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‘Dead people don't claim’: a psychopolitical autopsy of UK austerity suicides

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Abstract:
One of the symptoms of post financial crisis austerity in the UK has been an increase in the numbers of suicides, especially by people who have experienced welfare reform. This paper develops and utilizes an analytic framework of psychopolitical autopsy to explore media coverage of ‘austerity suicide’ and to take seriously the psychic life of austerity (internalization, shame, anxiety), embedding it in a context of social dis-ease.
Drawing on three distinct yet interrelated areas of literature (the politics of affect and psychosocial dynamics of welfare, post and anti-colonial psychopolitics, and critical suicidology), the paper aims to better understand how austerity ‘kills’. Key findings include understanding austerity suicides as embedded within an affective economy of the anxiety caused by punitive welfare retrenchment, the stigmatization of being a recipient of benefits, and the internalization of market logic that assigns value through ‘productivity’ and conceptualizes welfare entitlement as economic ‘burden’. The significance of this approach lies in its ability to widen analytic framing of suicide from an individual and psychocentric focus, to illuminate culpability of government reforms while still retaining the complexity of suicide, and thus to provide relevant policy insights about welfare reform.

Key Words: austerity, mental health, psychocentrism, psychopolitics, stigmatization, suicide

‘Dead people don't claim’

On the 30th of March 2017, during a meeting in the UK Parliament about cuts to welfare payments (benefits) and sanctions, a minute’s silence was held to remember all those who died as a result of the welfare cuts and austerity measures that have become part of the UK policy landscape since the 2007-08 financial crisis. Disabled activists, including those from Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) held a banner outside Parliament that read ‘Dead people don't claim’ [‘claim’ here refers to claiming welfare payments].[i] One minute’s silence is not long enough to remember all those whose deaths, including suicides, have been linked to austerity measures. Activist groups such as the Black Triangle Campaign and Calum’s List maintain websites of newspaper coverage of these deaths. These include Tim Salter who hanged himself after losing his Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) (which he claimed for blindness and experiencing agoraphobia) due to be being found ‘fit to work’ following a medical assessment (Traynor, 2013). Christelle Pardo is also on the list because she jumped from a third-floor balcony after finding out her Job-Seekers allowance was to be stopped (despite numerous appeals), killing herself and her 5-month-old baby (Daily Mail, 2009).

Tim and Christelle are not the only ones. In 2013, in the UK, suicides reached a 13 year high, with population level data linking this increase to austerity policies (Barr et al, 2015a). Furthermore, globally, a range of empirical studies drawing on aggregate data have shown a

significant association between financial recession, austerity measures, and suicide rates (Stuckler and Basu, 2013; Reeves, McKee, and Stuckler, 2014; Antonakakis and Collins, 2014; Karanikilos, 2013). Death in relation to austerity doesn't occur solely through suicide. Department for Work and Pensions mortality statistics show that 2,380 people died between December 2011 and February 2014 after being found 'fit to work', and a further 7,200 people died after having their ESA made conditional on their participation in groups that would prepare them for employment (DWP, 2015). Some calculate that on average 80 people per month are dying in the UK after being found 'fit to work' (Ryan, 2015).

Symptoms of the austere times we live in are apparent in multiple forms: suicide notes stating the culpability of Government policy are publicly available on the internet (discussed later), deaths linked to austerity are discussed in the House of Commons (BBC, 2012), and austerity suicide was referenced in the 2015 general election (see The Mirror 2015 - 'remember those killed by Tory austerity when you cast your vote on Thursday'). The extent to which suicide has become normalized within the welfare system became apparent recently when the Disability News Service reported that the company Maximus, who carry out Work Capability Assessments[ii] for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), assess people's eligibility for Personal Independence Payments (PIP) by asking people if they have considered suicide, with one person reporting on twitter that they were asked: "Can you tell me why you haven't killed yourself yet?" (Pring, 2017).

Compared to the numbers of deaths, suicides linked to welfare reform have received scant newspaper coverage or scholarly attention. Therefore, the point of departure for this paper is to explore how welfare reform suicides are reported in newspapers and if this can in part explain the absence of coverage more widely.

Differently from newspaper coverage, this paper develops and utilizes an analytic framework of psychopolitical autopsy to trace suicide as one of the symptoms of austerity and welfare reform. This brings together analytical tools rarely used alongside each other – research into the politics and economies of affect, post and anti-colonial psychopolitics, and critical suicidology (one notable exception to this is Hunter 2015). This enables a timely analysis that takes seriously the psychic life of austerity (internalization, shame, abjection, anxiety), embeds 'psychic distress in a context of social dis-ease' (Orr, 2006:29), avoids understanding suicide solely through a psychocentric register (Rimke and Brock, 2012), and ultimately aims to attempt to better understand how austerity 'kills'. The significance of this approach lies in its ability to widen analytic framing of suicide from a solely individual focus, to illuminate culpability of government reforms while still retaining the complexity of suicide - how welfare 'practices' can kill and can come to feel like murder (Stevenson, 2012) - and thus to provide relevant policy insights about welfare reform.

Three key findings emerge from this work: a) that newspaper coverage tends to report individual cases of suicide without making links to the wider pattern of such deaths; b) that the mobilization of mental health problems in much newspaper coverage works to configure suicide as a response to mental illness (even where mental illness is

acknowledged to be linked to austerity); and c) wider stigmatization of welfare claimants (and 'dependency' more broadly) is a key element of the psychic life of austerity. In doing this the paper first foregrounds analytical concepts of psychopolitics and autopsy. It moves onto trace newspaper portrayals of trajectories of causality for austerity suicides, and compares psychocentric mobilizations of mental health with austerity's 'nervous conditions' and the internalization of eugenic and market logic. Finally, the paper turns to examine what a psychopolitical analysis means for understanding Government culpability and activism.

The psychopolitics of austerity

This paper draws upon and is situated within the field of Critical Suicidology, which aims to conceptualize acts of self-killing beyond narrow medical and psychological approaches that frame suicide as an outcome of individual pathology (White, Marsh, Kral and Morris, 2016). This problematizes 'taken-for-granted ideas that any death named suicide happens in apolitical contexts' (Reynolds, 2016:169). This is particularly evident in what Marsh calls the 'compulsory ontology of pathology' of suicide - the dominance of an 'individualized, "internalized", pathologised, depoliticized, and ultimately tragic form of suicide [that] has come to be produced, with alternative interpretations of acts of self-accomplished death marginalised or foreclosed' (2010:43&219). The dominant conception of suicide as an outcome of 'mental illness' that has become normatively monolithic in the global North, means that suicide prevention based on treatment of 'mental illness' has become common-sense (Battin, 2005). This means that alternative framings of suicide as contextualized, as historically and culturally contingent, or as a method of resistance, are subjugated and silenced (Marsh, 2010). Even the act of naming certain kinds of death as 'suicide' is seen to mask 'daily conditions of suffering and immiserisation' and to normalize 'social contexts marked by stigma, exclusion and hate' preventing us from understanding how indifference and 'hate kills' (Reynolds, 2016:170).

To better understand how austerity kills, this paper draws upon the psychopolitical work of anti-colonial revolutionary and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon. Fanon's work is important here in two main ways: his insistence on situating 'symptoms' of distress within the psychopathology of colonialism itself – the ways colonialism gets under people's skin (epidermalisation) (Fanon, 1967); and his 'psychopolitics' – a denouncement of the colonial practice of using psy-expertise to focus on the brains of the 'natives', overlooking the structural conditions of colonialism (Fanon, 1961). Adams says of Fanon (1970:811): 'the poor are plagued by poverty....Jews by persecution, blacks by exploitation ... Fanon rallied against a "psychologism" that dealt with all of these estranging afflictions as if they were...mere states of mind'. Therefore, not only does Fanon provide us with a language for tracing the psychological impact of colonialism but also for tracing how the psy-disciplines reconfigure this impact as being the result of individual pathologies – what Rimke and Brock (2012) call 'psychocentrism'. This is not a relic of the past. Razack (2015) powerfully illustrates the individualization, medicalization and pathologisation of oppression evident in the way categories such as alcoholism and 'mental illness' are used to obscure colonial and

governmental culpability and violence in deaths (including suicides) of indigenous peoples in current-day Canada.

Psychopolitics enables a dual analysis of both how austerity kills but also the mechanisms through which economic crisis comes to be rearticulated and reconfigured as individual crisis, including its psychologisation as 'mental illness', enabling 'political crises to be cast as conditions of specific bodies' (Berlant, 2007:765) and diverting public discussion of Government culpability to individual level psychological factors. This constitutes, according to Clarke and Newman (2012), the alchemy of austerity – the intense ideological work of reconfiguring profound economic inequalities into individualised problems of 'welfare dependence' and 'cutlures of entitlment', which mirrors the reconfiguration of economic problems as individual 'illness' through psychotherapeutic vocabularies. Reading what the psy-disciplines frame as 'symptoms' *psychopolitically* has long been a strategy of the psychiatric survivor movement (Burstow, LeFrançois, and Diamond, 2014). This approach frames 'symptoms' as personally and politically meaningful in that they may constitute 'rational and resistant reactions to maladaptive environments' (Goodley, 2001:215), including maladaptive socio-economic politics of austerity.

In Fanon's account colonialism has a violent atmosphere, which 'here and there bursts out', a violence 'which is just under the skin' (Fanon, 1961:70-71). This is similar to Goodley and Runswick-Cole's (2011) use of Zizek (2008:1) to analyse the violence of disablism through stepping back from overt violence to 'perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts'. Similarly, this paper seeks to illuminate the environment from which 'welfare reform suicides' represent an escape, addressing the need 'to structure into our analysis of a person's death the context of social injustice in which they lived' (Reynolds, 2016:170).

Atmosphere is also key within literature on the psychosocial dynamics of welfare, which are situated within, and yet move beyond, focus on the discursive production of welfare subjectivities to better grasp the affective and embodied experiences of welfare (Stenner, Barnes, and Taylor, 2008) – how welfare practices, and indeed austerity, come to be inscribed on bodies. This literature places 'emotional life at the heart of social policy and welfare practice whilst retaining a critical perspective on issues of power' (Frost and Hoggett, 2008:438). There are links here to work within cultural studies on economies and politics of affect (Berlant, 2007; Puar, 2011), austerity as atmosphere (Hitchen, 2016), and questions around how capitalism feels (Cvetkovitch, 2012). Particularly relevant is Berlant's (2007) 'slow death' as an analytical strategy to describe 'the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people' (p. 754) under contemporary global/national regimes of capitalist subordination, and the 'destruction of bodies by capitalism in spaces of production and in the rest of life (p. 764). Puar (2011) draws upon Berlant's work to ask (in reference to deaths categorized as 'gay youth suicides') 'what kinds of "slow deaths" have been ongoing that a suicide might represent an escape from?' (2011: 152). Povinelli (2011) in examining modes of making and letting die in late liberalism takes this further by asking who can be

seen as accountable for such slow deaths (Povinelli, 2011: 134), and in relation to this paper, for austerity suicides?

The psychic life of austerity

A psychopolitical analysis is also concerned with subject-making and with psychic life. Conceptualization of 'psychic life' has occurred broadly within psychosocial theory where individual psyches are understood as always already social and the social is 'imbued with the "psychic" life of individuals' (Froggett, 2012: 179). Much of this work merges Foucauldian thinking (particularly on subjectivity) with concepts from psychoanalytic theories, exemplified in Judith Butler's (1997) 'psychic life of power'. A recent example is Fortier's (2017) work on the 'psychic life of policy', which attends to the psychosocial dynamics of UK citizenship policy and the psychic reproduction of hierarchies of belonging through both desire and anxiety. Pre-dating Butler's work is Nandy's writing on 'the psychological contours of colonialism' and colonial selfhood (1983:2), as well as more recent postcolonial work on the 'psychic life of colonial power' (Riggs and Augoustinos, 2005; Hook, 2012). This literature references both the use of the psychological to explore workings of power, but also hints at how the colonial shapes and makes possible psychic life. It emphasizes colonial psychic life as dehumanizing and objectifying because the colonized are cast as instruments of production, or as non-persons that need to be erased (Loomba, 1998/2009).

This raises important questions about whether the psychic framing of colonialism and racism transfer to thinking about the psychic life of austerity, especially given the racialized dynamics of austerity that 'subject certain populations to exploitation, oppression, displacement, and dispossession while conforming to the colorblind optics of official anti-racism' (Thomsen, 2016:1). Useful here is the link traced by Stevenson (2012:597) in thinking welfare colonialism alongside 'the psychic life of biopolitics' in relation to the contemporary suicide epidemic among Inuit youth in the Canadian Artic. Stevenson seeks to 'understand state-sanctioned death and genocide within a political formation that seems to privilege the promotion of life' (p. 597). Eugenic logic provides a crucial link here between distinct and yet related colonial regimes and rationales for austerity. Eugenics is closely linked to biopolitical discourses of 'fitness' (in terms of economic productivity and reproduction) and tied to racism, ableism and sanism, and the multiple ways these are linked to poverty (for example through old yet still present conceptions of degeneracy). The implications of these logics can be seen in the systematic eradication, compulsory sterilization, impoverishment and institutionalization of non-normatively 'productive' bodies, disabled and mad people, and indigenous, racialised and colonized peoples.

Dependency is central here – in both the creation of economic dependency of colonized states on the metropole (and the disavowal of the dependency of the colonizers on the colonized), and the stigmatization of dependency on the state, for example of those in receipt of disability or unemployment benefits. Eugenic logic is evident in the devaluation of certain forms of life (indigenous, disabled, mad, and poor) and the production of lives that cannot or will not be improved or self-govern (Razack, 2015) as a 'surplus humanity that is superfluous to a regime of capitalist value' (Gidwani and Reddy, 2011:1653). This paper argues that the

psychological impact of coming to understand oneself as an economic burden can be seen through austerity suicides, and further that these deaths are a logical outcome of eugenic and market logic.

Autopsy

Long have researchers looked inside brains and minds for the causes of suicide. Marsh (2010) traces how autopsy and dissection of the brain in the early 1800s were key to the production of medical truths about suicide. Later the truism of the link between 'mental illness' and suicide was produced and substantiated mainly through the psychological autopsy: a method within suicidology literature, which involves interviewing family members of the deceased, consulting medical records and suicide notes, and sometimes retrospectively applying psychiatric diagnostic criteria (Marsh, 2010).

In contrast, this research seeks to flesh out a different kind of autopsy as an analytic tool: a psychopolitical autopsy based on the social/sociological autopsy developed by Klinenberg (2002), and used to research suicide by Scourfield et al. (2012). While a social autopsy dissects the interlacing relations underlying suicide by embedding individual-level factors within a broader social context, a psychopolitical autopsy further develops this by also attending to the mechanisms through which social context (in this case austerity) comes to be rearticulated and reconfigured as individual crisis, and the implications this has for public recognition of austerity suicides as well as for culpability.

This paper analyses the stories of 30 different suicides (occurring between 2009-2015) that are linked to austerity and welfare reform, and that were reported on by local and national newspapers in the UK. The articles were chosen because they were all archived through the websites Calum's List and the Black Triangle campaign. Newspapers are important because they shape public discourse and organize public imagination about the link between austerity and suicide (Cover, 2012). Newspapers also play a key role in the (re)production of mass stigmatization of people who claim benefits and the creation of a punitive anti-welfare common-sense (Jensen, 2014; Tyler, 2013), especially demonizing people in receipt of disability benefits (Briant, Watson and Philo, 2013). Interestingly, the same newspapers that publish articles that demonise benefits claimants also publish articles that sympathetically and heartbreakingly depict austerity suicides, yet nearly always as individual stories without reference to similar deaths. According to Marsh (2014:3) journalists are encouraged to frame suicide 'in terms of individual mental health', and newspaper reports in the UK have long acted 'as conduits for the dissemination of medical ideas on suicide' (Marsh, 2014:116). Thus newspapers tend to (re)produce a psychocentric approach employed globally, for example, by the World Health Organization in their guidelines on reporting suicide within the media (WHO, 2000), which specifically state that suicide should not be reported as an understandable response to social conditions.

The psychopolitical autopsy carried out here involved a textual analysis built upon a framework of questions guided by the literature outlined above, including; constructions of

causality, i.e. trajectory of events and of life prior to the suicide; context/environment; the kinds of expertise drawn upon and cited within the articles; culpability (and how different frameworks lead to different conclusions about responsibility for suicide); specific mention of mental health or disability, and the way this is linked to austerity and suicide; and action taken by families and friends. There was a focus on discussion of affect within the articles, i.e. anxiety, worry, shame, with the aim to explore what kinds of affect and psychic livee of austerity are made public. Next the paper will explore trajectories of causality mobilized within newspaper articles, followed by an exploration of the 'nervous conditions' produced by austerity.

'Killed by benefits cuts': trajectories of causality

Out of the 30 articles analyzed, 26 make an explicit link between austerity measures and suicides, and 23 name specific welfare reforms, the most common being Work Capability Assessments and being found 'fit to work'. Often the casual link between austerity measures and suicide is made in the title of the article, for example:

> 'Killed by benefits cuts: Starving soldier died 'as result of Iain Duncan Smith's welfare reform' (Lyons, 2014).
> 'Man with brain damage and 'uncontrolled' epilepsy hanged himself when DWP threatened to cut benefits' (Armstrong, 2014).
> 'Benefits withdrawal led to man's suicide' (Darley, 2013).

In these articles, cuts, and the threat of cuts, kill. Other articles imply a correlation between cuts and suicides:

> 'Pregnant mother leaps to her death with five-month-old son in her arms after losing benefits' (Daily Mail, 2009).
> 'Grandad shoots himself after finding out his benefits were being stopped' (Rockett, 2014).

Causal and correlational claims between austerity measures and suicide are made in numerous ways in the articles, each having implications for how agency is constructed and made sense of within austerity. Such claims are made through documenting the circumstances of the suicides (for example, the presence of a suicide note), the inclusion of statements from family and friends, and/or statements from professionals. In only two of the articles do we hear from the person who died, through suicide notes which place blame squarely on the government: Paul Wilcoxson left a suicide note in which he 'expressed concerns about government cuts' (Napier, 2011), and the BBC reproduced part of Stephanie Bottrill's suicide note, which reads: 'To my darling son…I can't cope anymore…Don't blame yourself for me ending my life. It's my life, the only people to blame are the government, no one else' (BBC, 2013).

Family are cited in many of the articles, and often attribute causality to cuts. The father of David Barr, who jumped from the Forth Road Bridge after learning that the decision to stop

his benefits had been upheld, is quoted as saying that 'I'm in no doubt this matter was the final straw. I would say they [Atos (the private company that preceded Maximus in holding the Government contract to carry out Work Capability Assessments) and the DWP] are 90 per cent to blame for him taking his life. He'd just had enough' (McDonald, 2013). Stephanie Bottrill's family is quoted as saying that prior to her suicide Stephanie had been worried about how she would pay an extra £20 a week due to changes in her housing benefit, which came as a direct result of the 'bedroom tax'. Stephanie's son feels that 'It's definitely down to them [the government] putting this law in because she would have still been here'. Similarly, the parents of Trevor Drakard (a man with epilepsy who hung himself after a long battle over changes to his benefits and being found 'fit to work'), said that prior to his death he was 'beside himself' with worry, and that "there is no doubt whatsoever that is what caused his death" (Armstrong, 2013). Doctors and Coroners are also cited in many of the articles. Dr Stephen Carty, a GP in Leith told a welfare reform committee that Paul Reekie (a 48-year-old writer who lived in Leith, Scotland) was 'driven to suicide by the Government's welfare reforms' (Edinburgh Evening News, 2012), and the Coroner for Tim Salter is stated as saying that a 'major factor in Tim's death was that his benefits had been greatly reduced leaving him almost destitute' (Traynor, 2013).

'Nervous conditions'

Worry and anxiety are central in family accounts and suicide notes as to how cuts kill. Thus, it would seem that anxious states and nervous conditions constitute the psychic life of austerity for many. In his preface to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre writes of colonialism's production of a 'nervous condition' (Sartre, 1990:17) that is both political and psychological, for it arises when one's cultural resources have been (almost) eradicated (Hook, 2005a:480). While the nervous condition produced by colonialism is distinct, it seems that austerity too may produce its own nervous conditions and anxious states (and these conditions are racialized, ableist and gendered) (Fortier, 2017).

In his writing on the psychopathology of colonialism Fanon critiques colonial psychiatry for seeing distress and resistance to colonialism as biologically organised, when instead he sees it as a 'direct product of the colonial situation' (1963:250). Fanon's (1961) *Wretched of the Earth* documents 'symptoms' of colonialism that include colonial depersonalisation marked by deep depression, suicidality, and persistent insomnia. Using Fanon's psychopolitics, it is colonialism itself that is psychopathological, 'a disease that distorts human relations and renders everyone within it "sick"' (Loomba, 1998:122). There is evidence too of austerity (and global capitalism more widely) making people 'sick' through psychologically and physically wearing them out. Shame in relation to stigma (discussed shortly), insecurity, isolation and powerlessness, are key 'austerity ailments' that have a damaging psychological impact (McGrath, Griffin, and Mundy, 2015). Furthermore, the uneven global distribution of endurance, exhaustion and enervation is conceptualized by Povinelli as an 'another form of violence: ... the weakening of the will rather than the killing of life' (2011: 132).

Focusing here on worry and anxiety enables a move beyond solely a discursive analysis to explore how austerity is inscribed on bodies - embodied and lived. The inscription of worry

onto bodies is evident in the death of Elaine Christian, who was 'found dead in a drain [and] had been worried about attending a medical appointment to assess disability benefits' (Hull Daily Mail, 2011). The inquest heard that Elaine, who died from drowning and whose wrists were covered in self-inflicted cuts, 'had been worrying about a meeting she was due to have to discuss her entitlement to disability benefits' (Hull Daily Mail, 2011). From a psychopolitical frame of analysis, Elaine's worry is made flesh as the toxicity of austerity gets under, and is marked upon, her skin. For Fanon, this is a process of epidermalisation, where anxiety and inferiority as a product of hierarchies is made flesh and lived through the body (Fanon, 1967:11). Elaine's death then seems marked by worry linked to 'entitlement' to benefits, which is itself structured by hierarchies and moral economies of 'worthiness' that come to be internalized – what might be understood as the epidermalisation of the stigmatization of welfare recipients.

'He feared being "a burden"'

Discursive repertoires of the 'scrounger' in the UK frame entitlements to incapacity benefits as a 'lifestyle choice' abused by those whose unscrupulous choices ultimately lie at the heart of the UK's economic crisis (Tyler, 2013; Briant, Watson and Philo, 2013). A body of literature points to the key part played by print media and television in embedding new forms of common-sense that garner public disgust for the figure of the 'skiver', and thus consent for welfare retrenchment (Allen, Tyler, and De Benedictis, 2014; Jensen, 2014). For example, in a content analysis of media representations of disability in the UK, Briant, Watson and Philo (2013:880), found an increase (post-Recession) in use of words like 'workshy', 'skiver', and 'drain on the economy' to describe claimants of disability benefits after the financial crisis, with those claiming benefits due to mental health framed as 'faking it'.

A number of family members and others quoted within the newspaper articles analysed here actively invoke 'scrounger' discourse, while simultaneously distancing their own family from it. David Clapson's sister is quoted in the Daily Mirror saying 'my brother was not a scrounger. He was getting £71.70 a week. He was not living on champagne and caviar' (Lyons, 2014). An article on the suicide of Martin Hadfield states that 'Despite being unemployed for months, proud Martin refused to accept state handouts…"He got nothing off the government and was proud not to"' (Byrne, 2014). Martin Rust's Mother explained 'he had attempted suicide before because he feared being "a burden"' (Shields, 2012). Other articles make similar moves through invoking the unfairness of the system, not for all, but for the 'genuinely ill' (Armstrong, 2014). It seems from these articles that public mourning for those who have died through suicide can only occur if they are positioned as worthy and 'deserving' of benefits i.e. hard-working, too proud to receive 'state handouts', and living a frugal life.

Hierarchies of worthiness (Fortier, 2017) and value are threaded throughout these articles, where 'worth' is conceptualized through an economistic framing of productivity where value is reduced to market value (Povinelli, 2011). 'Burden' discourse also hinges on an older moral economy linking to early eugenicist formulations of the economic cost of disabled

people and conceptualizations of fit/unfit – used to argue for systematic eradication, compulsory sterilisation and institutionalization of disabled people. This biopolitical framing produces non-normatively 'productive' bodies and minds as 'unfit' (if not 'fit to work'), parasitic disposable life constituting a 'surplus humanity that is superfluous to a regime of capitalist value' (Gidwani and Reddy, 2011:1653), a set of people seen to have no stake in neoliberal futurity.

Moral economies of human worth structure capacity for public mourning. Thus, the relatively sparse coverage of austerity suicides (compared to actual numbers of deaths) are embedded within the reality of increasingly high rates of disability hate crime (Baumberg, Bell and Gaffney, 2012) and the stigmatisation of people living in poverty, all embedded in a world where it seems easier to imagine the end of a life, or no life at all, than imagine a life lived with difference (or disability) (Chandler and Ignagni, forthcoming). We can see in suicides that are linked to people's fears of being a 'burden', the internalization of market and eugenic logic, where stigmatization is made flesh, and through which people come to think of, and act on, themselves as though their lives have no value. This process of internalization relates to both the 'internalized injuries of class' (Frost and Hoggett, 2008:438) as well as Fanon's 'interiorization of inferiority' or epidermalization (that occurs in relation to racialization) (Fanon, 1967:11).

Mental health and austerity

Analysis of psychic life and internalization of stigmatization stand in contrast to the assumed link between 'mental illness' and suicide dominant in much newspaper coverage. This is one of the central mechanisms through which suicide comes to be pathologised and individualised, thus diverting attention from Government responsibility (Marsh, 2010). Psychocentric framing is encouraged in media guidelines on reporting suicide (WHO, 2008), and activism and journalism that seeks to show links between austerity and suicides 'are met with short shrift in certain elements of the media' (Marsh, 2013:3). For example, Brendan O'Neill (2013) wrote an article in the *Telegraph* condemning the 'exploitation of suicidal people' as 'a new low for campaigners against welfare reform' and described suicide as "the act of someone in a fevered, unstable state of mind" and that "to exploit such psychologically disturbed behaviour for political ends... is politics of the most depraved variety" (cited in Marsh, 2014). Yet to attribute suicide to unstable minds is also a highly a political move.

Mental health problems are mentioned in 17 of the 30 newspaper articles analysed. The framing of suicide in relation to mental health occurs in many complex ways within the articles, with mental health mentioned as pre-existing the person's experience of austerity, worsening due to austerity, or as caused by austerity:

> 'A man with mental health problems who was worried about benefit cuts killed himself' (Paul Wilcoxson, in Napier, 2011).

'The sales coordinator, who had battled depression for a number of years, had taken a turn for the worse after receiving a letter telling her she had to be assessed by a doctor to see if she was fit to return to work' (Leanne Chambers, in Doughty, 2010).

'The decision to stop his allowance was a major trigger which led him onto a severe depression and desperate action' (Edward Jacques, in Howell, 2013).

A number of articles document the role of mental health as explicit within people's encounters with the benefits system. i.e. claiming benefits because of mental health issues. Leanne Chambers, whose body was found in the River Wear on August 5th 2010, is described as having 'battled depression for a number for years' (Doughty, 2010). The frameworks evident in the newspaper coverage of austerity suicides analysed here are not entirely psychocentric and stand in contrast to wider global discourse on suicide, particularly around 'economic suicides' in low and middle-income countries, where there is a tendency for the literature to either overlook affective politics and solely focus on systemic and structural factors that may lead to suicide; or frame suicide as an outcome of 'mental illness' that is amenable to psychotherapeutic and psychopharmaceutical intervention (Mills, 2014).

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We have so far explored how conceptual work on 'psychic life' (internalization, shame, anxiety) rather than a psychocentric construction of suicide as linked to 'mental illness', is useful as an analytic framework to better understand how austerity 'kills' and the Government's culpability in these deaths. This will now be developed in contrast to DWP framings of suicide, tracing the implications of both in terms of culpability.

Government culpability

Out of the 30 articles analysed for this paper, 11 cite spokespeople from the DWP. These quotes convey a uniform approach to suicide by the DWP, that: 'Suicide is a tragic and complex issue and we take these matters extremely seriously' (Chakelian, 2015); that it's not appropriate to comment on 'individual cases'; and that 'suicide is always a tragedy and a lot of different reasons are always involved. We look at a number of suicides but on a private basis, as a lot of the information cannot be shared, so that is not a useful approach' (Pring, 2016). Such statements frame suicide as tragic, complex and individualized. The Samaritans are also occasionally cited in articles about austerity suicides, and like the DWP have a stock response about complexity: 'although a catalyst may appear to be obvious, suicide is seldom the result of a single factor or event and is likely to have several interrelated causes' (Samaritans spokesperson cited in BBC 2013). These responses are entirely in line with advice outlined in the WHO's (2000) guidelines for the media on preventing suicide, which state: 'Reporting suicidal behaviour as an understandable response to social or cultural changes or degradation should be resisted…Suicide should not be depicted as a method of coping with personal problems' (p.7-8).

Despite the numbers of suicides linked to welfare reform, the DWP claim to keep no record of the circumstances surrounding these deaths, and are quick to point out that the statistics do not point to any causal link between changes to benefits and mortality, and that the figures

cannot be used to make any judgement about the effectiveness of the Work Capability Assessment. Yet since 2012 (and up to 2017) the DWP have admitted carrying out approximately 60 'internal process reviews' of welfare reform complaints, 49 of which involve the 'death of a customer', with 40 of these involving suicide (McVeigh, 2014; Pring, 2016). Internal process reviews are carried out when a death is 'associated with a DWP activity', according to its internal guidance. None of these reviews have been published or been made publicly available. In response to Freedom of Information (FoI) requests to update figures on the number of peer reviews undertaken by the DWP, Lord Freud, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Welfare Reform from 2010-2015, refused to release this information and admitted that monitoring of welfare reform deaths does not take place.

While people's decision to die by suicide may well be complex, the mobilization of this complexity by the DWP, and advice from the WHO not to contextualize suicide as a coping strategy, seems to work to delimit recognition of government culpability in austerity suicides. Further denials of responsibility occur through the naming of these deaths as suicides, a language that obscures the role of structural violence and enables denial of responsibility from violent state policies by blaming the victim (Reynolds, 2016:172). Yet recognizing the complexity and multiplicity of factors that may contribute to suicide can occur simultaneously alongside invoking government culpability.

Many newspaper articles tell stories of long battles with the system, appeals processes, letters written to the DWP, and medical reassessments that eventually ended in suicide. These articles hint at the affective and psychic life of austerity overlooked by statements about suicide rarely having a 'single cause'. Such statements fail to engage with the ways that austerity is lived and felt as affective force and atmospheric fear, a pervasive psychological and bodily anxiety, shame, and anger, differing in intensity at different times, and fatiguing the body - physically and psychologically wearing it out. According to Hitchen (2016) 'austerity is felt as a series of atmospheres' that 'become the "background noise" of everyday life [and] that surface at various moments' in different intensities, such as in waiting for the arrival of a letter from the DWP (what Callum's List calls 'brown envelopes of despair'). Here feelings of enervation and exhaustion register not at the level of the catastrophic but as 'quasi-events' – 'little things pile up' - that occur sometimes below thresholds of awareness and theorization (Povinelli, 2011:132-133). This supports findings from research into suicides linked to austerity in Greece where suicide is a result of cumulative effects and not spontaneous acts (Vandoros and Kavetsos, 2015). Similarly, Razack makes the case that suicides of First Nations peoples in Canada need to be understood as part of a 'continuum of violence' that includes deprivation of land rights and ongoing settler violence that 'produces a collective for whom suicide makes sense' (Razack, 2015: 200&207). Situating welfare reform deaths against this background noise enables a reading of austerity suicide not as a sudden reaction to a single letter from the DWP but as an act embedded within an affective economy of dehumanization. Here stigmatization is key in crafting a hostile environment for welfare claimants – a context against which suicide makes sense.

It is the denial of Government culpability that made Mary Hassell's (a senior coroner for inner North London) verdict that the suicide of Michael O'Sullivan, a disabled man who

hanged himself, had been a 'direct result of being ruled "fit to work"' (Pring, 2015a; McVeigh, 2015), so significant as it is 'thought by campaigners to be the first official link of WCAs to suicide' (Chakelian, 2015). Since this verdict, over the period of 2010-2013, the WCA process was associated with an additional 590 suicides (5% of the total number of suicides) (Barr et al, 2015b). These are statistics that might in part be explained by the psychic life of austerity traced above, and yet may be disavowed while psy-expertise is used as a tool of neo-conservative governance and austerity measures, evident for example in the promotion of positive thinking in workfare programmes, and with the increasing employment of cognitive behavioural therapists in job centres (Friedli and Stearn, 2015).

Conclusion

This paper developed an analytic framework of psychopolitical autopsy that contributes to extant debates about psychosocial suffering and dimensions of welfare through analyzing the psychological impact (psychic life) of austerity while remaining alert to the ways psy-expertise, particularly in relation to mental health, can operate to depoliticize and individualize austerity suicides. Psychopolitics was used here to avoid psychologized or psychocentric understandings of suicide, and ultimately to better understand how austerity kills. This analysis has wider policy implications, specifically around the need for internal review processes carried out by Government departments, such as the DWP, to be publically scrutinized and analyzed in a way that illuminates culpability of Government reforms, while still retaining the complexity of suicide. A key move would be for both the DWP and newspaper coverage to situate suicides within a wider pattern of deaths, and not analyze them as individual 'cases'.

The frameworks drawn upon in this paper, particularly Critical Suicidology, frame distress and suicide as social justice issues that exceed narrow reductionist psychological explanations and, in so doing, open up collective and political possibilities for action (Marsh 2014). This approach is more than conceptual and is evident in the political activism of the families and friends of many of those who have died through suicide, including: letters and appeals written to the DWP, protests by activist groups throughout the UK, cases taken to local MPs, reviews undertaken by parliamentary and health service ombudsman, the creation of online petitions (see the petition 'hold an inquiry into benefit sanctions that killed my brother' on Chang.org) (Lyons, 2014), and multiple protests (such as the one detailed at the beginning of this paper). Activism from disabled people has been far from fruitless. In 2012, Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) submitted testimonies to the UN on the impact of welfare reform policies on disabled people, under article 6 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The subsequent confidential investigation into effects of welfare cuts is the first of its kind and its findings are due for publication in 2017.

It is not a coincidence that some people deemed a 'burden' by neoliberal market logic would end their lives. People are killing themselves because they feel exactly the way the Government is telling them they should feel – a burden. Put another way, people are killing

themselves because austerity is killing them. Austerity suicides may be read as the ultimate outcome of the internalization of eugenic and market logic underlying welfare reform driven by austerity. Such deaths make visible the slow death endemic to austerity. Therefore, this paper makes the argument that austerity suicides can only be understood if we take seriously the psychic life and slow death of austerity against which these suicides are embedded.

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[i] The banner was made by Vince Laws, and information about the meeting – a Unite meeting on Community Benefit Sanctions and Benefit Cuts - was kindly shared with me by Paula Peters from DPAC.

[ii] Work Capability Assessments are used to reassess recipients of out of work disability benefits (Employment and Support Allowance [ESA]). They were originally introduced by

the Labour Government in 2008, and subsequently rolled out by the Conservatives, and were used to reassess over one million people between 2010-2013.