

## **Care in an age of austerity: men's care responsibilities in low-income families**

### **ABSTRACT**

Drawing on data from linked qualitative longitudinal (QL) datasets, this paper considers the under-researched impacts of economic crisis and austerity, on men from different familial generational positions, with care responsibilities for young children in low-income families. Recent debates indicate that recession and austerity provide the conditions for care arrangements in which low-income fathers are more likely to engage, producing 'caring masculinities'. However, austerity is also deepening everyday hardships for citizens, as care responsibilities are further entrenched as the private responsibilities of individual families. This 'responsibilisation' of care is producing numerous challenges for men, as evidenced in their discussions of their everyday caring practices. With reference to an ethics of care perspective and insights about processes of change and continuity in the austerity context, from men in low-income families, including those that are kinship carers, it is argued that processes of welfare reform and self-responsibilisation are antithetical to the reworking of male identities as identities of care. The paper concludes that wider structural change and support for men to engage effectively and positively in care are required in order for these identities, and for men's critical engagement in gender equality, to flourish.

**Keywords:** Men, caring responsibilities, poverty, austerity, hardship

## **Introduction**

This paper examines the gendered impacts and implications of the global economic recession in 2008, and subsequent austerity measures on families, that were implemented post-crisis in the UK. This is a context in which ‘the welfare contract is being redrawn and the state is imposing new rules and expectations on low-income families in return for reduced, conditional and tightly regulated financial support’ (Ridge, 2013, p. 406). In this context, shifting distributions of domestic labour within families, between men and women, and intergenerationally, are considered. Austerity has been acknowledged as a feminist issue (Feminist Fightback Collective, 2011), yet the situations and circumstances of men who provide care receive relatively limited attention compared to women, who have been worst affected by processes of welfare reform in the aftermath of the crisis (e.g. McKay et al. 2013; Miller & Nash, 2016).

Data from linked qualitative longitudinal (QL) datasets spanning more than ten years provide the empirical basis for this paper. This time frame captures the initial impacts of the global economic recession on low-income families in 2008 and its longer-term effects in the UK. The data provide insights into the familial relations, responsibilities and austerity driven hardships of men in low-income families, and capture broader processes of continuity and change. Recent scholarship about fatherhood indicates that there has been an increase in male care giving by fathers in low-income families (e.g. Dermott, 2016; Smith, 2009). The QL data presented here, include such men, but additionally include men who are kinship carers for young children, including brothers, uncles and grandfathers. This is a relatively invisible population providing care for children when their parents are unable to do so. Particular attention is paid to their narratives about their care responsibilities, their lived experiences of economic

upheaval and change, and their views on the implications and impacts of austerity. The findings highlight the contradiction that while austerity is increasingly providing the conditions in which men are required to provide care, this is occurring in a policy context producing intensifying material hardships for families. This is especially problematic when considered within an established debate that suggests that conditions of economic hardship and deprivation are more likely to produce masculinities and intimate relations that are antithetical to care (Izugbara, 2015; Meth, 2015).

The paper begins by linking three debates that explain the macro level dynamics providing the backdrop to men's contemporary care experiences and patterns of care. This includes how austerity permeates everyday family life; changing landscapes of care; and the links between caring masculinities and a feminist ethics of care. Following discussion of the methodology and the empirical evidence drawn upon to explore men's individual iterations of their care responsibilities, the data analysis is presented, highlighting how austerity measures are deepening hardships and impinging on men's experiences of caring.

### **Caring masculinities and changing familial relations in austere times**

Three strands of academic debate inform the conceptual framework for this paper and are elaborated in what follows. These include the impact of austerity and economic recession on everyday life and familial relations (e.g. Edwards & Irwin, 2010; Hall, 2016a, b); associated shifts in 'landscapes of care' and family practices (Boyer et al. 2017a, b); and an emerging theoretical literature conceptualising caring masculinities (Hanlon, 2012; Elliott, 2016).

*Austerity, families and everyday life*

Drawing on a growing, interdisciplinary body of research that explores how family relations might be reconceptualised and understood in times of austerity, Hall (2016a, b), emphasizes the inseparability of familial and financial relations, everyday life, and economic change. In her argument she references the Timescapes study (2007-2012) and its network of seven linked QL research projects (Neale & Bishop, 2012), which provide valuable insights into the ways in which individuals were beginning to make sense of the economic downturn in 2008 and the impact it was having on their lives (Henwood et al. 2010; Irwin & Edwards, 2010). The longitudinal designs of these studies meant that they were ideally situated to capture how families viewed economic change and the impacts of austerity as it unfolded (Bornat & Bytheway, 2010).

Findings across the studies highlighted the disproportionate impacts of the recession on families, depending on their existing socio-economic status. In their research with families from one of the most deprived wards in the UK for example, Emmel & Hughes (2010) noted that the 2008 recession went largely unnoticed for their participants, a population that described a persistent experience of marginalization and vulnerability, even through more prosperous economic periods. Reflected in the title of their article, “Recession, its all the same to us son”, for Bob, and other participants in their study, the 2008 economic recession meant business as usual (Emmel & Hughes, 2010). Since being made redundant from manufacturing work during the 1980/81 economic recession, Bob went on to experience the ‘churn’ (MacDonald et al. 2010) of low-pay, no-pay for many years. Just two years post recession, these low-income families continued to be some of the most deprived in the UK, to the extent that their early responses to external shocks like the recession were relatively muted.

Seven years later these findings deserve reconsideration. In a recent international comparison of change and continuities in familial experiences of hardship after the crisis in nine European countries, including the UK, Dagdeverien et al. (2017) distinguish between an ‘old poor’, who were impoverished both prior to, and after the crash, and a ‘new poor’ who fell into hardship post-crisis. Henwood et al. (2010) also note that change often takes time to emerge. Post-crisis, the impacts of the longer term politics of austerity are becoming clearer, indicating that families have increasingly had to develop their individual resilience and capacities to weather hard times (Hannon, 2013). In contexts where the state is reluctant to provide care, the burden is often devolved to families, impacting on both individuals and households (McEwan & Goodman, 2010). Austerity is further marked out by the intensification of moral rhetoric relating to the conduct and behaviour of parents at the policy level. Discourses of individualization and self-responsibility, where citizens are increasingly expected to ‘take responsibility’ for their own welfare and for others (Jensen & Tyler, 2012; van der Heijden et al. 2016) have supplanted acknowledgement of ‘deeply entrenched structural inequalities and systems of privilege’ (Jenson & Tyler, 2012), standing in sharp contrast to ethics of interdependent care. Within this framing, social policy discourses reflect contradictory constructions of families as both ‘risky’ and responsible for economic and moral decline, or ‘resourceful’ and the possible solution to a diverse set of social problems (Morris & Featherstone 2010; Jensen & Tyler, 2012).

*Gendered impacts of austerity and changing landscapes of care*

A parallel set of debates examines the gendered impacts of austerity and its implications for shifting divisions of domestic labour, that are thought to be producing new landscapes of care. The gendered impacts of the global economic crisis and austerity have been relatively neglected (Bennett & Daly, 2014; McKay et al. 2013), despite recognition that economic transformations impinge on men and women in different ways and are connected to unease about gendered identities, and men and women's roles in the home and the labour market (McDowell, 2004).

Gendered analysis of the impact of the recession on men and women from a feminist economics perspective, has revealed that in the initial aftermath of the recession, men in the UK (and other countries in Europe and the US) fared worse than women with regards to job losses, as a result of disinvestment in male-dominated manufacturing jobs (Bennett & Daly, 2014; McKay et al. 2013). In the longer term however, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's recovery strategy to cut public sector employment and social welfare in the UK, have meant that women have been more deeply affected (Bennett & Daly, 2014; McKay et al. 2013; Fawcett Society, 2012). Austerity has even been described as a 'war on women and children' demanding urgent reconsiderations of questions of care, labour and social reproduction (Allen et al. 2014). While women are undoubtedly at a higher and more consistent risk of being impoverished than men, linked to a combination of the labour market, welfare state and family relations as key factors influencing access to resources (Bennett & Daly, 2014; Dermott & Pantasiz, 2014), this has obscured the differential impacts austerity has had on men. According to Dermott & Pantasiz (2014) this might be because men do not appear to be especially vulnerable to becoming impoverished. However, their detailed, gendered analysis of change and continuity in

poverty across the lifecourse, based on UK Poverty and Social Exclusion data (1999 and 2012), indicates that there has been some convergence in the rates of persistent poverty experienced by men and women in the UK during this time frame (Dermott & Pantasiz, 2014).

These findings provide context to more recent debates that examine the relationship between economic crisis and recovery, labour market change and austerity, and linked transformations in household decision-making and gendered divisions of labour. While feminist research about care work has predominantly focused on women, who continue to take responsibility for the majority of unpaid care work and its organisation, recent research indicates that men - especially fathers - are increasingly engaging in the everyday tasks of social reproduction and care (Boyer et al. 2017a). While this has been theorised by some as the result of changing cultural expectations of fathers associated with models of involved fathering (e.g. Dermott & Miller, 2015), links have also been made between economic crisis, recovery and male unemployment as key factors in the regendering of care (Boyer et al. 2017a). There is also broader historical evidence that fathers are more likely to become involved in social reproduction in times of economic downturn (Henwood et al. 2010), reinforced by a larger field of feminist research that highlights shifts in gendered parental responsibilities in these contexts (Doucet, 2017). Debates relating to gendered divisions of domestic labour have explored how far male unemployment, redundancy, and rising rates of female employment can give rise to the renegotiation of domestic labour in households (see Doucet, 2017). In these circumstances, unemployment is thought to open up opportunities for men to reconfigure their parental and personal identities (e.g. Smith, 2009). While there is much to celebrate, in spite of these changes, women are

still more likely to 'take on much of the organizing, networking, and managing of children's activities and lives' (Doucet, 2017, p. 17).

### *Caring masculinities and ethics of care*

Linked to these changing patterns of care, a third strand of debate attends to the feminist ethics of care perspective and the potential of its application to men, masculinities and fatherhood (see Doucet, 2005; Held 2006; Philip 2013). This scholarship emphasizes that men both give and receive care and that there is a need, and indeed a value, in researchers analysing men's emotional and affective ties, everyday obligations and unequal gendered power relations (Locke, 2017). Empirical evidence indicates that men do engage in domestic work and that the extent of this work varies across cultures and class (Locke, 2017). This has led to consideration of the extent to which masculinities are diversifying, and to which, men's identities are being reworked and reconfigured to reflect values of care (Doucet, 2005; Brandth & Kvande, 2015), producing 'caring masculinities' (Hanlon 2012; Elliott, 2016). Combining feminist ethics of care with masculinities scholarship, Elliott (2016, p.17) argues that caring masculinities explain 'a refiguring of masculine identities away from values of domination and aggression and toward values of interdependence and care'. This represents a distinct departure from constructions of masculinity as a normative cultural project that entails independence and separation from others, a strongly bounded sense of self and a drive for power, agency and action (Meagher & Parton, 2004). Caring masculinities require men to reject practices of domination and aggression, practices that are typically associated with cultural ideals of hegemonic masculinity in western societies. Hegemonic masculinities carry harmful costs for men and women that are expressed through violence (against others and self), high-risk behaviour,

limited self-care, poor health and impoverished relationships with others (Elliott, 2016). Accordingly, the reworking of masculinities away from dominance and dependence into identities of care and non-domination might facilitate men's broader engagement and involvement in gender equality (Elliott, 2016; Hanlon, 2012; Morrell et al. 2015) and offer the potential for sustained social change for men and gender relations (Elliott, 2016).

While certainly to be encouraged, these theoretical developments do not offer a complex account of the social contexts in which caring masculinities might flourish or be supported. There is need for caution about the transformative power of an ethics of care that is located solely in the private sphere and limited to men's care giving at the micro level. While men may be increasingly involved in social reproduction this has not led to the wholesale transformation of men's and women's responsibilities for childcare (Boyer et al. 2017a). Similarly, O'Brien & Wall (2017) caution that involved fatherhood and gender egalitarianism are not always synonymous and need to be conceptualised and analysed separately.

Another key challenge is that masculinities associated with marginalisation and deprivation, are often at odds with alternative, caring practices of masculinity like nurture, interdependence and responsibility for self and others. As Meth (2016) argues, unemployment is often implicated as a key factor in men's explanations for perpetrating domestic violence. While this is not an inevitable relationship, nevertheless, it is essential to develop a contextual understanding of the particularities of the austerity context and how this shapes, and sometimes impedes, men's involvement in, and experiences of care. An ongoing challenge is

the marginalised status of these men, their economic position within low-income families and the continued de-valuation of unpaid labour.

### **Methodology and Method**

The empirical data that is presented and interpreted for this article is drawn from linked QL studies conducted in the UK. Capturing the period both pre- and post-crisis (Emmel & Hughes, 2010; author, 2016), these studies provide rich insights into the experiences of men with care responsibilities in low-income families, highlighting the social and relational dimensions of poverty, its impacts and effects (e.g. Ridge, 2009). The data consequently offer perspectives of austerity from those at the hard face of the cuts, and on men's perceptions of their everyday practical ethics of care and commitment.

The 'XXXX' (XXXX)<sup>1</sup> study was funded to explore men's patterns of care across the lifecourse in low-income families. Qualitative secondary analysis of existing, archived QL datasets that are stored in the Timescapes Archive was conducted first, followed by an additional phase of primary data collection in a follow up study (see author, 2016 for further discussion). The two datasets that were analysed prior to the collection of new empirical data were Following Young Fathers (FYF) and Intergenerational Exchange (IGE). IGE was conducted between 2007 and 2010 and has been described extensively elsewhere by the originating research team (Emmel & Hughes, 2010; 2014). This study was chosen because it explored the care experiences of low-income, mid-life grandparents (aged 35-55) residing in a low-income urban estate in a city in

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<sup>1</sup> The XXXX study is ongoing. It commenced in October 2014, and was funded by the [funding body]

the North of England. A key substantive focus of this study was the roles that these grandparents played in shaping future possibilities for their grandchildren. Significantly, the eight family cases that comprised the overall sample for IGE also included interviews with men who are kinship carers and grandfathers (Emmel & Hughes, 2010; 2014) and these data had not been analysed in-depth by the data originators. The decision to recruit male kinship carers for the XXXX follow on study was prompted by the discovery of high levels of kinship care engaged in by the participants in the IGE study, including by men (Emmel & Hughes, 2010). The fieldwork for the XXXX follow on study was conducted between July 2015 and July 2016 and sought to address gaps in the Timescapes studies (which were not originally set up to explore men's patterns of care over the lifecourse) and to generate key research questions with regards to men's caring responsibilities in comparable low-income families. Data from both IGE and XXXX is presented where analytically relevant.

These datasets include accounts from some of the most vulnerable and least visible men in society. As individuals who live in marginalised localities, providing relatively invisible forms of care, they are especially vulnerable in their relationship to the state and the labour market. Academic interest in fatherhood, and in particular, the cultural shift to involved and engaged models of fatherhood, focus predominantly on middle-class men, despite acknowledgement of heterogeneity in men's fathering practices and in relation to their socio-economic status (Meah & Jackson, 2016). This has obscured some of the complex patterns and practices of care that men who occupy more socially and economically marginalised positions engage in (Ridge, 2009; Boyer et al. 2017b), across the life course and over time. The XXXX study was designed to explore

diversities in men's caring responsibilities in low-income families more broadly to address this gap

The combined sample comprises eleven men who are male kinship carers (IGE, n=3, XXXX, n=8), fathers with adult disabled children (XXXX, n=2), and biological fathers with varied family configurations (XXXX, n=20). In the XXXX study, retrospective biographical interviews were conducted with each of these men to understand their histories, followed by a more structured focus on the circumstances of, and developments in, their care arrangements; the lived experience of providing care in financially constrained contexts; and their experiences of service provision and support. These questions prompted discussion about current welfare provision and the impacts of austerity and government cuts on their everyday lives and family practices. Given the amount of data available, across projects there is a great deal of diversity within these men trajectories particularly with regards to their fathering status; caring and housing situations; employment and level of service involvement.

For the follow on study, participants were identified and recruited via a number of routes. The majority were recruited following key informant interviews with support professionals in the city, two were participants of FYF, two were recruited from a support group for kinship carers in the city centre, and five were accessed at a community centre in a marginalised area of the city. Key informants played a central role in the recruitment process and aided in accessing a statistically and socially invisible group of men that are often described as 'hard to reach'. The datasets are linked in that all participants reside in the same post-industrial city, inhabited by

368,000 males, 6000 of whom are of working age and provide 20 hours or more of unpaid care (White et al. 2016).

The data presented in the sections below are excerpts from cases where men describe the hardships of austerity and the impacts that having care responsibilities has on their everyday lives, family practices and capabilities to provide care for family members. The first, examines men's experiences of providing kinship care and the implications of this for distributing limited financial and emotional resources within a network of wider interdependencies, within and across households. These data highlight that while the recession had limited impacts on these already poorly resourced families in the initial aftermath (e.g. Emmel & Hughes, 2010), taking on unanticipated care for children, particularly those who have their own histories of deprivation and disadvantage, rendered these men even more vulnerable. The second section presents cases where men reflect on both anticipated and realised exacerbations of hardship in the context of increasingly deepening cuts.

### **Care in a time of increasing hardship**

This section begins with consideration of the men in the sample who were kinship carers and their responses to taking on unanticipated care for grandchildren and other family members. Despite providing essential support to the state by looking after children who would otherwise enter the care system, research highlights that kinship carers and the children they look after are an overlooked population who experience high levels of poverty and disadvantage, usually with little or no statutory support (McAndrew, 2013). Selwyn et al. (2013) also raise concerns that in a climate

of austerity there are well-founded fears that cuts to welfare benefits and legal aid may further increase the disadvantages that kinship carers already face.

The participants describe diverse transitions into this challenging, but rewarding role. Despite taking on often unanticipated responsibilities for children and having to learn how to care for them, over time, these relationships become reciprocal and multi-directional and these men derive a great deal of reward and pleasure from them. This is exemplified by Sam<sup>2</sup> (age 51), a grandfather interviewed in 2015 for the XXXX study. Sam describes a long, challenging struggle with social workers to be considered as a potential carer for his grandson, who was initially released from hospital as a premature baby to his mother and maternal grandmother, despite his grandmother having had children removed from her and taken into care in the past. The baby later presented with signs of abuse and neglect, which Sam continually raised as an issue with social services. Following a series of assessments he eventually became the legal guardian for his grandson, now four. For Sam, becoming a kinship carer has been emancipatory. He states:

*[grandson] has changed my life entirely. And when I say at first it was hard, we were a bit skint, you know what I mean, and everything else. Now it has made me more successful in every department*

Not all of the men in these studies could articulate the positive benefits they derive from this role, linked to their inability to rely on support services and their dependence on the state to support their welfare requirements (e.g. Emmel & Hughes, 2010). Many

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<sup>2</sup> All participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities

also give up secure employment to care for children (Selwyn et al. 2014), as exemplified by Geoff, who was interviewed for the IGE study in 2008 just after the recession (see also Emmel, 2017). Both Geoff, and his wife Margaret are members of the 'core poor'. They are both dependent on disability welfare payments and struggle to cope with the sudden arrival of their three granddaughters, as a result of the deprivation and incapacity experienced by one of their daughters. She was dependent on prescription drugs and had also tried to steal money from them. They express a great deal of care and concern for their granddaughters but taking on responsibility for them had significant financial repercussions. This results in Geoff breaking down, which he links to the loss of secure employment and frustration at their relative powerlessness. He explains:

*I were so annoyed at the time I could have put 'em [granddaughters] in care but I thought you can't do that. I've been in care, I didn't want them to go through what probably I went through. I mean don't get me wrong I had a good...what I remember being in care, er, a good childhood but when I got like say abused and that...*

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*I know for a fact I won't work again, I won't work again now....I've worked all me life and like I say I had to give a good job up financially. I couldn't take it. There were so much pressure on me. The pressure, I mean I admire any woman who will look after their grandkids or anything but, er, it's bloody hard work. Financially wise and everything else it's, it's tiring sometimes. I mean especially obviously at our age it's not easy because financial wise*

Geoff's decision-making process with regards to taking on responsibility for his granddaughters is linked closely to his own biography of being a 'looked after' child. Despite the consequent constraint this imposes on their already limited household economy, Geoff is clear that he cannot allow his grandchildren to go into care. His case also illuminates how inequalities and care responsibilities are organised and redistributed *across* low-income households. Like Geoff, Victor, another participant from IGE also describes having a breakdown linked to decisions about how best to financially resource family members across multiple households. He has a young son from a previous relationship and his new partner Carolyn has four children and one grandson who become Victor's new responsibilities and financial dependents. In the following extract he describes the context in which he was forced to make decisions about how to direct his financial resources:

*...from when I left my ex, I was paying her maintenance, but she was refusing to let me see [son] ... my ex-partner, she's never worked and she's always sat on benefits, which then affected what happened to me, with the Child Support Agency (CSA)... What she did was, she took two part time jobs, the emphasis then was on me...They weren't legal jobs. The emphasis was then on me to grass her up for working on the side whilst at the same time being pursued for maintenance by the CSA. I couldn't convince them, because they saw me just as an absent father, who was disgruntled and would say anything, and they, the CSA, although I had four step-children, dismissed [names step-children with Carolyn] and said that they, and they actually wrote to us...They said, "They do not count, you are an absent parent". It meant Carolyn was worse off and her children were worse off than before I moved in, and I thought that was intolerable.*

The experiences of both Geoff and Victor highlight the gendered impacts of men's vulnerabilities in circumstances where decisions about care need to be made in contexts of finite financial resource. As Deacon and Williams (2004, p. 387) argue, people make morally informed choices in response to changes in their circumstances, drawing on 'repertoires of values about care and commitment in order to work out what, in practice, would be the 'proper thing to do'. This involves complex negotiations and accommodations, which are worked out in and through their relationships with others, but also influenced by the opportunities and constraints provided by who and what they are and where they live'. This is an example of 'constrained choice' (Bird & Reiker, 2008) in which individual agency and decision-making are influenced by social position and policy. Victor's narrative exemplifies this point, indicating that while some opportunities to provide care are opened up for him in re-partnering, others are shut down. Victor's decision not to provide financially for his son from his first marriage, is divorced from consideration of his wider interdependencies and family configurations, meaning that he is interpreted by the CSA as an absent parent; a man that has reneged on his responsibility as a provider and who lacks commitment and moral purpose. In his new family context however, Victor is considered an exemplary step-parent by Carolyn, and also by social services who, after a comprehensive vetting process, designated them as foster parents for two additional children. Therefore, depending on which service perspective is taken, Victor is constructed as either an absent father, or an exemplary foster carer. This example highlights the sometimes contradictory ways that care by men is constructed in the current policy context, in this case by different institutions.

### **Increasing hardships**

Even for relatively resourced men, taking on unanticipated care responsibilities on behalf of the state can be disadvantageous, representing a period of disruption and enhanced vulnerability. Toby is 39 years old and was interviewed for the XXXX study. Following the death of his sister he took on the care for his niece (age 16), great-niece (age 1) and three nephews (aged 19, 8 and 5). At the time of interview in October 2015, he was living in his sisters sub-standard, privately rented accommodation for five days a week, while he liaises with social services about a legal order for the two youngest children. This process has taken over six months and was ongoing at the time of interview. He describes a distinct lack of financial (as well as emotional and practical) support by social services. Prior to his sister's death, Toby was relatively well resourced financially with stable employment and savings. The process of housing and supporting his young relatives, which he promised his sister he would do when she was diagnosed with terminal cancer, has pushed him into crisis:

*they've given us £160, which equates for that amount of time, since the 13<sup>th</sup> April, £3.26 a day and that's to feed, clothe and run a house for five kids*

*I: So what have you done, how have you done it?*

*It's just money that I had, I had savings – I had some money put to one side – I had to borrow some money off my mum. But again I brought that up and they said, "Well the child benefit has gone to the priority team" and I said, "Well yeah but you didn't sort that out, my mum's social worker sorted that out."*

One of these young children also has behavioural problems and for many of the men in this study, the practicalities of providing care for children with complex needs and lives

marked by significant levels of deprivation represents one of the biggest challenges. The men also identified and discussed numerous socio-economic, relational and housing factors that impacted on their ability to provide care, increasing the hardships they faced. Some outlined the high level of skill required to support children with complex needs including those who had experienced the challenges associated with deprivation and adverse childhood experiences (ACE's)<sup>3</sup>. Illustrating this point is Paul, age 52 who was also interviewed for the XXXX study in 2015. He became a kinship carer to three of his grandchildren (two granddaughters and a grandson), following the death of his daughter (aged 32). In the aftermath of her death, his ex-partner was also incapable of providing care to these children because of disability. She died not long after her daughter so Paul was approached by social services to take on their care instead. At this time, he was living in a two bedroom, council house in an area he had lived in all his life. His two granddaughters moved in with him but because of legalities about how looked after children should be safely housed (namely sisters should not sleep in the same room as brothers), his grandson was separated from his siblings and placed in a care home. Paul requested a larger home via the local authority so that he could house all three children but his request was not immediately followed up and he was told that there was not enough available housing. As a result of going into the care system, his grandson is now regularly in and out of prison (unlike his sisters), something that Paul blames on what he describes as 'the system'. He states:

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<sup>3</sup> These include the early death of a parent, criminal behaviour and experience of the youth offending system, and mental illness

*The system has made him [grandson] what he is, to be honest. That's my view and what I see. I mean, I'm not blaming nobody, but I'm blaming the system because that's what's made him what he is.*

*I: Yeah. So describe the system to me in your—*

*Well, the system is, when they put them into care, like [care home], he weren't old enough to go into [care home name]*

*I: What's [care home name]?*

*a children's home in [city], which is closed down now. What happened was, when he went into [care home] he was about eleven. Well, everybody in there was up to sixteen/seventeen. So he was running, as I see it, with the pack. So he got brought up in a pack and then their bond is with them. They get a bond with them. This is how I look at it. They get a bond with thieves and whatever, and anybody else has no say, and he just ran with them. If he wants money, he runs with them. They gave him money, he runs with them. And that's how it is.*

When Paul's grandson returns home from prison, he stays with Paul. Paul is now living in a larger council owned house with enough rooms for all three of his grandchildren. He likens his responsibilities for his grandson to a very poorly paid form of employment, requiring specific skills and experience:

*it's so frustrating for people. I mean, this is my case; I don't know about other people... I mean, for me, to look after [grandson] in a professional capacity, I'd have to go to college to look after him, every week for four years to look after him, and I can still do it. They expect me to do it with no qualifications. It's like asking me to go and do a doctor's job, isn't it?*

Later in the interview Paul also reflects that he further anticipates that this already challenging situation is only like to get worse under the conditions of austerity and cuts to welfare:

*It's just a hard life and the government's going to make it harder...I mean financially, you know, to look after a child. This is my view. I mean, I think I get tax credits for [granddaughter]. She isn't my child, if you understand what I mean. This is what I'm saying. If she was plonked in somebody else's house, if you understand what I mean, they get fortunes for them, you know, and I think I get about £30 a week or something like that, to bring a thirteen-year-old child up.*

While the transition to becoming a kinship carer could be challenging to these men's sense of self and their identities, many were also worried about the implications of proposed cuts to welfare and the long-term impact that this would have on their ability to provide care. Matthew is not a kinship carer but as a single parent to his adult disabled son, his narrative demonstrates a shared concern about impending cuts to welfare support for his son:

*with this Care Act, if I don't work and I haven't got a job by then, you can't absorb these charges. You just can't do it. And I've got savings but they're not going to last forever. Because of the cuts, the austerity measures, [city] Council have got – is it £74 million less in the next – last four years or something? It's a lot of money. So I don't know. So I've basically said to them, "I'll have no option but to be moving him in day care." Then you've probably taken away my options of working. A couple working could probably absorb these charges. A single person couldn't.*

These men are particularly vulnerable to policy changes such as these because they directly impact on their care responsibilities and their access to the labour market. Matthew's example demonstrates that austerity policies constrain the time, space and financial security required to effectively balance work and care responsibilities. Thus, the austerity context places emphasis on questions like 'how can I manage this?' rather than 'what ought I do?' (see Deacon & Williams, 2004). As a single father to a disabled, adult son, Matthew has diminished access to an independent income. He regularly applies for employment, but cannot find part time work that can fit flexibly around his son's needs. His narrative evidences how austerity and the retrenchment of the state permeate everyday care experiences and their moral framing. Previously well resourced, Matthew has a distinct and articulate sense that austerity, and the effect of these changes to policy, are likely to make his situation as a single father worse and impede on his ability to provide adequate care.

## **Conclusions**

Existing academic debate suggests that responses to the global economic recession in 2008 have afforded men in low-income families with greater opportunities for involvement in practices of social reproduction, with implications for the relationship between changing divisions of labour, new patterns of inequality, and the social construction of gendered identities, including masculinities (see McDowell, 2004). Consideration of men's care responsibilities post-recession in this paper highlight that under the new austerity regime, men in low-income families are increasingly required to take on a diverse range of care responsibilities, as fathers and as uncles and grandfathers. Attention to men's responsibilities as kinship carers for example, highlights that the exacerbation of economic inequalities between family members, situated within diverse sets of intergenerational interdependencies are significant yet unrecognised at policy level. Valentine and Hughes (2010) explain that like 'ripples in a pond', concerns affecting one generation can also adversely affect other family members. Despite being the most resourced individuals in their families, these men receive limited financial and social support to fulfill those responsibilities for others when they arise. As carers, they are rendered additionally vulnerable in their dependencies, taking on care for children with their own distinct histories linked to disadvantage and deprivation, a role that Paul reframes as one that requires specific skills and qualifications. As such, their vulnerabilities and caring masculinities are structured by a complex set of relations relating to social disadvantage, disability, precarious employment and care for others, all of which impact on their affective and intimate relationships.

These men's narratives subsequently highlight the distinct social and relational dimensions at work in the experience of poverty, emphasising that poverty is an ethical

issue. These men are forced to make decisions about what care responsibilities they can take on and who they can resource, but this is done so in worsening conditions of material and financial constraint. In making sense of their decision-making processes and everyday family practices, their responses also notably reflect the language of self-responsibility. As both Paul and Matthew suggest, they do what must be done in order to keep their families together, even though they anticipate economically harder times to come.

What this empirical evidence points to is that while theoretically and normatively, men's increasing involvement in social reproduction might be recognised as an influencing factor in a broader project of gender equality, the sustainability of such a project while austerity measures are being imposed, is questionable. This is not least because not least because austerity policies entrench an ethos of independence and self-responsibility (Edwards et al. 2012), rather than an ethic of care and social solidarity (McDowell, 2004). Loss of access to the labour market post-recession as a result of job insecurity and the need to fulfill care responsibilities on behalf of the state, caused several of these men, including Victor and Geoff, to experience breakdown linked to their identities and circumstances. The more recent concerns of Matthew and Paul highlight their considerable anxieties about the withdrawal of the essential financing required to manage challenging care responsibilities in a context where the labour market is also increasingly inflexible and insecure.

Significantly, insights into the contexts shaping men's care responsibilities, and their fears of worsening economic hardship, emphasise that there is no inevitable relationship between care and gender equality. Gender equality is a process that cannot

be individualised (i.e. made the sole responsibility of individual men) if it is to be sustained. The empirical evidence presented here suggests that there is much more work to be done to ensure that care giving by men is valued and extended to the broader political and social context, particularly if it is to flourish in the longer term.

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