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Exclusion and Sense of Displacement Under Austerity: Experiences from Young Adults in Ballymun, Dublin

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Abstract

This article explores exclusion and sense of displacement through the austerity experiences of young adults in Ballymun, a disadvantaged urban neighbourhood in Dublin, Ireland. Such youth encountered exclusion on the labour market, urban housing, and support services. As austerity intensified urban exclusion, youth's affective relations with their neighbourhood, their city, and the state transformed. Using the concept 'at-homeness', it is argued that reduced income and funding for social services resulted locally in a partial 'sense of displacement'. Nationally, the class character of austerity reduced sense of belonging as youth felt betrayed and unfairly treated. It is argued that social, economic and political developments affect at-homeness, and that reduced sense of belonging induced by austerity can lead to a sense of displacement, not through physical movement, but by estrangement from the places one inhabits through processes of abandonment. Therefore, sense of displacement is expanded beyond gentrification as it can emerge from socio-economic transformations in a more-or-less stable physical and demographic environment.

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Keywords

Austerity; sense of displacement; exclusion; Ireland; austerity urbanism; youth

Introduction

Two processes stand out when considering displacement and exclusion in the lived experiences of austerity in Ballymun, one of the most deprived urban neighbourhoods of Dublin, Ireland. First, the effects of austerity and recession result in exclusion from the neighbourhood and the city for young adults looking for independence. Second, spatial relations are transformed in the context of austerity. These transformations lead to a 'sense of displacement' (Valli, 2016), predominantly at the national scale and partly on the local scale. Although physical displacement was absent for participants, 'affective displacement' resulted in estrangement from the country and, partly, the neighbourhood they inhabited (Butcher and Dickens, 2016). This essay contributes to discussions on displacement in two ways. First, it considers a sense of displacement of inhabitants following forms of abandonment and without alternative places or neighbourhoods to move to. Second, beyond previous contributions on displacement pressure and affective displacement (Butcher and Dickens, 2016; Marcuse, 1985; Valli, 2016), it moves these themes beyond gentrification and explores them in the context of austerity urbanism (Peck, 2012), which in Ireland both excludes disadvantaged youth from 'decent' urban life and potentially leads to spatial alienation on multiple scales.

Austerity in Ireland

In Ireland, the almost simultaneous bursting of a home-grown property bubble and the shock of the 2008 international financial crisis resulted in a fierce austerity regime (O'Riain, 2014; Whelan, 2009;). As construction came to a nation-wide halt, property-based revenue dried up, and spending on unemployment benefits soared – in 2007, 15.0% of employment was in construction or construction-related sectors (Drudy and Collins, 2011; Kearns, 2014). A blanket asset guarantee of all six Irish banks made the state responsible for debts and deposits up to €485bn, of which €64bn was eventually spent (Fraser et al., 2013). To regain control over state finances, an austerity programme was implemented. This proved insufficient, and late 2010 the 'Troika' – the tripartite commission of the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission, and the European Central Bank – bailed-out Ireland on condition of more austerity. Between 2008 and 2013, austerity totalled €28.8bn in tax increases and spending cuts (Whelan, 2014). Although in 2015, then Minister for Finance Michael Noonan declared that the era of austerity was over, six years of spending cuts and reforms had a dramatic and long-lasting impact on Irish society (Kearns et al., 2014).

For youth, austerity and recession meant increasing unemployment, precarious labour conditions, reduced social welfare, raised education fees,

intensified labour activation programmes, and a decline in public, community and voluntary services. Although austerity widely affected Irish society, low-income and low-wealth groups were among the hardest hit (Fraser et al., 2013; Peck, 2012). In Ballymun, unemployment was far above the national average – 19.0% vs. 11.8% in 2011 (CSO, 2011). As crisis particularly affects youth (Murphy, 2014; Verick, 2009), it is argued that Ballymun youth is among the most severely hit by recession and austerity. Nationally, youth unemployment (18 to 25) was above average before the crisis, rose faster, and remained higher - 16.0% vs. 7.0% in July 2016 (Kelly et al., 2015; CSO, 2016). I studied this group to illuminate experiences of those hardest hit by austerity, following Sassen's (2014) claim that so-called extreme cases make visible otherwise invisible 'subterranean trends' affecting society as a whole. Furthermore, this age group represents the first generation that grew up under neoliberalism and coming of age during a crisis (McGuigan, 2016). Therefore, this article builds on fieldwork with 20 young adults aged 18 to 25 living in Ballymun, Dublin.

Multiple Exclusions

Starting from young adults' experiences of austerity and recession prevents a primacy of policy in austerity research (Youdell and McGimpsey, 2015). The austerity experiences of participating Ballymun youth indicated three main spheres of exclusion; the labour market, housing, and support services (van Lanen, 2017). Fieldwork was carried out from August to November 2015, and included in-depth interviews with 20 young people aged 18 to 25 and living in Ballymun. These interviews discussed the participants' experiences with austerity and its effects on their everyday life. Participants were recruited via gatekeepers such as youth centres, training facilities, cultural facilities, and sports clubs, and interviews often took place on the premises of these institutions. This method enabled an exploration of the diverse and cumulative consequences of austerity and insights into its affective and emotional impacts (Hitchen, 2019).

At the time of research, both unemployment and involuntary part-time employment rates for the age group 15 to 24 in Ireland were above average (CSO, 2016; Glassdoor, 2016). Unemployment benefits for youth under 25 were specifically reduced to encourage individuals into work or education. Financial pressure and increased, sometimes punitive, activation measures further facilitate ongoing precarisation (Murphy and Loftus, 2015), while part-time income supplement reforms reduced eligibility and thus protection against insufficient part-time income. Therefore, only a few participants generated an adequate income through work, while others combined part-time work with subsidised courses or depended heavily on overtime, if in employment at all. Having a low income excluded participants from social life, consumer goods, and housing opportunities, and thus limited their participation in urban life. Several participants had to decline invitations, give up long-term hobbies, and social relations beyond the neighbourhood could no longer be sustained. Furthermore, declining neighbourhood

income resulted in 'time-space expansion' (van Lanen, 2017); basic amenities left the area and inhabitants became removed from vital services.

Housing opportunities are intricately connected to developments in property and construction (Hearne et al., 2014), which played a vital role in Ireland's economic boom and bust (Kitchin et al., 2012). In Ballymun, having the lowest rents of Dublin, at least twice the minimum wage was required for an affordable one-bedroom apartment[1] (Kapila, 2016). Most participants lived with parents or other caretakers and experienced difficulties finding affordable independent housing. Insufficient income excluded Ballymun youth from homeownership or private rent while rising demand for social housing and disinvestment resulted in a 60% increase of households waiting for public housing in the period between 2008 and 2013 (O'Connor and Staunton, 2015). Apart from a waiting list disadvantage following young age, Irish social housing supply is family oriented and generally unsuitable for young and single people (Threshold, 2010). The combination of falling income, rising rents, and reduced access to social housing thus excluded participants from affordable housing.

Traditionally, state, community, and voluntary services assisted the navigation of deprivation and exclusion. Austerity slashed funding availability for organisations and thus reduced or discontinued their services (Harvey, 2012). This consolidated and intensified exclusion as the availability of social and professional opportunities diminished. Austerity, in ideology and practice, excluded youth from services for personal development, leisure, or other support. These spheres of austerity encounters contributed to the increased exclusion of disadvantaged urban youth from 'decent urban living'. Thus, limited income, reduced access to affordable housing, and a lack of support might challenge a sense of belonging experienced in the neighbourhood and the city.

Pressure of Displacement and Gentrification

Studying the relations between gentrification, abandonment and displacement, Marcuse (1985) identified four forms of displacement that affect especially populations of lower economic status. First, last-resident displacement where the last inhabitant moves out of a dwelling to leave it abandoned. Second, chain-displacement, where another tenant fills the void left by a displaced household. Third, exclusionary displacement, which signifies the inability of a household to move into a dwelling because of rising rents or abandonment, and thus relates to a household's incapability to live where it otherwise would have lived. Finally, Marcuse adds 'pressure of displacement' to describe the processes through which the liveability of an area declines for specific households. Such pressure includes the moving away of friends and family, a change in neighbourhood atmosphere,

[1] Based on a 35.7 hours per week and affordable defined as a rent not over 30% of pre-tax income.

transformations in available consumption through retail turnover and the abandoning of a neighbourhood by public or private services.

For this paper, which considers a sense of displacement experienced without actual physical displacement, this pressure of displacement is most interesting. The situation in Ballymun, however, asks for a reconceptualization of this pressure of displacement. Marcuse (1985) and Slater (2009) conceptualise displacement pressure through cultural neighbourhood transformations reflective of increasing social status during processes of gentrification. In Ballymun, however, the experienced spatial alienation does not directly result from an inflow of more wealthy inhabitants followed by services which cater to these new inhabitants. Instead, a decline in place attachment follows downward transformations of how consumers and producers are valued on wider scalar levels (Sassen, 2014).

Since 2008, the economic crisis has transformed processes of displacement (Annunziata and Lees, 2016). Beyond physical displacement as a result of new and intensified forms of speculative activity, in Ireland the rapid change in value systems following the boom and bust of the economy affected experiences of place (van Lanen, 2018). As a sudden event, gradual adaptations to adjust to a new spatial imaginary were impossible, disrupting the urban meanings which shape social and cultural interactions (Manzo, 2012). Annunziata and Lees (2016) have addressed displacement in the context of austerity in Southern Europe, although their focus remained upon displacement in relation to gentrification. Again, the absence of actual physical displacement in Ballymun under austerity does not signify the absence of a sense of displacement but rather a rise in spatial alienation without alternative places to go or be displaced to.

Turning to the question of displacement without physical dislocation, Valli (2016) speaks of a sense of displacement which arises from the emotional, affective, and psychological responses to changing demographics in gentrifying neighbourhoods. Inhabitants can experience a ‘loss of place’ when they are longer able to make place the way they used to. Similarly, Butcher and Dickens (2016) describe the loss of belonging following the classed and cultural interactions which accompany gentrification as ‘affective displacement’. For these authors, loss of place is experienced as long-term inhabitants feel othered by newcomers and experience anger over competing claims with more privileged gentrifiers. Similarly, Manzo (2012) describes the situation where people have the right to remain in place but their feelings of belonging decrease in the context of everyday changes under gentrification as ‘moral displacement’. Here, I expand sense of displacement beyond gentrification, the encounter of newcomers, and changing patterns of consumption. Employing austerity experiences of Ballymun youth, I show that a sense of displacement can also arise within a relatively stable physical and social environment.

Sense of Displacement Under Austerity

As austerity intensified exclusion in Dublin, it transformed the relations of Ballymun youth with their neighbourhood, the city, and the state. I use the concept of at-homeness to consider sense of belonging under austerity. At-homeness is "the usually unnoticed, taken-for-granted situation of being comfortable in and familiar with the everyday world" (Seamon, 1979, 70). For Seamon, feeling at-home has five elements; (1) rootedness; a sense of belonging developed over time (2) appropriation; a sense of possession or control over place; (3) regeneration; allowing physical and mental restoration; (4) at-easeness; the possibility to be oneself; and (5) warmth; an atmosphere of friendliness and support. Regeneration is excluded from this analysis as it hardly emerged during the interviews. At-homeness relates to the physical, social, cultural, and economic characteristics of a place, and can thus transform without clear 'objective' physical changes (Rose, 1995).

In the neighbourhood, rootedness remained strong. As participants grew up in the neighbourhood, their extensive social relations spread throughout Ballymun. Nonetheless, the reduction and unaffordability of services diminished their sense of appropriation. Therefore, the possibilities of fulfilling professional and personal needs in the neighbourhood declined. In participants' leisure activities, for example, the absence of formal leisure activities and exclusionary practices in public space were often mentioned. Donna, 23 years old, for example, stated that "you can't go, like just go into a pool hall or anything, like. We used to have one but, like, they're all just shut down, like, and everything, everything just keeps getting closed down or moved". Like Donna, participants often mentioned declining opportunities as the reduction of available services such as youth clubs, leisurely facilities and support organisations. Such services are vital to constructing a comfortable atmosphere in which people live. Through the reduced access to both publicly funded and private services in Ballymun, its inhabitants suffer a sense of displacement rooted in abandonment, the inability to experience this comfortable atmosphere, and the impossibility to move somewhere that does. Sense of displacement in Ballymun reflects what Manzo (2012) calls 'moral displacement', as youth remains in place but their sense of belonging decreases in response to a changing environment.

Following such service decline, youth increasingly spent time on the streets, where Gardaí[2] challenged youthful neighbourhood appropriation by sending youth away or threatening them with arrest. Orla, for example, recalls the Gardaí approaching and dispersing the group of people she was hanging out with: "…sometimes they [Gardaí] get section eight on and all, and you get sent home, and if you're seen you kinda get arrested, like. … I don't know what that is. … That's what they say, section eight". For Annunziata and Lees (2016), displacement includes such exclusion from particular places. Although enacted temporally, such temporary and repetitive exclusion from public space contributed to the sense of displacement in Ballymun. Furthermore, as the street became increasingly imagined

[2] Members of the Garda Síochána, the police service of the Republic of Ireland.

as a place of trouble, in part because of these encounters with law enforcement, reduced at-easeness of public space made some participants retreat into private the private sphere.

Overall, the closure of services and inability to participate in social activities and sports negatively affected feelings of warmth in the neighbourhood. Michael, who worked in one of Ballymun's youth centres, appreciated enabling social activities and personal guidance through his work. Simultaneously, he lamented the lack of funding required to expand these services.

> …I know what good work this building does, like, but it's only so much it can take in, like, and as I said with budget cuts and stuff like that … this building could offer a lot more but it wouldn't… (Michael, 24)

Like Michael, participants felt that the inability of participation prevented the formation of dense community ties. So although rootedness remained strong, other at-homeness factors clearly declined, sometimes leading to self-exclusion in the private sphere. Belonging was contextually affected both negatively and positively; the neighbourhood served simultaneously as a secure haven through familiarity and rootedness and as a spatialisation of everyday feelings of unease and hardship. Among a strong sense of place, nonetheless, feelings of displacement could develop as some opportunities for belonging diminished in the neighbourhood.

Equally, rootedness remained strong on the city scale, although it was spatially differentiated. Rootedness was especially strong in 'north-side Dublin'[3], the area which encompassed social relations beyond Ballymun. These neighbourhoods serve as a space to escape the daily experience of deprivation in Ballymun into physically, personally and culturally close areas. Rootedness, including the desire to remain in Dublin, contained financial-practical elements; participants expected worse employment opportunities outside Dublin. Although the city felt less 'appropriable', predominantly by higher costs preventing Ballymun youth from participation, the sense of appropriation at the city scale did not seem to change with austerity. Such discomforts in Dublin city centre are experienced as exclusion and stigmatisation attached to Ballymun. Hannah, for example, stated "I actually have people visibly walk, take a step back from me, because I'm from Ballymun, because people just assume we're all, pardon my French, but we're all scumbags". Despite experiences such as Hannah's, participants used the city for non-locally available amenities, even when the city was widely perceived to be stricter and more judgemental towards Ballymun inhabitants. This affected at-easeness among participants. At-easeness, too, varied spatially, with north Dublin experienced as more at-ease than the city centre. However, at-easeness did not seem significantly affected by austerity and recession. Some participants felt hostility from Dublin City

[3] In Dublin the 'north side' and 'south side' also function as identity signifiers, where the north side is working class and the south side more affluent.

Council, identified as a source of austerity, which increased feelings of urban abandonment. Overall, the dependence on non-locally available services and employment preserved a sense of place and belonging at the city scale, and thus prevented intensified feelings of displacement.

Finally, a sense of displacement clearly existed at the national level, predominantly referring to actions by the Irish State. Many participants perceived the crisis as clearly rooted in Ireland. Although they were aware of similar situations in other countries, they saw the crisis and recession as specifically Irish. In comparison to other countries, which they deemed fairer, they often portrayed Ireland as having incapable leaders:

> I'd go over to Canada or some, or Australia, I'd go anywhere rather than this country, somewhere where you get treated right, like, where everyone is treated fairly. (Ian, 18)

> …it's hard to say what they [the government] done right, … I think there's loads of things that is wrong, and the most vulnerable people get the blunt of it, all the time, you know, between cuts and taking things away… (Donna, 23)

Ian, for example, clearly paints Ireland as an exception among countries who 'treat everyone right', while Donna strongly blames the Irish government for the way they handled the crisis. Similarly, several participants addressed special incompetence to Irish politicians and bankers, feeding a sense of betrayal as 'politicians', 'suits', and 'bankers' were destroying the country built by the 'general population'. Distrust towards politicians negatively affected feelings of appropriation of the state through, for example, voting. Most participants voted or would vote, but scepticism and uncertainty fuelled feelings of minimal influence on State direction and policy. In the eyes of many participants, Ireland failed to care for the poor and 'little' people. This growing us-them divide reduced at-easeness at the national scale. Like rootedness, this divide and the experienced non-care for marginalised populations was considered particularly Irish, and participants deemed citizen-relations in other countries more fair and just. Nationally, the increasing divide between the powerful and marginalised, especially youth, negatively affected sense of belonging and disconnect among parts of the population (van Lanen, 2018). As youth's sense of belonging declined with austerity, a sense of displacement developed as they could no longer make place in ways they were used to (Valli, 2016).

Conclusion

Austerity entered the everyday lifeworld of young adults living in Ballymun through varied and multiple sources – exclusion from the labour market and adequate income, reduced access to affordable housing, and the reduction and closure of support services (van Lanen, 2017). In this essay, I employed at-homeness to explore how these multiple exclusions affect the multi-scalar spatial relations of youth with the spaces they inhabit (Seamon, 1979). Using a four-level approach to assess spatial

relations of belonging and sense of place, I argue that variegated dynamics operate at different scales. At the urban level, spatial relations are relatively stable. Locally, in the neighbourhood, both positive and negative feelings develop or intensify under austerity, while nationally at-homeness decreased through the experience of heightened inequality and powerlessness. In the narratives of participants, this deterioration of spatial relations at the national scale is specifically spatialized to Ireland. In gentrifying neighbourhoods, Manzo (2012) described occurrences of 'uneasy cohabitation' between various groups. Under the Irish austerity regime, uneasy cohabitation did not necessarily emerge in the neighbourhood of Ballymun, but Ballymun youth did become more aware of uneasy cohabitation within the city of Dublin and the country of Ireland. Therefore, I propose to extend the concept of uneasy cohabitation to the multi-scalar spatial alienation and sense of displacement as exhibited by Ballymun youth.

Physical displacement did not occur among participants in this project, although several knew family or friends leaving to the 'countryside' in search of cheaper accommodation. Nonetheless, their spatial relations were affected. Spatial alienation does not always result in spatial displacement, or in the words of Marcuse (1985, 214), "[i]f households under pressure of displacement do not choose to move, it is probably because of a lack of alternatives, rather than a lack of pressure". These experiences of 'sense of displacement in place' are an invitation to (re)consider exclusion, displacement, and socio-spatial justice in the context of the financial crisis and austerity (Slater, 2009). Annunziata and Lees (2016) claim eviction and displacement as a collective rather than an individual problem. Austerity and its effects on sense of displacement (Valli, 2016), pressure of displacement (Marcuse, 1985; Slater, 2009), and moral displacement (Manzo, 2012) should similarly be treated as a collective issue with socio-spatially divergent outcomes affecting the quality of urban life in its totality.

Previous studies of displacement predominantly focussed on pressures of displacement generated in the direct environment of a residence or within a neighbourhood (Marcuse, 1985; Slater, 2009). However, the wider encompassing nature of austerity, which affects whole cities and countries (Peck, 2012), is similarly capable of creating a spatial alienating forging a disconnect between inhabitants and their place of residence. This sense of displacement under austerity arises from the socio-political context beyond the neighbourhood. Austerity thus contributes to the processes that create pressure of displacement by abandonment through cuts to social welfare, disinvestment in public services and experiences of social exclusion. Furthermore, austerity's overarching presence leaves those experiencing this sense of displacement with nowhere to go, resulting in desires of living in fairer places which are predominantly imagined outside of Ireland.

These wider social, economic, and political developments affect feelings of belonging, at-homeness, and sense of place. And although Ballymun youth is not physically displaced, feelings of community uprootedness, falling sense of belonging and at-homeness and a transforming sense of place create a sense of displacement

(Butcher and Dickens, 2016; Valli, 2016). As this sense of displacement did not result from an influx of new inhabitants and cultural transformations (Marcuse, 1985; Slater, 2009), I propose to expand sense of displacement beyond the demographic developments related to gentrification. This sense of displacement is not caused by physical movement of inhabitants or others, but by the qualitative transformation of the inhabited places and feelings of abandonment. Physical place stays, more-or-less, the same, but socio-economic changes transform the spaces participants inhabited and thoroughly affect the relations and experiences tied to these places. This confirms, once more, that space and place are created relationally and depend on their institutional, socio-economic and cultural contexts.

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