

## **The precariat, everyday life and objects of despair**

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The monetary subjugation of civil society by speculative capital has been linked to societal unrest and increased disparities in income between 'the haves' and the 'have nots' for millennia (Graeber, 2011; Hodgetts et al., 2014; Standing, 2011). Countries, including New Zealand and the United Kingdom, are experiencing an epoch of neoliberalism characterized by the coordination of economic and social life that is being shifted increasingly from the state to private interests. In line with the neoliberal worldview - cultivated by the political right over recent decades - almost all domains of life have been subordinated to market rationality and economic liberalization. Welfare and healthcare supports that were established to reduce, or at least buffer people against, the harshest consequences of poverty caused by social hierarchies and inequalities are being systematically dismantled (Hodgetts et al., 2014). Recently increased austerity for the poor has exacerbated the dilemmas faced by families already living stressful and inadequately resourced lives (Boon & Farnsworth, 2011), around income insecurity (Green 2012), food insecurity (Dowler & O'Connor, 2012), and social exclusion (Boon & Farnsworth 2011). Neoliberal politics of austerity are played out in the lives of socio-economically vulnerable groups and have sparked renewed interest in concepts such as social class (Hodgetts & Griffin, 2015).

This chapter draws on the everyday experiences of adversity of 100 families who live particularly precarious and austere lives in Auckland. We focus on the materiality of these lives and consider how particular objects of despair, such as empty food cupboards and lunch boxes, prepaid power meters, urine soaked blankets, and absent slippers exemplify and metonymise frustrations, anxieties, and injustices in the lives of impoverished people. These objects render income, housing and food insecurities 'real'. Our analysis demonstrates the consequences of socio-political hierarchies and associated inequalities for the everyday and precarious lives of families in need. A focus on material objects reveals the human agency, practices and ways of being that emerge as families work materially to make sense of austerity and survive.

Contemporary re-engagements with the concept of social class in psychology (Hodgetts & Griffin, 2015; Tyler, 2008), reflect a long-standing, politicized tradition in community psychology of documenting how socio-economic upheavals are played out in the everyday lives of communities in need (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld & Zeisel, 1933/1971; Hodgetts et al., 2010a). Although the concept of class remains polysemic, it is useful for opening up explorations of how the personal is interwoven with the socio-political (Hodgetts & Griffin,

2015). Attention is given to the impacts of economic and socio-political positioning of groups within social hierarchies and their differential access to power, employment, money, housing, food, education, healthcare, opportunities in life, and goods and services (Anthias, 2014; Bourdieu, 1987; Raey, 2013; Standing, 2011). Many contemporary approaches to class focus on networks of inequalities that manifest both economic and cultural processes (Hodgetts & Griffin, 2015). A central concern is the ways in which class intersects with interrelated social formations of oppression, including gender, ethnicity, race, disability, and sexuality. These work in concert in the constitution of lives, social relations, discrimination and inequalities. Although shaped by local, societal and global politics, social classes are also co-constructed by people through daily practices. Broader landscapes of power operate through everyday practices and relationships to reproduce social hierarchies and to produce various dynamic 'social locations' for ordinary people at the intersections between these social formations.

Social class remains a useful concept for unravelling the complexities surrounding the reproduction of privilege and power, and the subordination that is perpetuated by the inequitable distribution of social, cultural and economic resources between groups (Bourdieu, 1987). We approach social class as comprised of a dynamic set of social and material relations based around power, and the operation of economic, political, cultural and ideological relations of domination and subordination (Hodgetts & Griffin, 2015). Rather than simply comprising an economic group, a given social class can be read as a dynamic and evolving social space. Here, social space refers to a sense of place shared among human beings from, or currently living within, similar cultural, social psychological and material circumstances. The concept of habitus is central to understanding social class as a social space through which, people come to experience sameness and difference, attraction and revulsion depending on the class status of those around them (Bourdieu, 1987). We use the concept of habitus to invoke a network of dispositions, material practices, ways of being and tastes through which a people come to understand and engage with the world and other people. We will consider how the social space of families living austere and precarious lives due to their class positioning, and their associated habitus, becomes embodied and intertwined with their everyday lives, practices and experiences.

In terms of conceptual work on new class formations that span various intersections, the rise of the precariat classes (Standing, 2011) is directly relevant to this article. The precariat classes reflects the entrenching of neoliberalism and undermining of work conditions and securities for the traditional working and middle classes (Standing, 2011). The precariat comprises an emerging social class of 'denizens' whose rights and being are brought into question: they are people who live insecure lives with limited economic and social capital, and very constrained hope of social mobility. The precariat is made up of people with insecure and

highly casualized employment and reduced employment rights. Their lives are characterized by the dynamics of underemployment, a revolving door between work and unemployment, unliveable wages and a raft of insecurities that are played out in everyday life. Such precariat lifeworlds are characterized by uncertainty, despair, limitations of agency and resistance, insecurities in housing and food, and their numbers are growing (Standing, 2011).

In exploring the psycho-political aspects of urban poverty for the precariat, it is important that we do not lose site of the materiality of everyday experience. In focusing on material and cultural aspects of adversity, psychologists have explored how material objects provide personal anchorage points within everyday landscapes. For example, Hodgetts and colleagues (2010a, 2010b) document how homeless people talk about MP3 players, books and other possessions when recounting how they cope with adversity and seek to preserve their humanity. Such objects are used to preserve a sense of self and provide some ontological security within insecure lives. Re-telling the significance of an object can also invoke a nexus of politicized social practices that exceeds the materiality of the specific thing (Miller, 2010; Olsen, 2003). Through the use of material objects, members of the precariat can cultivate agentive strategies for escaping aspects of adversity and for exploring the larger existential issues of life, one's place within it, who one is and who one might become (Cohen & Taylor, 1973). Objects serve a purpose in enabling people to make sense of and communicate the inequalities they face, their situations, frustrations, and despairs, and to invoke the inequities they face daily. We can see a dialogical relationship between members of the precariat and the basic commodities of life, through which objects and the people involved with them are remade and take on new meanings in signifying an inequitable social system (Miller, 2010). Precarious lives are signified by precarious access to a place to belong, to food, bedding, clothing and utilities.

Such lives are hard and feel hard. As researchers, we need to respond by engaging with the emotional and material nature of everyday experiences of hardship. We need to consider how, in trying to explain what it is like to live unstable, precarious, stressful, draining, austere and hard lives, members of the precariat often do so with reference to material objects. This chapter explores how certain 'objects of despair' become focal points for the dilemmas of the precariat, their frustrations and hardships, and their emotional and agentive responses to austerity. Complementing the sporadic research into emotionality and social class (Tyler, 2008), we consider ways in which class is felt through the despair associated with being trapped in austerity, guilt in not being able to provide for one's family, and anger in being surveilled by institutions who are essentially disinterested. To do so, we draw eclectically from scholarship on materiality (Miller, 2010), emotion and class (Tyler, 2008), actor networks (Latour, 2005), social practices (Reckwitz, 2002), interobjectivity (Moghaddam, 2003),

everyday life (de Certeau, 1984), being (Heidegger, 1927/1962), and the precariat (Standing, 2011).

### **Theory, focus and approach**

Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2005) provides a useful theoretical framework for orientating us towards the materiality of austere lives, directing us towards the political, material and relational aspects of everyday austerity. As a theory of social interaction, Actor Network Theory considers the material objects that populate everyday lifeworlds to be actors indisputably connected to the relational networks of human beings. The ontology of objects is active rather than passive and implicated in the performance of social life because objects do things to the lifeworlds in which they are situated. Also reflecting recent discussions within psychology on interobjective relations (Daanen & Sammut, 2012; Sammut, Daanen & Sartawi, 20012), divisions between active human beings and passive material objects become blurred as material objects are worked upon, enacted and re-enacted within everyday lives (Jóhannesson & Bærenholdt, 2009). As we will show, people constantly use material objects, such as tables, lunch boxes, power cords, and blankets to signify and solidify social orders, relationships, shared practices and identities. This blending of distinctions between people and things is particularly salient, given the precarious relationship between families experiencing poverty and the various goods that many of us take for granted, such as food, clothing and bedding. In their engagements with such objects, peoples' experiences, desires and frustrations become anchored to particular items, giving these things socio-cultural and political significance within socio-political geometries (Latour, 1995).

Further insights into these processes can be gained from philosophical considerations on the nature of being. Following Heidegger (1927/1962) we consider how, through the use of mundane objects, people can realise themselves as interconnected beings in the world. For Heidegger being is fundamentally relational and an ongoing process that involves the use of things in the world. Human beings extend out into the world through affective connections to everyday objects that present to us as meaningful in their own right, and via which social formations are lived and reproduced (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Through processes of socialization within social groups, human beings obtain taken-for-granted knowledge of themselves, familiar objects and how the world works. This knowledge is embodied, emplaced and enacted. It rarely requires conscious awareness or reflection. It is when relationships with familiar things is problematized or disrupted that people have to forge new understandings through conscious deliberations (Daanen & Sammut, 2012). As we will demonstrate, objects that are rendered problematic for members of the precariat due to austerity come to manifest

emotions and frustrations and anchor personal desires for a better life and being. Accounts of these material objects enable members of the precariat to locate themselves within broader social-political landscapes, social policies, and in relation to austerity measures.

Also informed by the work of scholars such as Latour (2005), Heidegger (1927/1962), Bourdieu (1987) and de Certeau (1984), social practice theories offer insights into the complexities surrounding objects in everyday life (Reckwitz, 2002). As Halkier and Jensen (2011, p. 104) note, “The most basic theoretical assumption is that activities of social life continuously have to be carried out and carried through, and that this mundane performativity is organized through a multiplicity of collectively shared practices”. A dynamic nexus of social practices make up lifeworlds and constitute the everyday conduct of life (Hodgetts et al., 2010a). These practices comprise activity structures and can be understood as routine forms of human action that involve bodies and physical acts, knowing how to get by, the use of material objects, the conduct of relationships both interpersonal and structural, and emotional experiences (Reckwitz, 2001). Objects are central to social practices because they enable the performance of physical acts and the reproduction of social structures and personal innovations upon these (Latour, 2005; Reckwitz, 2002). A social constructionist approach to social practice theory (Reckwitz, 2001) also aids our exploration of the socio-cultural and economic relationships and inequalities that are embedded in, and reproduced and resisted through various social practices that involve the use of objects. By focusing on the use of material objects and associated practices we are able to explore responses to adversity as on-going, contingent, relational and material accomplishments in everyday life.

The concept of *phronesis* (Flyvbjerg et al., 2012), practically orientated knowledge regarding how to respond life events, is central to our analytic approach. People experiencing hardship develop a stock of intimate, practical experiential knowledge about their particular situation that other people lack. Such experiential wisdom is not simply cognitive in nature; it is embodied through stress, humiliation, frustration, fear, despair, anxiety and anger; it also materializes through the involvement of particular objects (*cf.*, Daanen & Sammut, 2012). We explore the ways in which reference to such objects conveyed more felt and personally experienced accounts of adversity, relationships and agency as participants in our research worked to construct and convey their experiences. A key consideration is how general (societal) structures and relationships are reproduced via particular (personal) situations and the use of material objects. In this regard, our work is informed by Simmel’s (1903/1964) *principle of emergence* of social phenomenon and his orientation towards looking locally in order to understand systemic elements of the socio-cultural world within which people reside and make do (*cf.*, de Certeau, 1984). Asserting that the specific resembles the general, but is not reducible to it, Simmel worked as an impressionist to extracted general arguments out of

detailed considerations of local urban practices. Likewise, our analysis moves from the local social practices of our participants in broad brush strokes to the social universe at play in situated happenstance. We work to bridge the gap between philosophical abstractions and detailed empirical engagements with actual everyday lives, which are typically written out of history. The importance of objects of despair in informing knowledge of the politics of precariat lives emerges from the analytic dialectics between theoretical abstraction and everyday experience.

### **Everyday things in precarious lives**

We draw on insights from the Family100 project<sup>1</sup>, which is located within the Auckland City Mission (ACM) and seeks to develop alternative understandings of families in need and to promote initiatives that better meet their needs (Hodgetts et al., 2014). Participating families were selected to be representative of families regularly accessing the ACM food-bank; the cohort consisted of 40% Māori, 25% Pacific Islander, 22% European, and 13% Asian and other minority groups. The sample of families reflects the intersection of issues of ethnicity, gender and disability within precariat households. Specifically, 100 householders spoke frankly with social workers about their experiences every two weeks over one year using a range of drawing exercises and interviews. We met with the social workers every week to conduct training, collaboratively develop research materials, review participant responses and ensure continuity over the project. Drawing exercises involved asking participants to think about and diagram service networks, social relationships, health, food, finance, education and other such issues. Such visual exercises increase reflection and engagement on the part of participants in the interview process, give form to issues that can be difficult to discuss in the abstract, and enable participants to set part of the agenda for discussion by highlighting elements we did not expect, in a similar way to photo-elicitation exercises (Hodgetts et al., 2011). Materials for analysis consisted of discussion notes from the fortnightly interactions, participant drawings, and bi-monthly recorded interviews.

This chapter focuses on particular objects, including houses, kitchen furniture, food and lunch boxes, power meters and cords, blankets and slippers, which provide focal points for participant frustrations, stress and conflict. We consider these objects as focal points for their ability to expose related practices of what poverty is really like and how people work materially to make sense of it. We explore how 'making do' (de Certeau, 1984) implicates

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<sup>1</sup> This project was initiated and funded by the Auckland City Mission. It was designed and conducted by the authors of this article.

these objects in a variety of practices, such as obtaining electricity from one's neighbours when one's own power has been disconnected, sleeping as a household in a single room to retain warmth, and escaping into dreams of a better life (*cf.*, Cohen & Taylor, 1973). A focus on things and practices enables us to invoke human agency in conveying the implications of austerity for these families. Our interpretation also moves beyond particular objects, situating these in terms of broader insecurities around housing, income and food, and the political paternalism of authorities that impact our participants' everyday lives.

Food-related examples are particularly striking in highlighting the implications of material objects in broader relational and social practices that shape precarious lives. These include accounts of empty cupboards that produce shame; lunchboxes that materialise anger and conflicts around the provision of food for children; and a kitchen table and chairs that disrupt the commensality of a family's dwelling and eating. A disconnect between self and place is often raised in relation to food and food-related objects. Kitchen cupboards invoke feelings of shame through not having food to share with visitors. As Pirihiira notes:

I stress over having no food in the cupboards. I feel embarrassed when people come to my house. Even for coffee. I hate the thought of opening up my cupboards, "I haven't done the shopping yet." It's always that stress... I've had a lot of embarrassing situations where I've had to make excuses, "Sorry, there's nothing there." To me, it's embarrassing all the time. I hardly have anyone come to my house (Māori, 62).

Making excuses, such as having not done the shopping yet, for not being able to host and feed a visitor constitute a strategy or social practice through which food insecurity and scarcity is positioned (Halkier & Jensen, 2011). The situation conveyed above also invokes the transgression of important cultural norms for these families around hospitality that emerge for Pirihiira at the intersection of ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status. Culturally, this Māori, precariat woman expresses a sense of *whakama* (shame and humiliation) at not being able to provide *kai* (food) to *manuhiri* (visitors) as part of her obligations to *manaaki* (host and care for visitors). Empty cupboards prevent such families from meeting their cultural and gendered obligations to respect and show kindness to visitors due to limited economic resources. Over time, this can reduce social ties that buffer people against adversity.

Also surfacing in relation to accounts of food and food-related objects are clashes in class-based *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1987) between the precariat families and middle class professionals. For example, these families are pressured by schools and welfare agencies to provide their children with the 'right kind of foods' and healthy options. Several families mentioned having to send their children to school with lunches in clear zip-lock bags or lunchboxes so that the contents could be viewed and vetted by teachers. Through such practices food becomes a point of distinction between groups in society where power relations

are reproduced, and middle-class taste is imposed on precariat families (Bourdieu, 1984) who have limited options with regard to what their children eat. In one such example, our fieldnotes state that Peta “lives with constant worry that her kids are being singled out by teachers and fellow pupils alike for being poor”. These tensions manifest in their lifeworld in relation to school lunches and the stigma that comes with a lack of food, let alone the ‘healthy options’:

I can't send my kids to school with a tin of beans. If I could I would... If I keep them home cos I haven't got the right foods to send them to school with, it's, “Why aren't you sending them to school?” And then when I do send them... it's, “Where's their lunches? Why did you send them to school with basically nothing?” And I think, well, either way I can't win... (Peta, Māori, 45 years).

Amelia makes a similar point, elaborating on how lunchboxes that do not contain the right type of food become objects of judgement and contestation between parent and school:

I think they're getting a wee bit too picky about what kind of foods. There's a lot of kids don't have what they [teachers] want in their lunches. I make sure my kids' lunchboxes are always full. Now the school's saying that you're not allowed this, not allowed that.... At least they're fed. At least if the kid's got a full lunch box... I put my kids first no matter if it's not the healthiest of food... Whatever parents wanna put in their lunchboxes they should be able to put in... But, no. Letters get sent home with them, have them confiscated and everything. To this day I'd still like to know where the confiscated food's gone... I told them to get fucked. I did... Look at society today, half the kids go to school with no lunches (Māori, 44 years).

Here, we see a clash of habitus associated with the different class positions of these parents and teachers take form in relation to children's lunches (*cf.*, Daamen & Sammut, 2012). The dominant middle-class worldview, which comes from a place of food security and ability to engage in ‘healthy dietary practices’, is morally sanctioned in society. It presents members of the precariat as consumers of ‘junk food’ and parents as incompetent in making appropriate choices for their children and, therefore, in need of scrutiny. ‘Junk food’ is an object of scorn for teachers, but a reward for many families who have limited options for treating children. These parents resist the imposition of teacher's objectification of children's lunches by reasserting their own meanings that reflect their lived realities (Sammut, Daanen & Sartwi, 2012). Food becomes an object for expressing austerity and a mismatch between the expectations of schools and the resources of precariat parents, leading to conflict, anger, stress, and in some cases, truancy as a means of avoiding stigma. In such accounts we witness the manifestation of broader relations in society through particular objects.



Contestation over the content of lunch boxes binds these families into the present social order and hierarchy (*cf.*, Heidegger, 1927/1973; Latour, 2005).

Food insecurities challenge and disrupt parents' engagements with their children's education and position them as 'bad parents'. Such accounts deflect understandings of self as responsible parents who do what they can for their children, but who are often frustrated in the process by external agents. Below, another participant discusses how the kitchen table is a constant reminder of her precarious situation characterized by limited personal control over her immediate environment. Angel foregrounds her frustrations with the family's situation and the scrutiny they endure by authorities who are unresponsive to the family's needs:

The way we eat, they [welfare authorities] should butt out. What I think is they shouldn't come in the house concerned that my children don't eat healthy food... I've been asking them [housing authority] to remove the chairs that are fixed against the table in the kitchen... for us to sit properly and eat. The kids, they can't sit down and eat, they have to stand up and grab their food. If they sit the chair is too low and the table is high up to their chest here... You don't feel like you're enjoying your food... I'm sick of seeing the kids feel awkward at the table... I hate it. Sometimes I walk in the kitchen with a hammer, I tell my husband, "I'm not gonna call them [housing NZ], I'm gonna do it myself." [destroy the table] My husband said, "No, don't do it. This is not our house, they're gonna charge us if you do that."... And one time the case manager came over and I showed her. I said, "Can you help me with this table?" She said, "Oh, sorry, there's nothing we can do about it. That belongs to the house and you can't do nothing." I was sitting down myself, I said, "Look"... She doesn't wanna look at me, she looks like she's not interested in what I'm explaining to her! (Tongan, 36).

In this account a table and chairs provide a metonym for the state housing and welfare systems, which do not fit the family. They are positioned as being out of place and frustrated with public housing and a lack of response from authorities to what they see as their needs. Such members of the precariat often feel out of place because their ways of being are disrupted by their lack of control over such issues as housing and food. The account of a case manager that does not want to look reflects a phronetic understanding of an unresponsive system, which does not want to witness the hardships and frustrations people face. Such case managers try to avoid taking such families interobjective understandings of their material environments into account when these differ from, and require critical reflection on, the institutional perspective (Daanen & Sammut, 2012). Angel's account also conveys her alienation from such things and what it is like to feel out of place and not fitting with one's surroundings. Angel goes on to recount how she vented her frustration and anger by taking the hammer to, and removing the chairs from the table. The hammer provides a related

metonym; one that offers agency and a means of resistance to external control and assertion of the right to dwell and belong (de Certeau, 1984).

Issues of disruption and the constant struggle to create a place that feels like home where the family can gain a sense of stability, warmth and wellbeing in the face of unresponsive organizations were central to participant social practices and accounts of the use of things in everyday life. In one example, Greg recounts his precariousness in relation to access to basic utilities such as electricity. He uses a GLO-BUG (pay-as-you-go electricity meter), which restrains his efforts to heat a damp house. His account invokes vigilance, restraint and rationing as everyday social practices:

It's just too expensive with running a 2000 watt heater for a few hours. You're paying near to 30 bucks a week... If you're not keeping an eye on it, it could be 35 bucks a week... Make sure you don't have the heater on because you can use a 2000 watt heater for an hour and that will be all your light usage for 24 hours... You know that you can't deal with it on GLO-BUG... It's just a pre-pay phone card type of thing... And you put a minimum of 20 bucks, it costs \$1.50 to put in every time... If you get below \$11.00 they cut you off... They'll give you a warning and some stupid lights... When it's green, it's fine. When it's orange, you're power's low. It's going to be off in two days. When it turns red your power's going to be cut off at 12 o'clock... It drives you a little bit nutty... (Pakeha, 42).

Constantly monitoring the lights on the power meter reminds participants, such as Greg, of their precarious access to electricity and other such basic utilities that other members of society often take for granted. Such accounts remind us of the constant stress of being poor and show how the meter has become an active agent in the lives of the precariat. When the meter light goes orange families go to bed to save power; the power meter regulates lighting, determines bedtime, and other interactions in the household. Rationing power also comes at a cost; it is linked to an inability to keep the house warm and dry, and to ill-health. As Amelia states:

I have mould in my rooms. There's nothing you can do about it... Just wipe it down again. I'm a bad asthmatic, so that doesn't help. I've got a dehumidifier, but that just eats out the power so what do you choose? An extra blanket or an extra day's power? No doubt it sacrifices my own health...

Through accounts of material objects, such as the GLO-BUG meter, we witness the implications of inequity for people's health. In these objects reside the ramifications of austerity measures that restrict the ability of families to pay for electricity and produce exploitative

relationships in social hierarchies. Investor demands for high returns from privatized power companies<sup>2</sup> are linked to the precariat living in cold and damp houses unable to afford increasing electricity prices. Identifying such links constitutes an engagement with aspects of the 'referential whole' of material objects (Heidegger, 1927/1973). This is to invoke what Heidegger referred to as the network of involvements contained within material objects. At a micro level we have regulation and restraint, but this has broader ramifications in the reproduction of social hierarchies and exploitative relationships. In monitoring lights on a GLO-BUG power meter, our participants re-situate and enmesh themselves in broader intergroup relationships in society, and reveal themselves as beings living insecure lives in poverty (Heidegger, 1927/1973). Their humiliated lives and selves are realised and situated systemically through the use of such things.

Power meters and power cords (discussed below) are not isolated things, but part of a larger whole that carries relationships in society. These objects become intelligible in relation to lives of scarcity and the exploitation of power companies and investors. Monitoring the meter is a form of rationing that characterizes such households as members of the precariat who are being exploited by those further up the social hierarchy. In line with recent theoretical work on interobject relations we propose that our participants become consciously aware of the GLO-BUG due to the rupturing of the 'taken-for-grantedness' of electricity supply (Daanen & Sammut, 2012). They are forced to keep an eye on this pre-paid meter and to develop particular practices for managing their limited access to electricity. In the process, these participants become estranged from the GLO-BUG as a foreign' object in their dwellings, and are able to consciously reflect on the function of this object within their lifeworlds, which they associate with austerity, hardship, anxiety and inequality.

Several of our participants stated that they avoided the GLO-BUG power meters. In doing so they invoke a perverse system in which the precariat pay the most for electricity (highest wattage rate). For those unwilling to use GLO-BUG meters or unable to pay their conventional power bills because they prioritize 'eating over heating', their electricity is disconnected. For example, Shelley (Māori, 43) lives in a public housing unit with her four children, the youngest of whom has bronchiolitis. The unit is cold and un-insulated and, as a result, Shelley accumulated a large power bill in an attempt to keep her children warm and healthy. In recounting the situation, Shelley summons issues of housing, power, heating, illness and neighbourly relationships in reference to social practices she has developed in response to her power being disconnected:

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<sup>2</sup> In the last year, the New Zealand government partially privatized several power companies arguing that this provided an important investment opportunity for 'mum and dad investors'.

My neighbours are drinkers and they drink out in their shed. At 7.30 you can hear them popping their first can, in the morning... We race out and hang out our washing and go back inside because there's a lot of men and they all sit and drink and it's not very nice. It's not nice for the kids... They're really good neighbours. It's just their lifestyle is different to mine... They helped us out with a cord running next door. My power's running through them at the moment... I take the kids down to the pools in the afternoon and then they have a swim and then shower. No, it's not ideal at all... A few months now, but there's still nothing I can do about it because I don't have the money to pay it [outstanding power bill]... I'd rather have the hot water than the power. You can survive without power...

Part of Shelley's response to austerity involves the development of phronetic knowledge of how to get by, including the strategy of running a power cord next door to a 'gang house' and taking the children to local swimming pools for showers. Her account exemplifies collaboration and resistance among the precariat through the use of a power cord that reduces her costs. The situation is not ideal, and in recounting it, Shelley invokes power relations and complexities in such cooperative strategies that render the situation even more precarious.

Tina (Māori, 42) also talks in a manner that weaves objects such as her house, electricity, a drier, blankets and other objects into the conduct and hardships of her everyday life. Of particular note in this account are the ramifications of unresponsive and uncaring institutions in society in necessitating that our participants develop of innovative and unorthodox practices for obtaining basic utilities. Tara spoke repeatedly of approaching welfare and health authorities for resources to meet the extra costs associated with managing her son's health needs that arose from him being hit by a car:

It's very cold and damp around the windows and the shower... Sometimes the water comes, sometimes it doesn't and we have to limit our showers to keep the hot water going... The condition of the house is freezing – no carpets... My kids and myself have been sick now because of the conditions at home. The main thing is, because my son – 14 and a half – he was involved in a hit and run accident, so he started to bed wet a lot. It's just costing when its winter and it's raining, I can't afford to dry his blankets and he gets frustrated, so I have to give him my blanket... We don't tend to sleep in our own rooms cos it's so cold in there... I get all my kids together, even my eight month-old baby, and put her in the middle and put my son on the other side and my daughter on the other side, even though he bed wets, but I don't want him to be cold, so I just sit on top of their mattress... I gave birth to a premature baby again, cos I stressed out, what

my kids are gonna eat and how to dry his bedclothes, his blankets... We will get lucky, the sun will come out on one of those days.

Through such accounts we can witness the dilemmas parents face for keeping themselves and their children warm, clean and healthy. These dilemmas are rendered material and tangible through reference to windows, heaters and blankets in a manner that brings forth the hardships and frustrations that characterize such precarious lives. Tara brings into view her immediate situation in a manner that implicates the denial of support to meet the family's practical needs. Here we can see how lives already rendered undignified are further dehumanised by being literally soaked in urine, the result of restraints on welfare spending that mean that blankets shared by householders cannot be cleaned and dried. Such accounts demonstrate how a local nexus of material objects involved in enacting particular social practices are used to articulate austerity in a manner that implicates unresponsive welfare agencies. We have described welfare austerity and the denial of basic supports to these families elsewhere as a form of structural violence (Hodgetts et al., 2014).

Participant references to specific objects also foreground their aspirations for a better life for themselves and their children. For example, accounts of footwear, clothing and bedding communicate how these families live through disrupted relationships with the little things in life that many people take-for-granted, and which can mean a lot in terms of expressing inequalities and disparities across ethnic groups. Tiare (Samoan, 37) talks about her children needing slippers:

My kids don't have slippers like the Pakehas' [European New Zealanders]... My kids don't have those. I go to a Pakeha's house and I see their kids with slippers, so warm. I dream. Oh, my gosh, I wish my kids had those. They could sleep in it. But no, there's no carpet... I can't go to the toilet because I can't put my baby down and if I give it to an older one of my children, it's not fair on her to wake her up or keep her up till 10 o'clock at night just to help me with this baby screaming and screaming. Why? It's freezing. It's freezing... I've sacrificed. Everything I use for this house is a sacrifice because I could use it on my kids. I have sacrificed a nice quilt from the Auckland City Mission for my baby. I've sacrificed it to cover those holes... And I swear, when God pours that blessing upon me my kids will wear slippers. They'll have five pairs in their own cupboards...

This account asserts Tiare's subjectivity as a responsible parent who cares. The slippers function as a metonym for comfort and a warm, secure childhood watched over by a caring mother willing to make sacrifices. We should not overlook the function of imagination and dreams of a better life in such accounts. Such imaginative work aids coping, gives members

of the precariat something to look forward to, and constitute 'escape attempts' that offer instances of respite, hope and normality that open up and keep alive possibilities for 'genuine escapes' from austere lives (Cohen & Taylor, 1976).

Our analysis speaks to how the precariat takes form through engagements with material objects in everyday life. Objects deliberated upon play a constitutive role in such lives. These objects are woven into a lived everyday nexus (Heidegger, 1927/1973), coming to stand for austerity and the precariat. These participants come to understand themselves, their situations and their [dis]place in society through particular things. Their accounts reflect how networks of relations between social actors are not always intrinsically coherent, and may indeed contain conflicts (Latour, 2005). This creates dilemmas for members of the precariat; when essential items, such as food, electricity and clothing are scarce or absent, being is problematized and diminished. Noble (2004) has noted that the accumulation of things is associated with the 'accumulation of being'. Objects tether people to and help recreate particular ways of being. For our participants, such accumulation and tethering of being is particularly complex. The scarcity of, and inequities in, access to basic material resources of daily living is associated for them with the dissipation of being. Responses involve the development of social practices through which participants struggle to maintain access to basic necessities and to recreate a place to belong in an alienating world. Our participants become people who do not fit ideals for healthy eating, the design of public housing, and neoliberal subjectivities. When problematized in households, mundane objects become 'objects of despair', that are assimilated into the subjectivities of participants, marking them as people who lack things. A lack of the basics restricts their ability to be full members of society and to take part in cultural and communal practices.

## **Discussion**

This chapter demonstrates the utility of psychologists attending to the material world of objects and everyday practices in extending understandings of lived experiences of austerity. We have documented how objects of despair are used as anchor points when our participants convey their experiences of austerity. Through these accounts we can see how insecurities in housing, food, electricity and autonomy intersect in everyday life. By problematizing dominant taken-for-granted associations with everyday objects, our participants are able to show what it is like to live their lives and the emotional impacts of hardship. In their accounts of objects of despair we can see how human beings come to reflect upon and grasp themselves materially in everyday life and rendered poverty tangible to outsiders. Poverty is rendered perceptible to us through despairing accounts around children's lunchboxes, kitchen furnishings, power meters,

urine soaked blankets, and children's slippers. Our participants can articulate the implications of social inequalities and their class position on their very existence. Participants' relationships with everyday objects also resituate them within social hierarchies that characterize the intersectionality of social class today (Hodgetts & Griffin, 2015). Accounts of material objects reveal how these lives have to fit around unresponsive institutional structures that 'manage the poor' and comprise a structurally violent social field (Hodgetts et al., 2014). Social hierarchies, classes and intergroup relations are reproduced and surfaced through daily practices involving the use of objects of despair. More than this, through their relationships everyday things our participants come to understand their situations, selves and the injustices of their situations and themselves (Heidegger, 1927/1973).

Much of our participants' accounts of things are made against a highly politicised symbolic context in which precariat parents are often presented as incompetent and neglectful (Tyler, 2008). Classist and prejudicial tendencies are particularly directed at people who depend on welfare provision resulting in reduced care, compassion and communal responsibility towards people in need (Hodgetts et al., 2014). The prominence of moral disdain towards the precariat comes with an abjectifying reification of negative traits around a lack of parenting skills and motivation among the 'under class', a perspective that has been carefully cultivated by the political right over recent decades (Michels, 2013). Our analysis paints a very different portrait of the precariat than is evident in dominant neoliberal and victim-blaming 'underclass' narratives. Our participants problematize public caricatures that abjectify people living austere lives and pressure people in need to feel defective, dirty and ashamed. These are people who do their best despite precarious access to basic things that make contemporary lives habitable.

Finally, psychological research often misses the implications of broader political debates and policies on the everyday lives of vulnerable people, such as our participants (Tileagă, 2014). Striking omissions include detailed engagements with the material and emplaced practices through which everyday politics take place. Psychological research has all but failed to recognize the socio-cultural and political significance of everyday objects, social practices, and the mundane (*cf.*, Hodgetts et al., 2010b). Our analysis exemplifies how psychological research needs to document how societal structures and power relations are reproduced through everyday social practices. Central here is an engagement with material and emplaced experiences of austerity that moves out from participant accounts and the local setting to the broader socio-political forces that provide much of the situated context for these experiences (Simmell, 1903/1997). In exploring everyday objects of despair, we aim to contribute to a wider understanding of the role of things in everyday experiences of adversity in an increasingly inequitable society (Hodgetts et al., 2014). This chapter demonstrates how

political analyses of everyday life can benefit from an interpretive shift out beyond specific objects and social practices into the broader social structures that shape the everyday situations of austerity and the lives of families in need. Such engagements with participant knowledge of poverty in everyday life and the development of daily practices are centrally important in challenging neoliberal structures in contemporary society.

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