Emotions, affect and social policy: austerity and Children's Centres in the UK

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Abstract

This paper considers the 'affective turn' within social sciences, alongside the shift to a more emotional public and political sphere, and the implications of these shifts for the study of social policy. A context of austerity cuts and reforms to welfare services contributes to heightened and unstable emotions surrounding services. A case study of Sure Start Children's Centres in the UK is presented, in two areas where centres were threatened with closure. Interview and ethnographic material with both staff and service users is presented to show how emotions became heightened and politicised in this context. Both staff and service users articulated the values of the centres in new ways, drawing on intimate and emotional registers of experience. Overall, the material shows how in this context, emotions can be understood as place-based, relational and politicised, potentially producing different values and visions of welfare services.

Key words: affect, austerity, emotions, children's services, activism

1 Introduction

The importance of emotions in understanding the interactions and encounters that make up social policy governance has been considered within research from various angles. However, this paper argues that changes in the nature of policy, politics and the public sphere (author et al 2017), as well as in social theory around emotions (Greco and Stenner 2013), mean that there is now an opportunity to consider emotions in different ways. In brief, emotions now hold a new collective currency within the public sphere of policy and decision-making (Davies 2018), whilst social theory has developed new ways to understand the collective power of emotions and feelings, especially around the notion of 'affect'.

This paper considers what these new dynamics and understandings of emotions might mean for the study of social policy. How might placing emotions centre stage in analysis change how a particular case study of a social policy setting is understood? The paper places emotions in particular in relation to austerity, the cuts and pressures that the UK and other similar welfare states have been subject to. The pressure of austerity and service cuts on services may mean that emotions associated with services and governance 'surface' (Ahmed 2004) and become visible in a way that they are not when services are running within a more stable context. These emotions often involve challenges to technocratic values at the centre of service design. Furthermore, the public spheres surrounding austerity cuts, of meetings, protests and online activism, also draw on collective and individual emotions in new ways. Whilst the context of austerity is clearly damaging to welfare services, the 'surfacing' of such emotions also enables us to consider how different forms of welfare settlement could be built from a wider apprehension of the emotional self (Newman 2012a). If researchers wish to intervene in contemporary social policy debates they need to consider these emotional

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dynamics, and work with them rather than seeking a 'return' to social policy as a technical, rational and non-emotional sphere.

In the first part of the paper some debates about emotions and affect in the social sciences more broadly are discussed (Halley and Ticinento Clough 2007). I then introduce ways in which emotions have come into view within recent social policy analysis. The case study of the Sure Start Children's Centres programme in the UK is introduced, as a site of emotional politics which have surfaced and intensified as austerity pressures have been brought to bear on the services. Analysis and discussion of this case study reveals new, politicised registers of emotions now surrounding the centres. The conclusion discusses the extent to which paying attention to such emotions might point to different ways of valuing and imagining the welfare state.

2 Approaching emotions and social policy governance

2.1 Social science, emotions and the turn to affect

Whilst emotions have long been a focus of sociology and related disciplines (Bericat, 2016), there has been a particular upsurge of interest in emotions, affect and feelings within sociology, human geography and other areas of social science over at the past two decades (Greco and Stenner, 2013), that can be associated with a notion of the 'affective turn' (Halley and Ticineto Clough 2007). To place this within the history of social science research on emotions, Greco and Stenner (2013) highlight an initial wave of social science research on emotion that saw them as 'discursive, dialogical phenomena, structured and influenced by both historical and cultural context' (8-9). Greco and Stenner (ibid) refer to this earlier wave

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of research as the 'textual' or discursive turn in research on emotions, whereby the cultural

meanings of specific named emotions are critically explored. Much existing research on

emotions within social policy analysis (as discussed at 2.3 below) might be seen to fit within

this paradigm.

This approach is challenged by the 'affective turn' in relation to emotions, whereby,

'psychoanalytical and affect-theoretical approaches emphasize the variability and inherently

indeterminate or excessive nature of affect' (Gammerl et al 2017, 87-88). Gammerl et al

(ibid) see the intellectual roots of this in cultural geography and anthropology,

psychoanalysis, phenomenology and feminist theory. As Pile (2010) argues, the turn to affect

brings into question the extent to which it is possible to categorise, represent and consciously

emotions as discursive phenomena.

Within human geography, this has involved new forms of attention to emotional and

embodied aspects of experience and subjectivity as intertwined with particular spaces and

places, geographies which are seen as always emergent, practised and unfolding (Davidson et

al 2005). Atmospheres and collective feelings have been a particular concern (Anderson

2014), as well as the movement or transmissions of emotions, that may attach or 'stick' to

different objects (Ahmed 2004). Indeed, one way to understand 'affect', is as 'emotions on

the move' (Boler and Davis 2018, 81) as opposed to residing in individual subjectivities and

experiences. Emotions can also be considered as 'relational', producing identifications and

attachments rather than being part of individual bounded subjectivities, flowing among

bodies, places and objects.

These debates also bring into view questions of 'whether feelings reproduce social orders or

disturb them' (Gammerl et al. 2017,87), with those drawing on affect theory often more

interested in change, emergence and resistance to dominant structures of power. Hemmings

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(2005) argues that an affective approach potentially liberates analysis from more

deterministic accounts of social structures and the operation of power. For example, Carolyn

Pedwell's (2013) work on empathy and transnationalism, whilst noting the ways in which

empathy has become part of certain governmental projects, also considers how such an

emotional force might be understood as potentially exceeding neoliberal discourse.

> the unpredictable force of affect might produce empathetic identifications which
>
> exceed the moorings of social and geo-political location or subject position, opening
>
> out to processes of affective translation that can create new horizons for political
>
> action and solidarity (Pedwell, 2013, 24).

Such propositions sound as if they are taking place on a very wide scale, but a focus on

'affect' has also led to a focus on small-scale and intimate politics, and considering how they

speak to wider arenas of governance and politics. For example, Askins (2014) discusses a

community befriending scheme for asylum seekers, focusing on two women in a particular

neighbourhood, in terms of its power to suggest a new kind of 'quiet politics'.   The approach

I develop in this paper, whilst using the language of emotions, draws on the lines of enquiry

opened up by this affective turn. Specifically, I am interested in emotions as collective and

relational, linked to places and atmospheres, and also political, able to bring about forms of

change and resistance in society.

2.2. Emotions, the public sphere and the state

As already suggested, these new waves of social science theory have been developed within a

shifting social and cultural sphere around emotions. In relation to a more emotionally driven

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public sphere around politics, policy and governance, Davies (2018) has recently argued that

the forms of expertise and knowledge that underpin the welfare state have been brought into

question, especially because of digital culture. He argues that the contemporary state was

founded on an erasure of personal experience from the public sphere and policy-making, but

that political and cultural shifts have enabled an eruption of subjective, emotional and

affective experience into public spheres at various levels.

It seems clear that what may be longstanding circuits of feeling among populations have

recently been expressed in particularly emotionally intense ways (Hoggett and Thompson

2012, Durnova, 2019). The rise of forms of populist politics across the Global North, often

associated with nationalism, has resulted in a rejection of both institutions (such as the

European Union, and the 'Brexit' vote in the UK), and individuals associated with the

political establishment (as evidenced in the 2016 US Presidential election). The tenor of

recent elections as well as policy-making seems to rely increasingly on emotional appeals and

rhetoric, fuelled by both new forms of media (Boler and Davis, 2018, Gerbaudo, 2018,

Davies, 2018) and an apparent rejection of technocratic forms of politics and associated

expertise. Such moods and their power encompass not just right wing populist or

nationalistic sentiment at a range of levels, but also progressive activism and resistance: for

example, Trump's America has seen an unprecedented level of progressive activism, fuelled

by ongoing high levels of anger among some groups (Moss and Maddrell 2017). Indeed

Fraser (2017, *online so no page*) sees the current political moment as 'an open and unstable

situation, in which hearts and minds are up for grabs'. This fluid and emotive context clearly

also has impacts for social policy, whether it be around questions of immigration and welfare

entitlement, or the protection and provision of services such as health and education. At the

time of writing, the global crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic has also shaped more emotional

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commitments to health and care services expressed through collective events such as

'clapping for carers' and public art (Wood and Skeggs 2020).

2.3 Emotions and social policy research

The 'affective turn' in research on emotions within social science has been less evident

within social policy and public administration literatures (although for recent exceptions see

Durnova 2013, Durnova 2019, Jones 2013; Hunter 2017; Newman 2012a; Hardill and Mills

2013). Hoggett et al (2013) have called for 'an alternative to approaches which solely stress

the role of discourse or material resources and neglect the role that human feelings play in the

life of communities, institutions, social movements and governments' (570).

Nonetheless, there has been a long standing focus on the emotional labour (Hochschild 2013)

of 'frontline' or 'street level' governance and the intersubjective processes involved when

considering the 'peopled' nature of the state (Painter 2006). Important ideas within this vein

of analysis have included the notion of 'street level bureacrats' (Lipsky 1971), exercising

subjective 'discretion' and judgement in the work of operationalising policy. It is clear that

such practices involve emotions and emotional competences as workers seek to reconcile

competing demands, pressures and feelings, including empathy, compassion and kindness as

well as perhaps antagonism, alienation and ambivalence (Jones (2013, Askew 2009; Hunter

2012).

More recently, research has drawn attention to the ways in which emotions and

intersubjective processes within welfare governance have been thought about as in

themselves categories of governance, of the shaping of emotional selves and subjectivities

(Rose 1989). Whilst not new (Gagen 2015), these technologies of governance have arguably

intensified recently, and therefore emotions have increasingly become part of policy

discourses and approaches. Muehlebach (2012) and de Wilde and Duyvendak (2016) both

argue in different ways that citizenship and governance is now premised on the emotional

engagement of citizens, especially in relation to forms of volunteering and community

engagement. De Wilde and Duyvendak (2016) analyse the 'techniques that seek to

instrumentalise personal bonds, intimate relations and emotions in order to 'sensitise' citizens

into the spirit of community engagement' (975).

Both the studies of emotional labour among street level bureaucrats, and more recent studies

of the instrumental use of emotions as part of policy design, have viewed emotions as part of

the implementation of social policy programmes - emotions can work in the service of social

policy goals to ensure more active citizens, more engagement with interventions, and the

translation of policy ideas into personal outcomes. Yet the approaches to affect discussed

above; as well as politics and public debate infused by emotions, have created a context in

which emotions might be thought of as providing *challenges* to social policy regimes;

generating alternative attachments and feelings that might speak to the overall designs, values

and ethics framing social policy. In this sense, the micro-emotions of social policy

interactions can become linked to larger scale dynamics of political and economic change.

As I go on to discuss, this more politicised and disruptive view of emotions may come into

particular view in a context of austerity.

2.4 Emotions and austerity

The notion of 'austerity' (Clarke and Newman 2012) has been used by politicians and critical

commentators to analyse the nature of the political and economic present in the UK and other

national contexts. It points to both experiences of increased economic hardship and precarity,

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and government measures to reduce expenditure, particularly on welfare and social policy

programmes.   As a number of commentators have pointed out (Clayton et al 2015, Horton

2016, Tonkens et al 2013), conditions of austerity may render the dynamics of emotional

labour in public sector work more complex. Researchers have analysed experiences of

working in conditions shaped by collective feelings including anxiety and precarity (Clayton

et al 2015), fears for the future (Horton 2016) and resentment from citizens (Hoggett et al

2013).   As Horton (ibid) reports, austerity does not just produce certain emotions, but

potentially resets the overall emotional repertoire of public sector work, so that many

experiences are absorbed within an acceptance of 'the current climate'.   Clayton et al (2015)

also report that austerity tends to individualise and privatise emotional responses, with

workers and service users attempting to absorb negative emotions and experiences, rather

than becoming shared and public (and possibly political/collective) expressions. Such

individualized and fragmented experiences may undermine collective feelings and resistance

to the changes involved in austerity. As Hitchen (2016, 117) writes, 'put simply, repeated

exposure to austerity fatigues the body'.

Such commentary suggests the emotional costs and tolls of austerity. However there has

been less focus on austerity politics and the productive role of emotions in 'surfacing' or

making visible alternative visions of welfare and resistance to the rationalities of the austere

welfare state. Some commentators indeed have reported on new ethics and practices of 'care'

within public sector organizations, resistant to these dominant modes, that are being opened

up within a context of austerity (Morse and Munro 2015).   Resistance to austerity cuts can

therefore open up spaces for the articulation of different values and visions in relation to the

welfare state.

To draw together the literature discussed in these sections above, new social science theories

of 'affect' and emotion have encouraged a more politicised, collective and relational view of

emotions in society. Alongside these theories the wider political context of policy has

enabled the expression of emotional and subjective experience in new ways. In relation to

social policy regimes at the current moment, this suggests the need to move away from seeing

emotions and affect as residing only in the 'playing out' of policy at the 'street level', or

through the instrumentalization of emotions within neoliberal policy discourses. Instead we

might consider how emotional attachments and inter-subjective dynamics can contribute to

more fundamental questions and approaches to policy values and design. A context of

austerity 'surfaces' and intensifies such emotional attachments in new ways, making

emotions visible and powerful in debates about the future of welfare services.

3. Emotions and the Sure Start Children's Centre programme under austerity

3.1 Background

The Sure Start Children's Centre programme[1] was an extension of the 'Sure Start'

programme, initiated in 1998 (see Eisenstadt 2011). The programme involved

neighbourhood-based, local programmes that were tasked with intervening in parenting in

disadvantaged families to improve outcomes for children under five across a range of

measures and services, including health and education. The focus of these programmes were

neighbourhood centres, offering play sessions and a range of other activities and support for

children under five and their parents (predominantly mothers). A second phase of this

programme involved the universal role out of centres across England to support 'one in every

neighbourhood' although there continued to be more resources focused on those areas most

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[1] The naming of the programme is somewhat complex: the original programme called 'Sure Start' was focused on selected, deprived, localities only. This was then extended in 2004 to the 'Sure Start Children's Centre programme' to provide centres across the country, although in practice these centres have had somewhat different names in different localities. The programme has also played out somewhat differently in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: I focus here on English examples only.

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in need. As I go on to explain below, these centres have been the target of particular austerity cuts.

The centres employed a range of locally based workers, mostly providing community outreach and parenting support, but also midwives and health visitors. Much critical commentary on the Sure Start programme has noted how it has sought to shape the subjectivities of both mothers and children in line with neoliberal identifications and commitments. Lister (2003) argues that the programme treats children as 'citizen-workers in becoming', with values and aspirations around education and paid work central for both young children and their mothers. More specifically, the programme draws on rationalities of the 'social investment state' (Newman and McKee 2005), to target welfare state spending on citizens in the 'early years'. The programme was therefore very much focused on particular outcomes and targets for children, such as 'school-readiness' and healthy eating, with less emphasis on providing social and emotional support for parents. Volunteering has also been central to the programme's operations, drawing in the forms of 'affective citizenship' discussed above (de Wilde and Duyvendak, 2016).

My previous research (discussed below) found that Children's Centres were often conflicted spaces that brought together a range of different orientations to the relationships between professionals and parents, and between parents and children, and the kinds of 'interventions' the programmes should be making into family life (see author 2013). Instrumental and more 'disciplinary' rationalities in play were often challenged by the everyday practices of centre workers, who drew on more caring and relational approaches with families. These challenges often involved quite small-scale resistances to formal policy. For example, one centre worker during my earlier research told me that they were not strict about the kinds of food on offer, despite the fact that they were supposed to be regulated by 'healthy eating' policies. She told

me, 'well, it's meant to be a "health eating" centre, but a lot of our mums, they need to put their feet up and eat cake!'

The programme can therefore be thought of as springing from instrumental attempts to shape certain forms of 'affective citizenship', but other kinds of attachments and identifications might be apparent within everyday practices. Horton and Kraftl (2009) similarly point out that the emotions and relationships in circulation at Children's Centres often 'exceed' policy rationalities. As I go on to show, these attachments and identifications become more apparent and more intense under conditions of austerity, producing a politics around the programme that potentially values intersubjective and personal experiences in new ways.

3.2 Methods

This paper draws on my research into the programme in two UK localities, both local authority areas in the South East of England[2]. In one of the areas (B) I had undertaken initial research during 2010-2012, involving interviews with both centre users and staff, and ethnographic observations in a number of Children's Centres (see author 2012, 2013). Whilst I do not use this data here it informs my overall analysis and understanding of the centres as they previously operated. In 2017 I undertook a second phase of research (from which the data below is drawn), in order to observe the impact of austerity on a set of services that I already had some familiarity with. This second round consisted of fifteen interviews with staff and service users, including four interviews with professionals working or previously working in Children's Centres, and nine service users. This was at a time when centres were

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[2] For the purposes of this paper, I name these local authority areas 'A,' where the centres were going through a process of closures at the time of the second round of research, with accompanying campaigns to save them as discussed in this paper, and 'B', where such a process had already taken place over some years, and many centres had already been closed by the time of my second round of research.

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being threatened with closure (in Area A) , or had already just closed (in Area B). As well as these interviews I also undertook participant observation in Area A, attending six meetings, small-scale demonstrations and other events in order to take an ethnographic approach to community responses to centre closures. Finally I tracked the campaigns against centre closures in social and conventional media, including blog and Facebook sites set up by campaigners. In particular, I set out to record the 'stories' that service users made public about the centres during campaigns to retain services (see Section 3.4 below), tracking such stories as they were told in meetings and online as well as during interviews.

 In terms of sampling for the research, during this second round of research I was operating in a fluid and politicised context, as I discuss further below. Because the centres were not operating normally I was not able to seek to recruit a particular sample of service users. Instead I relied on snowballing as well as my own involvement in the campaigns to locate service users and professionals. The service users and professionals who came forward to speak to me, or who I observed at meetings and in the media clearly felt strongly about the centres and motivated to speak out. My research would not therefore claim to provide a representative sample of all views of the centres, but rather analyses the emotional dynamics and politics of the centres that did emerge.

3.3 Approaching the emotional landscapes of Sure Start Children's Centres under

austerity

In terms of the reasons for the closures of the centres, UK local authorities have had to

contend with massive ongoing austerity cuts to revenue received from central government to

run services (Hastings et al 2015). The statutory or legal duties around the Children's Centre

programme are not very clear and the Centres have been a particular target of cuts.

Nationally, it is estimated that 1000 centres have closed since 2010, around a third of all

centres (Ryan 2018). During 2017-18, both of the case study local authorities took a series of

steps to significantly reduce their centre services, involving other services coming together in

a much slimmed-down set of centres called, euphemistically', 'Family Hubs'. The number of

these Hubs proposed in each case is around a quarter of previous provision: in the larger

authority (B) the number of centres has gone from 44 to nine, and in the smaller local

authority (A) from 19 to 4.

In both areas, there was a strong and co-ordinated campaign by local service users to resist

these cuts (supported by centre staff where they were able to speak publically about the

services). These campaigns took place online via social media, via traditional forms of media

such as local newspapers , television and radio, and also via attending council meetings and

staging a range of forms of protest events such as marches, sit-ins and more playful events

such as picnics. In both cases, the campaigns did succeed in persuading local decision-

makers to retain some of the services, as I will go on to discuss.

It is worth noting here that undertaking research in this context was an emotional experience

in itself. Indeed reflexivity on the embodied experience of research is one way to bring

emotions centre stage in analysis (Evans et al 2017). My own positionality in relation shifted

over the course of the research– as I spent time with service users and professionals affected,

I moved from a distanced researcher, to a more activist position, supporting the campaigners where I could. This was as a result of the emotional impact of the interviews I undertook, which transformed my views of the value of the centres as I go on to discuss.

As well as the affective impact of particular interview and fieldwork encounters, I would also suggest that there is a particularly emotional quality about researching service and building closures (Robinson and Sheldon, 2018, Stewart, 2019). In area B, I was researching just as the centres were closing after protracted campaigns – whilst in area A I was researching at an earlier stage in the closures process. Within both areas, the past, present and (thwarted) futures of spaces and times of services came into sharp and poignant focus at different points during the fieldwork. For example, one of the service users in area A commented, 'it's not just about what's happened there already, it's about what won't happen in the future… the friendships that won't be made, the help that won't be given'.

Overall, it became clear during the campaigns that the Sure Start Children's Centres were at the centre of profound emotional geographies, especially for the everyday lives of mothers with young children. A key theme in my interviews both with service users and staff was the quality of relationships between staff and service users, and a sense of the emotional but also material proximity of the centres in the everyday lives of service users. The notion of 'pram-pushing distance' was an idea that had been expressed as part of the original policy discourse surrounding Children's Centres (Eisenstadt 2011), to explain the notion that the centres should be local and easily accessible for parents of young children. This idea was taken up by service users as part of anti-austerity activism, both in my case study areas and elsewhere: expressed on social media as '#prampushingdistance'. This was in contrast to the proposed reconfigured geographies of the Hubs, which covered much larger areas and didn't make the same claims to form part of a local geography of care for service users.

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This sense of intimate connection with the spaces was by service users revealed in public meetings, media debates and demonstrations, meaning they were very emotional events, often focused on struggles of new parents including isolation, depression and anxiety. One senior council official complained during a public meeting in area A that, 'it is all very well being emotional, we need to look at the facts'. The 'facts' being referred to in this case were the economic rationales of cutting expenditure, opposed to the everyday and intimate experiences being represented during the meeting.

In the analysis that follows, in order to explore this emotional landscape of Children's Centres that surfaced during the campaigns in more detail, I am going to focus on two pieces of data in particular. My analysis of these small fragments of data is of course informed by the wider project, however this close focus enables a more focused attention to individual subjectivities and feelings. One is an interview with a former Children's Centre manager in area B, as indicative of the feelings being expressed by centre workers, and the other is a statement made by a service user and activist in area A during a (particularly emotional) council meeting, at which I was present.

3.4 Emotions, place and professional values

It is unsurprising that professionals who had been working in Centres that had closed or were under threat experienced austerity cuts in intensely personal and emotional ways. For those I interviewed, it was not solely a question of losing a job, but a sense that professional identities and values, whole ways of working with families that had been developed, were being destroyed.   The centres and the ways of working they embodied were therefore discussed as emotional issues.

The interview I held with the former Children's Centre manager, whom I call Anne, was an emotional encounter, in which she several times apologised to me for her the strength of her

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feelings about the issues. The centre that she had overseen had become a 'Hub', where the ways of working and approaches now adopted clearly felt very alien to the Children's Centre ethos and atmosphere that she had worked within and been committed to. As will become clear below, the shift to the Hub, as well as involving a reduced service, changed the rationalities of working to more of an interventionist and disciplinary orientation towards families, as opposed to what Anne saw as a relationship-based and caring set of approaches. As already noted, this tension between different approaches to working with families had been apparent within the spaces of the centres previously, but with austerity had become more apparent and more intensely felt and expressed.

Anne spoke about the atmosphere and affect previously surrounding the centre as a particular set of emotional geographies (Horton and Kraft 2009), connected to questions of care, compassion and the building up of relationships over time, involving qualities such as being 'gentle' and being 'trustworthy', as show in the quote below.

> I think you can never get across to legislators the difference between a place where you have to jump through incredibly high levels of thresholds to get any services and then the service is sparse and time limited, compared to a Children's Centre where people walk through the door, experts in families and children under five are there on hand to gently encourage you in and keep offering a very informal, trustworthy level of support, there's no comparison between that and a service where you have to fill in a huge form with everything about you on it in order to get any level of service. And then they say, well it's an 'intervention'. I'm allergic to the word actually.

Anne spoke of the intersubjective bonds that had developed in the centre, linked to feelings of belonging, of feeling supported in a caring way (Askins 2014), as opposed to the emotions

associated with a more controlling space and discourse. These feelings and interactions were

seen as linked to the feelings and atmospheres surrounding the space itself, now under threat.

> And they really, really don't understand, because they haven't done it, they don't
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> understand how highly vulnerable and sometimes volatile families can be made to feel
>
> welcome, can be made to feel they belong.. We were in a meeting about just
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> reorganising the building six months ago and the people from a Social Care
>
> background came in to say, for instance they'd put security on the doors and they've
>
> said, they'd talk about clients. And I said, Children's Centres don't have clients. It's
>
> just the terminology, everybody has that built in sense that you're going to be doing
>
> something to somebody
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> ... Because lots of these families need more than a six week, they need the
>
> building up of relationships, they need to build up their confidence... And that's not
>
> the same as you going up to some stranger in some remote hub who's offering
>
> variably skilled, some of them highly skilled and some not skilled at all. It makes us
>
> very angry so.... (laughs)

This was a point at interview when Anne clearly felt anger about what had happened to the

delicate eco-system of relationships and trust surrounding the centre in the process of

restructuring. The fact that she laughed here suggested not amusement, but a level of

hopelessness or despair which was expressed as laughter in this instance.

Therefore as austerity cuts were brought down to bear on the Centres, critiques of the new

values being espoused by the service, and an affirmation of previous values, were expressed

in particularly emotional terms. As both my previous research (author 2012) and Horton and

Kraftl (2009a) showed, the somewhat intangible emotions and interconnections surrounding

children's centres were never fully captured within the policy discourses and values

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surrounding them. And as other research has shown (Morse and Munro 2015, Robinson and Sheldon 2018), such emotional attachments to services and spaces may become more visible and intense under austerity.

3.5 Service users: telling affective stories

Whilst professionals such as Anne articulated the emotional and intersubjective values of the Children's Centres in new ways when the centres were faced with closure, for service users, these values were expressed in even more intimate and emotive ways, through the telling of their own 'stories'. As Cameron (2012) argues, the telling of 'stories' allows the story-teller to situate their own experience within time and space in new ways, and to connect 'small stories' to wider political and economic change. The story-telling was not necessarily a conscious strategy for activists seeking to save the campaigns, although the social media feeds and blog site in area A that were set up did ask service users to 'send in their stories' as the campaign developed. This approach had also developed in other areas where Children's Centres were under threat.

Such 'stories' were therefore recounted at public meetings, on websites, via other forms of social media and publicity, and to me as a researcher undertaking the interviews during processes of centre closures. The stories were often quite complex and involved situating their use of the centres within a wider personal narrative about experiences of being a parent to small children. The 'place' of a Children's Centre within the wider experience of parenting small children might therefore be revealed via a sustained attention to the emotional and subjective experiences of care that could emerge from a story.

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The stories were often highly intimate and emotional, conveying profound struggles with

mental health, wellbeing, but also giving testimony to the friendship and support found at the

centres. Told almost exclusively by mothers, they spoke of gendered issues of maternal

mental health, domestic violence and relationship breakdown and the place of children's

centre services within that.   Although ostensibly about 'everyday life', the stories made

visible profound struggles at the centre of parenting. Emotions included loneliness and

isolation, feeling overwhelmed and inadequate as a parent, and also the friendship, support

and empathy accessed at the centres, from both staff and services users.

Whilst all of the stories had emotional qualities, some of them had a particularly performative

quality, with story-tellers aware of the emotional impact of what they said. Of the different

stories that I collected (Author, forthcoming), some had been recounted on a number of

occasions before as part of public meetings and events. I witnessed the emotive and

disruptive power of this on a number of occasions. One service user and activist in area A

(whom I also interviewed) had a particularly emotional and moving experience involving the

suicide of her teenage daughter, which then profoundly shaped her experience of becoming a

parent for the second time and looking after her new baby, in which she was greatly

supported by the children's centre. She spoke about this experience in a number of public and

council meetings, and whenever she spoke, people were visibly moved by what she said.

It was clear from the mothers' accounts that many of the services provided by workers at the

centres went far beyond prescribed professional roles. Another mother in area A spoke about

how staff would let her stay behind after formal sessions were over:

> I ended up being diagnosed with post-natal depression.... and the people down there,
>
> they gave me a drink, they let me hang around after session and that kind of thing,..
>
> probably weren't supposed to… and if I wasn't in a fit state to go home or whatever.

These accounts therefore revealed the Children's Centres to be sites with complex emotional dynamics, including different forms of connection, relationship and identification. The extract from the story below further demonstrates the different emotions which circulated around that particular place. It was recounted by a service user I call Claire, and read out at a public council meeting in area A where cuts were being discussed. The occasion was a meeting of the 'Scrutiny Committee' with responsibility for children and young people's services. The committee involved local politicians who were discussing the proposals by the council to close the majority of the children's centres. The opposition councillors on the committee had asked for service users to come and speak at the meeting. Claire was the only service user who had come forward to speak. The room was laid out in a semi-circular fashion for the committee, with the 'witnesses' called to come forward and speak from a small desk and chair in the middle of the room. The meeting therefore had a very formal feel, like that of a courtroom.

Claire had written out her story and she read it out. As she read she became visibly upset. Whilst we can see the telling of her story as having a performative quality, it would be wrong to suggest that it was not an authentic and raw account of her own experience. Personally I felt very upset after listening to her speak, and indeed the telling of her story had a powerful emotive effect on many of those present, as was apparent in subsequent discussions at the meeting. In the first part of her account (not included) she tells about her own depression after the birth of her son.

As a guilt racked mum, I pushed myself to attend my local Children's Centre. It was here that my recovery started (although it is still ongoing). It is a safe space to take my son, down the road, no commitment, no money, where you would think it was just somewhere my son could play.

In fact it was the complete opposite, it was a safe space for *me* to get a little bit of respite.

A place where the staff went out of their way to catch up with me.

A place where I could meet other mums and discover I wasn't the only mum whose child pulled their hair or wouldn't eat vegetables anymore.

A place where I took a postnatal wellbeing course, the first step to tackling my depression.

A place where me and my son took a cooking course.

A place where, in my darkest hour, I was in the arms of a playworker sobbing because I felt I was a complete failure.

A finally, a place where I decided to give back. I trained as a Breastfeeding Peer Supporter and now give support to other local mums myself.

Her account therefore reveals the emotional geography of the centre, offering a multi-layered landscape of 'care' that moved beyond an instrumental approach to shaping identities. Both this and other accounts also highlight the importance of activities which might seem peripheral to what the centres offered, such as a cookery course or finding out about other parents' struggles with children eating vegetables (see also Horton and Kraftl 2009b). This was particularly significant at a moment when cuts were being made to services and

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discourses of rationing and hierarchies of 'need' were apparent, in ways that marginalised

such aspects of the centre. The story-telling approach revealed that it was not possible to

consider the importance of the centres without considering service users' lives and

experiences in a far wider way than might normally be considered.

As already noted, her telling of the story elicited powerful reactions among the councillors

and officials present, many of whom were visibly moved. Whilst the centre closures did go

ahead in this and the other area, a number of 'concessions' were made by decision makers

during this process, including keeping more centres open across the region in this case. The

campaigns did therefore have some success, although of course overall closures did still go

ahead.

However, for Claire herself, whom I got to know and stayed in touch with after the campaign,

the emotional exposure involved in speaking at this and other meetings, was personally very

difficult. She told me, in a later interview, how she felt about some of the of feedback she

had heard when she had spoken out: 'It does feel like – 'oh those mums, they can't have

everything', people that don't understand, what value they have to your lives'. Following the

scrutiny meeting she rather withdrew from the campaign for these reasons. This highlights

the vulnerabilities involved in more emotional forms of political engagement.

4. Conclusions: Re-placing emotions within social policy analysis?

Overall, I have argued that, especially at times of heightened pressures on services under

conditions of austerity, emotions surrounding the welfare state become more apparent,

particularly via attachments and connections around and within spaces of service provision

(Horton and Kraftl 2009a). Through drawing on approaches associated with the affective turn

across the social sciences, I have shown the need to consider the power of emotions in new

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ways. ==Firstly I have shown how emotions can be understood to circulate around particular places and spaces (Davidson et al 2012, Morse and Munro 2015), that are easily swept aside or ignored during austerity cuts and restructuring, yet may constitute the most important aspects of the service. Secondly emotions can be understood to have collective and political significance and impact, including being involved in resistance and political change.==

Such an approach suggests the need to reconsider the scale at which emotions might be thought to matter to social policy. For example, in the account above, the emotional geographies of Claire's account above may have been 'small-scale', yet they were hugely significant in her life. Her story spoke to wider politics and debates about the future of services in her area, and beyond, as the local campaign was communicated on social media and connected to other national campaigns (see Gerbaudo 2018). Considering such identifications might involve a focus on 'small-scale' or intimate geographies and considering how they speak to wider arenas of governance and politic, as noted earlier (Askins, 2014). As Pain (2009) has argued, there is a need to connect up everyday emotional dynamics with wider political processes, rather than separating politics and everyday emotions. Therefore rather than seeing emotional dynamics as nested within a hierarchy of governance that has national political power and policy discourses at its centre, I am interested in how current emotional landscapes of social policy have dynamics which can cut across or 'jump' these different scales (Fincher and Panelli 2001).

I do not want to suggest that such dynamics will necessarily have positive impacts for social policy. In relation to the wider current emotional context for social policy, Newman (2017) identifies within neoliberal 'austerity' governance a far-reaching emotional 'politics of division and rage', at 'bureaucracy', 'experts', public services, and 'others' including migrants and welfare claimants. Such emotions might be thought of as lying behind

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discourses of populism and aspects of political change discussed at the opening of this paper. However, as well as potentially unleashing rage, anxiety and suspicion, it is also worth considering whether different, more progressive emotional registers of hope, possibility, resistance and solidarity might also have space to 'surface', cutting across governance scales and sites within such a landscape, leading to possibilities of progressive transformation and change.

Indeed, it is particularly important at a moment of austerity pressures to pay attention to how such feelings might be generated by attachments to and identifications with public services, in order to consider how the welfare state might recover and move out of this period of austerity, and indeed recover from the current Covid-19 crisis. Focusing on such emotions might help us generate understanding of the shared importance of 'public things' (Honnig 2017), the collective spaces and services which Honnig argues (ibid), people need to become attached to in order to become properly citizens of a democracy, at a time when public goods and services have been so undervalued. Feelings and practices of solidarity, between workers and the public, and within communities have also been articulated in new ways during the pandemic (Wood and Skeggs, 2020).

The current moment therefore seems to be one in which the emotional contours of governance and the welfare state are being redrawn (Davies 2018). This poses challenges for social policy analysis. As the paper has argued, whilst longer-standing apprehensions of emotional labour and emotional governance within social policy remain relevant, the terrain of social policy has also become more emotionally heightened, intense and unstable under conditions of austerity and crisis. The case study discussed has pointed to some of the powerful emotions now surrounding spaces of service provision, and shown the importance of becoming attuned to these emotions, drawing on social science analysis of affect. Rather

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than rejecting these more emotional registers, a progressive project might consider how to

reclaim emotions as part of social policy debates and programmes in new ways.   Through

focusing on both individual and collective expressions of emotions such as empathy, care and

attentiveness, among service users and professionals, and how these are experienced in

relation to public services, we might think differently about the welfare state at the current

moment.

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