

What is the point of anti-austerity activism? Exploring the motivating and sustaining emotional forces of political participation

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Abstract

The continued resistance to austerity in the UK almost a decade after its imposition raises questions about what motivates and sustains anti-austerity activism. Drawing on 30 interviews with local activists, this article argues that anti-austerity activism is sustained by a combination of emotions and normative ideals. It is about more than opposing austerity and appealing to social protections of the past; it is about imagining an alternative future and situating this within conversations about what it means to be human, as well as enacting these moral values in the present. Activism is conceived of as care not only for austerity and those it impacts but also within activist communities, with the social dimension of activism and the relationships it creates becoming a central sustaining force for continued political participation. This article explores how emotion sustains political participation during periods of disillusionment and the everyday ways that activists resist and subvert the pervasive force of neoliberal capitalism and its discourses. Overall, it asserts the importance of paying close attention to the lived and felt dimension of political participation to better understand the nuanced ways that anti-austerity activism is sustained over long periods of time.

Keywords:

activism; austerity; emotion; empathy; morals; normative; affective; motivation; neoliberalism; capitalism

Introduction

It has been 9 years since the introduction of the austerity programme in the UK, which involved widespread and deep cuts to public spending. Between 2010 and 2015, 35 billion pounds of cuts were made, with a further 55 billion pounds still to be cut by 2019 (Gentleman, 2015). The Institute for Fiscal Studies (2014) stated that ‘colossal cuts’ to public spending will take government spending to its lowest point since before World War Two and that by the end of this process ‘the role and shape of the state will have changed beyond recognition’. Austerity is the guise that enables a drastic shrinking of the welfare state and an increase in privatisation and financialisation, turning citizens into consumers of previously public services. Thus, austerity is more than a solution for managing government debt; it is an ideological extension of neoliberalism.

In response, we witnessed a surge in collective action that sought to challenge not only austerity but the wider neoliberal capitalist system that underpins it, including movements such as the Spanish Indignados, the American Occupy, and UK Uncut. These movements reframed austerity as an ideological attack on the poorest in society, highlighting the growing inequalities between the richest 1 percent and the other 99 percent, and addressed issues of political representation by drawing attention to the democratic deficit. Della Porta (2015) asserts that anti-austerity politics is as much about reconfiguring democracy as it is about defending social protections of the past, such as state welfare. Shannon (2014: 13) remarks that 'living in an age of multiple crises creates multiple possibilities for the widening of antagonisms between privilege and power, on the one hand, and the dispossessed, on the other'. This notion is no better summed up than by Occupy's pitting of the 99 percent - 'ordinary' citizens against the 1 percent - 'fat cats' who were deemed responsible for the financial crash but faced none of the consequences.

Despite such anti-austerity movements, evidence of the damaging impact of austerity on people's lives (Oxfam, 2013) and claims of austerity's ineffectiveness (Blyth, 2013), the austerity regime has been reinforced. While anti-austerity politics has entered the mainstream arena with the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader, the re-election of a conservative government in 2017 suggests that we are unlikely to see the end of austerity in coming years. Nevertheless, individuals and groups locally and nationally have maintained the resistance to austerity, resolutely proclaiming that there is an alternative. This continued resistance raises questions about what motivates and sustains anti-austerity activism. Put crudely, what is the point? For if anti-austerity activism has had little impact on austerity, then why continue fighting a losing battle? Moreover, how is action sustained in the face of seeming failure?

Drawing on anti-austerity activists' narratives from interviews before the election of Jeremy Corbyn, I contend that anti-austerity activism is motivated by more than simply a desire to impact policy. A central feature of political reactions to austerity is the widespread sentiment that austerity is an infringement of human dignity, demonstrated by the 15M movement's (a Spanish precursor to Occupy) slogan 'We are not products in the hands of politicians and bankers'. This emphasis on the lived and felt experiences of human beings, as humans, as opposed to products and objects of a capitalist system, is reflected by movements' emotional framing of austerity as an affective, lived condition.

Brown et al (2013) suggest that such movements should be understood as a response to a 'crisis of care'. They contend that movements approach this crisis by criticising the government's lack of care for its citizens and by seeking to demonstrate how alternative social relations based on care are possible. In this respect, moments of crisis can open up spaces for reimagining possible, better, futures. Shannon (2014: 2) asserts:

When historical moments of crisis hit — when people’s expectations are undercut by austere social realities — they shake the faith in capitalism that allows it to be continually reproduced in our daily lives. People begin to see that the way that we’ve organised our lives is one option, but that other possibilities may also be on the table. While global movements have also arisen in times when capitalism has not been in crisis, in the current, historical moment, crisis was a primary spark.

As Holloway (2010) explains, ‘cracks’ in capitalism begin to show, revealing the possibility for agitation to widen these cracks. Likewise, Butler and Athanasiou (2015) demonstrate the ‘double-sided effects of dispossession, including the opportunity to create new social bonds and forms of collective struggle against the suffering, immiseration and violence of austerity politics’ (Brah et al, 2015: 5). By focussing on the affective dimensions of movements, the processes of these alternative spaces are revealed.

At the same time as developing an analysis of the micro-level of political participation, it is vital to situate this within the wider macro-level. As Della Porta (2015: 3) asserts, we need to ‘look at the specific characteristics of the socio-economic, cultural and political context in which these [anti-austerity] protests developed’. Anti-austerity activism forms part of a wider resistance to neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberalism’s emphasis on the market above the social reflects an immoral economy which anti-austerity activists react to in defence of their dignity. While anti-austerity activism is concerned with material factors and class relations, it is also concerned with wider normative questions and a demand for recognition. In this respect, such activism reinforces Fraser’s (1995: 69) claim that ‘justice today requires *both* redistribution *and* recognition’.

Anti-austerity activists are motivated by moral and ethical values, ‘bridging a moral framing with a political one’ (Della Porta, 2015: 68). A key feature of this is a concern with how neoliberalism attacks conceptions of ‘humanity’. Brown (2015: 43) demonstrates that:

Neoliberal rationality eliminates what these thinkers termed “the good life” (Aristotle) or “the true realm of freedom” (Marx), by which they did not mean luxury leisure, or indulgence, but rather the cultivation and expression of distinctly human capacities for ethical and political freedom, creativity, unbounded reflection, or invention.

Neoliberalism is thus framed as inhumane, with activists drawing on widespread notions of humanity in resisting austerity. When stating their reasons for protesting, a YouTube video promoting the 15 May 2011 demonstration in Spain states ‘Because we are more humane. Because we are more decent. Because we are more respectable. Because we are more’ (Gerbaudo, 2012: 67). Thus, anti-austerity activism reacts to neoliberalism’s transforming of humans into ‘human capitals [...] [who] do not have the standing of Kantian individuals, ends in themselves, intrinsically valuable’ but

are conceived of solely in terms of economic value (Brown, 2015: 38). Questions are raised about the role of morals and the normative within anti-austerity activism, as well as the ways in which universal discourses of humanism are utilised to ground resistance to such perceived attacks on humanity, and how these work alongside particularist concerns about difference. Moreover, the further question arises of how resistance to such a pervasive force as neoliberalism can be sustained over time and what this looks like in practice.

It is argued that to understand the continuing resistance to austerity we need to pay close attention to the lived and felt dimension of everyday political participation, focusing on the central role played by emotion and how it combines with morals and normative ideals to sustain activism. I now turn to a brief exploration of the role of emotions and morals in social movement theory in order to situate this article and its contribution in its theoretical context before presenting a discussion of the research methodology and analysis of the data.

Social movement theory: emotions and morals

Since the late 1990s, there has been a growing emphasis placed on the central role played by emotions in protest (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2000, 2001; Jasper, 1997; Jasper, 2011; Flam and King, 2005). Despite this expanding body of literature, cultural studies of social movements have tended to focus on the cognitive, reflecting the persistence of the traditional emotion versus reason dichotomy where emotions are presupposed to be irrational. Challenging the assumption that emotion and thinking are two separate and even opposed functions, Jasper (2014: 23) argues that ‘rather than the opposite of thought, emotions are forms of thinking, and as such are a part of culture mixed together with cognitive propositions and moral principles and intuitions’. Jasper highlights the need to consider the moral dimension of protest and how this interconnects with the emotional, a relationship which has not been sufficiently recognised (Goodwin and Jasper, 2007). Yet, as Calhoun (2001: 50) asserts, ‘one of the advantages to taking emotions seriously is to see better how moral norms and injunctions come to have force’. In this respect, emotion is understood not solely as subjective but also social and active – ‘doing’ things, as Ahmed (2014) suggests.

A key area in which emotion ‘does things’ is that of sustaining social movements during latent periods (Goodwin et al, 2001). While social movement research tends to explore emotions in relation to how individuals are recruited to social movements (Corrigall-Brown, 2012), it is argued that we need to pay attention to the role of emotion during movements’ latent as well as active periods (Melucci, 1996). Linking lived experiences to the emotional dimension of activism, Brown and Pickerill (2009: 27) state: ‘there is a need to understand how participants emotionally experience their actions, how action is embodied, and how meaning is constructed out of those experiences and feelings’. This focus on the affective dimension of political participation widens the focus of

research from rationalistic approaches which focus on strategy and the effectiveness of movements, to looking at questions of why and how individuals become and *remain* politically engaged, where emotion plays a central role.

In order to explore the processes of emotions, morals, and normative ideals, and how these interlink to sustain political participation, it is argued that we need to pay close attention to the everyday lived and felt experiences of social movement activity. Alexander (2006: 115) contends that 'we need to develop a model of democratic societies that pays more attention to solidarity and social values – to what and how people speak, think and feel about politics than most social science theories do today'. This article explores how anti-austerity movements attempt to harness and subvert dominant neoliberal discourses and how this is rooted in normative ideals and humanist values. A central part of translating traditionally abstract, normative concepts is to look at the concrete, everyday experiences of citizens and the symbolic codes that they invoke. As Alexander (2006: 551) contends 'rather than an abstract deduction of philosophers, the normative stipulations of civil society turn out to be the language of the street'.

This article draws on data from 30 interviews with individuals involved in anti-austerity activism between 2010 and 2013 to explore what motivates and sustains it, in the context of continued austerity. By paying attention to the lived and felt experiences of political engagement, insights are revealed about the centrality of emotions and how they combine with moral and normative values to produce and sustain action. It is argued that anti-austerity activism has persisted because it is concerned not solely with impacting policy and reversing austerity but with wider concerns about collectivism and what it means to be human. These concerns are both thought and felt, propelling individuals to enact humanist ideals in the present as a way of imagining a better future that is constructed in opposition to the dominant dehumanising neoliberal values. This article demonstrates how neoliberal discourses are subverted and reinterpreted by activists as a way of resisting the status quo while simultaneously being a part of it, a process which Levitas (2012) describes as a hermeneutic of both suspicion and faith, highlighting the complexities involved in social movement's engagement with dominant structures and discourses. Reflecting the approach of the movements researched, this article focuses on the processes rather than the ends of anti-austerity activism. By doing so, it reaffirms the importance of the affective dimension of social movements and builds on attempts to break the 'silence about the sphere of fellow feelings, the we-ness that makes society into society' (Alexander, 2006: 53), that have been made through the study of social solidarity and compassion (Flores, 2014).

Methodological approach

The overall aim of the research was to produce an in-depth understanding, or 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973), of local anti-austerity activist cultures and the lived and felt experiences of anti-austerity activism. Such research uncovers processes that are vital to movement life, helping us to understand how

movements are sustained during less active phases and times of pessimism. Qualitative research's attention to the complexity of social interactions and the 'meanings that participants themselves attribute to these interactions' provided the opportunity to explore participants' experiences and meanings of anti-austerity activism. Maddison (2007: 397) contends that 'qualitative research allows for an understanding of how experience, feelings, meaning, and process in turn influence the actions of research participants', which aids an understanding of the connection between emotion and action. I used an ethnographic research approach that combined participant observation in anti-austerity activism over an extended period and semi-structured interviews with local activists. The research method choices will be discussed following a brief description of the local research setting in order to provide the reader with background context.

It was necessary to provide a boundary to the research to enable an in-depth exploration of a particular activist culture. The research therefore focused on Nottingham as a location that has been particularly active in the resistance to austerity. Nottingham is the largest city in the UK's East Midlands, built on a history of heavy industry that includes coal mining, manufacturing and engineering. At the height of anti-austerity activism in Nottingham in 2010-2013, there were several specific campaigns against the cuts that protested on a weekly basis, forming a vibrant and dynamic local activist scene. These included groups that campaigned against specific cuts such as Notts Save Our Services, feminist activism and groups operating from the Women's Centre such as Nottingham Women Campaign for Change, and local branches of wider national movements such as UK Uncut and the People's Assembly Against Austerity. It is important to remember, as Beth (participant) states, "austerity is a thread that runs through many campaigns". Therefore, participants have been involved in various groups and campaigns that resist austerity, with anti-austerity activism being a broad area. Furthermore, the research took place within a specific temporal context, before the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader, and during a time of disillusionment with mainstream politics. This article thus sheds light on a distinct moment in the history of neoliberalism and resistance to it in the form of anti-austerity activism. I will now provide some background information about the two key groups in local anti-austerity activism, to aid the building of a picture of the local activist landscape, before discussing the research methodology in more detail.

UK Uncut

UK Uncut is a grassroots movement that formed in October 2010 to protest against tax avoidance by large corporations and banks. Describing itself as 'taking action to highlight the alternatives to the government's spending cuts', UK Uncut (2010) argues that the cuts are 'based on ideology, not necessity' and seeks to highlight this perceived injustice by taking direct action against tax-avoiding corporations such as Starbucks, Vodafone, NatWest, Lloyds TSB, and Boots, which has local significance having been founded in Nottingham. UK

Uncut have been successful in creating a link in the public imagination between tax avoidance and public spending cuts, utilising the popular discourse of 'fairness' which is also used to legitimise austerity (Bramall, 2016: 34). We start to see how dominant ideologies can be reinterpreted and turned against themselves.

In this respect, anti-austerity activism employs a 'hermeneutic of faith' (Ricoeur, 1981) which is 'an attempt to restore meaning to a narrative and its different voices and silences' (Levitas, 2012: 332). At the same time, such movements read austerity discourses through a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' which involves 'an attempt at unmasking disguised meanings and practical implications' (Levitas, 2012: 332). Thus, we see the complexities and dialectics present in anti-austerity activism. Similarly to how it draws on the 'common sense' of fairness, UK Uncut does not question the need to reduce the deficit, which is a point that has largely been accepted by the public, but instead argues that it should be reduced in a way that does not hit the most vulnerable the hardest. Given that tax avoidance is legal, UK Uncut has to find an alternative grounding for its argument, which it finds in the frame of morality.

According to its website, the first mention of 'UK Uncut' was on October 27th 2010 in the Twitter hashtag #UKUncut. This was the date of UK Uncut's first direct action when approximately 70 people formed a sit-in at Vodafone's flagship London store to protest against austerity measures announced one week earlier. After this single action group in London, Uncut quickly spread to 55 locations across the UK with a diverse range of participants; the movement (2010) states that 'everyone from pensioners to teenagers, veterans to newbies have already joined our actions in towns from Aberdeen to Aberystwyth'.

There is no official membership; people join the movement by organising or attending an action near them (UK Uncut, 2010). Uncut claims to be leaderless, having been formed on and organised through the Internet and has a strong virtual presence. Most participants discovered UK Uncut online. The UK Uncut Facebook page currently has more than 150,000 supporters who are subscribed to its posts (a number that has doubled in two years and is growing every day). The Notts Uncut Facebook page has almost 2,000 likes. Reflecting Castells (2012) notion of 'networked social movements', some participants contend that social media is a central feature of newer horizontal forms of activism. Harry, a participant of the research, states that "a smart phone in the right hands is the nuclear bomb of the activist", emphasising the potential impact that social media can have as well as its accessibility. At the same time, UK Uncut remains concerned with the use of public spaces for protest, reflecting Castells' (2012) contention that networked movements combine online and offline spaces for activism.

Despite its claims to leaderlessness, within Nottingham there was a core group of around 8-10 activists who managed the Notts Uncut social media and organised many of their actions. This core group is included within my sample, as are others who had more casual links to the movement. While UK Uncut is still active, in Nottingham the movement peaked between 2010 and 2012; there

are occasionally plans to revive it and participants describe it as currently “sleeping”.

The People’s Assembly

The main anti-austerity group currently active in Nottingham is the People’s Assembly which is part of the national People’s Assembly Against Austerity that acts as a platform for anti-austerity protests and events, attracting several celebrity supporters such as Owen Jones and Russell Brand. It was formed in 2013 and states ‘[t]here is no need for ANY cuts to public spending; no need to decimate public services; no need for unemployment or pay and pension cuts; no need for Austerity and privatisation. There IS an alternative’, demonstrating a similar message to UK Uncut. Whereas Notts Uncut was more horizontal and used consensus decision-making methods, the People’s Assembly is a more vertically structured group that is mainly organised by one local activist (who is also part of my sample). This is a point of contention for some participants who choose not to be involved with the People’s Assembly because of this.

Reflecting their more organised approach, the People’s Assembly support ‘The People’s Manifesto’, a list of policies that the movement proposes to create a fairer society (see http://www.thepeoplesassembly.org.uk/what_we_stand_for). The People’s Assembly national Facebook page has just over 74,000 likes and the local Nottingham page has almost 4000 likes. Similarly to UK Uncut, though the People’s Assembly does not claim to be mainly constituted online, Mary (participant) notes that “we [People’s Assembly], have started doing a lot of our stuff, events that we organise we set up Facebook events and that sort of thing and you get very quick shares of things and you get an impact quite quickly”.

As previously mentioned, anti-austerity activism is complex and dynamic, comprising many groups and campaigns and a range of protest forms. Furthermore, individuals were often involved in several different groups and campaigns, with there being a considerable amount of overlap between these. Given this diversity and interconnectedness of different groups and forms of protest, it is overly simplistic to refer to only one group or anti-austerity ‘movement’, instead I have chosen to refer to anti-austerity activism and activist cultures to reflect this complexity. Of course, there are issues concerning how ‘activism’ is defined and understood, and this is a key topic which I explore in the broader research but which there is not space to go into here. For now, I am using a wide definition of activism that incorporates participation in protests, direct action, online petitions and campaigns, and community groups that are focused on resisting austerity. However, it is noted that the term is fluid and that this definition is open to revision. Furthermore, the focus of this article is not on the organisational features and differences of the groups involved but on the common normative ideals and moral values that anti-austerity activists spread, and the role of emotion in motivating and sustaining action. These central themes, to be discussed later, were present across all groups and most

participants' narratives. I have presented the above background information for the purposes of aiding the reader to construct a picture of the overall local anti-austerity activist landscape, providing broader context.

In order to understand the interactions between activists and the processes and dynamics of wider activist cultures, an ethnographic approach was deemed the most appropriate; as Haiven and Khasnabish (2013: 477-78) contend, 'Ethnography needs to be understood not only as a genre of scholarly writing characterized by "thick description" or even as a set of research methods grounded in participation and immersion in "the field", but as a perspective committed to understanding and taking seriously people's lived realities'. This attitude is reinforced by the research's feminist approach which focuses on lived experiences, feelings, and the subjective.

A feminist approach to research recognises that knowledge is relational, produced intersubjectively, and that the researcher's relationship with participants influences the knowledge produced. Oakley (1981: 49) explains that:

A feminist methodology [...] requires [...] that the mythology of 'hygienic' research with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production be replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives.

Likewise, Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2007: 147) assert that 'without empathic, interpersonal relationships, researchers will be unable to gain insight into the meaning people give to their lives'. It is therefore important to foster good relationships with participants, something which I achieved through participating in local anti-austerity for 2 and a half years. I attended anti-austerity groups' organising meetings, events, and protests between 2011 and 2013, including those by Notts Uncut, the People's Assembly, Trade Unions, Nottingham Women for Change, and other isolated campaigns against public spending cuts. I entered the field with an open strategy, attending events and protests 'with broad areas of interest but without predetermined categories or strict observational checklists' (Marshall and Rossman, 2011: 139). This enabled the research to be led by topics which emerged in the field, preventing a predetermined choice of which data to exclude (Fetterman, 1998). The longer I participated, the more refined my questions and observations became as I learnt how and what to ask (Brewer, 2000), which influenced the topics raised in the interviews.

The research used semi-structured, open-ended interviews to produce in-depth data about participants' experiences and meanings of political activism. This method was chosen because of its ability to 'provide greater breadth and depth of information [and] the opportunity to discover the respondent's experiences

and interpretations of reality' (Maddison, 2007: 399). I interviewed 30 local individuals who self-identified as having been involved in local anti-austerity activism. A mixture of snowball and selective sampling was used with participants helping to recruit subsequent participants by spreading the word that I could be trusted (for which I am very grateful).

The sample included seventeen males and thirteen females, seven of whom were mothers, including two single mothers. Eighteen participants were in their twenties, nine in their thirties, two in their forties and one in her fifties. Just over half of the participants were university-educated. Several worked in the public sector. Fifteen participants identified as working class, seven as middle class and the remaining eight had an ambivalent relationship with class, having been raised in working-class families but now considered to be middle class through education, occupation or marriage. The majority were white with one British Pakistani, one Black British, one Chinese and one white first-generation Eastern European migrant. Participants noted the visible absence of non-white, black minority ethnic (BME) anti-austerity activists and had tried, unsuccessfully, to address this. However, in the post-Brexit political context there are signs that anti-austerity campaigns are attempting to address issues of racism and anti-immigration. The local People's Assembly has held several anti-racism protests, whether this will reflect an increase in BME participants remains to be seen. A central priority of this research is protecting the participants who have kindly given their time and trust to myself as the researcher. In order to preserve anonymity, I offer minimal information about participants' characteristics so that there is no danger of individuals being identified, and use pseudonyms.

While I allowed the interview to be led by the participant in order for topics to emerge which I had not previously considered, I quickly discovered that beginning the interview with too open an approach could be daunting for participants who would often not know what to say. I therefore started the interviews with some general questions and then let the conversation develop more naturally once the participant had relaxed into the situation. The interview guide acted as a prompt only as I was keen to follow the participant's lead, engaging in what DeVault and Gross (2007: 182) have called 'active listening', which required my full attention. Active listening (DeVault and Gross, 2007: 182):

[M]ore than just physically hearing or reading; rather, it is a fully engaged practice that involves not only taking in information via speech, written words, or signs, but also actively processing it – allowing that information to affect you, baffle you, haunt you, make you uncomfortable, and take you on unexpected detours, “away from abstract [...] bloodless professionalized questions,” toward peoples, knowledges, and experiences that have been disavowed, overlooked and forgotten (Gordon, 1997: 40).

Therefore, my interview guide was altered over the course of the research as areas of interest emerged from early interviews and participant observation. A minimalist structure allowed such freedom, giving the participant the space and time to speak openly about topics. I made sure to finish the interview by asking if there was anything else the participant wanted to speak about so that I did not miss anything that they deemed significant.

The interview situation produces narratives through which participants attempt to make sense of their experiences (Riessman, 1993). It is important to recognise that these narratives are fluid and constantly reshaped by participants during the telling. Kvale (1996: 31) argues that 'the process of being interviewed may produce new insights and awareness', which was demonstrated by several participants who stated that they had not realised certain things before discussing them during the interview. Furthermore, narratives do not 'speak for themselves', and thus they need to be interpreted (Riessman, 1993: 22).

I transcribed each recording soon after the interview took place and used this as part of the analysis process, noting key themes and interesting quotations, which helped me to begin making connections across the data (Mason, 2002). Themes were constructed by the researcher based on commonalities among the transcripts and added to a codebook of themes and sub-themes which were grouped together into a logical structure (Mason, 2002). A new narrative is thus created by the researcher from the data. Therefore, the product of research is always 'our story of their story' (Oakley, 2015: 14). My analysis is grounded in quotations from the interviews to give participants' voices a prominent place in the research and so the reader can judge my interpretations, as well as make their own.

Before moving into analysis of the data, it is worth noting how, as asserted by feminists, the research process is an interaction between researcher and the researched which has a bidirectional effect. Letherby (2003: 6) remarks that the 'research field' metaphor is useful in thinking about how 'when we enter a field we make footprints on the land and are likely to disturb the environment. When we leave we may have mud on our shoes, pollen on our clothes'. This two-way impact on researcher and researched was demonstrated during my research in several ways. While I had an interest in anti-austerity activism, I had not previously been very active in the local scene (partly due to time pressures), and having to participate for research purposes enabled me to become more politically active. After the research ended I continued to be involved in local activism and to build friendships with many of my participants, some of whom are now good friends of mine. I became involved in administrating Facebook groups and organising events with other activists and have spoken openly about my research to help strengthen groups. While a positivist approach would consider this bias that negatively affects the research, I contend that, following a feminist approach, such experiences enable me to gain a fuller understanding of local activist cultures through sharing activist experiences and being immersed in the research setting.

From my participants' perspective, it was clear that participating in the research had an impact on them. Several participants found the interview process therapeutic and emotional – as evidenced by Leonie who at the end of a 90-minute interview was visibly emotional, stating “I feel all emotional now” and speaking about how good it was to remember. Following this interview and others, participants started to speak to each other about their interview experience and the thoughts and memories that it brought up, which resulted in them deciding to become active again, organising a march which was better attended than any local event in recent years. The interview space can often be a ‘welcome space for reflection’ (Maddison, 2007: 404), which encourages individuals to reflect upon their experiences more than they otherwise would have done (Oakley, 1981: 48). Leonie and other’s experience of the interview as an emotional occasion further emphasises the importance of emotion to our social lives and the necessity of researching this dimension.

Having presented a discussion of the theoretical framework that informs this research and an extended exploration of the research methodology, I now turn to analysis of the interview data focusing on the themes of how emotion and normative ideals motivate and sustain anti-austerity activism (as well as their limits) and the ways anti-austerity activists subvert dominant neoliberal discourses in their resistance to austerity. It is argued that anti-austerity activism is underlined and sustained by care; care about the injustice of austerity, care for the people impacted by austerity, and, importantly, care for one another within the activist community, as activists and fellow human beings. By enacting the moral values of collectivism and care within the everyday and as part of one’s activism, anti-austerity activists challenge neoliberal capitalism’s dominant narratives about individualism and competition, and create new forms of intersubjectivity that bolster sustained political participation.

Findings and discussion

The affective and normative as motivations for activism

Participants’ sustained political engagement is motivated by a combination of emotions and normative ideals. Joe speaks about the ‘unfairness’ of austerity, arguing that society is currently ‘wrong’ and ‘we need to pull together to change it’. Owain questions ‘the way society is run’ and Lily contends that ‘society shouldn’t be this way’. Participants reinforce Turner and Killan’s (1987: 242) contention that ‘the common element in the norms of most, and probably all, movements is the conviction that existing conditions are unjust’. Significantly it is an emotional response to this perceived injustice that motivates participants to do activism, signifying that emotions and morals combine to produce action.

The initial emotion drawn upon by participants is anger, reinforcing Jasper’s (1997: 126) assertion that ‘the passion for justice is fuelled by anger over existing injustice’. Owain states that he “hates injustice” and is moved to act by his anger at the current situation. Likewise, Beth says “I’m quite political in that

I get very irate [...] always angry and wanting to do something about it”. Martin says “I think there is a lot of anger that is still there, kind of bubbling under the surface”, suggesting that this needs to be tapped into by activists to galvanise support. Similarly, Charlotte suggests that “we should be more angry, I think we should be protesting more, we should be demonstrating more”, implying that anger incites political action. Adrian suggests that channelling his anger into activism is “therapeutic... ’cause it’s like, yeah, my anger can’t go at the world ’cause the world doesn’t owe fucking anyone anything but it can go at the injustices”. Here, protest is a healthy outlet for anger. However, Martin suggests that while anger can be a motivation for action, it needs to be translated into a longer lasting, positive movement: “so I think there is anger there and there is energy, but doing that all the time – getting people on the streets all the time won’t work unless people think that it is leading to something positive”.

Participants’ narratives reveal a widening of emotional responses and motivations; Adrian suggests that activism involves ‘channelling emotions full-stop, not just anger’. Martin asserts that he gets involved with issues ‘that I feel’, Amanda speaks of how austerity ‘breaks my heart’ and Charlotte remarks ‘I am sad about how things are going’. In particular, participants draw on empathy, an emotion which Todd (2004: 339) describes as embodying ‘both moral force and political possibility’. Participants affirm Jacobsson and Lindblom’s (2012: 57) claim that ‘the most important emotions in social movements are morally based emotions’. Jasper’s (2011: 291) notion of ‘moral batteries’ draws our attention to the combination and interaction of positive and negative emotions, where anger at injustice is combined with hope for change and this combination of negative and positive emotions (as in a battery) energises action. Indeed, Jasper (2014: 38) asserts that ‘emotions provide the motivational thrust of morality’.

Empathy: the moral emotion that motivates and sustains activism

Empathy and caring for others emerged as a central motivating and sustaining emotion for activism. Charlotte comments that her reasons for becoming politically active were ‘just sort of an empathy’. Empathy is a relatively recent Western word that draws on the traditional meanings of the Greek word ‘sympathy’, which means to feel or suffer with somebody. It connects thought and feeling by translating an idea into a feeling through the use of the imagination. Though the word itself is relatively new, this idea of ‘feeling with another person’ has a long history which can be traced throughout religious and philosophical traditions (Weber, 2011). Its contemporary use more accurately reflects the traditional use of ‘sympathy’, however, empathy is possibly used instead by participants because the popular understanding of ‘sympathy’ evokes ideas of pity, which imply a paternalism and condescension on the part of the empathiser.

Participants use empathy and compassion interchangeably, with Amanda describing her activism as ‘active compassion’. In the same way, Lampert (2005: 20) speaks of ‘radical compassion’ which drives individuals to action, Berlant

(2004: 5) refers to compassion as an ‘emotion in operation’ that can enable individuals to understand and thus try to change structural conditions of injustice, and Flores (2014) speaks about ‘public compassion’ as a social force. Emphasis is placed on being moved to act by empathy; Lampert (2005) contends that we must not view empathy as an end in itself but as a spur to social activism.

Many participants suggest that while they may personally be in a comfortable position, they are motivated to act out of empathy for other people’s plight. Dermot remarks that despite the fact that ‘I don’t need to change anything, necessarily’ his motivation for doing activism is ‘because I have empathy’. This reinforces Slote’s (2007) suggestion that action is inherent to empathy as the capacity to feel like another and to imagine their situation is enough to spur an individual to action. Jasper (2014: 31) remarks that ‘we must observe the emotions involved in the imagination: empathy and sympathy for the imagined others, which can lead to indignation on their behalf’. This element of ‘imagined’ loyalty and connection is significant as participants do not necessarily know those who they empathise with and often draw on a common humanity, rather than a tangible relationship with others, as a motivation for doing activism. In a similar way, Castells (2012) stresses the importance of empathy in networked social movements that span large geographical areas and where individuals are connected via communication technologies.

Adrian perceives acting out compassion as a moral duty grounded in care for ‘the other’. He notes how ‘it’s usually questioning for someone else and not for myself’ and that even though he may feel uncomfortable, he stands up for others ‘because this is important for this person that I do this’. Similarly, Joe suggests that he is motivated to do activism by his “social conscience”. Slote (2010: 13) contends that empathy is the basis for an ethics of caring about those who are not kin, and thus the ability to empathise provides the ‘cement of the moral universe’. Likewise, Agosta (2011: 7) asserts ‘Hume establishes sympathy as the glue that affectively binds others to oneself and, by implication, binds a community of ethical individuals together’. Mary demonstrates this by suggesting that “We have to fight for everybody. I could just go oh well I’m alright, but that doesn’t help society generally and I think it is unjust and I think our society is becoming very unbalanced in terms of wealth”. Here, Mary links caring for others to the material dimension of economic inequality and suggests that the common good needs to be placed above individual interests.

Participants perceive neoliberal capitalism to perpetuate values that are not only in opposition to empathy and caring for the collective but that actively erode such moral values. Joe contends that “it’s that kind of attitude that I just can’t make any sense of, you know, it’s giving to people in need, in desperate need, is wrong but spending it on luxuries for yourself is fine... it’s that kind of self-centred thinking that I want to get away from”. Amanda demonstrates how this selfish attitude is part of Conservative (neoliberal) ideology and announces caring for others as its opposite: “I’m not a Tory bastard, that I’m not just out for myself, that I do want to create a caring sharing world”. Likewise, Charlotte,

Alex, and Mel speak of the “greed” and “selfishness” of “Tory ideology”, contrasting the focus on individual wealth and profit with caring for others and community values. In response, participants attempt to reverse the status quo by emphasising caring and putting others before themselves. Mel contends that “any campaign and particularly the anti-austerity [movement is about] starting to care about people again”. Participants therefore construct their activism in terms of care, which involves both caring about austerity and its impacts, as well as caring about the people affected by austerity.

The limits of empathy?

However, the limits of empathy are revealed by the ‘authentic’ activist identity that participants construct. Different ‘types’ of activist are constructed and arranged into a hierarchy by participants where those without lived experiences are seen as less legitimate than those with them, who are considered to be ‘authentic’ activists. Hazel contends that without lived experiences, people’s activism is ‘inauthentic’ and ‘fake’. Authenticity is a moral value that reflects desirable qualities such as ‘credibility, originality, sincerity, naturalness, genuineness, innateness, purity, or realness’ (Grazian, 2010: 191). There is a sense that authenticity is an inherent quality that cannot be earned, yet it is paradoxically something which is defined and attributed by others. Authenticity is ‘ascribed, not inscribed’ (Moore, 2002: 209); other activists decide who is ‘authentic’ or not, it is not a quality that is self-declared.

Notably, ‘authenticity is so often associated with hardship and disadvantage’ (Grazian, 2010: 192), which is reflected by the ‘authentic activist’ being typically from a working class background who has experienced hardship. The authentic activist is amplified by its inauthentic other — the ‘middle class activist type’. Participants paint a caricature of a relatively wealthy, young activist who, at best, is out of touch with ordinary people’s lived realities and, at worst, is a ‘champagne socialist’ who should step aside to make room for ‘real’ activists:

It’s all well and good to pitch a tent in market square for a few months and claim that you’re against capitalism and when you decide you’ve had enough, go home to your parents. It’s not the same as people that have to live with these decisions, day in, day out.

Hazel draws attention to issues of privilege by highlighting the way in which such ‘middle class activist types’ have the choice to participate in actions and then walk away, not having to live the issue in the same way that those who are affected by austerity do. Therefore, while empathy is emphasised by participants as a motivation for activism, it appears that there are limits to this, and that to have an authentic understanding of certain realities (and thus an authentic motivation for activism), one must have lived experiences of them. In this respect, a distinction is created between the person experiencing the problem, austerity, and the person who seeks to alleviate it out of empathy or

compassion. Berlant (2004: 4) summarises this relationship, emphasising the divide that is created between the two individuals: ‘the operation of compassion describes a social relation between a sufferer and a compassionate one. In alleviating the pain of others – who are *over there* – the compassionate enact their social privilege’.

However, unlike Hazel who contends that only those with lived experiences of issues can speak about them, Alex argues that limiting activism in this way is problematic as it creates divides between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’:

I don't like this idea of insiders and outsiders as far as things are concerned because if you go down that path then people in comas perhaps should be the only people who can advocate for people in comas. You know what I mean? So, we have to be, we have to have solidarity with each other. And that's not about co-opting and taking over people's movements when you pretend to have, to know their interests more than they do, shouldn't be doing that. But as far as supporting, according to what people wish you to support them in then yeah, I'm all for that but yeah, I don't wish to speak for other people.

Here, solidarity is distinguished from empathy as it does not require one to understand another's experience. In the absence of understanding, we need motivation for reducing the other's suffering, which can be provided by an ethical responsibility to the other. Thus, we can have solidarity with another because we recognise our shared humanity, vulnerability, and the possibility that the other's suffering could be experienced by ourselves, all of which are underlined by the responsibility that we each have to the other (Levinas, 1969). By drawing on a shared human condition and vulnerability, solidarity does not position or privilege one individual above another (the ‘onlooker’ or the ‘compassionate one’ above the ‘sufferer’) or invoke pity, which compassion arguably does or can do (Berlant, 2004; Vitellone, 2011).

Despite tensions around ‘authentic’ motivations for activism and the limits of empathy, participants still seek to ground their reasoning for doing activism in universalist discourses about shared humanity, reflecting Harvey's (2007: 178) assertion that as dispossession is fragmented, it is difficult to fight without recourse to universal principles. Della Porta (2013: 15) speaks of activists' indignation remarking that ‘indignant is a definition of the self which manifests the outrage at the disrespect for the right of a human being, which then resonates with a widespread claim: humanity’. Reflecting this, Hazel argues that everyone having enough food to live is ‘a basic human principle’. Similarly, Jared argues that we need to respect people's inherent worth as fellow human-beings, rather than attaching a value to individuals based on their productivity or monetary worth. Likewise, Holloway (2010: 39) argues that it is not only the assertion of our own dignity that matters but others' also, rooted in ‘mutual recognition and respect’. Empathy is thus utilised by participants as a way of redefining and reasserting what it means to be human in the face of neoliberal

capitalism. Alex states that ‘having the capacity for empathy’ means ‘to be human in that sense’.

However, assumptions of a core human nature and shared humanity rest on the problematic notion that a universal ‘core’ of humanity exists once all other layers are stripped away. This is problematic because the stripping away of such layers results in differences being ignored that prevent people from being treated the same. This casts doubt on our ability to build understanding on ideas of a universal humanity and raises questions about the tension between universalism and difference. Furthermore, while such universalist discourses may have a wide appeal, there is the risk that their abstractness may result in the concepts becoming empty and lacking a real-world application. Participants overcome this by translating abstract universal concepts of empathy and humanity into concrete, particular actions in the everyday context.

Making a (small) difference and the everyday

Participants demonstrate activism as care by helping individuals and creating change in the local community. Dermot asserts “just because I might not ever change the system, you can help individuals. Which is worth doing”. He reinforces this by giving the example of a recent local protest against an individual being evicted from their property: “I haven’t stopped people being thrown out of their houses but for now we’ve stopped Tom from being thrown out of his house”. Maeckelbergh (2013) observes how in the aftermath of the crisis, across the world, ‘informal networks of solidarity’ functioned as ‘mechanisms for survival’, providing much needed material support to individuals. This understanding of solidarity as physical acts emphasises how emotion ‘does’ things (Ahmed, 2014), and links together the material and symbolic dimensions of protest. Similarly, Alison says:

I can help a person that day, so I think that’s important and I think you can fight back in your everyday life like, I don’t know, I really sort of believe in the stuff that Gramsci wrote about the everyday, like the battleground of common sense.

Mel reinforces that politics is an everyday, lived phenomenon rather than an abstract concept that is out of individuals’ control: “Because everyone has a little thing they can do, the problem is the way the propaganda machine works for politics is ‘oh politics is this huge serious thing that happens in the houses of parliament’- bollocks it does!” Mel suggests that making individual choices is a relatively easy way to start making a difference and to empower individuals. She speaks about conversations with members of the public that aim to “educate and empower” people to boycott unethical companies and to take up a more environmentally sustainable approach. The notion of individual responsibility and being able to make a difference through our choices is attractive in how it shifts away from the notion of individuals as powerless victims, instead giving them agency that can lead to mobilisation and political change.

However, neoliberal capitalism draws on and utilises people's desire to be ethically responsible, accumulating money by doing so. As Brown (2015: 27) asserts, 'caring' has become 'a market niche' with 'social responsibility' representing little more than 'the public face and market strategy of many firms today'. Often, ethical consumption choices require money as well as knowledge. While Mel attempts to help with the latter, the former is rarely recognised by participants, hinting at the ways in which privilege goes unnoticed in some respects, forming invisible barriers to becoming politically active and revealing that individuals are not equal. Indeed, neoliberal capitalism relies on individuals being unequal, creating competition between them.

Therefore, while actively fighting against neoliberal values, activists also problematically reinforce them, revealing the tensions present here and the difficult reality of resisting such a pervasive force as neoliberal capitalism, which we are all complicit in upholding. Kennelly (2014: 250) asserts how 'even within activist subcultures contesting neoliberalism, we see the cultural effects of neoliberalism at play, in particular via the belief that young people might "choose" to "change the world" through their individual actions'.

While it may not be possible to always and completely resist neoliberalism, attempts can be made to utilise and subvert its dominant discourses in ways that create an alternative, emancipatory meaning.

Activism as (individual) responsibility to the collective

Participants draw on the neoliberal responsabilisation discourse but reinvent it in ways that both appeal to the public and undermine the dominant narrative, demonstrating both a hermeneutics of faith and suspicion (Levitas, 2012). Amanda states that the neoliberal narrative says "you should stand up for yourself, take responsibility" and counters this, saying "we're not saying people shouldn't take responsibility, for me that [doing activism] is taking responsibility". Amanda's use of "we" suggests a collective identity and an activist community that is opposed to neoliberal ideology. This discourse of responsibility is transformed to mean having a duty to stand up for others and against injustice. Joe notes how, for him, activism is a responsibility to others less fortunate than him and speaks of it as "serving society". Similarly, Hazel quotes Alice Walker, saying: "activism is the rent I pay for living on the planet". There is a sense of 'giving something back', which Mel draws on raising the questions: "What is my gift? What can I give back?" Similarly, Chatterton (2005: 547) discusses 'autonomous geographies' as a collective project concerned with 'an ethic of responsibility and reciprocity'.

Participants suggest that individuals have a responsibility to make choices that alleviate suffering, as Alex says "to reduce harm", and that this is rooted in morals, ethics, and empathy. In this respect, activism is a moral duty and something that everyone should and can do. Mel asserts "it's about doing what you can, where you can". Though participants acknowledge that attempts to change things may be futile, they contend that "there is no excuse for not doing

so” (Dermot). Here, “doing something is better than doing nothing”. Dana says “Unless I try I can’t say I’ve tried... so I might be whistling in the wind but I’ll just keep whistling”. We start to see how participants place significance in the process of doing activism, regardless of its outcomes; Jasper (1997: 82) acknowledges that ‘bearing witness and “doing what’s right” are satisfying in and of themselves, lending dignity to one’s life even when stated goals are elusive’. Reinforcing this, Alison notes “but you have got to fight the fight, haven’t you? Even if you know that you’re going to lose”. While this seems negative, Alison makes the point that “although it might feel like you are arguing with people and it seems pointless I kind of think that it is important to have those arguments and to raise awareness and that by doing that you are changing things”.

While anti-austerity activism imagines an alternative future based upon normative ideals, it is simultaneously grounded in the present through every day acts. Lydia contends that ‘you can’t just do everything straight away, but activism is something that you can do’. This approach emphasises choices that can be made in the present in people’s daily lives and reflects the prefigurative politics notion of ‘be the change you want to see in the world’. Here, ‘change is possible through an accumulation of small changes, providing much-needed hope against a feeling of powerlessness’ (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006: 738). Moreover, Mel asserts that small actions add up: ‘let’s really make a difference, let’s have everybody make tiny small differences and have a bigger society that really works’.

Participants speak about individual choice in ways that emphasise working together as part of a collective, and being aware of the wider impact of small actions, rather than in terms of isolated individual acts. Thus, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Were we to consider society as a machine, in the eyes of participants it is empathy, or solidarity, which acts as the oil that maintains its functioning. This holistic thinking is constructed by participants in opposition to the dominant, neoliberal notion of individualism which instead reflects selfishness, competition, and therefore disconnect from others.

Despite the difficulties that they face, participants’ narratives are underpinned by a sense of possibility. Mel quotes the Chinese proverb: ‘keep a green tree in your heart and maybe the singing bird will come’. Crucially, she emphasises the importance of ‘maybe’: ‘it *might* happen, but it also may not. However, wouldn’t you feel better at the end of your life having done something? You’ve got to at least try’. This element of possibility and uncertainty, rather than leading to doubt or despair, inspires hope which compels participants to ‘keep whistling’, regardless of the wind. Again, we see how emotions combine with moral values and a sense of wider responsibility to propel individuals to action. Solnit (2005: 5) reinforces that ‘hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope... because hope should shove you out the door’. Furthermore, Kiwan (2017: 134) suggests that action in turn creates hope: ‘it is the *act* of doing, its performativity, which creates hope through possibility. This does not mean that they envision that change is imminent, but rather, it reflects an individual

commitment to an ongoing process, rather than expecting a “result” or arriving at a particular moment in time.’

For many participants, doing activism is in part about how they wish to perceive themselves and how they wish to be perceived by others. As Jasper (1997: 136) asserts that ‘doing the right thing is a way of communicating, to ourselves, as well as others, what kind of people we are’. To not do activism is seen to be a negative reflection on an individual’s character; Owain states: “I can’t not fight, I wouldn’t be able to look myself in the mirror if I didn’t”. Participants refer to doing activism as a “moral imperative”, emphasising its vital importance. This is different from the notion of activism being a moral duty that everyone should do, as it forms a key part of participants’ identity. Anti-austerity activism, then, becomes a way of being for participants who attempt to forge spaces of resistance to the wider neoliberal society, where the collective is privileged over the individual and humanist values are enacted. This reflects what Kiwan (2017: 123) refers to as ‘understandings of social change as a “way of living”’, where it is the ‘activity of activism’ that is important, conceiving social change ‘not as a vocation but as a way of life’. In this respect, activism has value in itself, regardless of the outcomes. Lily refers to activism as her “purpose in life” and Harry says it is “a defining part of my identity”. Alison says:

I guess that [activism] motivates me in my life and for some other people that’s money. They will probably get a bit further than I do, but that is what motivates, that is what gets me up in the morning, I suppose.

Alison contrasts activism with neoliberal, capitalist values reflecting the construction of a selfish individualistic attitude versus caring about the collective, though she appears to have internalised part of this narrative that progress is related to monetary gain.

Significantly, participants enact such values of community and solidarity within their activist culture, demonstrating the emotional and personal benefits of caring for others through their relationships with one another.

The sustaining force of the social and affective dimensions of activism

Participants’ narratives reveal the varied ways in which social relations and emotion motivate and sustain activism. A key element of this is the strong sense of solidarity and community between activists that developed through their shared emotion and activities.

It felt and to look around and see all these people, wow, actually this is something that people care about and people think this is wrong. And it makes you feel, sometimes you feel like you are on your own, you are the only one who has

noticed this or who is bothered about this, and it makes you feel actually it is not just me. (Leonie)

I just don't feel like anyone was taking these issues serious and it was just reassuring to see that there was loads of other people out there that not only had your views but were passionate about them to... go and do something about it. I guess that's why they [Uncut] were really appealing... it wasn't just me out there thinking 'oh my god, I can't believe all of this crap is happening'. (Tony)

Adrian suggests that meeting new people "who are exciting and speak their mind" can reinvigorate his participation when he is feeling disillusioned or fed up: "it [meeting new activists] sort of ignited a flame again". Forming these relationships through activism enriched participants lives; Mary says "I just meet loads of people. I have developed so many friends in a whole sphere of places over the years that I have been active and I would miss all of that. If I hadn't engaged in it I wouldn't have all of those links really".

The bonds between activists that developed through shared experiences were enduring; Joe explains that sharing political beliefs and joint experiences of activism is "quite intimate" and helps friendships to develop. Similarly, Amanda speaks of the special bonds she shares with other activists as a "deeper thing" and Alex asserts that such bonds are "empowering and inspiring". In fact, Adrian recalls meeting Alex as "almost something spiritual... it was just an understanding that came without words" and describes them as "almost like brothers". Likewise, Leonie speaks about a particularly difficult time for her:

That year was a horrible, horrible year for me and, probably one of the worst years that I have had [...] and the people that were there for me and kept me going and were like my family, were the people that I met through Uncut. Whereas longer standing friends didn't really get it so much. They [Uncut people] were the people who bolstered me when I was really at my lowest point.

Corrigall-Brown (2012: 84) suggests that social ties can be developed during engagement which help participants deal with the emotional impact of difficult times. Similarly, Brown and Pickerill (2009: 33) emphasise the significance of *caring* for one another; one of their interviewees remarks "the connections we have at that level are incredibly deep". Here, we see the importance of caring for other activists as well as the issues and those who are affected by them, with these new relationships that develop through shared emotion and morality helping to sustain on-going activism in the face of perceived failure to impact policy.

Conclusion

It becomes clear that anti-austerity politics is about more than merely preserving social protections of the past and influencing social policy. It is also

about challenging neoliberalism and raising normative and moral questions about how society should function and how human beings should act. Haiven and Khasnabish (2014: 3) contend that anti-austerity politics encapsulates the 'radical imagination' which imagines society in ways it might be, considering possible, positive, futures and finding a way to 'bring these back' to 'work on the present, to inspire action and new forms of solidarity today'. In this sense, it involves a prefigurative political approach, acting in ways that constitute better alternatives to the current situation. The radical imagination builds upon this to aid feelings of empathy for others and produces solidarity. Crucially, the radical imagination is 'not a thing that individuals possess in greater or lesser quantities but [...] a collective process, something that groups do and do together' (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014: 4). Here, the active, intersubjective, and affective dimensions of movements are emphasised.

Rather than conceiving of social movements as 'things' but 'as products of the collective labour and imagination of those who actually constitute them' (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2013: 479), exploring the everyday processes of lived and felt experiences of political participation, reveals that activists are concerned with spreading wider moral and normative ideals of equality, justice, empathy, community, and humanity. Further, these normative ideals are not merely rational values but are *felt* by individuals as an emotional response to the current context of neoliberal capitalism, demonstrating the intertwining of thinking and feeling, and challenging the traditional emotion/reason dichotomy. The combination of such moral ideals and strong emotions sustains anti-austerity activism over a long period of time because it is about more than achieving the instrumental goal of ending austerity.

Furthermore, sharing such emotions and morality with others forms the foundations for enduring social bonds and new relationships that bolster individuals and sustain their activism despite apparent failure to impact policy. The continued existence of anti-austerity activism, then, encourages academic analyses to widen their understanding of political engagement and to refocus attention on the process rather than the ends, reflecting the approach taken by the movements themselves. In this respect, we move towards an understanding of movements as 'living spaces of encounter, possibility, contestation, and conflict' (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2013: 479) which involves 'the formation and continuation of new social relationships, new subjectivities, and a new-found dignity' (Sitrin, 2012: 14). It is important to recognise such processes and their impacts given the ways in which they help to sustain activism and combine individualism and collectivism in a neoliberal capitalist context that pitches the two in opposition to one another.

This article has explored how anti-austerity activism is motivated and sustained by a combination of the affective and the normative, with a focus on the moral emotion of empathy, normative ideals about how society should be and how individuals should act towards one another. It has demonstrated that such abstract, universal ideals and discourses about empathy for a shared humanity are translated into concrete, particular actions through how participants enact

activism as a form of care in the everyday. Here, participants emphasise “doing something rather than nothing” and suggest that small acts can make a significant difference. Anti-austerity activists challenge neoliberal capitalism’s and austerity’s attack on human dignity by reaffirming what it means to be human, understood as feeling and caring for others, constructing notions of a common humanity in the process. This involves the reinterpretation and subversion of dominant neoliberal discourses to emphasise the collective and common good over selfish individualism and to conceive of activism as an individual responsibility to others.

Anti-austerity activism, then, becomes a way of being for participants who attempt to forge spaces of resistance to the wider neoliberal society, where the collective is recognised and nurtured, and where humanist values are enacted. While this article has focused specifically on anti-austerity activism, it is worth remembering that, often, a combination of aligned political causes comprise such spaces of resistance, with anti-austerity activism forming one part of a wider, holistic activist community and vision that seeks to create a more caring and fairer society. However, anti-austerity activism is an intriguing case study given the diversity of its participants, with activists being “not just the usual suspects” (as one interviewee explained). Further, as previously noted, austerity is a thread that runs through many campaigns, meaning the wider anti-austerity movement is made up by a range of groups with porous boundaries. It is the over-arching notion and experience of activism as care for the issues, people affected by issues such as austerity, and, crucially, for one another as activists and as human beings, that is the thread which runs through and connects such individuals and groups within a wider space of resistance to the dominant power structures. This is revealed by paying close attention to the lived and felt dimension of political participation and listening carefully during the quiet mundane moments of social movements. Doing so loudly reaffirms the central role of emotions and relationships to social life, thus contributing to the rising voices that seek to shatter sociology’s ‘silence about the sphere of fellow feelings, the we-ness that makes society into society’ (Alexander, 2006: 53).

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