Manufacturing the right way to be in debt: Can psychologists explore the UK debt industry?

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There has been a significant increase in personal debt in the United Kingdom (UK) in recent years and this increase in personal debt, and the associated strain and suffering, has been particularly skewed toward those on a lower income. This article suggests that personal debt can best be understood as a symptom of the activities of problematic politico-economic regimes. In particular, it explores the role of the UK government and draws critical parallels between the management of problems of personal debt and the management of experiences of employment and mental distress. The paper concludes by exploring the lamentable contribution of psychologists to the understanding of indebtedness, poverty and subjective suffering. This is particularly important in the collective failure to explore, and make public, the relative importance of the political and the economic institutions dependent on the continuation of poverty and debt. Suggestions are made for a critical community psychology that explores, critiques, and contests the macroscopic institutions and actors that construct, negotiate and benefit from personal debt in the UK.

In the last few years in the United Kingdom (UK), casual viewers of the television and print media would find it extraordinarily difficult to avoid ruminations on the potentially ruinous state of the UK's national debt crises. State borrowing, frequently positioned as part of an international response to prevent a global depression, has received considerable coverage, with an array of public figures sensing the opportunity to make political capital through grave judgements on the consequences of such financial profligacy. In the midst of this political manoeuvring there has been little public speculation on experiences of personal or consumer debt in the UK.

However, the fact that personal debt has largely escaped the kind of media coverage that the national debt has incurred should not be taken as an indication of its non-problematic status. Currently, the average debt (including mortgages) owed by every UK adult is £30,190 (about AUD$44,108) (Creditaction, 2009). More importantly, personal debt in the UK continues to increase (Edwards, 2003). From 1993 to 2009 we have seen a steady increase in total credit card debt and the Citizen's Advice Bureau, a free national legal and financial advice service**,** recently reported 9,300 new debt problems every day (Creditaction, 2009). Indeed they report that the number of their clients with debt is continuing to rise in response to the recent recession (Citizen's Advice Bureau, 2009). Just under half of their debt clients are also in fuel poverty.

As of October 2009, 25% of people in the UK were currently struggling to cope with their monthly bills and 39% described themselves as 'being in trouble' if they had to find £50 (about AUD$73) extra per month (Creditaction, 2009). Almost half of those who described themselves as being in serious debt were too scared to take action because of the social stigma attached to it. Of a sample of people who had experienced mental distress or had used a mental health service in the previous two years, 70% had been unable to pay a bill at the final reminder in the previous 12 months (Mind, 2008).

At this juncture, it is important to be explicit about the nature of the distribution of personal debt in the UK. While it is certainly the case that personal debt generally becomes more problematic during a recession, it should be noted that the current crises of personal debt has been building for a number of years. By mid-2009, almost every local authority reported increased demands on services due to the recession; however, many high unemployment neighbourhoods have remained disadvantaged through growth and recession over the decades (Tunstall, 2009). Moreover, the extent of personal debt should not necessarily be understood as being experienced equally by all members of society. A review of qualitative evidence with low income families in the UK suggests that the everyday demands of sustaining a family life often result in severe financial problems and debt (Ridge, 2009). Many families had little access to affordable credit and so were forced to consider accessing dangerously expensive credit. A recent poll by the Resolution Foundation found that 3 million low earners now worry ‘all the time’ about their personal finances (Creditaction, 2009) and recent work by the Department of Trade and Industry (2005) supports this by stating that those overrepresented on over-indebtedness are typically those who earn less than £9,500 (about AUD$13,880) per annum and/or are renting accommodation. Most indices of national relative poverty (typically below 60% of the median national income) would stipulate the group of people in this income bracket as living in relative poverty.

And while the UK government may celebrate the purportedly small number of people in the UK who experience problem debt (Department of Trade and Industry, 2005), the fact that 64% of people on annual incomes of less than £9,500 have problem debt suggests that the experience of personal debt is particularly distressing for those living in relative poverty. This skewing of high personal debt, and the distress associated with trying to manage this debt, has been supported by the Citizen’s Advice Bureau who noted that their debt clients tended to be ‘particularly poor, with a high proportion of people in receipt of means tested benefits’ (Edwards, 2003). Moreover the Citizen’s Advice Bureau have noted in recent years that there has been a move from priority debts (debts where non-payment can incur serious legal action, e.g., council tax, mortgage, utility bills) to credit debts with low income being one of the key factors determining the size of the client’s total debt.

So, there has been a significant increase in personal debt in recent years and this increase in personal debt, and the associated strain and suffering, has been particularly skewed toward those on a lower income. The experience of poverty and severe financial strain is utterly immiserating and is characterised by subjectivities that are both inevitably and powerfully traumatising (Moreira, 2003; Nettleton & Burrows, 2001). The scale of relative poverty in the UK is particularly problematic with nearly 13 million people and nearly 30% (3.8 million) of children living in relative poverty. This figure is considerable higher than the majority of the UK’s European neighbours (Luxembourg Income Study, 2009; Walker, 2007) and the UK has the fourth worst income poverty of 24 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF], 2007). The remainder of this paper will explore the social and political processes that have come to sustain personal debt in recent years. It will contest current prevailing government and mainstream academic discourse that institutionally fails to recognise the deliberate and systematic manufacture of consumer debt as a strategic economic and political strategy and an act of political and social violence that perpetuates enormous suffering.

UK Government Discourse on Personal Debt

An analysis of UK government policy literature in recent years suggests that the government are largely aware of the problematic area of personal debt. Indeed a recent report from the Department of Trade and Industry (2006) accepted that there had been a significant increase in contact with debt advice agencies in the previous calendar year and that telephone calls to a national debt line had increased by 43% from the year before. There has been a recognition that the average amount owed per household with an outstanding credit commitment went from £1,570 to £3,220 (about AUD$2,294 to $4,705) between 2002 and 2007 (Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, 2007).

However, the 2006 Department of Trade and Industry (2006) report notes that it is still only a small but significant minority that suffer from indebtedness (defined as the experience of bills and credit commitments becoming a major burden), although there is an acceptance that over-borrowing is a problem particularly associated with low income groups. The prevailing construction of personal debt found in recent policy literature is that of debt as the personal problem of a small group of feckless and/or financially illiterate people. This discourse of personal financial irresponsibility is central not only to the UK government's construction of the problem but to their construction of the solution to this problem. A number of documents and textual resources (Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, 2007; Department for Business Innovation and Skill, 2009; Department of Trade and Industry, 2006) have stated clearly that there is a need for an "increase in levels of financial capability and awareness alongside more transparent financial literature so individuals can take control of their finances" (Department of Trade and Industry, 2006, p. 11) and address the process where "those lacking essential financial skills, including the ability to budget sensibly, may over-commit themselves by taking on excessive debts" (Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, 2007, p. 4).

To this end, the Department of Work and Pensions mobilised their resources with the 'Now Let's Talk Money' campaign and an original commitment of £45m (about AUD$66m) to a financial inclusion fund for free debt advice (Department for Business Innovation and Skill, 2009). As part of the government commitment to social justice and prosperity for all (Department for Business Innovation and Skill, 2009), and by way of servicing their rhetorical construction of personal debt as the result of a regrettably ignorant public's financial incompetence, we have seen plans to embed financial capability in the national curriculum by including it as a functional General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) maths component from 2008 (Department of Trade and Industry, 2006). Moreover in September 2009 the Department for Business, Innovation and Skill, together with the Ministry for Justice and The Insolvency Service, launched a consultation on debt management schemes in order to deliver effective solutions for both debtors and creditors so that people in debt can meet their commitments (Department for Business Innovation and Skill, 2009).

At this juncture it is worth reflecting on the ideological work being performed by such documents and the interventions that they inherently legitimise. To follow the logic of government rhetoric on personal debt is to accept subjectivities characterised by fecklessness, incompetence and the financial naivety of a growing number of predominantly low income UK citizens. In such a scenario, the UK Government is positioned only as an agent of solution rather than as an institution that may in some way be responsible for this growing crisis of competence. It garners an acceptance that the political, economic and regulatory procedures that govern and constrain personal lending are beyond reproach, or at least beyond the need for a detailed structural analysis.

A Problematic Construction of Personal Debt

However, such an analysis need not be the only way to conceptualise the current issue of personal debt in the UK. A persuasive case can be made that constructs personal debt as a symptom of the political regimes of recent years. Moreover, such an argument provides a more comprehensive and integral understanding that locates personal debt within the framework of neoliberal discourse on financial regulation, economic growth and consumer confidence.

In an economic analysis of the recent and severe economic recession, Turner (2008) suggests that to understand recent increases in personal debt requires a more considered reflection on transformations in the relative strength of capital versus labour. Further, he contests that such transformations lie at the heart of the current financial turbulence experienced in many countries around the world. In the first ten years of the New Labour project the increase in personal debt moved from £570 billion to £1511.7 billion (about AUD$833 to $2,209 billion), a 10% annual increase in personal debt. As a result of the movement of labour from the industrialised West to nations where the price of labour is presently cheaper, wages in the West have been under pressure in recent years. This problem has been particularly acute in the UK where the free market advantages of global trade have been seized upon with particular enthusiasm.

Accompanying this movement of labour has been an astonishing rise in property prices. The UK government has responded by bemoaning the problematic shortage of properties and a lack of building of new houses and an increase in buy-to-let investors. However, there has been little political reflection on the way that persistently low inflation and low interest rates following the dotcom recession has allowed people to take on higher debt. Globalisation provided the western world with a much cheaper pool of labour, but to combat the persistent downward pressure on prices, Turner (2008) suggested that debt was allowed to soar in order to stop deflation taking root. This would also prevent a potentially catastrophic increase in unemployment. He contends that without this huge increase in consumer borrowing, wages would have shown very little increase.

Whereas previous recessions required soaring interest rates and unemployment to manage inflation, inflation was now managed by the globalisation of the labour market, and so there was no need to raise interest rates to reduce inflation. It is these low interest rates that have fuelled the sharp rise in house prices. The central contention of Turner’s (2008) work is that an economy can grow without manufacturing but it requires a considerable escalation in the scale of consumer debt needed to counter the deflationary impact of exporting so many of these jobs. The replacement of manufacturing with service-related jobs is entirely contingent on economic growth and this growth has been largely funded by personal debt. Housing wealth has been the key source of demand and mortgage debt and higher house prices have forced borrowers to take out loans on far bigger multiples of income. Soaring house prices temporarily increased the availability of credit (Edwards, 2003; Lloyd, 2009) and in many cases lenders have actively sought out new customers for extended credit, often regardless of current difficulties that they may have repaying existing credit (Ambrose & Cunningham, 2004).

This set of economic circumstances has been fuelled by public policy which promotes free market principles. The absence of an effective regulatory framework for mortgage lending and personal consumer credit has fuelled a huge increase in personal debt, especially among those at the lowest end of the income scale and living with the devastating experience of poverty. The rubric of short term neoliberal capitalism demands that the consumer credit market be maximally exploited and in the absence of meaningful national or international regulation, this is exactly what has conspired. Personal debt is big business for banks and other lending organisations seeking to deliver ever more elusive record profits and Griffiths (2007) notes that policy makers have abrogated their own responsibility for the growth in consumer debt.

The very particular economic discourses of neoliberalism have enacted a series of changes that have led not only to the politico-economic circumstances described above but also to the construction of individual, person-oriented solutions that abnegate any requirements for structural social change. This specific and strategic series of economic and political machinations have conspired to make resistance to personal consumer debt almost impossible for all but the wealthiest of citizens and yet personal debt has been characterised by the discursive construction of debtors as feckless, irresponsible and without personal financial competence (Walker, 2012).

A macroscopic analysis reveals that the increase in personal debt has potentially clear structural antecedents following the consequences of global neoliberal policy formulation on international trade and debt regulation. The supposedly sound economic growth reflected in the public self-congratulations of New Labour acolytes over the last 10 years of their administration has been largely built upon personal debt as the panacea to potential deflation. In the current economic model the UK government simply requires a certain level of sustained personal debt in order to provide economic growth and there are few signs that effective regulation will be developed to stop further economic crises occurring again in the near future.

This careful balance of promoting the necessary fiscal policy to sustain personal debt while offering individual advice to 'cure' the profligacy of personal over-indebtedness has a broad analogue in the arena of employment policy. Using a Marxist mode of interpretation, Gorz (1997) has eloquently noted the complex and pernicious series of changes in the subject spaces available for employees in the West in recent years. Gorz contends that the neoliberal management model has led to wholly damaging modes of regulating labour relations. A historically unprecedented mass of capital has created wealth production that depends on increasingly less labour. This mass of capital has restored employment relations characterised by domination, subjugation and exploitation and has culminated in the debasing process of making workers fight to obtain the work that is being gradually abolished. We have a historic peak in the capacity of business to dominate the conditions and price of labour and, as such, have witnessed a concomitant growth in experiences of work intensification and job insecurity (Burchell, Lapido, & Wilkinson, 2002; European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2000). Despite the sustained and politically legitimised suffering in the arena of employment resulting from the growing domination of the neoliberal business model, official government policy and academic consensus in the area of sickness incapacity constructs work as a panacea for recovery from mental health difficulties (Clark, Layard, & Smithies, 2008; Cohen, 2008; HM Government, 2005; Lelliott & Tulloch, 2008; National Health Service, 1999; Rife, 2001; Zabkiewicz & Schmidt, 2009).

Central to the 'Pathways to work' scheme and IAPT (Increasing Access to Psychological Therapies) initiatives have been the need to position mental health service users as requiring individual, largely context-free advice or therapy in order to allow them to benefit from the immeasurable and universal effects of being employed. The dominance of the ‘work as beneficial for psychological recovery’ discourse positions the UK government as an intermediary between the universally favourable context of work and the isolated and individualised suffering of those with ‘disorders’ (Walker & Fincham, 2011). The role of the UK government in creating, managing and promoting an ideological model that has contributed to increasingly poor labour rights and working conditions is absent. A continued reduction in the availability of permanent work and a refusal to effectively legislate on the workplace conditions, marginalisation and abuse that are extraordinarily problematic for the increasing number of people with mental distress (Eakin, 2005; Seebohm & Secker, 2005; Stuart, 2004; Thomas & Secker, 2005; Thornicroft, 2006) rarely merits consideration in this construction of events. The UK government have stated that stress is the most significant cause of sickness absence and that the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), through the generation of incentives, is working with organisations across the public sector to deal with it through the management standards approach (HM Government, 2005). The problem is that HSE guidance is not legally binding and relies on managerial prerogative. Robinson and Smallman (2006) note that with the recent decline in union representation there is little to ensure that employers comply with HSE regulations. Moreover, on average, companies can expect a visit from the HSE inspectors once every 17 years (Wainwright & Calnan, 2002; Taylor, Baldry, Bain, & Ellis, 2003).

It is this unusual and paradoxical dichotomy between promoting neoliberal employment management models (and their multifaceted pernicious effects), and the positioning of themselves as the promoters of individual solutions that marks UK government policy not only as both contradictory and damaging but analogous to their policy around personal debt. Just as with over-indebtedness the government has formulated individualistic, educational and psychological treatments to address problems that are unavoidably cast in the realm of socioeconomic relations. UK fiscal policy relies on substantial and sustained personal debt but over-indebtedness is treated as an educational issue of the feckless. UK economic growth is sustained by increasingly distressing employment models, standards and environments. Such environments are constructed naively and unproblematically as part of the solution to the suffering endured by individually-treated sufferers and there has been little legislative labour directed toward addressing the increasing number of people whose subjective experiences of work are characterised by increased intensity and insecurity. The subjective suffering endured by people who are struggling with or indeed feel unable to cope with their indebtedness and those whose suffering problematises their inclusion in work should not and cannot be viewed individually. The construction of over-indebtedness as an issue which institutions are committed to tackling with only face to face advice, child education and other person-oriented initiatives is both disingenuous and unfair.

The remit of this article is not to produce a body of acolytes who uncritically buy into the notion that personal debt is an increasingly debilitating social problem that requires urgent political action. Altogether more modestly, the aim is to contribute to an acceptance that, now more than ever, debt and the associated suffering belong outside of the psyche, outside of the realm of individual capacity. It is to create a context with which to interrogate whether there is any place for psychologists, community or otherwise, in an area of profound concern that has been artificially and unhelpfully segregated into the personal, the political, the economic, the social and the educational.

Can Psychologists Make a Meaningful Contribution to Debt and Poverty?

There has been plentiful work in recent years that has explored the detrimental effects of psychology as the means by which issues of economic and political importance become personalised, depoliticised and subsumed into a medicalised world of individual discursive constructions (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993; Walker, 2007). The contribution of psychologists to an understanding of the processes that underlie indebtedness, poverty and subjective suffering have been at best negligible and at worst toxic. For those who identify themselves as psychologists, recent years have seen a failure or refusal to effectively separate the political from the personal. There has been a failure to explore, and make public, the relative importance of the political and the economic and a failure to illustrate exactly why people *don't* need individual interventions, either for financial capability or for the suffering caused by debt. It should be the remit of psychologists to illustrate and expose the social, economic and political processes that so impact on the subjective experiences of suffering, distress and deprivation rather than to medicalise, personalise and 'treat' them regardless of their precursors. This includes engaging with policy that is formulated through an ideological framework that provides only contradictory, impotent and devastatingly ineffective formulations of indebtedness and poverty. If psychologists are serious about mental health and suffering then they have to critically engage with the institutions contingent on the continuation of poverty and debt.

Most mainstream and community psychology practitioners currently act as ideological devotees to the processes of individualisation. That is, they help to manage and marshal the discourses of consumerist neoliberal ideology that postulate destructive subjective experiences as requiring only management by medical people. The focus has tended toward understanding the way debt/poverty influence mental health problems within people and how to treat the people with these problems. The declaration of a war on poverty by the American Psychological Association (Carr, 2003) does not appear to have incorporated a war on the medicalisation of poverty. Indeed Fitch and colleagues (2007) contend that community mental health nurses should have a role in raising and monitoring debt issues among their clients. There has been a plentiful supply of work that supports the association between debt and mental disorder (Drentea & Lavarakas, 2000; Fitch et al., 2007; Hatcher, 1994; Hintikka, Kontula, Saarinen, Tanskanen Koskela, & Viinamaki, 1998; Jenkins et al., 2008) and such work has prompted Hintikka et al. (1998) to imply that people who have experienced difficulties in repaying their debts may need psychiatric evaluation because of their common mental symptoms and increased risk of suicidality.

In recent years we have seen the reification of impulsive-compulsive buying disorder, stipulated as an impulse control disorder not otherwise specified, that is characterised by compulsively buying unneeded things, personal distress and financial problems (Black, 2001; Dell'Osso, Allen, Altamura, Buoli, & Hollander, 2008). This disorder has been proposed to affect 2-8% of the general population and is 80-95% prevalent in females. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this condition is presented as a suitable substrate for the cognitive behavioural therapy and selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitor industries.

National UK mental health charities like Mind (2008), while supporting progressive initiatives like improved access to affordable credit and the better regulation of doorstep lenders, also draw upon prominently individual and medical discourses that frame money management for individual people as a central and effective strategy for ameliorating the suffering associated with debt. Indeed they have suggested that it would be useful to have advisors who are able to provide information about debt based at general practice surgeries (Mind, 2008).

However despite their dominance, the logic of psychologies that draw upon discourses that individualise and medicalise constructions of debt and poverty fails on two counts. Firstly, it fails to engage with UK government policy that actively promotes sustained economic growth through increasing consumer debt. Second, it fails to engage with work which has shown that very few of the paths into debt involve the fecklessness of the debtor rather than increased vulnerability stemming from unpredictable, often structurally mediated, life changes (Ambrose & Cunningham, 2004).

Psychology has contributed little to any notion of combating poverty. This is partially due to its over reliance on attribution theory, a theory which is completely inadequate for the task in hand (Harper, 2003). As a result of the predominantly individual focus, mainstream psychology has tended not to engage with potentially useful materials like government press releases, ministerial statements and policy documents or made any sustained and institutionalised attempt to engage with the people who actually have any control over structural economic resources (Harper, 2003). This includes the academic institutions, governments and transnational corporations that are intimately involved in the production and legitimisation of the complex systems that produce debt, poverty and its associated explanations. If we fail to subject these institutions and their practices to a critical gaze then it is difficult to disagree with Mehryar's (1984) contention that psychology is simply irrelevant.

Of 24 OECD countries surveyed, the UK stands fourth worst in relative income poverty (UNICEF, 2007). The institutions of our growing over-indebtedness crises allow only subjectivities characterised by despondency, distress and helplessness and government policy portrays economic growth founded on personal debt as not only acceptable but positive. We are witnessing the transformation of human beings to passive objects of illness as opposed to active agents of social change and it is useful to recall Moreira's (2003) notion of collective trauma. Institutionalised political and academic institutions and processes that manufacture poverty and debt also manufacture the collective trauma of poverty and this often monumental subjective suffering not only negates simplistic notions of debt-associated mental health problems and their medicalised treatment, but can rightly be constituted as acts of political and economic violence.

In order to contribute anything worthwhile to our understanding of the processes and institutions that regulate debt and poverty in the UK, people who identify as psychologists must scrutinise and challenge relevant policy formation and decision making. They must explore, critique, and contest the macroscopic institutions and actors that construct, negotiate and benefit from personal debt. This might involve exposing damaging and paradoxical government debt policy, exploring citizenship as a means of therapy (Moreira, 2003), working toward effective policy legislation that addresses the illegal loans economy (Citizen's Advice Bureau, 2009) or organising action to reduce irresponsible lending and promote credit unions (Ambrose & Cunningham, 2004). Whatever the locus of social action, the only meaningful way for psychologists to engage in debt and subjective social suffering is to address the way that complex networks of institutions manufacture personal debt and poverty to meet the needs of a diminishing number of people in the UK.

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Author biography

Carl Walker is a critical community psychologist with an interest in social inequality and subjective suffering. He is interested in community approaches to mental distress and works with local community members and service users on projects of debt, employment and mental health. He has designed, and is the course leader for, the MA in Community Psychology in the School of Applied Social Science at the University of Brighton and is an active presence in the local community.

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