

We must understand the cultural, as well as the economic, dimensions of austerity

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/parent-blame-in-austere-times/

2/18/2013

While there has been some recognition of the gendered impact of austerity, less attention has been paid to its specific implications for mothers. Drawing on a journal special issue, [Tracey Jensen](#) explains how through understanding austerity in cultural as well as economic terms, we might come to see its implications for our shared culture and sensibilities, as well as its specifically gendered dimensions.



In the aftermath of the 2008-2009 recession and as the resultant austerity regime of reduced public spending began to be implemented, [budget reviews](#) demonstrated that it would be women who would bear the brunt. Fast forward to 2013 – with the second dip of recession a recent memory and a third dip imminent – the gendered effects of recession are impacting most acutely on one group in particular: mothers. The lattice of austerity policy – including reductions in public service provision, reduced levels in real terms of social security payments, frozen housing benefit and reductions in tax credit payments (amongst others) work together to have a compound effect on the support, income and security of mothers and especially those on low incomes, single mothers and those caring for disabled children. Changes in employment since the recession, such as the rise in short-term, part-time, insecure and precarious work, all impact disproportionately on those with caring responsibilities who are more likely to be snared within the [‘low-pay, no pay’ cycle of underemployment and poverty](#). The Equal Opportunities Commission [estimated](#) that some thirty thousand women a year lose their jobs as a result of becoming pregnant, and [emerging](#) evidence suggests that this maternal discrimination is currently increasing as employers seek to cut back, stall promotion and reduce workforces. Austerity is powerfully gendered, certainly, but it is particularly fixed upon women who have children.

Examining the public debate around austerity and gender, and extending it to consider more closely the implications and impacts of austerity upon families, the online journal *Studies in the Maternal* has published a Special Issue on the topic of ‘Austerity Parenting’. Drawing together work from sociology, critical social policy, community development, media and cultural studies, gender studies and economics, ‘Austerity Parenting’ examines how the developing public narrative of austerity is connected to moral discourses of parenting. In particular we have asked how parents and parenting have been called upon by the architects of austerity, as both ‘to blame’ for the crisis (through ‘bad parenting’) and as being the solution (through ‘good parenting’) to an increasing variety of social and economic ills. ‘Parenting’ – articulated as moral and personal conduct and choices – is positioned as being *the most important factor* in determining a child’s life chances, more important than income, security, access to decent housing, healthcare, education, and so on. This moral narrative around good parenting distorts the wider debates we should be having about widening social and economic polarisation and stagnant social mobility.

An (initially tentative) rhetoric which has accompanied the implementation of austerity policies is that austerity is the necessary lean time which must follow on from the excessive spending of the previous Government. This rhetoric has grown bolder and is now echoed across policy and popular debate. We have spent too much money supporting those at the bottom, according to this narrative, and this spending has led to the breakdown of moral fibre and personal responsibility. This rhetoric rewrites the crisis of capitalism as being caused, not by the high-risk speculative financial sector, but rather by the ‘burdens’ of the welfare state and the ‘dependency culture’ it is said to create. Incredibly, social security levels (in 1979 worth 23% of the average income, now worth a paltry 11% and falling) are positioned as ‘too generous’ and as such enabling people to ‘choose’ a life on benefits. Those placed and blamed at the centre of this so-called dependency culture are ‘troubled families’, held to be chaotic, undisciplined, lacking in work ethic and responsibility; and importantly, to be transmitting these problems to their children who are doomed to repeat the cycle. These ideas are familiar enough to social scientists who remember Charles Murray’s claims about the underclass, which (despite a lack of evidence) exerted an enormous influence on

policy in the early 1990s and as Imogen Tyler has documented dramatically re-emerged in [media representations](#) and [political responses](#) to the riots in August 2011. In the United States the underclass thesis led to the construction and circulation of figures such as ‘welfare queens’ and since the beginning of the current recession, we have seen a surge in similar stigmatized names for those in poverty, including ‘welfare scrounger’ and ‘feckless poor’.

But this particular moment is also bearing witness to the emergence of new terms and subjectivities designed to censure, accuse and condemn: the ‘skiver’ (vs striver) the ‘shirker’ (vs worker), the ‘feral parent’ and the ‘troubled family’. Such terms are wounding – they are designed to police, punish and hold in place, to individualise blame for stagnant social mobility and the conditions of poverty and worklessness. These ‘names for Britain’s poor’ are also [arguably designed to produce or procure](#) a consensus for welfare roll-back and deepening inequalities. Certainly, the enlivening and reanimating of such wounding terms alerts us to a profound poverty of imagination in policy debates. Emerging critical research [demonstrates](#) the inaccuracy of these emerging and moralising vocabularies and even more troubling the wilful ignorance of policy elites who insist on individualising poverty with [no empirical evidence](#). This Special Issue contributes to this growing body of critical policy research, and seeks to explore the ways that austerity might be understood to operate not only as a set of economic policies but also as a cultural object within policy and popular debate, a subject-making discourse that is conferred, occupied and resisted, and as a web of socio-historical fantasies about the nation’s past and its possible futures. As such, this collection of work examines how austerity, in its connections with parenting, is circulating a particularly damaging vision of what causes poverty and social inequality and what our response could be. In proposing that social injustices are simply the result of bad choices made by lazy, irresponsible or workshy parents that ‘the rest of us’ can (and should) no longer afford, austerity parenting is reconfiguring our very sense of what public, mutual and collective sensibilities we should or ought to have towards one another.

*This article is based on a [special issue](#) of *Studies in the Maternal*.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the *British Politics and Policy* blog, nor of the *London School of Economics*. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

About the Author

Tracey Jensen is a Lecturer at Newcastle University. Her research explores the classed and gendered intersections of contemporary parenting culture, and how these are reproduced across social, cultural, media and policy sites. Tracy tweets at [@Drtraceyjensen](#).