

Locked into the System? Critical Community Psychology Approaches to Personal Debt in the Context of Crises of Capital Accumulation

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ABSTRACT

The considerable and sustained boom in personal debt recently has in many countries around the world led to experiences of over-indebtedness that are associated with very considerable distress and suffering. This article explores critical perspectives that situate personal debt, material deprivation and suffering, and specific ways of knowing and acting, within the context of recent political and economic practices. There is a need to focus on positioning people's experiences of debt within a broader matrix of factors of national and international practices and policies, including globalisation, changing labour markets, and poorly regulated financial industries. These factors appear to have allowed a network of international financial institutions to adopt practices that have proved successful in creating personal debt. Yet, an individualised discourse of financial capability has been propagated, configuring personal debt as a problem of irresponsible individual consumption. In order to explore ways of resisting reactionary and individualised modes of addressing personal debt, proposals will be made of alternative paradigms for responding to personal debt, defined by two dimensions of community psychological practice, with examples. This article aims to increase collective awareness of the systemic character of debt and the collective responses required. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

Rutherford (2007) noted that we are currently living in a social recession whose symptoms we often experience as our own shameful and personal feelings. The dominant ideology in the

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liberal economies of the West tends to encourage the blaming of and victimising of people who experience economic problems that in essence are rooted in systemic causes. The ultimate end point of individuals taking responsibility is to promote autonomous self-regulators who are willing to make the necessary self-corrections in order to participate in what have been described as increasingly poorly paid, deunionised, and casualised labour markets (Wacquant, 2009). Such circumstances impact on the way that we understand and address recent rises in the use of personal credit and unmanageable debt. Personal debt, and the various institutions, techniques, and discourses that have been mobilized to render it knowable and remediable, need to be contextualized within the crises of late modern capitalism.

This commentary was developed following a symposium at the 2011 European Congress of Community Psychology in York. The purpose of the symposium was to bring together interested parties to think about the increasingly problematic issue of personal debt in many contexts from a critical community psychology perspective. This paper represents a synthesis of the work of the four symposium contributors. Following an introduction that locates the problem of personal debt and over-indebtedness within social, political, and historical perspectives, we explore the ways in which personal debt may be understood as a manifestation of a structural crisis of neoliberal capitalism. Following critical reflection on the dominant ideas related to 'financial capability' and that citizens are rational autonomous economic agents, we suggest some potential praxes that require the linking of ameliorative short-term responses to debt at the personal, family, and community levels, with more transformative political action for change at the social and economic level.

A MACRO-SYSTEMIC ACCOUNT OF PERSONAL DEBT

The increase in personal debt is a growing problem in a number of countries (European Parliament Directorate General for Internal Policies, 2010). Research across 20 European nations suggested that consumer mortgage and non-mortgage loans totalled EUR 9.08 trillion at the end of 2011, up from EUR 8.03 trillion in 2007 (Benn, 2012). Commenting on the findings, the Director of Finaccord, a leading international market research and consulting company specialising in financial services, said: 'In most countries, the idea that households are shoring up their financial situation by paying off loans is simply not correct. Rather, the value of outstanding consumer debt is a structural feature of many economies and for a lot of individuals it is simply not possible for them to manage without it' (Benn, 2012).

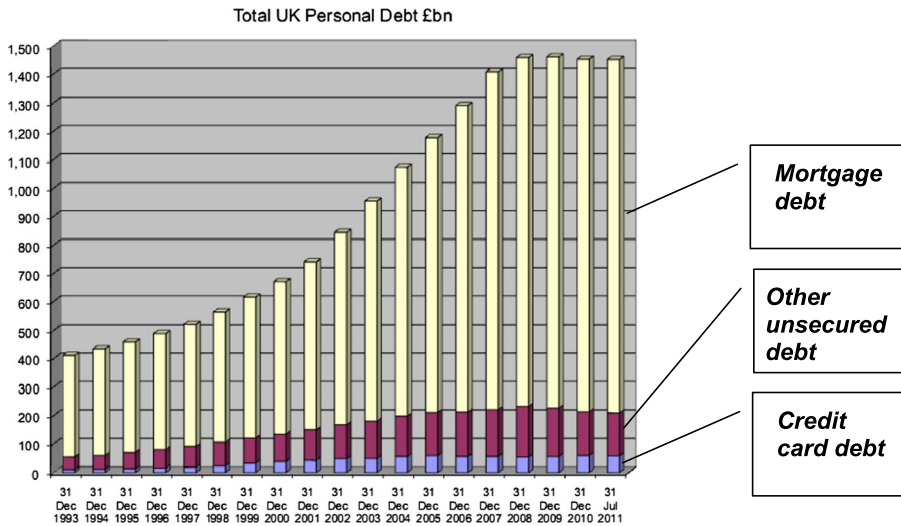
An understanding of the nature and function of personal debt in recent years requires a broader understanding of current economic conditions. This requires a consideration of capital not so much as a 'thing' but as a process where money is perpetually sent in search of more money (Harvey, 2010) and an historical interrogation of flows of capital. Capitalism is a system that reproduces capital, through accumulation (Baran & Sweezy, 1966; Wallerstein, 1996). To do this, social processes are commodified: exchanges, production, distribution, investment—previously conducted through media other than markets—are all reduced to financial elements. To accumulate capital, it is necessary to make profit. This is done at various points in the system, particularly in the extraction of surplus value from workers and the unequal exchange between the core areas of the system and primary resource producing areas (Amin, 2010). Without unequal exchange, capitalism cannot work.

Capitalism has been faced with a number of crises resulting from the internal contradictions it generates (Harvey, 2010). These have largely been crises in capital accumulation driven by the falling rate of profit, the saturation of markets, the successful struggles of workers, the excessive productive capacity of the system, and the increasing difficulty in absorbing the capital produced in each iteration of the cycle. Each time, 'fixes' have been found: technological, social, military, political, and financial, sometimes applied separately and sometimes together.

The 'post war settlement' and establishment of what is termed Keynesian mitigated monopoly capitalism, in tandem with the welfare state, was the 'fix' that stabilised the world economy in the period after World War II. However the system moved into the stagnation crisis of the late 1960s and 1970s. The next set of 'fixes', now described as 'neoliberal', that were established under the tutorship of the Chicago school of economists, comprised a number of policies that led to a sustained politics of wage suppression. These included the repression of organised labour, the outsourcing to third world labour markets, the casualisation of labour, the creation of a reserve of the unemployed, and state subsidy of low wages through in-work benefits. Practices of governance are organised around the fundamental conviction that a focus on 'trickle down' economics operates as a panacea for the various global social orders that have in some sense been defined as problematic (Gray, 1998). Also central to neoliberal governance has been the notion that the free market and deregulation could provide more efficient public spending, beyond the reach of state institutions. The resulting emphasis on privatisation and globalised markets has reduced the capacity of nation states to meaningfully conduct social change (Harvey, 2010).

The implementation of neoliberal capitalism in the West has taken a particular form with respect to the accumulation of personal debt. The globalised movement of production to sites of cheaper labour in the East (Bauman, 1998; Turner, 2008) has facilitated cheap manufacturing which, together with increasingly competitive labour markets characterised by stagnating 'real terms' wages, have created conditions for low inflation and low short term interest rates. In the richer countries, the value of wages in relation to national income (measured by the proxies of Gross Domestic Product or Gross Value Added) has declined since the 1970s (Bailey, Coward, & Whittaker, 2011). British Trades Unions have argued that in the UK the fall has been from nearly 65% of GDP in the mid-1970s to 55% recently (Public and Commercial Services Union, 2008; TUC, 2012). While there is some technical controversy about the significance of this, a strong claim can be made that median earnings have fallen in real terms and that this has been exacerbated since the global recession started in 2008. Those at the bottom of the income distribution have fared relatively badly (Pessoa & Van Reenen, 2012). This has contributed to a crisis of under-consumption, with the system tending towards stagnation. Comparatively lower wages in real terms have meant less spending, and this in turn has led to the need for a growth in personal debt as shown from 1993 to 2011 (Figure 1). The deregulation of finance sectors has facilitated access to funds for citizens increasingly unable to match the reduction in real terms wages, with a cost of living that has exploded during the sequence of housing booms.

In recent years the notion of the consumer-led recovery has grown more problematic as consumer spending is increasingly reliant on personal debt (Walker, 2012). State mechanisms of governance have been supplemented through broader transnational practices of private and public global governance (McGrew, 2010). Economic globalisation has been supported by the activities of a complex of specialised agencies that include the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation, the UN



Source <http://www.themoneycharity.org.uk> September, 2011, reproduced with permission.

Figure 1. The rise in personal debt in the UK.

Development Programme, regional bodies such as the European Union, as well as the activities of major credit agencies, which facilitate the connection of national governance with the concerns of global bond markets. These influence the access to, and costs associated with, borrowing money on global financial markets, in turn influencing fiscal, tax, and welfare regimes around the world.

The availability of sub-prime credit (Cohen, 2007) has supported the sustained practices of wage suppression, profoundly influencing the accumulation of capital in the West. Bauman (2007, p. 79) noted that ‘living in credit in Britain has become part of the national curriculum, endorsed, designed and subsidised by the government’, disinclined to effectively regulate the availability of easy credit. Personal debt is a structural creation of this system, and those who experience debt are locked into an arrangement that operates at the super-macro level through a range of transnational institutions and modes of authority. This feature of modern living is framed by many centre-right political administrations as both an unavoidable consequence of political and economic circumstances beyond the control of nation states and as the scourge of growing numbers of profligate citizens in thrall to the seductions of consumer accoutrements. However, those mounting critiques of the levels of consumerism stop short of interrogating the systemic reasons for its explosive expansion (e.g. Assadourian, 2010).

Such framing of personal debt has profound implications for any worthwhile intervention with those who are struggling with personal and household debt. While limiting and decontextualised models of mental distress do scant justice to the realities of subjective suffering, they do illustrate the impact of being enmeshed in the institutions of personal debt. There is a growing consensus from traditional medical and mainstream psychological researchers and practitioners that people’s experiences of over-indebtedness and financial strain are conclusively associated with mental health problems, distress, and suffering and that the scale of debt and financial strain is approximately proportional to this distress (Drentea & Lavrakas, 2000; Fitch, Simpson, Collard, & Teasdale, 2007; Hintikka et al., 1998; Jenkins et al., 2008).

PSYCHOLOGY AND A MICRO-SYSTEMIC FOCUS ON PERSONAL DEBT AND FINANCIAL CAPABILITY

Martín-Baró (1996b) noted that psychology can be a valuable tool to soothe the consciences of those who present the 'indisputable' advantages of modern economic life. It can contribute effectively to the obscuring of the relationship between personal estrangement and social oppression where individual pathologies, failures, and limitations are presented in a historical and social vacuum. The predominantly negative image that debtors construct of themselves and their circumstances is an accumulation of an aggregate of many factors but represents the internalisation of a subtle yet discernible economic oppression. The indebted poor are constituted as external fragmented 'others' (Burton & Flores, 2011), depicted as failing to control an urge to consume that is alien to the model of the rational economic actor predominant in both mainstream psychological and classical economic literature. A Canadian report (Policy Research Initiative, PRI, 2005) emphasised that both policy makers and financial product providers perceive that individuals make informed decisions based upon on adequate knowledge.

Mainstream psychology has been used as an ally in the presentation of social inequality as dispositional failure. Psychology renders knowable, measurable, and treatable those who have been excluded. With its basis in individualist ideology (Danziger, 1990; Leonard, 1984), the responses from the institutions of mainstream psychology have been largely reactionary. Through the reification (Ingleby, 1970) of such artefacts as 'compulsive buying disorder', 'locus of control', and 'cognitive narrowing', complex social, political and economic relations have been funnelled into an array of pathologised individuals who require the remediation of a coterie of experts to solve their failure to live lives devoid of feckless and profligate spending. The sustained politics of wage suppression and financial deregulation have created a growing number of citizens in need of credit, for the necessity of everyday items of survival and to cope with the financial impact of everyday events (Ambrose & Cunningham, 2004; Dearden, Goode, Whitfield, & Cox, 2010; Marmot, 2010; New Economics Foundation, 2009). These have been transformed into problems of delay of gratification and financial incompetence (Webley & Nyhus, 2001). In so doing, the institutions of mainstream psychology have largely complemented and indeed perhaps enabled the thriving credit and debt remediation industries that have been essential to the sustained accumulation of capital.

The categorisation of problems of poverty and debt as dispositional legitimises the power of specialised authorities to deal with them (Edelman, 1977). Such psychological formulations have made feasible the development and proliferation of an array of techniques of financial education, capability, and literacy. A prominent response to the growing problem of personal debt has been first to improve the efficiency of consumer credit markets and more prominently to promote strategies designed to redeem the supposed cognitive and intellectual frailties of those who may find themselves overindebted (Walker, 2012). In recent years the UK government has bemoaned people who lack 'essential financial skills, including the ability to budget sensibly, and may over-commit themselves by taking on excessive debts' and so there is a need to equip 'people with the capability to make savings decisions, promoting access to savings opportunities' (Department for Work and Pensions, 2007, p. 39).

In some countries (e.g. the USA, Australia), the term 'financial literacy' became popular to describe the sorts of skills needed by ordinary people to navigate the many decisions needed to manage financially in adulthood. The Organization for Economic Co-operation

and Development started an inter-governmental project in 2003 with the objective of providing ways to 'improve financial education and literacy standards'. In the UK the ideas associated with 'financial literacy' were expanded in a preference for a broader (and perhaps more acceptable) term, 'financial capability', purporting to focus on three aspects: context-specific knowledge; related skills used as a basis for making decisions; leading to actions being taken with confidence and competence (PRI, 2005).

The UK's Financial Services Authority (FSA) conducted a baseline survey in 2005 of over 5,300 people in the UK (FSA, 2006), and the headline findings were that: many people were failing to plan ahead adequately and were taking on financial risks without realising it; problems of debt were severe for a small but growing proportion of the population, and many more people will be affected in an economic downturn; the under-40s were, on average, less financially capable than their elders. However, it was interesting to note, when reading the survey in more detail that 'financial capability' was not found to be correlated with income level. Examples were that (i) people who struggled to 'make ends meet' included many earning average or even above average incomes, (ii) groups such as single parents, those living in social housing, the unemployed, and people without current bank accounts all performed better than average on 'keeping track' of finances, and women out-performed men; (iii) people at all income levels were not careful at 'planning ahead', but there were many examples of people with very low incomes who did plan ahead. The experience of the present authors in working with poor and indebted people accords with this: financial illiteracy is not generally the problem they face.

A manifestation of work evolving from the concept of financial capability is to provide education in schools. For example, a representative of the FSA, speaking at a teachers' conference in Northern Ireland stated that 'good financial capability is a vital life-skill which all young people should have the opportunity to develop, allowing them to avoid making the same financial mistakes as previous generations' (2010). The educational turn is based on a perception that people's competencies related to financial management will be influenced by their background: advice and guidance from parents, or more broadly familial approaches, as expressed both directly and through role modelling are part of the effect of 'social capital' transmitted through the home environment (Pond, 2010).

PROPOSALS FROM CRITICAL COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY

Writers in community psychology often criticize the systemic roots of problems and propose changes to the system. For many the attraction of the discipline lies precisely in its promise to aid principled social transformation in the interests of the disadvantaged. Transformation may be considered in contrast to amelioration. Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005, p. 144) describe the distinction as follows:

Ameliorative interventions are those that aim to promote wellbeing. Transformative interventions, while also concerned with the promotion of wellbeing, focus on changing power relationships and striving to eliminate oppression. First-order change, amelioration, creates change within a system, while second-order change, transformation, strives to change the system and its assumptions. Ameliorative interventions tend to frame issues as problems and as technical matters that can be resolved through rational-empirical problem solving. Transformative interventions, on the other hand, frame issues in terms of oppression and inequities in power and emphasise strengths of people rather than their deficiencies.

Yet ameliorative interventions are often desirable (people need help) and are easier to mount than the 'revolutionary' task of changing the system, especially for indebted people

and for concerned psychologists whose domain for action is typically at micro- and meso-levels. The problem though is that ameliorative interventions leave the underlying systemic problems unaddressed. The challenge is to find ways to tie the two together, linking work with people to political activity for system change, so that collective action and the consciousness necessary for it are nurtured. In the spirit of Liberation Psychology's critique of individualising complicit psychology, we suggest the following two potential future avenues for such socially committed praxis.

(1) Alternative conceptions of human development and their role in influencing praxis.

Prefigurative action, a concept that originates in the work of Antonio Gramsci, has been proposed as a way to address the problem of linking meso- and macro-level change projects while learning about the ways in which the social system offers openings and imposes barriers to principled change (Kagan & Burton, 2000). Inherent in this approach is a horizon that is utopian in character—the notion of a just society. Prefigurative action research is an organising frame that seeks to prevent local initiatives and demonstrations remaining only local and hence fragmented in terms of the horizon of socially just change. This is not a predetermined state, but rather somewhat unknowable, so its characteristics need to be clarified dialectically, through progressive political practice supported by a continuous cycle of reflection and action. This raises the question as to what the characteristics of a just society might be. Some of the ideas that are informing the related climate justice, degrowth and ecological economics movements, for example the concepts of 'Enough' (e.g. Latouche, 2010; O'Neill, Dietz, & Jones, 2010) and of 'Living Well' offer a first approximation. The concepts of *Sumak Kawsay* in Quechua, *Suma Qamaña* in Aymara, and *Buen Vivir/Vivir Buen* in Spanish (Fatheuer, 2011; Gudynas, 2011; Huanacuni Mamami, 2010) are being used to both articulate and struggle for new forms of social and ecological justice. 'Living Well' was described as follows by the Bolivian delegation to the UN:

Living Well is not the same as living better, living better than others, because in order to live better than others, it is necessary to exploit, to embark upon serious competition, concentrating wealth in few hands. Trying to live better is selfish and shows apathy, individualism. Some want to live better, whilst others, the majority, continue living poorly. Not taking an interest in other people's lives, means caring only for the individual's own life, at most in the life of their family. As a different vision of life, Living Well is contrary to luxury, opulence, and waste, it is contrary to consumerism. In some countries of the North, in big metropolitan cities, people buy clothes they throw away after wearing them only once. That lack of care for others results in ... elites who always seek to live better at other people's expense (Energy Bulletin, 2010)

Using practices similar to 'conscientization', proposed by Freire (1972), participants' discussion of concepts such as 'Enough' and 'Living Well' becomes useful tools to link local action and activism to broader systemic considerations.

(2) Rethinking amelioration/transformation.

As noted earlier, the distinction between ameliorative and transformative praxis has received attention in Community Psychology. Transformation is an ambitious goal, one that can be paralysing since it can appear so distant and so difficult. Moreover, failure to take ameliorative action when faced with human suffering raises ethical dilemmas. Kagan, Burton, Duckett, Lawthom, and Siddiquee (2011) suggest a more nuanced rethinking about the amelioration/transformation distinction. Their approach is based on the observation that in concrete cases there are always both ameliorative and transformative aspects.

Moreover, where social transformation has taken place it has often started from ameliorative action in the first place, with the experience gained in ameliorative work (action research findings, understanding of barriers to prefigurative action, alliances constructed, conscientization achieved...) contributing to later transformative interventions. The bold text in Figure 2 represents Kagan et al.'s (2011) reconceptualisation of the ameliorative/transformative distinction in terms of between two dimensions of change: scope and extent. Scope is spatial and/or temporal going from very local, short-term changes to widespread and long-term changes. Ambition refers to whether or not social relations are changed: is the change merely in the degree of a situation or does it re-write the rules of the situation? In Figure 2 three illustrative levels of scope (parochial/short term; city or regional range/medium-term; and national or international/long-term) and three levels of extent provide a simple scale across columns and rows of the table, respectively. In this two-dimensional space, interventions are more ameliorative towards the top left and more transformative towards the bottom right.

Applying this thinking to praxis in relation to personal debt, a variety of possible debt-related interventions is used to illustrate the nine possibilities, filling in the matrix. The arrow indicates a dimension from collusion with the status quo through amelioration towards transformation. Oppressive and destructive forces are more likely to oppose change projects that represent actions further towards the right and bottom of the matrix.

The examples illustrate the positioning of such activities as debt counselling and the training of people in 'money management' as having relatively limited focus and impact, whereas recent moves such as the establishment of credit unions and co-operatives may

Extent of change Scope of change	No change – status quo preserved	Changes of a 'quantitative' nature – no change in social relations but an improvement in experience.	Changes of a 'qualitative' nature – involving a change in social relations.
Parochial / short term focus	Collusion Ignoring the issue.	Debt counselling	Establishing Micro-credit schemes
Medium range focus (city or region-wide / medium term)	Training people in money management	Amelioration Establishing Credit unions Establishing consumer co-ops	Establishing producer co-ops De-linking / re-localisation initiatives (e.g. local currencies) Campaigns against loan sharks
Long range focus (national or international / long term)	School based financial literacy training	Campaigning for better welfare benefits	Transformation Political campaigning for a just economic system.

Figure 2. Applying the revised amelioration–transformation distinction.

have ameliorative effects. Engagement in such movements, though, when linked together regionally, may provide the type of popular education that leads to political activism, with the development of campaigns for more widespread changes in practice, for example the protests at the high cost credit markets (Centre for Responsible Credit, 2013). Since a categorical distinction between the ameliorative and the transformational has been supplanted by a relative and dynamic dimension, the question arises as to what kinds of activities can link local and macro change, grounding change at the political level with the experience of people's everyday experiences and struggles against an oppressive system? It would not be appropriate to recommend specific activities in ignorance of their proposed context of application and we trust in the creativity of community psychologists and other actors to innovate. But as a general orientation we suggest that more successful activities have a clear focus, engage the affected who, in Freirian terms can come to 'read the world' (understand how the social and economic system constructs their experience and what therefore needs to change) through their experience in practical action, and in relations of solidarity with others. So it could be asked: 'how does this activity open a space for constructing new collective understandings, how does it engender or support alliances for just change, and what will be left, in people's day to day to day experience, their consciousness and their ongoing life options, after the action has taken place'? An example might be a project that starts by exposing 'loan sharks' in a particular community and promoting alternatives to them (e.g. credit unions) and then moves to the setting up of community-based financial services and political campaigning, for example for a 'Living Wage'.

Examination of practice by considering activities to address problems of indebtedness using the dimensions of scope and extent could enable those informed by community psychology to choose and reject praxis on the basis of its potential for transformative change, but it also indicates options that might be more feasible than a societal level transformation. In keeping with the concepts of prefigurative action and prefigurative action research, this framework can also suggest ways of connecting initiatives, projects, allies, and struggles, building a social movement for macro-level change. This highlights the need for transformative community psychology that facilitates inter-linking, since work in local projects can so easily remain localised and thereby fragmented and detached from policy and societal change.

CONCLUSION

Over-indebtedness and growing personal debt are a manifestation of a particular model of late modern capitalism where the dominant economic and political modes of organisation demand the increased use of credit to sustain consumer demand. A key element of this organisation has been the mobilisation of a range of ideological and discursive representations of debt that privilege the pathologisation of individuals at the expense of a macroscopic analysis (Martín-Baró, 1987, 1996a). The contemporary institutions typically charged with remedying problems of human conduct, such as the 'psy' sciences and education do not contain the conceptual tools to make knowable and remediate the resulting social problems at levels above a focus on proposed individual interventions. The argument of this article promotes the development of a critical community psychology of debt through the use of conceptual tools that make evident the inter-connections between shorter range ameliorative actions and longer range transformative projects, promoting linkages between local projects and broader programmes of political change.

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