Hard Times: The Growth of an 'Avoidant' Culture

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SYNOPSIS

This paper explores how we might situate our understanding of early psychological development within the economic and political culture in which we live. How has an increasingly harsh and polarized political economy affected our emotional and relational 'structures of feeling'? Drawing on attachment theory, the paper argues that both extremes of poverty and wealth tend to lead to insensitive and authoritarian parenting practices which promote an avoidant style of emotional regulation. The more dominant this becomes, the more it supports policies based on individualism and self-sufficiency, and leads to instrumental values within our social institutions.

The cultural critic Raymond Williams once identified something he called 'structures of feeling',[1] an evocative but elusive term which hints at a shared felt experience of the social world. It's hard to pin down its meaning because the whole point of a structure of feeling is that it isn't yet articulated in language, but is a sort of 'unofficial consciousness'. In this sense, it has some similarities with Freud's 'pre-conscious' and with 'procedural learning'. In infancy, we unconsciously pick up on 'how things are done' in this family and this society, and adopt the local habits and attitudes. Yet we may not be aware of doing so. As Anthony Barnett has pointed out,[2] each of us develops our individual sense of self within relationships, and within a historical process that we can't see clearly until they have already shaped us.

Structures of feeling are rooted in everyday life. They constantly evolve as people adapt to a changing reality. Looking back to the post-war period, for example, people then shared an experience of exhaustion, smog, families broken by personal losses and material deprivations such as rationing. However, before long the texture of ordinary life began to change; as social reconstruction efforts took off, there was a shared sense of life expanding again. Through the 1950s and 1960s, houses were built, a free health service was established, people received regular entertainment from their new televisions, and economic and social security grew. This greater sense of security gave rise to a different 'tone', a new structure of feeling. It became a fertile ground in which more open and relaxed attitudes could emerge, from Dr Spock's child-centred child-rearing through to many new 'rights', including gay rights and women's rights.

This morphed into what has retrospectively been recognized as 'the consumer society' increasingly dominated by individualistic and narcissistic ways of relating. And from there, to our current neoliberal historical moment, which is hard to see clearly, as we are still in it. The academic and psychotherapist Paul Hoggett, however, has described it as a malignant form of narcissism, which he believes has now become a 'culture of perversion'. By this, he means a culture that has come to value appearances, surfaces and audits more than real people and their actual experiences: 'Behind the virtual reality of the hedge funds and investment banks lay an actual reality of hubris, parasitism, corruption and greed. Behind the virtual reality of Labour's screen of

performance indicators lay an actual reality of increased social suffering...'.[3]

These cultural factors usually fall within the sphere of sociology or cultural studies, rather than of psychotherapy. However, I am increasingly interested in how we might link our psychological understanding of relational processes, and even neurobiology, to these cultural processes. This involves some attempt to make sense of the complex interplay between individual development and the political and economic forces that bear on our lives, a two-way process which is not easy to untangle.

How Parents' Security or Insecurity Shapes Their Child

My starting-point as a psychotherapist has to be with the individual's early emotional development as well as with the huge and often under-rated significance of early parenting, as the hub of both individual development and of the transmission of culture. Here, I draw on the substantial body of research in attachment processes and neurobiology which has confirmed how profoundly social and relational we are. In particular, this research has highlighted the importance of very early social interaction in babyhood and toddlerhood. It has made it clear that babies are not outside of society, in some sort of pre-verbal limbo, but from day one are in relationship with others and are rapidly learning how to fit in to their society – usually through the medium of the biological family, but also through daycare centres, substitute parents, orphanages and so on.

These early experiences don't just socialize children into acceptable behaviour, but also shape their neural pathways and brain structure. In particular, the first months and years are an intense period of emotional learning; babies are discovering from their parents how to modulate their emotions – either deliberately or automatically. For example, babies who have to adapt to more unpredictable or hostile environments may develop a more hypersensitive stress response, characterized by physiological tendencies to vigilance and anxiety, whilst a baby in a warm and responsive family is likely to develop a more balanced stress response and a good capacity to self-soothe.

But parents don't just pass on their particular ways of managing emotion; they also enact social structures. Babyhood is the first encounter with the power of other people either to meet needs or to withhold emotional resources – to provide constructive help or to dominate or ignore the infant. The lessons that are learnt at a tender age may provide life-long unconscious 'frames'[4] through which we understand social and political reality.

Emotionally secure parents convey their expectations that there are enough resources to meet needs. These parents tend to demonstrate a more democratic style of interaction, taking turns with their baby in a warm conversational exchange. Being good at regulating themselves, they are not overly distracted by their own feelings, and can identify with their baby's experience and constructively support their baby's development. Such positive social experiences enhance the growth of the pre-frontal cortex, and enable the gradual development of more sophisticated and pro-social capacities, such as self-control, conscience and empathy. Families with secure attachments, in effect, are more likely to enable 'structures of feeling' such as collectivism.

A high proportion of parents (over 40 per cent), however, lack that sense of security. For them, self-regulation is more difficult, and managing a baby can feel like a burden, or a threat. They may be uncomfortable with the baby's dependence on them, and feel impatient for the child to grow up. They often misread their baby's abilities, demanding more of them than they can manage. Because they are less well attuned to themselves, they may find it difficult to attune to the baby's states. Those who lack this sensitivity to their baby are less likely to use empathy to guide their responses. Instead, they may turn to child-care practices based on *external* control of the child's behaviour – such as strict sleeping and feeding schedules, and disciplining children through manipulation or fear – even through physical punishment, which is still practised by a majority of parents both in the UK and USA. Such parents often convey the message that the world is a hostile place, and you can only depend on yourself – again, feeding into individualistic structures of feeling.

How Social Insecurity Affects Parents

The choice of childcare practices is shaped by the internal landscape of the parents, their habitual ways of managing emotions and attachment relationships. But parenting practices are also shaped by wider economic and social realities. In our own ever-more unequal society, increasing numbers of parents face the stress of unpredictable conditions. They have to deal with zero-hours contracts, precarious jobs, low wages people can't live on, a lack of housing, unsafe neighbourhoods, noise and pollution. These experiences have been shown to affect parenting and to undermine the reflective capacity

of the pre-frontal cortex.[5]

How can such parents feel safely or securely attached *to society*? – when the social authorities that affect their lives are neither responsive nor protective, but more often disrespectful and careless of their well-being. Poverty and inequality, after all, are not just about living a more stressful life or being denied access to resources; they are also relational. They convey a particular relationship between one section of society and the rest – a lack of empathy and unwillingness to share resources, which in a personal relationship would be grounds for deep offence.

Indeed, Linda Tirado has recently written about her experience of poverty in the USA[6] in these terms. Supporting her family on two part-time minimum wage jobs, she describes the physical discomforts of not being able to afford dental care, of having an unmoisturized face, fryer grease in her hair, having to wear an itchy polyester uniform, and then getting home from work too tired to read or engage with anything or anyone, with a feeling of being 'less than the human I know myself to be'. As she puts it, 'Maybe feelings are something that only professional people have. My friends and I know that no-one gives a shit about ours.' (When interviewed after the event, some of the London rioters in 2011 also reported their feeling that 'no one cares about us'.)

As Neal Lawson put it, 'Miserable rusting estates offer no sanctuary, just a playground of violence for children far beyond the fear of Asbos or prison. When you have nothing to lose, why care? From 'Dragons' Den' to 'Who Wants to Be a Millionaire', the social norm we teach is the cult of the winner. There is no solidarity, empathy or humanity for the loser...'[7]

One way of defending the self against the hurt that no one cares is by withdrawing from relationship, flattening feelings into depression. The other defensive route is through anger. Linda Tirado says she cherishes her anger, because it can penetrate her depression at not being valued: it can 'punch through the haze', as she puts it.

However, the social insults experienced at the bottom of the heap not only give rise to anger or depression, they can also feed back into parenting behaviour. In unsupportive circumstances, worn down by stress and over-work, it can be harder to maintain the responsive, attuned parenting that is optimum for the child's social and emotional development. Exposed to a harsh social landscape, parents can become harsh themselves. Tirado herself sneers at the middle-class parent who mollycoddles her child, treating a graze on her daughter's knee 'as though she'd just lost a limb'. She herself does not have the luxury of such feelings. She has to prepare her own children for the reality of the working world in which she lives: 'I'm getting them ready to keep their damn mouths shut while some idiot tells them what to do.' Low socio-economic status is particularly associated with authoritarian parenting and with avoidant attachment.[8]

Harshness at the Top

However, poverty is not the only source of harshness and insensitivity. Many wealthy, ambitious parents hand their children over to substitute parents such as nurseries and nannies at an early age, followed by boarding schools. This sub-culture has its own particular cultural norms and practices which may also affect children's self-regulation and attachment security.

The current UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, came from this background and attended a private prep school, Colet Court, from the age of 7. Recently, another ex-student, Benjamin Ross, looked back at his experience at the school, and goes so far as to call it a culture of 'emotional sadism'. He recounts many incidents to demonstrate this. One in particular, that he witnessed, shocked him. As he puts it, a charismatic and admired teacher got into a frenzy of rage after some insolent behaviour by a popular boy in the class, and dragged the boy across his desk, ripping the buttons from his shirt, then beating him so badly across the face that he drew blood. Disturbingly, he then adds the detail that the teacher then

> placed our sobbing classmate across his lap and in a bizarre display of sympathy, began to stroke his head and back while offering a detached third-person narrative – 'This is where the boy weeps, this is where the master feels regret' – which, looking back on it, I can only describe as pornographic, post-coital even.[9]

The school is in fact currently under investigation by the police for both historic and current sexual abuse.

Ross sums up the school culture as one where,

> We are expected to express no weakness, vulnerability or sympathy. The cruelty which our masters show to us we then visit upon one another singly or in groups, and soon we are doing their job for them. Bullying is commonplace and takes many forms, not just physical. The lingua franca of the school is a kind of sneering insolence in imitation of our elders and seemingly with their approval. We learn to hate and humiliate one another. The most sympathetically advanced among us come to hate themselves too. Friendships are more like strategic alliances. Violence and humiliation are perpetual and endemic: random fights,

> organised fights, boys dragged from changing rooms by their peers and thrown naked into the corridor, to howls of laughter.[10]

The Bullingdon Club is clearly a natural progression for boys socialized in this way. Osborne himself was recently described by his biographer as having an 'unerring ability to find hidden weakness and to put people down'.[11]

So how do we think about the connection between Osborne the child schooled in hostility to weakness, and his unflinching commitment to 'austerity' policies targeted at the weakest in society? Without arguing for direct causality, it is hard not to think that the 'blame the scroungers' narrative might have particular appeal to a man who might have been forced as a child to be prematurely self-sufficient, or to despise his own attachment needs.

On the other hand, Osborne's psyche is not unique. In all strata of society there are many children exposed in early life to harsh cultures. Their individual responses may vary, but there are common defences such as learning to switch off or repress their feelings, learning to dissociate, or to defensively project blame on to others. Self-sufficiency is attractive to many avoidant people. For some, money becomes an important buffer which protects them against depending on others who may let them down. As the psychologist Tim Kasser found in his research, 'materialistic values increase when environmental circumstances fail to support needs for security and safety'.[12] The wealthier they become, the more able they are to buy in care when needed. For a select few, achieving a position of power may be another way to feel in control and to avoid dependence on unreliable others. However, once they become managers or politicians or other kinds of authority figure, their harsh internal objects no longer affect only their friends and family but can influence a wide swathe of people, and can even infect the culture with materialistic, extrinsic values.

Hard Times

British society is certainly becoming increasingly harsh for more people – and not just those in poverty. This harshness and growing inequality is the subject of many economic and political analyses, but what is less often discussed is whether or not our current economic and political imperatives are changing our emotional and relational culture.

One obvious change has taken place in parenting practices. The neoliberal agenda of economic growth at all costs and the shibboleth of the 'hard-working family' have increased pressure on mothers to return to work as fast as possible after having a baby. This has the flavour of a 'structure of feeling' – something parents feel they must enact because it's now 'the way things are'. Worse still, the valid argument that working parents need more support with childcare has increasingly become a justification for a blanket endorsement of nursery schools at any age. Currently 21 per cent of babies and toddlers under two are enrolled in day nurseries, and the numbers are growing. Many of the parents who choose this option have unwittingly adopted the prevailing instrumental mentality, believing that their babies need 'stimulation' to become literate and numerate as quickly as possible – the sub-text being that this will enhance their future earning capacity. The vulnerability of babies and their primary need for one to one, empathetic personal care in the first two years has become all but invisible.

Yet research has consistently shown that a proportion of these nursery-based children will become more disobedient, anti-social and avoidantly attached. The numbers demonstrating more aggressive behaviour may be small, but cumulatively they are significant and can affect the culture at large. As the psychologist Jay Belsky put it, referring to this risk,

> Let's imagine these are small effects. But let's imagine a reception class of 30 children in which two-thirds of them have small effects that make them a little bit more aggressive and disobedient versus another class of 30 in which only 10% of them do. Are those teachers going to be doing more time managing and less time teaching? Are those playgrounds going to be less friendly? Are those neighbourhoods going to be affected? No one single car pollutes central London or central LA. It's all the cars that do it.[13]

Insecure Institutions

So in terms of shaping the culture, there may be a growing cumulative effect of the mass of ordinary parents and their parenting practices shifting us towards a more avoidant culture – encouraged by governments who themselves may be made up disproportionately of insecurely attached individuals, whose policies further entrench a punitive and controlling rather than secure and supportive way of managing our public institutions.

And indeed it is becoming apparent that harsh practices are spreading and becoming more visible, occasionally erupting in outbreaks of scandal – even in the National Health Service (NHS), that beacon of public service. The example that made the headlines was at the

Mid Staffs Hospital, where some patients were ignored for long periods of time, left to lie in their own faeces, hungry, unwashed, cold or thirsty – one even resorted to drinking water from a vase. In another incident, a nurse was so bothered by hearing a baby crying that she taped a dummy to his mouth – even though he was a premature baby suffering from breathing difficulties. Pressure from the patients' relatives eventually led to questions being asked: how on earth had this been allowed to take place?

The official enquiry which investigated these incidents found some of the nursing staff lacked compassion and being dismissive of the needs of patients and their families. Unfortunately there was no further psychological reflection on the factors that may have contributed to such uncaring behaviour towards patients – such as a feeling of being overwhelmed by the demand for a rapid turnover of patients, perhaps a numbness at not having enough time to care, or of feeling traumatized by the emotionally demanding nature of the work itself.[14] Neither the Report nor the managers themselves recognized such possibilities.

However, what the Francis Report did make clear was that instead of a secure, supportive and thoughtful management that might have helped health-care workers to manage their ambivalence, and to sustain their empathy, there was an avoidant-style bullying management culture, which cascaded down from the top. Managers under pressure from the Department of Health in turn used 'short cuts' to get staff to comply with their directions by 'applying career threatening pressure'.[15] Staff who raised questions about the quality of care were harassed and threatened with legal action.

Mid Staffs was not an isolated case, either. Other recent studies[16] have also found high levels of bullying. (One report found 43 per cent of staff in the NHS had either witnessed or experienced bullying in the last year; another even reported physical bullying, such as being pushed or prodded, or in one case having a member of staff putting a hand in their face to stop them speaking.) Anecdotally, there is a sense of a cultural shift to a more authoritarian way of doing things. Malcolm Alexander, a lobbyist for patients, put it this way: 'The thing that really strikes me as something that has changed is that the hierarchy in hospitals seems more entrenched than ever.'[17]

So why has the culture of the NHS gone in this direction? The key finding of the Francis Report was clear. It argued that managers were so preoccupied with cost cutting and meeting government targets on waiting times, in particular, that they ignored basic patient care. A 'command and control' attitude was promoted by the former head of the NHS – focused on financial targets, as well as the achievement of elite foundation trust status or the latest re-organization of systems.

Managers who don't achieve these goals face financial penalties and, one might imagine, shame. It seems that one response to such insecurity is to defensively attempt to control and micro-manage staff, and thus anxiety gets passed on. In these circumstances, compassion for patients is more difficult to achieve. As Malcolm Alexander put it, 'the interaction between nurses and patients seems to have completely broken down. They are strangely distant. You rarely see them touch a patient...'. Fear – of losing jobs or funding – comes to dominate people's behaviour and trust evaporates.

It's a similar story in Local Authorities. In both Rotherham and in Doncaster, for example, over many years there have been extreme failures by both Councils and the South Yorkshire Police to respond empathically to the needs of children. Case after case has come to light where child protection has failed. Most recently, of course, in Rotherham, where social workers, their managers and local politicians had known for years that underage girls were being groomed and raped by gangs of Pakistani men – but little action was taken. Again, mirroring the behaviour of NHS managers, local councillors actively silenced and coerced those who drew attention to the problem; they intimidated a Home Office researcher, and even confiscated her research. One motivation seems to have been that the party in power depended on the votes of the Pakistani community so was willing to minimize, or even deny, the reality of abusive behaviour within that community – even though the Jay Report now informs us that some of the child victims had not only witnessed brutally violent rapes, but had also been doused in petrol and threatened with being set alight if they did not co-operate.[18]

The Jay Report went on to accuse both police and local authorities of a 'macho and insensitive culture' that was incapable of recognizing and responding to the vulnerability of children. However, this was not the only issue where Rotherham councillors behaved in a 'macho and insensitive' manner. There is also some evidence that they used a bullying and coercive approach to their own workforce. They regularly issued ultimatums both to council officers and to social workers, telling them what they had to do – or be sacked. In other words, they acted from an insecure position, attempting to control others by force instead of securely engaging with them in dialogue.

The question then arises as to whether or not avoidant types of individual are attracted to such organizational sub-cultures – or whether they are to some extent produced by the sub-culture itself.

Certainly Susan Long, the Australian management academic, believes that the problem is not so much to do with deviant individuals as the result of an instrumental culture. Clearly many organizations have become dominated by a 'transactional mindset', so exclusively focused on particular outcomes that they have lost the capacity to listen in a relational way to the whole person, or to respond to the whole situation. However, she goes further, arguing that managerial culture has become 'perverse' in psychoanalytic terms.[19] As she describes it, this is a culture of collective self-deception. It endorses individual gain at the expense of others, and is willing to deny other people's emotional reality to achieve its goals. The behaviour of both Yorkshire councillors and police could be seen in this light. The police overtly downplayed the harm they knew was happening to children. Perhaps because they were under pressure to meet their targets for effective prosecutions and these cases were often hampered by unreliable witnesses, police officers did not pursue offenders, and instead blamed the girls for being out of control. They denied the reality of these children who were being sexually abused and treated them as consenting adults.

However, in an instrumental culture, where your primary goal is only to achieve shorter waiting lists, or higher GCSE grades, or successful prosecutions, how can you make a place for listening and sensitive relating to others as individuals, how can you hold on to the value of people and their feelings? Perhaps our current political economy requires insecure, aggressive people not secure people, who are more likely to be open and empathic?

Certainly, insensitivity seems to me to be a growing trend in our public culture. Some people now interpret democracy as their 'right' to say anything without concern for others. The most obvious examples are the internet trolls, who have no inhibitions about expressing their aggression because they don't expect to meet their victims face to face. In one recent instance, a tweet was sent to the athlete Jessica Ennis-Hill after she said she would remove her name from a stand at Sheffield United football club if it re-employed the convicted rapist footballer, Ched Evans. The tweeter called her a 'cunt', and said 'I hope he rapes her'. When he in turn was called 'scum' by others for his threat, he responded, 'Freedom of speech, mate... I'll say what I want when I want'.[20]

Restraint and consideration for others are features of ongoing, mutual and interdependent relationships. But the more hierarchical society becomes, and the more that power and wealth are concentrated in the hands of just a few people who are cut off from the majority, the less need there is for such qualities.

A kind of bullish attitude is getting more common. It spills over into an attack on those liberal values established in more secure times, which are now seen as wimpish. As one Canadian study put it, 'allegiance to many old public virtues such as the Bill of Rights, the Geneva Convention and the rule of domestic and international law is now commonly mocked or dismissed as quaint by significant people in power and persuasion'.[21]

The ideologies that grip Western society have convinced people that economic growth, or economic targets, are the primary goal of a society. Despite a brief pre-election flirtation with talk about happiness, and the 'Big Society', emotional well-being seems to have little place in policy making. Seeking material security now seems to have drowned out other values, to the point where society has become unbalanced.

Yet at the same time, there are many individuals who are seeking greater emotional connectedness to themselves and others, and who are pursuing their own personal development. The rise of mindfulness meditation, the popularity of yoga and massage, attachment parenting, and the spread of psychotherapy seem almost like a parallel universe. Clearly, there are other narratives apart from the dominant public narrative, and other sub-cultures which want to preserve and develop the values of empathy, self-compassion, soothing and caring.

One notable aspect of all these practices is that they are about sensitivity and awareness – the very things that are missing in harsh parenting and bullying authorities. Both psychotherapy and mindfulness, in particular, involve noticing and accepting feelings, whatever they are. As Erich Fromm pointed out way back in 1962, only people who are in touch with their own feelings, and accepting of them, can really connect with other people's feelings: 'How could I understand his fear, his sadness, his aloneness, his hope, his love – unless I felt my own fear, sadness , aloneness, hope, or love?'[22]

This capacity for emotional self-awareness and reflection is at the heart of our work. Many of us will be working with children, families or individual adults, helping people develop a capacity for empathy for themselves and others. We may be working with those who have

been abused or neglected by their parent figures, or even with some of the people who have been bullied in the institutional settings I have described. But do we just keep repairing the individual damage, and say nothing about the culture itself?

It seems to me that decades of neoliberalism have deeply affected our current 'structures of feeling'. One aspect of this is the growing tolerance of an instrumental mind-set, and the increasing prevalence of an avoidant style of self-regulation, both of which hamper our ability to create secure families and secure institutions. If the first step is to become more conscious of these processes and to articulate what is happening, the second may be: to challenge them.

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