

‘Living with the cuts’ Panel 1 commentary

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Across the three papers we see different levels of analysis, from the wide-angle lens of UNICEF’s comparison of key indicators of child wellbeing in Anita Tiessen’s talk, through Marcus Evan’s analysis of professional structures and relationships, to Ann Phoenix’s close-up analysis of family members’ accounts of their everyday lives. But there are common strands – and important messages – that span all the talks.

First, all the papers prompt us to think about **difference**. We need to *understand* difference to make sense of the cross-country variations that Anita describes, to move beyond description or ranking of countries in order to understand the factors that shape well-being and children’s rights in social, cultural and familial context.

That prompts a question about how we recognise the ‘**other**’. Political discourses around austerity often rely on othering – of the poor, of migrants, and so on. We’ve seen this powerfully in the recent elections. We see it when Ian Duncan Smith draws distinctions between deserving and undeserving poor, echoing Elizabethan Poor Law. This othering extends through history, making distant those whose lives we do not want to, or cannot, recognise. One of the great values of cross-national analyses such as that offered by Anita today, is that they can challenge us to recognition of different perspectives to our own, prompting us to question the taken for granted aspects of our own lives and societies.

Marcus highlights the ways in which defensive social systems create distance in the healthcare relationship. It’s a really important point which has wider relevance in other systems, as you can see, for example, in Brigid Featherstone’s writing on social work. Targets and procedures – however well-intentioned they might be – cannot overcome the corrosive effects of inequality. But targets and rules are also distancing – they take the focus away from the relationship and in this sense, they contribute to an ‘othering’.

Butler argues that we need to recognise the mutual interdependence that we all have, our vulnerability to the other, as well as our ethical obligation towards the other. We see that vividly in Ann’s analysis of family lives, but it applies to all the levels of analysis discussed here – if there’s one thing the financial crisis has shown very clearly, it is that we are mutually interdependent on a global scale, as well as in our intimate and our professional relationships.

All three papers show the relationship between the economic and political production of austerity and the materiality of everyday lives. Whether we’re talking about healthcare practices, cross-national indicators of wellbeing, or everyday family lives, relationships and practices are shaped and constrained by austerity. The narrative analysis that Ann has presented shows the value of individual stories for understanding austerity. It reminded me of a quote from Corinne (from 2005, p3) who wrote that the story can be seen ‘as a kind of Trojan horse ... carrying politics into the walled city of the personal’. This morning’s speakers have eloquently shown us the importance of linking the political to the personal to understand the meanings and impacts of austerity on our everyday lives.

Featherstone, B., Broadhurst, K., and Holt, K. (2012). Thinking systemically-thinking politically:

building strong partnerships with children and families in the context of rising inequality. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42(4), 618–633.

Squire, C. (2005) Reading narratives. *Group Analysis*, 38 (1), 91-107.

Butler, J. (2004) *Precarious Life. The Power of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso