the tax and spending decisions of the government since austerity was decided upon as a political and economic strategy in 2010. Research provides us with sound evidence and insights into the gendered nature of austerity impacts. Most evidence based research on this topic acknowledges the fundamental need to look at gendered life and to do research on poverty and economics through a gendered lens. For example, Bennet and Daly's (2014) evidence based anti-poverty research indicated the centrality of gender to their in-depth study:

> At first glance, the links between gender and poverty seem obvious. Women have poorer labour market attachment, tend to head poverty-prone households and have less 'human capital'. But these are characteristics of individual lives, rather than explanations. Underlying them is the gendered nature of the processes leading to poverty and potential routes out of it. Poverty viewed through a gendered lens therefore requires an examination of social and economic relations, and institutions
>
> (Bennet and Daly, 2014:6).

This is not to say that men, and in particular working-class men as well as men on middle incomes, have not been affected. Men's lives are being affected in devastating ways by austerity, and much recent work (Crossley, 2016; Stenning, 2013) testifies to the impact men (as well as women) as workers, and in particular on older men facing redundancy and poor chances of re-employment. In addition, work carried out by Joseph Rowntree Trust (2012) focusses on the impact on people living in poverty, both men and women. The picture of devastation emerges as we consider cuts to housing benefit, universal credit, carer's allowances, bed room allowances, and the increasing gender pay gap. Women's location in the eonomy, and their position as welfare claimants, combine to make them vulnerable in times of deliberate austerity (Rubery and Rafferty, 2013).

Many writers have taken to blogging about the gender inequalities developing, for example Ellie Mae MacDonald (2017) identifies three areas where the brunt is harder. These are: changes to universal child allowance; inadequate childcare facilities; and the introduction of universal credit which will increase women's dependence on men. She goes on to suggest:

> The welfare state cuts have unacceptable consequences for women. Women are more dependent than men upon the welfare state; care responsibilities prevent many

> from entering employment and earning an independent income. Even within employment, women may suffer in-work poverty because they are only able to maintain part-time, low-paid jobs whilst caring for dependants (http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/gendered-impacts-of-austerity-cuts/).

The already existing socio-economic positioning of women, and in particular women who are mothers, creates a certain vulnerability at times of economic restructuring. We need more than ever to consider these processes through a gendered lens in order to unravel the gendered economic picture of the UK under austerity. It seems obvious that these cuts hit women harder because women are more likely to use public services, work in public sector and in low-paid peripheral work. In addition, women are more likely to be caring for children or older family members. These policies and the gradual removal of state welfare provision would seriously set back 50 years of moves towards gender equality. Whilst we are seeing the emergence of the precariat (Standing, 2011) the vulnerability of mothers within this process requires attention in order to work out what can be done about the particular impacts on lone mothers and on women and mothers as carers. Examining the recent economic data, Diane Perrons has noted that:

> In 2015 the UK gender pay gap was above the EU average with the unadjusted median hourly gender pay gap for all workers being 19.2%. This figure can be disaggregated to provide greater insights into the factors responsible. For those working more than 16 hours a week it falls to 16%, and if mothers are excluded from this group, it falls to 10%. For non-mothers working more than 16 hours per week who are between 22 and 35 years old, it falls further to six per cent. This data suggests that the gender pay gap is closely associated with the gender division of labour with respect to care work, as well as the high costs of care services (for

> example, childcare costs take 40% of a couple's income in the UK, compared to an OECD average of 17%), all of which discourages women from working unless they are very highly paid (Perrons, 2017:30).

This focus on women reveals the particularities of individual and collective experiences of new economic pressures, and the way that austerity has represented a serious set-back for many women.

In the ideological conditions of individualism, women are also being judged and placed at the centre of blame for so many social ills during these late modern and austere times. The devastating effects of austerity are hitting households, and women as mothers occupy particular roles in most households with most responsibilities for primary care of children. In particular, single mothers, women and men in black and minority ethnic groups, migrant mothers, disabled mothers and mothers of disabled children are bearing the brunt of both material and ideological reformation of society as a result of austerity policies. Stories from personal, the political and the philosophical diverge to create a mingled contradictory and yet central tale of precarious times and new lines being drawn around ours and our children's citizenship, identities and futures. Mothers are expected to be resilient, innovative with money, balance unpaid work at home and paid work, to keep families happy and secure during erosion of income and increasing job insecurity. They are held responsible for nurturing, guidance and producing the next generations of self-sufficient and 'responsible' neoliberal citizens. When the pressures increase the role of mother is held up as either saintly or to blame for a range of social problems and she is expected to keep mothering through austerity and precarious times. In addition, questions surrounding possible new cultures of domesticity are considered alongside the impact of cuts on parents and families. Intersections

of class, nationality, ethnicity and place are present in this review of mothering under austerity. Ideologies and discourses surrounding parent citizenship are explored and in particular, the implied role of mothers.

**Neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism is defined primarily as a policy that aims to reduce the role of the state (Calhoun, 2002). Yet as a corollary, it promotes ideas of independence and self-sufficiency, on the promise of choice and freedom instead of state direction. In addition, it fosters ambivalence towards, or even a wholesale rejection of, interdependency. Times are changing at a fast pace with neoliberalism and current austerity in directions that were not contemplated in the first wave of New Right policies in the 1980s. Taylor-Gooby (2017) suggests that this will include privatisation beyond anything we have imagined and

> That the class solidarities and cleavages that shaped the development of welfare states are no longer powerful. Tensions surrounding divisions between old and young, women and men, immigrants and denizens, and between the winners in a new, more competitive, world and those who feel left behind are becoming steadily more important. European countries have entered a period of political instability and this is reflected in policy directions. Austerity predominates nearly everywhere, but patterns of social investment, protectionism, neo-Keynesian intervention, and fightback vary (Taylor-Gooby, 2017, unpaginated).

For this new world system to take hold it requires fundamental economic restructuring and removal of the welfare model with which we were once culturally and politically comfortable in the UK. Austerity is ostensibly a fiscal policy designed to redress so called national debt and to reinvigorate the economy and it is also the most punitive, damaging and contemptuous political and ideological process of the 20th and 21st century. It is shrouded with ideologies

and beliefs about who is to blame for this crisis. The project requires both a practical reorganisation of the political economy and the discursive, ideological construction of neoliberal citizens and subjects. We are asked to 'tighten our belts' to believe that 'we are all in this together' and that paid work is the solution to poverty. In her book rightly called *Austerity Bites,* O'Hara (2014) documents the harsh end of these cuts and the phrase 'the big squeeze' is used to describe the erosion of household income, financial insecurity, and income support: even those in middle income occupations are bearing the brunt. Whilst the case is made by O'Hara that disabled people are taking a particular hit, the position of mothers in households has resulted in particular pressures. Also taking a disproportionate 'hit' from these cuts are 'women and children from black and minority ethnic groups' (O'Hara, 2014:4).

**Legitimising Austerity**

Ideological and discursive campaigns are being conducted as the press has repeated many neoliberal ideas and the media take a fundamental role in presenting the neoliberal project of austerity. Much recent work (Bramall, 2013, Anderson 2014) explores the cultural reproduction of neoliberal ideologies and suggest that austerity is presented as an impasse. A sense of collective responsibility is achieved by the creation of a mood of crisis and urgency and the idea that this is a perpetual crisis creates collective sense of urgency and ideas of crisis and emergency are becoming 'everyday experiences' (Anderson, 2014), and 'we are all in this together' (Bramall, 2013) is a typical of phrase that evoke emotionality to create political mood. Despite these attempts to persuade us all that we are in this together and that this is a national and collective difficulty we are facing there is a sense of fear and apprehension as this unfolds. The changes are unsettling us, making us feel uncertain and for many in UK society, decisions have already created a precarious material base which leaves

us feeling as if we are teetering on the edge of old certainties and with little knowledge about how to plan for our futures or for the futures of ours and others children (Standing, 2011). Neoliberalism produces uncertainty and reformations of class positioning, Standing (2011) suggests that the precariat is a new class, comprising the growing number of people facing lives of insecurity, doing work without a career, that is, without a past or future. Their lack of belonging and identity means inadequate access to social and economic rights. Standing (2011) poses questions surrounding the growth of this new class and the potential political dangers it may represent. The general themes emerging centre on the shifting ground of our lives and the removal of old certainties and securities.

**Ideological Focus on Mothers**

Mothering and the perceived failures of mothers are held up in new neoliberal parenting ideology as a source of many ills such as: poverty, low education attainment, criminality, racism, violence and above all, whether the generation of the future will be good or bad neoliberal citizens (Gillies, 2007; Jensen, 2010; Tyler 2009). The emerging field of maternal studies reflects the fact that the status of all women appears to be affected by dominant ideologies surrounding good and bad motherhood. Stories from personal, the political and the philosophical diverge to create a mingled contradictory and yet central tale. The centrality of motherhood in social and cultural reproduction has been a key focus of policies for many years, and this is why it is subjugated, controlled, regulated and locked in reproductive rules and norms. In addition to the marginalized position of migrant mothers and their children the development of mother/parent blame reared its head in reaction to the riots of 2011. De Benedictis in her analyis of the rhetoric of ‘feral’ parent and its link to neoliberalism, quotes Prime Minister of the time, David Cameron:

> The question people asked over and over again last week was ‘where are the parents? Why aren't they keeping the rioting kids indoors?’. . . Families matter. I don’t doubt that many of the rioters out last week have no father at home. Perhaps they come from one of the neighbourhoods where it’s standard for children to have a mum and not a dad . . . where it’s normal for young men to grow up without a role model, looking to the street for their father figures, filled with rage and anger. So if we want to have any hope of mending our broken society, family and parenting is where we’ve got to start (De Benedictis, 2012, comments made on 15th August 2011).

With this deliberately strongly worded statement, the class and gender positions of single mothers came to the fore in neoliberal thinking. The use of the term ‘feral’ was poignant in creating an element of disgust and ‘othering’ of working class single mums. De Benedictis explores the discursive creation of disgust and polarisation of mothers in these ‘feral parents’ comments: she point to the way that new versions of parent blame emerged under neoliberalism. Within this development it became clear that mothers, and in particular, single mothers were at the forefront for criticism. Whilst there is a steady shift of responsibilities from the state to individual families, a polarisation of ‘mother types’ is discursively constructed. Along with the culture of disgust came an ideological polarisation of mother types, as explored in Tyler’s analysis, with its striking title : ‘Chav Mum, Chav Scum’, noting the structure of difference being created between the normal and the deviant mothers (Tyler, 2008). Existing gendered practices of parenting placed mothers with increased responsibility for rearing a generation of future neoliberal citizens. During austerity mothers are expected to take responsibility for ‘getting by’ with thrift and resilience and the qualities needed; thrift, resilience, ability to toughen up, and take appropriate measures. The concept of ‘parental governance’ illustrates the way that parenting, and mothering in particular, have become both

the perceived cause of and solution to an array of social problems. Late modernity sees emergence of parenting as a political and economic category. As in the nineteenth century, parenting emerged as category for intervention with the medical and psyche professionals seeking to rebuild the child-mother relationship through organised early health initiatives to educate 'ignorant women'. (Lewis, 1993 and 1997). This strategy emerged in recent years in parallel with a denial of the psychosocial impacts of poverty, cuts, welfare reforms and the generally diminishing welfare provision for the poorest in society. Particularities of economic impacts on mothers are well researched and the Women's Budget Group (WBG) testify to the gendered impacts of the austerity cuts with 'an alarming picture for the economic recovery of women of women in England' (Elson, 2017).

The widespread neoliberal impacts created pressures in many countries but interestingly education and parenting seem to move up the political agenda in countries where austerity policies have been quite severe. Academic analyses of austerity fall roughly into two areas with, on the one hand, studies of the political economy and consequences and, on the other, studies dealing with the psycho-social impacts on people of the austerity cuts programme. Austerity and the increased legal endorsements of certain kinds of freedom have coincided: these last two decades have seen changes in terms of identity and legal choices that once seemed impossible during the early days of the new right. Homophobia and dogmatic attitudes to personal identity have been officially rejected, and social relationships have undergone substantial legal liberalisation. For example, same sex marriage, transgender recognition, equalizing of lesbian motherhood to some extent with heterosexual motherhood have been features of twenty-first century social changes, yet the neoliberal system produces marginality with new and rigorous regulatory powers. The new forms of freedom and

personal choice were accompanied by coercive and restrictive policies with regard to the unemployed and those in receipt of state aid. The customary solution to all social problems under neoliberal ideology is to be productive economically and to find work: this is scarcely new, but has taken paradoxical forms. This solution is denied to many of those refugees seeking residence (see below), and also to those with insecure residential status. Moreover, work is in fact part of the problem, in that most of the poor families with children have at least one adult in paid employment. The pay levels are, however, low, and it is *working poverty* that is the major problem today (Perrons, 2017). Nevertheless, emphasis on individual responsibility is dominant in governmental discourse where paid work is the suggested solution to all financial predicaments. This is despite consistent evidence that low paid peripheral work does not lift people out of poverty (Macdonald and Shildrik et al. 2010). Austerity policies, moreover, place responsibility on parents and expect then to demonstrate 'being more aspirational for your children', and being prepared to join in with an ideology of individualist producing of new generation of self-sufficient highly motivated young people. The idea of taking responsibility for your children's aspirations is matched by the pressure to take responsibility for economic hardship and the toll is likely to be felt collectively at a psychological level. The idea of 'taking responsibility for austerity' and 'tightening our belts' became governmental ideological messages. Whilst people are doing this, Stenning (2013) has shown the rise in anxiety, uncertainty, working to reduce expenditure as 'buffers disappear'. This is echoed in work by Clayton , Donovan and Merchant (2015) where they argue that 'austerity localism' and squeezed funding create undermining of trust and empathy between services. In the midst of this the squeeze on parents is well documented (Jensen and Tyler, 2013, and a variety of other pieces on related themes such as Hamnett, 2010). There are strongly felt uncertainties and collective feelings of going off track from 'normal' life course (Hall, 2014). This uncertain and corrosive effect on daily life for many in the UK is

illustrated with experiences which include family upbringing with debt, bad health, shaky investment in normative promises (pensions), difficulty with house buying, resulting in adult children living with parents and many more examples of financial squeeze which fundamentally alters the life course. In the midst of these discursive and economic restructurings new concepts of parent citizenship emerged as the role of parenting (for which, mostly read mothering) is to produce good neoliberal citizens. Maternal failure and the discursive shift to particular types of 'mother blaming' is illustrated in the poem at the start of this chapter which made up from headlines in the print media over the last few years.

**Parental Governance**

The politicisation of both education and parenting was intended to place blame and responsibility in these two roles for social ills and social problems. The ideological project of locating blame was achieved through discursive processes. In discourses associated with parental governance the maternal figure comes to the fore. In late modernity we see emergence of parenting as a political and economic category. The phrases such as 'parent citizenship', 'every child matters', 'every parent matters' and with the introduction of parenting classes the message that parenting was the both the cause of and the solution to every social problem was becoming very clear. Parenting in these debates, however, is often presented as a context-free unproblematic skill (Holloway and Pilmott-Wilson, 2014). Existing gendered practices of parenting place mothers as charged increasingly with responsibility rearing a generation of future neoliberal citizens. Stenning (2013) has drawn attention to the psychic costs of austerity on mothers, while others highlight the economic pressures on mothers in an individualised and increasingly unequal society. The internalisation of all of this psychological brutality exacerbates the already difficult experience of financial and material hardships. Neoliberal ideologies combined with punitive

austerity policies affect us in different ways depending on our position in society as women and men, child, migrant, employed or unemployed

**Migrant mothers**

The position of migrant mothers illuminates the new, rigorous regulatory powers under neoliberalism. New lines are drawn around citizenship and the tie between place of birth and nationality is broken in this neoliberal age thus creating children with no citizenship, no belonging and no rights to reside (Tyler 2013). So, whilst we have formal liberalization, in terms of the market, equality of access to services for all those in need is continually blocked on the grounds of a different framing of rights – that of natives versus outsiders. Many are denied citizenship today, and now in this neoliberal state, refugees are regarded sceptically as 'asylum seekers', with the consequence that they and their children are subject to exclusion from the economy, and even subject to detention. Children born here in the UK are denied citizenship because of their mothers' uncertain status. These are contradictory times in which freedom of movement for some, secure citizens and tourists, is guaranteed, while others are subject to official controls and media-driven resentment. With these developments new lines are drawn around citizenship with severe consequences for migrant women and their children. Migrant mothers are affected in very particular ways both through material precarity and ideological discursive positioning. Thus, the rights are separated from the birth place and the right to citizenship status is curtailed. Migrant mothers are seen as marginal, and in several ways, alien, not just as people of foreign origins, but also as bearers of an alien culture. When Cameron suggested that women's lack of English language was partly to blame for radicalisation, the mothers – nearly all Muslim women - were portrayed as a threat not just to social cohesion but even to the security of the nation: in this way, a new sort of othering was formulated. The new discourse of migration controls marginalises and

displaces even long-settled migrants, and has had the effect of positioning people in discourse as potential enemies within our national borders. Although much empirical research shows that migrant women's mothering practices actively and sometimes creatively intertwine with, and *change* the transmission of tradition, they are seen as barriers to modernity (Ganga, 2007; Erel et al., 2017). Migrant women are expected to prove their ability to belong by conforming to neoliberal ideals of the good citizen, involving especially their ability to contribute through paid work and integrate themselves and their children into 'British values'.

**Troubled Families**

The 'feral parents' discourse concerns about single mothers, turned into, at least for some, one of the most punitive interventions to be designed by recent government: this was the Troubled Families Programme (see Malin's chapter). This is held up by many as a key example of the central place family has in the neoliberal framework of social restructuring. The centrality of family to neoconservatism is both ideological and practical, to be crafted into a state apparatus. As a means of intervention, the focus is on families who are poor and in trouble (or troublesome), and this in turn led to 'mother blaming' with ideas about immorality and the responsibility of women depriving children of a 'normal' upbringing. This was overridden with subtle narratives of failure and shame and levelled against working class mothers. By 2013, Tyler (2013) argued, a consensus had been rebuilt around the underclass thesis (Murray, 1980) and the Cameron's statement following the 'riots' of 2011 included questions repeated such as 'where are the parents?'. This led to a new construction of the image of the 'troubled family'. The programme has its roots on the 2006 'respect' agenda (Crossley, 2016) which sought to get a 'grip' on families living in poverty and with those

unable to cope. Families on the margins of society were therefore identified and targetted for reconstruction. In the search for causes of cycles of poverty, Crossley argues, a reconceptualisation of 'the problem family' was required, and was derived from the idea that there is a particular culture and way of living amongst certain groups which perpetuates poverty and deprivation. Crossley (2016) has suggested that this is not upheld by evidence;

> Although unsupported with evidence this ideological stance has taken hold in the last decade . . . these reconstructions have occurred despite a large volume of social scientific research which has little evidence of a distinct group of poor people with different culture (Crossley, 2016)

The ideological shift of blame for poverty transfers the problem from the state to the family and its transmission of culture, values and aspiration, and responsibility for failure is laid firmly at the door of the parents. Crossley (2016) has highlighted how maternal mental health is emphasised in these procedures and this suggests that maternal failures come to the fore very easily in this process. The intensification of parent blame under neoliberalism sees maternal factors foregrounded, despite the concentration on the apparently neutral problems of 'parenting' (De Benedictis, 2013). During austerity policies in the UK critical theorists commented on the 'squeeze on parents' (Jensen and Tyler, 2012), and the construction of new marginalities, new 'mother types' (Tyler, 2013) and new ideological forms of respectable mothers and their opposites (Evans, 2015). Ideological lines are drawn in new and unprecedented ways. Neoliberal parenting is being defined and, whilst government discourse appears to conflate mothering and fathering as 'parenting', much current analysis suggests that, for women, motherhood, particularly, is being reconfigured. New discourses

surrounding parental governance and parent citizenship not only affect women generally but create polarising debates surrounding women as recipients of charity or welfare benefits. The debates are highly moralised and new divisions between the deserving an undeserving mother proliferate. As noted above, the discursive constructions of the 'chav mum' came to the forefront with the 2011 riots. The event of that summer evoked phrases such as; 'feral children and feral parents' (De Benedictis, 2012). New discourses of parent blame are thereby created, despite the evidence of the psycho-social impacts of austerity policies (Stenning, 2013). Motherhood as an identity is in reality highly complex, and is integrally linked to female identity and the position of women in society. Yet the ideological imposition of responsibility for social ills has reshaped it into an oversimplified, clichéd social duty, while at the same time fundamental changes in policy directions and in the state framework of support produce new and contested mother identities.

**Concluding Thoughts**

In the predominant ideology of our time, neoliberal subjects should be self-contained, relying only on themselves to achieve success. Of course, this means, following Valerie Walkerdine, that any failure (as much as any success) is also 'achieved' individually (Stenning, 2013). Neo-liberal economic restructuring began in the 1970s where Britain and USA saw a gradual rolling back of the welfare state ( Holloway, Pimlott Wilson , 2014), and whilst the roll out of neoliberalism has been an international process, various countries have responded in their own particular ways. The UK introduced austerity policies in 2010 under a New Labour government and so began a programme of cuts to welfare budgets and education budgets. The precarious nature of life under neoliberalism is evident in much academic work detailing the impact of the cuts. Such precarious lives are theorized in recent work where many

working people can justifiably be referred to as the precariat (Standing, 2011). The legitimacy of austerity is being constructed through discursive shifts around our thinking about personal problems which are refused the status of *structural* features of our society, and instead are portrayed as purely an individual failure. Experiences of crisis and emergency are becoming 'everyday experiences', and yet the sense of emotionality of the situation is employed in order to create political moods of resignation in the face of the inevitable economic reality that demands austerity. Despite the widespread feeling of disruption, the dissatisfaction is displaced onto mythical problems of culture and difference, forms of resentment and xenophobia, and little credence is given to the collective experiences of crisis and emergency which in reality has disrupted an idea of a positive future. Our collective need for austerity has endorsement from orthodox economics, and only the irrational – or the dangerously radical and unrealistic – will challenge it (Anderson, 2015; Stenning, 2013).

Within this situation, the role of women has both practically and ideologically a pivotal role. The primacy of motherhood in feminist theory is understood as a necessity for understanding cultural, political, social and economic positions of women. The focus on mothers in this chapter tells one story of particularity, and others have testified to the increased particular pressures on women, men, children. Yet the position of women as mothers is at the centre of so many social relationships that the mother role is worthy of attention at this time of reshaping and reforming of economic and personal family lives. Research reveals how mothers are held responsible not just for managing their children without getting overwhelmed but for putting right many of our social problems. The political technique being used to achieve the pushing back of welfare framework and model is a programme of austerity: yet austerity is a political choice designed to achieve particular political goals and

aims of neoliberal ideologies. This is the process surrounding, shaping and in some cases decimating the lives of ordinary people in the current era. It is created with existing patterns of gendered and racial hierarchies of power and the effects of decisions are impacting on people in gendered and racialized ways. Many decisions are being made by middle class white privileged men that have direct and devastating consequences on the lives of the poorest in our society. This is a gendered process with the impacts on women having particularity. Women are bearing the brunt of many austerity decisions and the lives of their children are subsequently affected. Women in the role of mothers are experiencing previously unknown pressures on themselves and their children. For example, since 2010 the rise in deportations and long convoluted decision making about asylum status is affecting migrant women. The rise in evictions of poor working class single mothers living on income support is often followed by displacement as they are relocated away from communities of support. The material life of particularly single mothers and migrant mothers is harsh as a result of policy decisions associated with austerity. The analyses of ideological processes and policy directions reveals the particular pressures, both material and ideological, on mothers in the situation since 2008. Old ideologies and prejudices have been re-institutionalised and given new impetus as a result of the crisis.

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