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Narratives of displacement and poverty: the intersections of policy and the shared experience of the everyday

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An extensive, and growing, global literature on the experience of people subject to migration control shows how state actions to “manage” migration and human mobility results in poverty and destitution. There is also a large body of evidence indicating how neo-liberal policy, alongside deeply embedded structures of privilege and inequality lead to the economic deprivation of fully entitled, “citizen” populations. Despite the commonality of disadvantage between these two groups—migrants and citizens—the parallels in experience of structures that create and maintain their impoverishment have rarely been explored. Close attention to the stories told by people with lived experience of poverty, as citizens or as migrants, challenges the normative assumptions about belonging and entitlement, deservingness and opportunity that underpin policy-making on both migration and social inequality. This essay argues that listening to, and engaging with, the stories of people in poverty is an important corrective to normative ideas about who can benefit from state support. Focusing on the UK, my aim is to explore the position of people subject to migration control alongside others living in poverty—marginalized and made precarious not by displacement but by deprivation, stigma and punitive welfare systems. Paying close attention to the stories people tell cuts through the official, normative positioning of people as outsiders whether as foreigners or as marginalized citizens. Stories thus reveal the technologies of power and oppression at work in everyday settings. Drawing on concepts including Butler’s ideas of grievability and Mbembe’s necropolitics I reflect on how welfare management systems and the “so-called” hostile environment, reduce the capacity of migrants and others to act as purposeful human beings. I hope to reveal the technologies of power and oppression at work in everyday settings and will argue that careful, attentive listening to human stories can challenge the imposition of normative discourses on the voiceless and encourage narratives that embrace complexity.

KEYWORDS

poverty, displacement, lived experience, narrative, marginalization, the everyday, hostile environment

1. Introduction

“Our life is like—not a human life. We can’t move, we can’t do nothing, we can’t go to college, we can’t work—nothing... we are hiding people.” (Cited in Williams, 2015, p. 13).

“Poverty means you are only allowed to observe, you cannot take part.” (ATD Fourth World, 2019, p. 20).

These quotations are from two people living in poverty in the UK. The first is a migrant, defined as someone in the UK who has yet to establish a secure right to remain in the country, while the second, is a citizen of the UK who has a permanent right to reside and participate; their sentiment is notably similar. Drawing on research I have been involved in, either as a lead researcher or as part of a team, I will discuss how policy that governs both migrant and citizen welfare is based on similar narratives of worth and moral value. I seek to identify the parallels between the punitive systems that manage both the lives of migrants with insecure leave to remain and citizens living in poverty through stories from lived experience.¹

Migrants living in the UK without secure rights to remain² are impoverished by their migration. Poverty, perhaps the result of political disadvantage, discrimination, or conflict, may drive their migration but for those migrants who make it across seas, deserts and borders to the UK, many will be treated as supplicants rather than as rights-bearing people. UK ministers have repeatedly made it clear that migrants entering the UK as spouses, workers or as people applying for international protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention are “privileged³” to enter the UK. They have rights, but only within clear and narrow legislative pathways and only for as long as the government determines. Asylum seekers⁴ thus may have rights to reside in the UK but must present a story of their experience that proves they deserve

1 In this essay I draw heavily on the work of the international charity ATD Fourth World which has challenged assumptions about poverty and worked with people living in poverty for many decades. Their deep and sensitive engagement with the lived experience of people living in poverty inspires this essay and I am indebted to their work and to the generosity of their members and the many others who have shared their knowledge and experience with me over many years.

2 I include in this category people who have entered the UK and sought international protection as refugees, people who have had secure status in the country but have lost it and people who are in the process of appealing against rulings that deny them rights to remain in the UK. The majority of migrant testimonies included in this essay are from people who have entered the UK seeking asylum but there are many “migrants” who have spent many years feeling part of the UK only later to discover they do not have secure rights to remain.

3 “It is a privilege to come to the UK and that is why I am committed to raising the bar for migrants and ensuring that those who benefit from being in Britain contribute to our society.” (May, 2010).

In 2021 Home Secretary Priti Patel launched her new plan for immigration policy by referring to her own family being *privileged* to enter the UK—“My family were forced from Uganda and they had the privilege to make a home in the UK” (Patel, 2021)—despite most Ugandan Asians having British citizenship and a strong case for international protection.

protection and, by implication, that they have suffered enough. These rights are earned by either their perceived value to the body politic or because of their story of suffering meets the criteria of the state.

For British citizens living in poverty, their right to remain may be assured⁵ as they are amongst those privileged to live in Britain but, like migrants to the UK, they must still prove their worthiness to receive support from the state. These citizens, like refugees, must prove their suffering and must show a willingness to work in state-determined sectors, regardless of their skills, dreams and capacities. Citizenship, and the benefits of citizenship in the UK, has always been in the gift of the state (or the Crown); it is deeply racialised and increasingly requires the demonstration of “good character.” Lister (2007) has described how citizens living in poverty often feel excluded even as full rights-bearing participants and, even white people of British heritage, born and raised in the UK, find their citizenship means less and less and guarantees fewer and fewer rights to security, good housing, health and opportunity. Eligibility for benefits is tested in myriad ways, through a “conditionality regime” (Watts et al., 2014; Dwyer, 2016; Reeve, 2017) of complex screening of health problems, interviews, testing, signing on, covert investigation and other hoops to be jumped through to prove need and deservingness. For British citizens living in poverty, the normative justification for low welfare levels and punitive sanctions is that, despite the privilege of their citizenship, they have not worked hard enough to raise themselves up into secure jobs and the consumer class. For migrants entering the country, the test they must pass is in establishing that they deserve protection in an environment of shifting standards, processes and criteria. Both groups face a capricious policy environment in which their moral character and life choices are at issue.

The stories that people living in poverty tell about their own lives give powerful insights into the effects of policies of austerity and precarisation. Projects led by people living in deprivation have used their knowledge to campaign for reform to systems experienced as keeping people poor rather than supporting them out of poverty. Without hearing and valuing these voices of experience we cannot know if the effect of policy is what was intended but we also need to recognize that the punitive nature of policy makes the telling and hearing of these stories difficult. For both ethical and practical reasons, we need to engage with lived experience if we are to understand how poverty shapes and limits the lives of migrants and citizens in the UK but researchers need to accept that their position in relation to the field is a significant barrier to overcome. Genuine participative, co-produced research is essential but rarely achieved especially with migrants whose uncertain lives may preclude the partnerships required.

Before getting deeper into the discussion however, it is important to clarify some issues of scope and the populations of concern. This essay will engage with the experience of people who are vulnerable to poverty and includes citizens, that is people holding full, formal British citizenship, and people with very

4 At the time of writing the “Illegal Immigration Bill” is before the UK Parliament, this proposes to make many applications for asylum inadmissible.

5 The Windrush scandal being one example of how even long residence and citizenship can be insecure.

tenuous rights to remain in the UK where they reside. Many will understand themselves to have been forcibly displaced from their homes by (for example) war or climate degradation and even some who hold formal British citizenship may have experienced forms of displacement because of post-industrial economic change or even forced internal relocation due to life events such as domestic violence (Bowstead, 2015). I reject the use of official, administrative categories⁶ to describe people caught within the immigration system, preferring to identify people as migrants or displaced people rather than by the often discriminatory nomenclature of asylum seeker, refugee, refused asylum seeker, person who is “appeal rights exhausted,” illegal, irregular, undocumented etcetera. For ease of expression, I will use “migrant” to refer to all people without formal citizenship enmeshed in systems that limit their right to remain in their country of residence. Poverty means a loss of independence, self-determination and dignity. It lays people and communities open to interference in their private and family life and places administrators in positions of power without a chance for redress. Poverty, whether experienced by migrants or citizens, is always alienating and dehumanizing. The “hostile environment” experienced by many migrants in the UK has the threat of deportation at its core—with destitution and detention as its precursors. I recognize the power of these threats but hope to show how impoverishment through policy is the everyday expression of the desire to effect the voluntary or involuntary removal of unwanted migrants from the UK.

The quotations used in this essay are from published research (with the addition of one unpublished quotation) in which the author was either one of the primary researchers or part of the research team. In all cases, I was either in attendance when the data was collected or part of the analytical process. I hope I have been able to reflect the spirit with which the quotations were collected as, in all cases, the research subjects were reflecting on how poverty has shaped their lives and experience and how, directly in the examples from the ATD Fourth World research, poverty affects their lives. In the research carried out with migrants, poverty was not directly under investigation but was described and discussed by young people, reflecting on their lives facing destitution and under threat of deportation (Robinson and Williams, 2015, 2017; Williams, 2017), and adults living under the threat of (re)detention and deportation (Klein and Williams, 2012). It is also important to note that while the ATD Fourth World research was fully co-produced by people with lived experience, practitioners and academics, the research with migrants was not. These migrants were given space to tell their experience freely but no-one with lived experience of the migration system had been involved in the research design or analysis. Claims to the authenticity of voices of experience are the subject of much debate in the academic literature (see Coddington, 2017 for example) and my selection and the methodological choices made in research design and data collection bear the mark of my, and others, position as researchers. I justify my selective use of this data as the purpose of this essay is to pose questions and

6 Administrative categories are rarely helpful in understanding a person's story. As migration policy changes different opportunities to migrate open and close reflecting changing political priorities and agenda. These categories are only helpful in understanding an individual's situation in respect to immigration control mechanisms.

make connections. Like Wright and Patrick (2019, p. 599) I argue for the inclusion of lived experience to “... animate the struggle by representing subjectivities of harsh conditionality as a social phenomenon.” I seek to place the stories I have heard and been involved in collecting into a narrative framework that counters the dominant view. This essay aims to provoke a discussion of these issues and does not claim to be a final word.

To make my case I look firstly at the role of poverty and economic marginalization in the UK immigration system and draw some parallels with the experience of citizens living under the benefit regime. I will argue that normalized, “common sense” narratives⁷ of people in power, who frame others as burdens, criminals, or “illegal” impact powerfully on both the lives of migrants and citizens.

2. Poverty, forced migration, and displacement

Impoverishment is undoubtedly a major driver of migration within the Global South—whether from the periphery to center, from rural areas to cities—and from Global South to Global North. People living in the poorest countries who suffer the most extreme material poverty cannot afford to migrate so stay put, and poverty alone rarely results in mass population movement across borders. It is mostly those with skills and a range of capabilities who move but, despite this, the stigma of poverty and “need” is attached to migrants. Poverty is closely linked to conflict, human rights abuse and systemic marginalization but the full complexity of the relationship between migration and poverty is beyond the scope of this essay. Here, I focus on how migrants seeking international protection through the asylum system in the UK are made poor by their exclusion from the labor market and from public funds. I argue that maintaining people in a situation of poverty is an defining element of the so-called “hostile environment” but one which has at its heart the same neo-liberal principles that guide the UK benefit system (Dwyer, 2016). The “hostile environment”⁸ named, but not created, by Theresa May has had wide ranging implications for migrants in the UK, and reaches into all aspects of life (see Griffiths and Yeo, 2021). Through it, the impoverishment of migrants is less an issue of paltry benefit payments than a policy that reduces choice, freedom of movement and access to protection any liberal democracy could be expected to facilitate (Carens, 2014). Accommodation for newly arrived refugees is provided on a no-choice basis, in shared accommodation chosen for the availability of space rather than the services—legal, medical, educational, social and spiritual—that migrants will undoubtedly need. Support is generally paid through debit payment cards (the

7 I draw on Ken Plummer's distinction between a story and a narrative—that “... *stories* direct us to *what* is told, while *narratives* tell us *how* stories are told.” (Plummer, 2019, p. 4 italics in the original). I use *narrative* here to refer to broad interpretations of reality—that may or may not be based on experience—and *story* to refer to how individuals have reflected on their lives.

8 Theresa May told The Daily Telegraph that her aim was to “create a really hostile environment for illegal migrants ... what we don't want is a situation where people think that they can come here and overstay because they're able to access everything they need...” (Kirkup and Robert, 2012).

Aspen card) which, in only some cases, can be used to withdraw cash. Asylum seekers housed where all meals are provided, receive £9.10 per person per week instead of the £45 offered to people in self-catering accommodation. These payments enforce immobility as they cannot be used on public transport and are only made while refugees stay in the state-contracted accommodation preventing them from moving in with family or friends.⁹ Negative decisions on asylum claims leave migrants with even less access to financial support and usually result in surveillance and strict controls on their living conditions (see [Schuilenburg, 2008](#); [Klein and Williams, 2012](#) for more discussion). [Bloom \(2015, p. 78\)](#) refers to these most debilitated of migrants as “ghosts” “... forbidden from acting either humanly or politically.”

Migrants receive financial support through the UK Visas and Immigration division of the Home Office, rather than the general welfare system run by the [Department of Work Pensions \(2010\)](#). Other forms of support, most importantly housing, are provided by private agencies fulfilling government contracts. These systems of support, remove the possibility of choice and are intrinsically punitive ([Dickson and Rosen, 2021](#)) built on the assumption that migrants are “burdens” ([Darling, 2016](#)) and represent a financial and social cost to be managed. Increasingly health care (primary only) is also being contracted out of general NHS services. A further element of the hostile environment is the power granted to Home Office Border and Enforcement staff who become involved in migrants’ lives, even in the case of long-term residents, if migration regulations are infringed or crimes committed. Anyone without secure status in the UK will be held accountable to immigration rules before criminal law and the heavy punishments for contravening immigration rules, which may be “wrongful” but which are not harmful or violent, have contributed to the criminalisation of migrants while denying them the protections afforded to people within the criminal justice system ([Zedner, 2010](#); [Aliverti, 2020](#)). Foreign-national only prisons are another feature of the parallel system that migrants live within.

The UK’s separation of citizens from “foreigners” resident in the UK may underpin much of the framing of migrants, in the UK but there are also many similarities in the way welfare provisions for citizens operates. As with policy toward migrants, government discourse on benefits and welfare payments is based on proving need and worth. It stresses the importance of “work” above individual circumstances such as skills, responsibilities, preferences or health. Following the already established trend to neoliberalism, policy reform in 2010 underwent a “punitive turn” ([Reeve, 2017](#); [Fletcher and Wright, 2018](#); [Wright and Patrick, 2019](#); [Wright et al., 2020](#)) with a marked increase in the “conditionality” of benefits ([Dwyer, 2016](#)). Unlike most other comparable welfare states, the UK system applies conditions to even vulnerable groups such as lone parents and people with disabilities:

“Contemporary British social security conditionality is distinct because it can remove financial protection entirely and threatens long-term penalties of extreme poverty and

destitution whilst offering almost no support or escape via paid employment (since job search requirements continue for low-paid workers).” ([Wright and Patrick, 2019, p. 598](#)).

The stated aim of the reforms that created Universal Credit in 2010, was that work should always “pay” and was explicitly based on ending “cultures of worklessness” and “welfare dependency” understood as individuals and families choosing a life on benefits over work.¹⁰ This policy, as with much policy on migrants, is driven by political agenda more than evidence. The existence of “cultures of worklessness,” “welfare dependency” and an “underclass” has been refuted through empirical research (see [Shildrick et al., 2012](#) and summarized by [Lister, 2021, p. 98-104](#)) but this lack of evidence, has “... never affected the popular potency of the concept.” ([Lister, 2021, p. 101](#)). Similarly policy makers continue to insist on the power of conditionality to generate behavioral change “... despite evidence of its ineffectiveness in enabling transitions from ‘welfare’ into ‘work’ (and since 2013, with the advent of in-work Universal Credit conditionality, from ‘work’ into more ‘work’)” ([Wright and Patrick, 2019, p. 609](#)). In this respect, the management of citizens living in poverty can be seen as following the same logic that subjects migrants to policies aimed at “deterrence.” Deterrence being an explicit and often repeated cornerstone of policy relating to migrants and irregular migration¹¹ that attempts to influence behavior by reducing support and increasing control ([Fletcher and Wright, 2018](#)).

3. The power of narrative in the study of the lived experience of poverty

Up and until this point, this essay has engaged with the narratives of people in power—politicians, policy and decision makers; narratives which have become normative, achieving the dubious status of “common sense.” The propagators and purveyors of these narratives, media outlets, public commentators, policy makers and politicians (in both UK governing and opposition parties) go largely unchallenged and those who would repudiate the dominant narrative have yet to succeed in countering such deeply embedded arguments. Challenging dominant narratives with alternatives drawn from experience has the potential to re-balance understanding and assert the moral value of individuals. Listening to stories can tell us much about ourselves and challenge the implicit biases in our thinking. Challenging normative thinking through the narratives of others, can reveal Slavoj Žižek’s “unknown knowns”—“the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and

¹⁰ See for example the Secretary of State’s Foreword to the White Paper setting on the most recent reforms to the benefit system—“... economic growth bypassed the worst off and welfare dependency took root in communities up and down the country, breeding hopelessness and intergenerational poverty.” ([Department of Work Pensions, 2010, p. 1](#)).

¹¹ This is made clear, if more clarity was needed, in the Illegal Migration Bill, explicitly designed to deter so-called small-boat crossings and which removes rights of claim asylum from specific groups of migrants based on their mode of entry. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/home-secretary-statement-on-the-illegal-immigration-bill>.

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get>

obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values.” (Žižek, 2006, p. 137). For Žižek, the intellectuals’ role is to identify society’s unknown knowns, and “... not to solve problems, but to redefine them; not to answer questions, but to raise the proper question.” (Žižek, 2006, p. 141). Rather than wait for the intellectuals, I argue that the stories of people living within oppressive systems can do this job. Stories presented here can challenge and confront our assumptions about who belongs, who is illegal, who is deserving, while providing grounded evidence of how policy is working—if it is efficient and producing the intended outcomes. Stories, in the telling, listening and sharing, may represent a step toward justice and social cohesion and the act of telling and being heard is a worthy objective in itself. It is hard, if not impossible, to tell stigmatizing stories about people we know, empathize with and hold fellow feeling for. Stories humanize, articulate complexity and promote connection and empathy but it is not enough to simply speak. Telling a story and sharing experience is powerful and empowering but is only a first step in challenging normative representations. Following Ken Plummer, “My concern is with *the voices of people who aim to capture their own intimate life through their stories about it*” (Plummer, 1995, p. 16 italics in the original) reflecting the “stream of power” that flows through lives and relationships at times empowering and at others, oppressing (Plummer, 1995, p. 26).

The “Understanding Poverty in All its Forms” project is an example of an international research project led by people with lived experience of poverty. It was carried out by the INGO, ATD Fourth World¹² and drew on the experience of poverty in six countries, Bangladesh, Tanzania, France, the US, Bolivia and the UK (Bray et al., 2019). Crucially, the research was designed in genuine collaboration with people with lived experience. Findings showed that the experience of poverty was, very similar across the different research sites, despite differences in economic development, and demonstrate that involving individuals and communities with experience of poverty (directly through life experience and indirectly as policy makers and academics) brings new insights into the experience of poverty:

“Six of these dimensions were previously hidden or rarely considered in policy discussions. Existing alongside the more familiar privations relating to *lack of decent work, insufficient and insecure income and material and social deprivation*, three dimensions are relational. These draw attention to the way that people who are not confronting poverty affect the lives of those who are: *social maltreatment; institutional maltreatment and unrecognized contributions*. The three dimensions that constitute the core experience of poverty place the anguish and agency of people at the center of the conceptualisation of poverty: *suffering in body, mind and heart, disempowerment, and struggle and resistance*. These dimensions remind us why poverty must be eradicated. They also drive home that

everyone, living in poverty or not, is dehumanised by the continued existence of poverty.” (Bray et al., 2019, p. 8 emphasis in the original).

The identification of “suffering in body, mind and heart, disempowerment, and struggle and resistance” united the activists with lived experience of poverty and contextualizes purely financial definitions of poverty. Anyone familiar with the stories migrants tell will be struck by the similarity between these sentiments and the reported experience of marginalized migrants and asylum seekers. People living under immigration control *and* citizens living in the UK in economic deprivation emphasize their struggle for recognition and assert their humanity in the face of marginalization and exclusion. Both groups experience being demonized, blamed for the circumstances they endure and treated as problems to be managed rather than as human beings.

The following quotations from young people facing destitution and deportation make this point.¹³ Ahmed, a young Afghan care leaver, described his experienced thus:

“Our life is like—not a human life. We can’t move, we can’t do nothing, we can’t go to college, we can’t work—nothing... we are hiding people.” (Williams, 2015, p. 13).

Another quotation from the same project makes similar points:

“... you see other people doing what they want and having what they wish—it makes you feel like you have been separated from a group of people who are doing good and you are not allowed to do what the rest are doing” (Robinson and Williams, 2017, p. 140).

Placed alongside testimony from citizens living in impoverishment the parallels are clear:

“The peer groups described how people living in poverty feel that they are often judged unfairly and that “*people in poverty are not only isolated but used as a warning*.” ... The result of these judgements and the barriers put in the way of participation was that “*poverty means you are only allowed to observe, you cannot take part*.”” (ATD Fourth World, 2019, p. 20 emphasis in the original).

In the ATD UK study, “Systems, structures and policies” were identified as the most intolerable element of the experience of poverty. “Systems, structures and policies” also dominate the lives of migrants as the Home Office infiltrates and influences even intimate areas of people’s lives—their shopping choices, their ability to move, who they can live and spend time with.¹⁴ Intrusive systems that manage the lives of both migrants and British citizens can create considerable suffering when they break down, as they inevitably do. Problems shifting from one private service provider

¹³ This quotation, and the others from Robinson and Williams (2015, 2017) were collected by myself and Kim Robinson during a Home Office funded research project, called unironically “Positive Futures”.

¹⁴ See Klein and Williams (2012), for a closer discussion.

¹² <https://www.atd-fourthworld.org/>;
<https://atd-uk.org/projects-campaigns/understanding-poverty/>

or bureaucratic system to another have led to great hardship if payments are not made, documents are lost, accommodation not allocated or non-attendance at meetings interpreted as non-compliance. It is the service users, migrant or citizen, who suffer when systems breakdown while the designers and managers of the systems are rarely accountable. Here is just one example of how carelessness, inefficiency and over-reach in service provision affects people:

“A Zimbabwean housemate of a research participant was recently hospitalised so didn’t use his Azure card [prepayment] for some weeks. Lack of activity on the card was interpreted as evidence of absconding and, on discharge from hospital, he found his room had been reallocated and his possessions dumped; it was his responsibility to inform the Home Office and the accommodation provider that he had been hospitalised.” (Williams, 2015, p. 12).

The workings of government and the profit-making private agencies that facilitate the system hang heavily and unaccountably over people’s lives and the following quotation describes an experience common to both migrants and citizens living in poverty:

“Poverty means being part of a system that leaves you waiting indefinitely in a state of fear and uncertainty.”- a participant with lived experience of poverty from the North of England.” (ATD Fourth World, 2019, p. 11).

The stories of lived experience collected in the ATD UK project are perhaps most similar to the stories migrants tell when they speak to the shame and indignity imposed upon them by policy. Both groups describe their situation as stigmatizing and that poverty and the marginalization and isolation it brings feels a lot like punishment. A person with lived experience of poverty in the UK ATD study said: “We have things done to us—crushed, manipulated, divided, gagged to prevent a social movement to effect change.” This sense of being “done to,” controlled and punished, echoes what migrants report—of arbitrary detention and release from detention, of electronic tagging, curfews and immigration reporting conditions.

The British contributors to the ATD study described how they “... begin to believe the negative stigma” and migrants too describe internalizing the treatment they have received and “Said” describes how he felt after detention but while still living under immigration control:

“The first 2 months I found it very hard to integrate into the community again—in the beginning. When I was walking in the street I felt like everyone was pointing at me by his finger saying look—that guy was in detention—I knew in my mind it’s not true but I thought that, I thought I am not like the others—I am less than the others—can you imagine? I felt like I am guilty! I am not guilty—I have done nothing!” (“Said”—Williams, Unpublished research data).

In addition to the disempowerment inherent in stigmatizing systems, there are physical and mental health implications of a life in poverty under threat of sanction and further loss of

support. The contributions collected by the ATD Fourth World research emphasized the lost opportunity of systems that only see people as burdens and not as contributors. Migrants too, talked of wasted lives and how their skills and capabilities are ignored. Young migrants who were taken into care when they first arrived in the UK were invested in as children only to be rejected on reaching adulthood:

“I had made friends, made a life and then I lost my case in 2011. I’d been given many opportunities and they took all of it back. They stopped financial support, I’d been given a house and they took the house away and I start facing the issues again. I ended up on the street...” (young Afghan cited in Williams, 2017).

Living under immigration controls, like living within the UK Benefit system, obliges people to try to make their way in truly hostile circumstances where the everyday but fundamental pleasures of community and creativity are denied. As a participant in the ATD Fourth World study from the North of England said “Poverty is not being able to smell the flowers because the stress of life gets in the way.” (ATD Fourth World, 2019, p. 17).

4. Understanding the stories of lived experience

The section above has drawn out some themes in the stories of people with a lived experience of poverty. It has argued that the oppressive systems and structures that blight lives lived in poverty are experienced by both migrants and citizens as dehumanizing and disempowering. In the section that follows, I will discuss these experiences in the light of two separate but connected aspects of impoverishment. Firstly, I consider the human aspects of poverty, framed as a mundane affront to dignity, and the normalization of marginalization and neglect. Secondly, I will look at the techniques of impoverishment and the systems, structures and normative assumptions that condemn people to lives in poverty.

4.1. The human and mundane face of impoverishment

Stories from lived experience challenge us to acknowledge the shared humanity between “us” and people we don’t know or expect to meet. While the UK government has made great efforts to separate migrants from general welfare systems, I have argued that impoverished citizens and non-citizens experience a very similar form of objectification and dehumanization. Both groups bear a similar narrative burden, in that they are spoken about more than listened to and are rarely able to shape how their lives and choices are presented.

Imogen Tyler, in her book on social abjection and resistance, is one of the few writers who have addressed the experience of asylum seekers alongside that of impoverished British citizens. A key element of her work is the identification of people living in poverty as “failed citizens” who the welfare system must manage (Tyler, 2013, p. 161). Tyler draws on Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic

power, and Loïc Wacquant's account of stigma as a form of "violence from above" (cited in Tyler, 2013, p. 212). Pertinently to this discussion, she argues that "... stigmatization operates as a form of governance which legitimizes the reproduction and entrenchment of inequalities and injustices" (Tyler, 2013, p. 212). It is hard to argue that the impoverishment of asylum seekers and migrants in general is not an intentional policy designed to govern the unruly bodies of migrants but, as Zedner (2010, p. 397) writes, people living in poverty are presented as having made "lifestyle choices" and have, in effect, chosen poverty. This rhetoric echoes the logics applied to migrants who are treated as having only themselves to blame for their position by having left home, failed to claim asylum elsewhere or having used a broker, smuggler or trafficker during their journey across securitised borders. Link and Phelan's classic paper on stigma stresses the important role of power in the creation of stigma and their definition of stigma describes the experience of welfare and immigration systems well: "... we apply the term stigma when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation..." (Link and Phelan, 2001, p. 367). Migrants face all these elements and may be, or feel themselves to be, physically marked by racial difference as well.

Shuman and Bohmer (2012) have taken the issue of stigma further by discussing how refugee stories, being unfamiliar and at odds with what the listener (or asylum adjudicator) may assume to be "normal" and credible, may be found unbelievable. As they point out "...if a cultural practice or situation is not recognized as falling within what the officials are willing to accept as plausible, the application will fail" (Shuman and Bohmer, 2012, p. 200). Migrants have limited opportunities to speak, and when they do their words are constrained by the narrow pathways of acceptable migration stories. These accounts relate their story but will be heard refracted through the listeners' cognitive frames of reference. These "interpretative frames" (Butler, 2009) which spring from formations of social and political power make us more or less open to a testimony of lived experience. It is only when the "other" owner of the story can seize control of the narrative that they can emerge with a moral claim to our concern. Stigma, and the normalization of discriminatory narratives force migrant accounts into narrow channels of credibility. Individual experience must fit within the expectations of institutions adjudicating refugee claims yet still be convincing as stories. A lack of openness to learning about or even hearing refugees' accounts of their own lives has rendered stories told by migrants not just untellable but also *unrecognizable* "... and the loss of the ordinary—especially the violent and catastrophic interruption of any possibility of ordinary life—often makes people unrecognizable, underlining and intensifying the hegemony of normalcy." (Shuman and Bohmer, 2012, p. 214). Stories are unrecognizable partly because they tell of physical, psychological and political violence in countries far away or tell of injustice, neglect and discrimination too close to home. These stories represent lives that are ungrievable, a life "... that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never been counted as a life at all" (Butler, 2009, p. 38). To become "grievable" and a "life that matters", (Butler, 2009, p. 14), a person

must establish a connection to the receiver of their stories and to do this, their narrative must be recognizable or "tellable." Tellability being:

"what allows a narrator to defend his or her story as relevant and newsworthy—to get and hold the floor and escape censure at its conclusion (Polanyi, 1981). Tellability addresses audience expectations, newsworthiness, uniqueness, relevance, importance, and humor but also—and perhaps just as centrally—appropriateness, contextualization, negotiation, mediation, and entitlement." (Goldstein and Shuman, 2012, p. 119).

Migrants and others living in poverty are rarely able to "hold the floor" nor can they count on the sympathy of their audience.

4.2. Techniques of impoverishment

The techniques used to silence ungrievable and ungrievable "others" are oppressive in themselves but, following Foucauldian logics of biopower, stigma and the overwhelming power of state agencies, may also cause people to change their behavior and effectively govern themselves. State power over both British people living in poverty and migrants seeking entry and security is all but total and, as the quotations cited above show, official norms and narratives become internalized. The systems both migrants and citizens in poverty live within function through sanctioning or withholding financial support. People are obliged to engage with complex and time consuming processes facing disbelief, surveillance through reporting, compulsory job searches and for migrants detention and the ultimate threat of deportation. For both groups the state uses waiting and delay, complexity, contingency, capriciousness, inefficiency and unaccountability to control. The management of systems from the top down means that both citizen and migrant lives are governed by people physically and psychologically far from those the systems govern. The increasing role of privatized, third-sector and profit-making agencies in delivery and management introduces another layer of administration that separates the creators of policy from the people who policy acts upon.

Mbembe (2003, p. 11) in his seminal essay of 2003 describes "Necropolitics," as "... the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die." Here I extend this analysis to explore the power of the state to dictate not just who may live but also who can "flourish"—that is who can speak, participate, be heard, choose a life course and build a social world. In the case of people impoverished by the state, the necropolitical logic can be seen as both performative and practical as not only does the state separate and degrade certain groups of people but it also parades their degradation to justify and promote its own agenda. The normative stories told about the poor, both citizens and non-citizens, sustain a "relation of enmity" which "continuously refers and appeals to exception, emergency, and a fictionalized notion of the enemy." (Mbembe, 2003, p. 16). Without a means of speaking back to state power,

those objectified by the state must live within the bounds set for them and as Mbembe notes, the setting of boundaries and controlling of space is key to the colonial project. As Mayblin et al. have noted, one sleight of hand achieved by the UK immigration system (and similarly, the benefits system) is to marginalize, divide and punish while still maintaining a veneer of respect for human rights. The state can "...deploy these same definitions of who matters and who does not *while* fulfilling their legal obligations to those making an application for asylum." (Mayblin et al., 2020, p. 121 emphasis in the original).¹⁵ In this, the state has developed technological mechanisms that keep the poor both silent and separate. State systems control the bodies of migrants through no-choice housing in designated holding centers, migrant hostels, shared accommodation and in prisons and detention centers and through controls such as bail conditions, electronic tagging, curfews and regular attendance at Immigration Reporting Centers. Policies that separate the worthy and deserving from the unworthy and ungrievable have been strengthened further by differential access to the protection of the law for citizens as well as migrants. The punishment of behaviors through techniques such as personalized intervention orders, parenting orders, penalty notices "... impose on individuals the burden of responsibility for self-governance or, at a minimum, compliance with norms prescribed in the terms of the orders" (Zedner, 2010, p. 396–7). In relations to migrants, the lower legal protections and standards of proof in immigration law (as opposed to criminal law) creates a direct path from infringement of migration controls to criminalization and then removal. Aliverti (2020, p. 11) writes, that immigration enforcement in the UK has "become an irresistible tool for getting rid of 'problem people' on the cheap" allowing the state to manage impoverished people by relying on powers that are "disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 29) and which distance them as physical bodies *and* as people with stories to tell and contributions to make.

5. Implications and some ways forward

I have argued throughout this essay that there are marked similarities of experience and process in the impoverishment of displaced migrants and citizens reliant on state support. Social security provision for citizens and migrants in the UK is based on a narrative of neoliberal individualism which impacts upon migrants and citizens alike. Current policies are a part of a long-term trend as Wright et al. have argued:

"... we suggest that the British sanctions regime has changed the mode of domination. In the post-war welfare system, much of the violence associated with unemployment benefits was symbolic—"the gentle, disguised form of violence" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 133). However, post-2010, more direct forms of material violence have dominated." (Wright et al., 2020, p. 282).

¹⁵ It remains to be seen if changes to the UK asylum system proposed by the Home Secretaries Priti Patel and Suella Braverman effectively removing access to asylum for specific groups of applicants will maintain this veneer.

There is no reason to think this trend toward punishment, sanction and domination of anyone considered unworthy, citizen or migrant, is anywhere close to completion. Running parallel to these changes are reforms to formal citizenship itself making it less meaningful and a potentially temporary status. In the case of serious crime, any citizen with dual nationality¹⁶ can lose their British citizenship despite deep and long-standing connection to the UK. In these cases, the legal concept of the "social fact of attachment" now works against the "nominal citizen" who is deeply embedded in their country of residence but lacks formal citizenship status. A non-citizen who belongs and is integrated into the UK, but who can be claimed to have a social attachment (e.g., nationality) elsewhere, can lose their right to remain as their social attachment to the UK is considered no longer valid (Macklin, 2014, p. 4). The danger of denationalization or denaturalisation thus disproportionately affects people of migrant heritage creating another form of post-colonial discrimination. Denizenship, Turner (2016, p. 679) argues, now encompasses people who are "permanently resident in a foreign country, but only enjoying limited partial rights of citizenship" along with formal citizens whose lack of social citizenship means that they "... begin to resemble denizens or strangers in their own societies." This trend to "thinner" citizenship begins to blur the separation between citizen and migrant and, while this is clearly more of an issue for citizens with a migrant heritage, the privileges of citizenship for those living in poverty may be less clear than for other citizens in work, in health and with greater material resources.

Throughout I have stressed the power of the systems and structures of the state over individual subjects and in doing so I have not drawn focus to discussion of the agency of individuals and communities. The empirical research cited here generated many examples of how people in poverty exhibit agency and challenge their situation. Examples of people facing impoverishment working to change the system and better their situation are plentiful and Wright et al. found:

"Positioning the state as the perpetrator of harm against disadvantaged citizens does not, however, mean that claimants can simply be understood as victims. Those we spoke to were active in seeking solutions to the challenges that confronted them. Claimants, despite their profoundly weak social position, responded to punitive social security policy by acquiescing, adapting, resisting, and disengaging. These responses "create small and necessary spaces of personal control and autonomy" (Gilliom, 2001, p. 7) and reflect the ways in which offenders adapt to incarceration." (Wright et al., 2020, p. 289).

Many of these forms of resistance are dangerous and risk heavy penalties especially for migrants who, as we have seen, risk detention and ultimately deportation if they are found to have transgressed immigration rules. Entitlement for migrants and citizens is based on vulnerability, ill-health (in the case of disability benefits) or past persecution and trauma which obliges claimants to emphasize their weakness rather than their strength.

¹⁶ The logic being that if a dual national loses their British citizenship they will not be stateless.

Nevertheless, people are not passive, nor without strategies and passion to participate in policy reform or to work together to campaign and to support each other. The stories of outsiders in society, when told from experience, are always powerful and carry with them a complex truth. There is a humanity in storytelling and the sharing of stories, the act of telling and listening to stories, makes people visible and recognizable. The rejection of personal stories, neglecting and refuting difficult and unfamiliar stories reduces the capacity of societies to thrive and also creates great injustice and individual suffering. Whether people are officially categorized as citizens living in poverty or as migrants, asylum seekers, undocumented people or as any of the expanding typology of dependent “others” our challenge is to see the person within the category. As Ruth Lister writes:

“So long as the poverty debate is framed by politicians and the media in terms that treat people living with poverty as ‘the Other,’ so that they continue to be shamed, the recognition and respect for human dignity required by a human rights perspective are unlikely to be achieved. Similarly, so long as the struggle for social justice for people living with poverty is waged without their active involvement and voice, it is likely to be ineffective.” (Lister, 2015, p. 159).

In his discussion of the rights of migrants, Carens (2014, p. 556) has insisted upon “...an assumption of human moral equality, a commitment to the equal moral worth of all human beings.” There are powerful arguments for non-citizens to be afforded the same rights as citizens but, as we have seen, not even all citizens can enjoy their rights. There is no denying that systems of welfare in the UK are inadequate to support the level of need in the country, currently one of the world’s most unequal, but the question is how can this systematic and ideological problem be tackled? I argue that the first stage of reform requires understanding how these systems function—and for that we need to hear the narratives and act on the stories of people with lived experience. Testimony from the subjects of immigration and welfare policy and from people working within them, can show how these systems really work and explore the full effect of these policies on human wellbeing. These stories can confront policy and decision-makers assumptions and illuminate the role politics plays in the impoverishment of people. Above all, these stories can build connections between people we have learned to discount and demonstrate the common, moral value of people struggling under oppression and stigma. Instead of deferring to the prevailing common sense we could dig deeper and listen to the quieter, more nuanced, voices of experience. Broadening the base of who can speak and importantly whose stories can be heard is essential to achieve equal communities, but also to ensure that the dignity and human rights of all are valued and protected.

Having placed impoverished people, “the poor,” as the subject of this essay, I have argued that the voices of lived experience must be heard and taken seriously as a necessary corrective to current policy. Listening to people who experience poverty and displacement is a humbling yet life affirming and radical act. Stories reveal people impoverished by policy to be active, creative and

fully human despite the indignities imposed upon them. It is hoped that placing the stories of British citizens alongside those of people considered migrants or “foreigners,” shows how policy has been weaponised against both groups to divide and stigmatize. Making the connection between systems of impoverishment that affect migrants and citizens has serious implications for scholars of welfare and migration policy. In part because of the separation achieved by successive governments, the literature on the experience of migrants rarely connects with the literature on citizens living in poverty—and vice versa. By accommodating newly arrived migrants away from metropolitan areas (and now in hostels and camps), by managing them through parallel systems and by removing them from the criminal justice system, governments have successfully separated migrants, and therefore research on migrants, from research that critically analyses the UK’s welfare systems.

Challenging the narratives that both welfare and migration policy rest upon is an urgent matter. I would argue that policy toward migrants is objectively more punitive than policy regulating welfare benefits but only because firstly, the state retains the ultimate punishment of deportation and secondly, because the general public knows little about the day-to-day lives of migrants without secure leave to remain. Policy relating to the support of migrants has been relatively unscrutinised by authorities on the welfare system but I argue it is an experimental ground for technological tools that monitor and control. Without change in the narratives that underpin policy, it is likely that the methods of control honed by migration policy will transfer across to the citizen population. Listening to the stories of people with experience of these punitive policies is therefore even more important.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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