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Imagining a future in the austerity city: Anticipated futures and the formation of neoliberal subjectivities of youth in Ireland

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Abstract
This paper explores what anticipated futures of disadvantaged urban youth can reveal about the contemporary and future consequences of austerity. As austerity has disrupted several transitions associated with adulthood, such as finding work and moving out of the parental home, it affects how young adults imagine their future. Young adults living in neighbourhoods of concentrated deprivation were particularly vulnerable to such disruptions. Therefore, this paper builds on semi-structured interviews with youth from Knocknaheeny (Cork) and Ballymun (Dublin) in Ireland to present two vignettes reflecting dominant narratives on anticipated futures. First, a narrative that embraces neoliberal logic, where young adulthood is the basis for future success through dedicated hard work rather than a phase of exploration of possible futures. Second, a narrative of “acceptance” where youth imagines the future to “go on” from the present and becomes a source of anxiety or resignation. This paper shows that combining vignettes with interview data presents two benefits. First, they illuminate the complex and sometimes contradictory stories of youth making sense of their present, past and future. Second, comparing and contrasting the vignettes to multiple participant stories can disentangle roles of location, class, gender and other differentiations. In conclusion, the paper stresses the importance of imagined futures for understanding everyday geographies of austerity as anticipated futures surface in everyday practices, behaviour, and attitudes.

Keywords
Anticipated futures, austerity, youth transitions, austerity urbanism, vignettes

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Introduction

A generation of young people was transitioning into adulthood when the 2008 financial crisis crashed the Irish economy. Employment opportunities evaporated, and social welfare payments declined drastically for individuals under 25 (Murphy, 2017). Transitions into further education suffered from reduced or discontinued education and training grants and falling household income (Holborow, 2012). Moving into independent housing was constrained by rapidly rising rents and social housing disinvestment (Byrne and Norris, 2018; van Lanen, 2020b). These immediate and long-term impacts of crisis, recession and austerity have severe impacts on the future of young people (van Lanen, 2021; Verick, 2009). As youth carries most of the crisis-related economic stress (Whelan and Maitre, 2014), young people from low-income households often perceived the future with pessimism (Carney et al., 2014). The post-crisis period of austerity thus eroded youth’s future outlooks on employment, independent living and personal development. As austerity creates new barriers and opportunities in employment, adult responsibilities, housing, and starting a family, it informs youth’s contemporary behaviour and strategies to achieve their desired or anticipated future.

In this paper, I argue that the futures imagined by disadvantaged urban youth while living with austerity influence how they prepare for their future and approach the present. As their anticipated futures fold into their everyday experiences, their disrupted life-course trajectories contribute to the many affective and experiential consequences that bear on young adults coming of age in a period of austerity (Hall, 2019a; McDowell, 2020). To explore the impacts of imagined futures on lived experiences of austerity and on narratives for the future, I develop existing work on anticipated futures in the context of austerity (Hitchen, 2016; Horton, 2016). The analysis presented in this paper shows how youth’s past experiences and anticipated futures interact to shape attitudes towards the present. These attitudes inform everyday behaviour of youth from disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the present, confirming the importance of “lived and felt” austerity for contemporary and future social geographies.

This paper synthesises vignettes with interview data from other research participants to establish the importance of anticipated futures. The two vignettes represent the dominant attitudes towards the future. Sophie represents a narrative of adaption, in which she embraces neoliberal values of hard work and personal responsibility (Holdsworth, 2017). Brendan represents a narrative of acceptance, in which he resigns and anticipates his future to simply “go on” from the present. A synthesis of these vignettes with interview excerpts aims to disentangle the role of personal histories, individual characteristics and geographic context in these stories. However, both narratives work to reinforce the status quo as they either embrace or succumb to individual responsibilities of hard work and dedication (Diprose, 2014). Taken together, this confirms that any just recovery from austerity should contribute to places in which everyone can anticipate a worthwhile future.

The next section establishes the importance of imagined and anticipated future to appreciate the impacts of austerity on young adults. After explaining the research design and context, the results are centred around the vignettes of Sophie and Brendan, which are complemented with interview data to illuminate the two narratives of anticipated futures and their impact on the present experiences of youth. The conclusion spells out the importance of anticipated futures in understanding lived experiences of the present and explore the potential of combining vignettes and interview data for further research into everyday geographies.

Austerity and youth transitions

The implementation of austerity policies has undermined the accessibility of traditional markers of adulthood. Such markers include finding employment, leaving the parental house, starting a family,
and taking up various legal rights and responsibilities (Thieme, 2018; Thomson et al., 2004). These transitions were already under pressure as western countries transformed into post-industrial economies and contracted their welfare systems (Ball et al., 2000; Silva, 2012). On top of that, the austerity regimes implemented in response to the 2008 financial crisis presented another wave of neoliberalisation (Peck, 2012), which, especially for working-class youth, placed such markers further out of reach (López-Andreu and Verd, 2020; McDowell, 2020). As austerity erects new barriers towards youth transitions, it transforms the meaning of growing up and the identities of youth that form during these transitions (Holdsworth, 2017; McDowell, 2014; Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). Therefore, the outlook of an increasingly precarious future has troubled traditional adult identities and will shape adult lives beyond the moment of austerity’s implementation.

In Ireland, youth increasingly struggled to complete the transition into employment under austerity when unemployment rose from 4.8% to 14.2% between 2008 and 2012 (Fraser et al., 2013). Youth is especially vulnerable to negative labour market conditions during a recession, as they lack job security, extensive work experience, and developed skills relative to experienced workers (Verick, 2009). Indeed, youth unemployment in Ireland rose even sharper than for the general population. Between 2007 and 2011, unemployment for 15 to 24-year olds increased from 9.2% to 28.8% (Kelly et al., 2014). In part, youth labour participation is lower because of training and education trajectories, but numbers of those “not in employment, education, or training” also rose from 10.1% to 18.7% between 2007 and 2011 (Kelly and McGuinness, 2015). If young people could secure employment, they increasingly faced precarious working conditions (Murphy and Loftus, 2015). Such temporary, part-time, or variable work limits the stability and sufficiency of income (Murphy, 2017), and thus cannot provide the financial independence associated with adulthood. The lack of employment opportunities is partly caused by the economic recession, as businesses had to downsize or stop operations. However, austerity measures also included public sector redundancies, hiring freezes, and adjustments to working conditions (Fraser et al., 2013). In Ireland, recession and austerity thus placed stable employment as a marker of adulthood increasingly out of reach for young people.

The transition of youth into independent housing is complicated by those difficulties in the education-employment transition. Housing often constitutes the most significant household expense, and recessionary employment conditions prevent the certainty of income required for household formation as an individual or a family. Furthermore, the Irish crisis and recession had particular effects on housing affordability (Hearne et al., 2014; Kitchin et al., 2012). First, social housing reforms in the early 2000s made the sector vulnerable to economic recession and austerity (Byrne and Norris, 2018). Between 2008 and 2014, social housing output fell by 92% (Byrne and Norris, 2018), and the number of families on social housing waiting lists grew by 60% between 2008 and 2013 (O’Connor and Staunton, 2015). Second, inflated pre-crisis house prices combined with the sharp rise in unemployment culminated in high numbers of mortgage arrears and potential repossessions (Hearne et al., 2014; Kitchin et al., 2012). This situation put both home-owners and renters with buy-to-let mortgage holders at risk of losing their residence. However, the relatively quick recovery of residential real estate prices and tightened mortgage conditions put up barriers to new homeownership (Kitchin et al., 2015). Third, these dynamics in public housing and homeownership increased the pressure on the private rental market. Households otherwise finding accommodation in the former sectors now had to find housing on the private rental market (Kitchin et al., 2015). Consequently, rental prices soared, especially in urban centres as Cork and Dublin. Average rents peaked at €1,418 amidst record low availability before the Covid-19 crisis hit in 2020 (Lyons, 2020). Affordable housing is thus increasingly inaccessible, especially for youth on low or insecure incomes (van Lanen, 2020b). Independent housing as a marker of adulthood became thus increasingly distant for youth in austerity Ireland.
Unfavourable labour and housing markets have consequences for other transitions, such as cohabiting or starting a family (Aassve et al., 2013; Hall, 2021). Unfortunately, detailed studies of family formation and childbirth in austerity Ireland are not available. What does become clear, however, is that falling economic prospects resulted in increased emigration. Two-thirds of individuals leaving Ireland are in their twenties (Gilmartin, 2017; Glynn et al., 2013), and these likely include those who otherwise would start households in Ireland. Trends in Greece, which also implemented a fierce austerity regime, suggest that the harsh economic climate resulted in delayed marriage and childbirth (Michas et al., 2013). However, the impacts of austerity on cohabitation are not purely about delays. For example, the financial consequences of austerity and precarity create pressures to cohabitate prematurely (Taylor, 2019). Either way, the transition into independent living is troubled by austerity and recession, and individuals often delay family formation until they are financially secure.

The dynamics outlined above deal with Ireland, which experienced high youth unemployment and an affordable housing crisis. However, such developments are in no way limited to Ireland. Silva (2013) has documented similar processes of delayed adulthood in America. In the UK, McDowell (2014) indicated that adult identity development, especially for men, is obstructed by the combination of unemployment and social welfare cuts. Achieving independent housing is constrained in the UK (Coulter, 2013), while becoming a home-owner is often restricted to those with available family financial support (Dewilde et al., 2018; Hochstenbach, 2018). As a result of these various processes, youth across Europe are restricted in their traditional transition pathways into adulthood by achieving economic independence or leaving the parental home.

**Imagined futures of austerity**

Young people without skills, education and often jobs, but not without determination and ambition, are the ones who will bear the main brunt of the uncertainty of the next few years (McDowell, 2012: 587).

The material impacts of austerity thus interrupt youth’s transition into adulthood and reach into the near and far future. Experiencing the adverse effects of recession during early adulthood can have long-lasting impacts (Verick, 2009), including weaker labour market positions, health issues and social exclusion (EurWORK, 2011). Beyond the material impact of austerity on youth’s future, its immediate and anticipated effects shape how youth feel about the future (Horton, 2016; van Lanen, 2020b). Hall (2019a: 490) states that austerity affects how individuals imagine their life and life-course “previously, presently and prospectively”. The period of post-crisis austerity thus provides an opportunity to investigate interrupted futures and their importance for coping strategies in the face of lower living standards and suspended social mobility. Such imagined futures of austerity are significant as “anticipation of funding cuts is having manifold everyday, lived consequences that are arguably more wide-ranging, intractable and troubling than impacts of funding cuts themselves” (Horton, 2016: 349). Excavating anticipated austerity futures can thus inform our understanding of present-day experiences and coping strategies.

Youth anticipates their future within a “current climate” of austerity (Horton, 2016, p. 349). Therefore, Horton invites scholars of everyday austerity to challenge linear temporalities of political-economic causality and to include the more complex temporal politics of anticipation. These politics of anticipation include, for example, the use of future wellbeing in government discourse around austerity and the emotional impacts of anticipated funding cuts by service providers and their clients. Ultimately, Horton (2016) calls attention to the everyday consequences of anticipated austerity in order to understand how anticipated futures inform anticipatory political action. This focus includes how the current climate shapes imagined futures and how these fold into
present-day spaces and situations, such as when youth fear their lack of a strong resume prevents a successful future (Holdsworth, 2017). Such complex circular temporalities shape austerity experiences in everyday lives and everyday places (Hitchen, 2021). Grasping imagined futures under austerity can illuminate these interactions between the future and the present and thus help understand austerity’s everyday experiences and how it takes hold of everyday lives.

Future imaginaries of young adults can thus provide an insight into various coping strategies in the current austerity climate (Hall, 2016). In her study of the “lived and felt” consequences of austerity, Hitchen (2016: 102) identified four relationships individuals hold to their future. First, ‘anticipating austerity’, where individuals fear further austerity measures which induce feelings of stress and heightened awareness. Second, ‘adapting to austerity’, where individuals adjust their everyday lives to the realities of contemporary and future austerity, especially in financial terms. Third, ‘getting on with life’, where individuals attempt to suppress austerity experiences to cope with uncertainty about the future. Fourth, ‘accepting austerity’, which entails accepting the reality or necessity of austerity and learning how to live with it. For Hitchen (2016), contemporary youth grows up in an affective atmosphere of austerity to which each responds differently. As these experiences take place in the formative years of young adults, they will likely serve as an experiential resource or frame of reference for later life decisions (Hall, 2016). Austerity is thus more than just a moment, but an event that stretches into the past and future.

Therefore, this paper employs anticipated futures to look at the future imaginaries of youth from disadvantaged urban areas in Ireland. As austerity establishes barriers to traditional markers of adulthood, elements of anticipation, adaption, getting on, or acceptance of austerity might arise in youth’s future imaginaries of their adult transition. As these anticipated futures might impact current coping strategies and transition pathways (Horton, 2016), these imagined futures of austerity illuminate the pathways through which urban (in)equality reproduces itself. Asking similar questions, Silva (2012) showed that barriers towards traditional adult transitions and labour market uncertainties transformed narratives of adulthood. Silva argues that, in contemporary “therapeutic narratives”, becoming an adult involves overcoming a “painful past” rather than achieving specific characteristics (Silva, 2012: 518). This process, however, often involves a temporal reversal. Thus, these stories are told backwards; they start from young people’s backgrounds and retroactively reflect upon the barriers they had to overcome (Silva, 2012). Here, I specifically look at future imaginaries to see how anticipated futures impact contemporary strategies of transition.

However, these transformed “therapeutic narratives” of adulthood are continuously “haunted by the meanings and rituals of traditional adulthood even though [young people] see this model as unattainable, inadequate, or simply undesirable” (Silva, 2012: 518). In other words, while narratives of adult transition change, young people still evaluate their coming of age in relation to more traditional narratives even when these are felt to be ‘cruelly’ unattainable (Berlant, 2011). Traditional markers thus continue to shape life-course developments that youth considers successful and desirable. Similarly, McDowell (2020) showed that narratives of transitioning into employment contain both elements of continuity and change in the UK. However, different life-course narratives and imagined futures exist between groups and individuals. For example, while youth service providers might worry about the future wellbeing of young people in the face of austerity, young people themselves often embody an “anticipatory sense of resilience” (Horton, 2016, p. 358). Young people thus portray a sense of certainty to be able to cope with austerity’s consequences. Diverging images of the future are a recurring theme. McDowell (2012) also observes that adult pessimism over the future of a lost generation often contrasts with more optimistic future imaginaries of young people themselves.

In this paper, I employ Hitchen’s (2016) four future imaginaries to explore the anticipated futures of disadvantaged urban youth under austerity and the extent to which these reflect a neoliberal sense of self (McGuigan, 2016; Rose, 1999). Silva (2012: 506) has argued that increasingly
flexible life-courses have drawn youth to “therapeutic selfhood”, an inward sense of identity pre-occupied by their own mental development. This development mirrors neoliberal self-responsibility and the idea that work is available to anyone dedicated to suitable interests and skills (Holdsworth, 2017; Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). However, within such narratives, it becomes possible to frame marginalised individuals as maladapted (Rose, 1999). Austerity is a disruptive force in everyday life and youth transitions (Hitchen, 2016; van Lanen, 2020a), and it reassembles relationships between the past, present and future (Hall, 2019a; Hitchen, 2021). In this context of transforming restraints and possibilities in the spaces of everyday life (van Lanen, 2017), this paper aims to explore how austerity is becoming a part of youth’s imagined futures and the types of subjectivities that emerge from it.

Methods

This paper employs in-depth qualitative methods to provide the complexity and depth required to reveal the messy and sometimes contradictory future imaginaries of youth. As Horton (2016: 251) argues, qualitative methods “challenge uncritically linear narratives presuming that policy decisions cause funding cuts that have impacts”. Qualitative research can uncover anticipated futures to excavate how the future weaves into the present.

This paper draws on interview data gathered for a larger project on the experiences of austerity by young adults from the neighbourhoods Ballymun (Dublin) and Knocknaheeny (Cork) in Ireland. Ballymun was built in the 1960s as Ireland’s first and only modernist high-rise housing scheme. While initially celebrated for its modern housing, from the 1970s the neighbourhood entered a spiral of economic, social, and physical decline after physical deterioration, missing amenities, and negative media attention resulted in strong neighbourhood stigmatisation (Power, 1997). Knocknaheeny was constructed in the 1970s to alleviate an acute housing shortage and quickly became an area of concentrated socio-economic problems. Unemployment rates grew following deindustrialisation in the 1980s, while its predominantly low- and semi-skilled labour force could not benefit from post-industrial employment opportunities. Nowadays, both neighbourhoods are among the most deprived of Ireland according to the POBAL HP Deprivation Index, which includes measures such as unemployment, the proportion of social housing, and the share of the population with only primary education (Haase and Pratschke, 2016).

This project focussed on disadvantaged urban youth, which was arguably one of the groups hardest hit by crisis, recession and austerity (van Lanen, 2021; Verick, 2009). In 2015, I recruited and interviewed 13 young adults in Knocknaheeny and 20 from Ballymun, aged 18 to 26 years old. Most participants were contacted through organisations working with youth and young adults, including youth clubs, community organisations, cultural institutions and sports clubs. Others were recruited at cultural events and by personal references. Overall, 15 young women and 18 young men participated. Most Ballymun participants were in educational or training programmes, four were employed, and three were neither in training, education or employment. In Knocknaheeny, too, most participants were in education or training, one was working, and two were not in training, education or employment. All participants were working-class and lived on low incomes, from which they often contributed to household expenses. The vast majority lived with their parents, three lived with non-parent caretakers, and two lived in homeless services. Two participants lived independently having acquired housing through the health services or emergency social housing after a year of homelessness. Participants’ ethnicity and origin reflected neighbourhood demographics; the vast majority had Irish citizenship, and all were white (CSO, 2017); one man belonged to the Traveller community and one man was adopted from an Eastern European country.
The interviews loosely followed a phenomenological research approach. Participants were encouraged to speak freely and widely about their austerity experiences. Clarifying questions were timed to prevent interrupting the narrative flow of participants. During the interviews, participants elaborated on their home situation, education and work, their neighbourhood, and how they imagined the future for themselves and their neighbourhood. Despite some research anxiety as a Dutch, middle-class university researcher, the rich narratives shared by participants indicate the establishment of rapport. In line with ethical procedures, participants were informed about the research project and their voluntary participation in advance, which they confirmed by signing a written consent form. When discussing sensitive issues, I aimed to minimise the risk of physical or mental harm by paying attention to verbal and non-verbal clues of discomfort to, if necessary, stop enquiring or provide details for professional support. All participants agreed to record the interviews and to use their anonymised quotes in research outputs. Therefore, all names in this paper are pseudonyms and other identifying information is concealed.

The recorded interviews were transcribed and coded for established and emergent themes of austerity experience (Dunn, 2005). This paper builds on the theme “imagined futures”, which captured how participants anticipated their future during the interviews. Analysis of the interview data for anticipated futures revealed two overarching narratives; a narrative that embraced the neoliberal logic of the responsible, hard-working self and a narrative of acceptance where participants anticipated their futures in line with the austerity present.

This paper uses the vignettes of Sophie and Brendan to explore the impact of austerity on the anticipated futures of disadvantaged urban youth in Ireland. Vignettes illustrate and offer a deeper understanding of anticipated futures under austerity (Ely et al., 1997). With these vignettes, I explore the multi-layered and complex construction of future imaginaries with close attention to detail (Hall, 2019b). Simultaneously, these vignettes are supplemented by interview data from other participants to contextualise these two narratives within broader research outcomes. Thus, vignettes are a valuable method to analyse and represent the complex relations between individuals and austerity in the study of lived austerity. The synthesis of personal vignettes with interview data demonstrates the intimate entanglement of austerity in individual lives and embeds these narratives in more widely felt experiences.

Adapting and accepting neoliberal futures

In what follows, I employ the vignettes of Sophie and Brendan to explore the future imaginaries of disadvantaged urban youth in Ireland. These vignettes scaffold the discussion on how future imaginaries provide insight into contemporary navigations of austerity and its future by youth from Knocknaheeny and Ballymun. These empirically contextualised vignettes suggest two future imaginaries among disadvantaged urban youth in Ireland. Sophie represents the neoliberal ‘adaptive attitude’, as she imagines a future following from her responsibility and hard work. Brendan represents the ‘accepting attitude’, as he accepts the reduction of quality of life caused by austerity and aims to carve out a living within it. The stories of these individuals represent general trends among participants which interact with their geographical and personal characteristics. Combining interview data with these vignettes aims to disentangle those general developments and how they intertwine with personal circumstances.

These narratives of imagined futures underline that austerity, beyond its materialised impact, has a materialising force by shaping the future perspectives upon which people act. In 2015, the post-austerity context was still unfolding (Raynor, 2018). Therefore, it might be too early to decipher a post-austerity youthful subject or sense of self. Nonetheless, in-depth engagement with the future imaginaries of youth affected by austerity and recession might reveal what sorts of selves are beginning to take shape.
Sophie

Sophie was in her mid-twenties and working a full-time job for a community organisation in Ballymun. She spoke in detail about the hurdles she encountered between graduation and her current job, and about her expectations to reach her ideal of employment, homeownership, and potentially having children in the next few years. Her story reflects a therapeutic narrative of coming of age (Silva, 2012). Sophie presented her transition into adulthood as a series of hardships she had to face in order to overcome a painful past. Her success in attaining some markers of adulthood resulted in the conviction that continuous hard work would allow her to overcome the remaining barriers toward adulthood.

Sophie started recounting her experiences of austerity during her secondary school period before the 2008 financial crisis. In hindsight, she believed, many of her difficulties in finding employment resulted from her lack of motivation in school. She would sometimes skip school to work extra hours, and this dedication initially resulted in full-time work after graduation. However, during the recession, the shop she worked for reduced her hours until she lost employment in 2010. At this point, she started to identify her limited educational capital as a self-inflicted barrier and a painful past (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017; Silva, 2012). The start of her austerity narrative before the crisis indicates austerity’s complex temporality, weaving into the present and past life-course experiences (Hall, 2019a; Knight and Stewart, 2016).

Sophie’s strategy to overcome her painful past of educational underachievement was one of personal responsibility and hard work. In response to experienced hardship, she thus adapted a neoliberal subjectivity (McGuigan, 2016; Rose, 1999). During her initial 18-month unemployment spell, she started attending short-term courses. Afterwards, she started securing occasional temporary and precarious work. Nonetheless, she still blamed herself for not putting sufficient effort into finding work. After an initial PLC\(^1\) course, she enrolled for further education which she did not finish. Again, she blamed herself for not being dedicated enough to “just get on with it and complete the degree”. Throughout the recollection of her life-course, Sophie constantly stressed her responsibility to work, study, and try hard. She had internalised a “cult of experience” (Holdsworth, 2017: 297), where past activities dictate her success or failure for which she herself felt fully responsible.

Eventually, Sophie started an internship through the Irish Youth Guarantee scheme. She described this as “the best thing that ever happened”. This opportunity was available to her because she lived in Ballymun, where the scheme was piloted and which benefited from a deeper institutional penetration of support services than Knocknaheeny (van Lanen, 2020a). During this internship, she proved her employability through hard work and the organisation offered her full-time employment. The scheme provides a 50€ top-up on unemployment benefits, but Sophie recommended the opportunity without financial rewards as “there is no benefit in sitting around”. At this point, her period of unemployment and insecure work became the painful past she overcame by gaining more work experience (Holdsworth, 2017). Because employment recovered quicker in Dublin than elsewhere in Ireland (Barry and Bergin, 2016), this potentially provided opportunities to transition into work in the capital which could affirm experience-based narratives of success. Furthermore, character traits considered “feminine”, such as empathy and care for others might have contributed to Sophie’s consideration for work in the community sector (McDowell, 2012). Personally, Sophie started to distinguish herself from parts of the Ballymun population which, in her eyes, had no intention to work, thereby contributing to competitive notions of personal responsibility for the future (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). She imagined her future outside of the neighbourhood to separate herself both in space and time from her past.

Sophie imagined her future as a continuation of her past. She was relatively confident that continuous hard work and responsible consumption would provide stable employment, educational qualifications, homeownership and a family. She was preparing to return to higher education and
was saving for a mortgage deposit with her partner. She built on her narrative of past responsibility to imagine an aspirational future (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). To facilitate this future, she balanced responsible consumption and productive leisure. Sophie “wouldn’t go out and hang around” and was committed to “saving hard”. While her success in finding employment is a combination of her personal characteristics, geographical context, and individual situation, her responsibility and hard work were dominant in her therapeutic and aspirational narrative. Strengthened by her relative success, such values became her strategies to overcome previous mistakes and anticipate a future in austerity.

Sophie’s imagined future mirrors what Hitchen (2016) called “adapting to austerity”. Sophie adjusted her everyday life because of her experience with austerity and confrontation with unimagined unemployment. Sophie no longer took employment for granted and invested in education and hard work to secure employment and achieve her desired future. She was not the only participant that took on this neoliberal responsibility in the context of austerity (Holdsworth, 2017; Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). Others also reflected upon austerity and recession as a wake-up call to become a responsible citizen.

…there’s some people that drink all the time, and smoke all the time, and you can be one of them people, or you can be somebody that is working, get a job for the future, like, while you’re young, learn to do them things before when you get older…

(Margaret, 20, Knocknaheeny)

I’ve kinda grown up where everybody has had to kinda really watch their money, so it’s, in a way it’s taught me that, at least, that’s one thing I probably learned from it.

(Michael, 24, Ballymun)

Some participants in both Ballymun and Knocknaheeny adopted this “adaptive attitude”. For Sophie, this attitude was successful in securing employment, but the adaptive attitude emerged among youth with different employment statuses and with little relation to the success of this strategy. This narrative did not only emerge among those whose effort and circumstances were successful in gaining employment but also by some unemployed and precariously employed youth. For Sophie, it was sustained by its successful outcomes, for others by anticipated future success. The pervasiveness of personal responsibility and hard work thus extends beyond those for whom it ‘worked’ (Holdsworth, 2017; Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). Apart from experience, this “adaptive attitude” is fostered through media narratives, employability services and youth groups, and socio-material necessity (Holdsworth, 2017; McGuigan, 2016; Rose, 1999). Others, including Michael, interpreted austerity as a life lesson, which confirmed the demand for responsibility in everyday practices of working, saving, and consuming. While adults can build on previous crisis experiences to cope with austerity (Hall, 2016), these young adults include austerity in their repertoire of coping in case of future hardship to construct images of personal resilience.

Another coping strategy is what Hitchen (2016) calls “going on with life”. Especially younger inhabitants trivialised the impacts of austerity on their future. They anticipated austerity as a temporary disruption before a return to normalcy. Similarly hopeful, this “going-on attitude” did not necessarily stress hard work but a continuation of a regular unfolding of life.

Probably the normal Irish life, like, few kids and be married and have my own house and stuff.

(Maria, 21, Knocknaheeny)
I'm finished college by then; I find out what I actually want to do, and have a good job. I'm hoping to just be settled, [...] Hopefully, I have a job and good money, and good life...

(Alice, 20, Ballymun)

Both Maria and Alice anticipated minimal disruption of their futures by crisis and austerity. As both expressed negative impacts of austerity in their interview, going-on serves here as a coping strategy. Gender differences in dealing with anger and frustration might explain a going-on attitude among young women who, according to Pimlott-Wilson (2017), express their anger over poverty less immediately than young men and often after ongoing attempts for employment stability fail. ‘Going on with life’ focuses less on responsibility compared to the adaptive attitude. However, participants with this attitude are still committed to continuous self-improvement through work and education (Holdsworth, 2017). This attitude was most present with participants with a complicated past, such as drug addiction or homelessness and thus partly based on previous examples of overcoming a painful past. This completion of a therapeutic cycle provided a hopeful base to navigate the future (Silva, 2012).

Both the adaptive and going-on attitudes to the future reflect a neoliberal subjectification in which participants expect self-improvement and dedication can deliver their desired future (Holdsworth, 2017). However, this sometimes contradicted narratives of structural constraint emerging within the same interview, where participants balanced accountability between themselves and social institutions (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). While participants identified constraints in the present, they employed a strategy of hard work and training for the future (McDowell et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the internalisation of a strategy of hard work was not universal. While some anticipated an improved future, the following section explores participants with a more accepting attitude.

Brendan

Brendan’s austerity narrative was full of frustrations. In his mid-twenties, Brendan lived with his mother and siblings in Knocknaheeny, Cork, and attended a training programme that provided a social welfare top-up. His coming-of-age narrative revolved around his failure to achieve traditional markers of adulthood, such as employment, housing and a family (Thieme, 2018; Thomson et al., 2004). He was frustrated about being unable to leave the parental house and his lack of stable and meaningful employment. His story could transform into a therapeutic narrative (Silva, 2012), but he would first need to overcome his “painful past”. For now, Brendan experienced delayed adulthood (Ball et al., 2000; Silva, 2013), or perhaps adulthood denied.

For Brendan, austerity meant a constant financial struggle to support anything beyond basic needs. He remembered himself and those around him being unable to continue hobbies that provided joy. When the crisis hit Ireland, he was 17 years old and worked to support the household of his single mother. Since that time, he worked low-paid jobs of short durations. Therefore, he grew disappointed and disgruntled with “working hard for little money”, and decided to live off unemployment benefits while volunteering. As a volunteer, he felt more respected and satisfied than in work and especially enjoyed working with children and the elderly. However, associations of working-class masculinity as challenges to service and care work might hinder his professional opportunities (McDowell, 2012; McDowell et al., 2020). Furthermore, fewer support services in Knocknaheeny and a slower economic recovery in Cork might have hampered Brendan’s options to find paid and fulfilling employment (van Lanen, 2020a). Nonetheless, he enthusiastically hoped his current training would improve his employment opportunities. However, he remained sceptical about the fulfilment provided by future work, providing a critical awareness of the cult of experience (Holdsworth, 2017). Although Brendan lost most of his professional aspirations,
his enthusiasm for volunteering portrays a selective weariness rather than a politics of inaction (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar, 2019).

The past played an essential role in Brendan’s experiences of austerity (Knight and Stewart, 2016). The pre-2008 Celtic Tiger period of economic prosperity was a constant source of comparison. He remembered stories about “everybody having money and everybody having well-paid jobs” and his brother earning “double money” for similar work. These real or imagined histories provide the past narratives with which Brendan interprets the present, and thus expose the complex temporal relations of austerity (Hall, 2019a; Knight and Stewart, 2016). In this way, Brendan realised that success requires more than personal effort alone and depends on a temporal and geographical context. Although not everyone had well-paid jobs and profited during the Celtic Tiger (Haase and Pratschke, 2005; Linehan, 2005), the discord between an imagined past and lived present exacerbate Brendan’s sense of discomfort and exclusion.

Brendan lived and felt austerity as a disruption of his life-course progression (Hall, 2019a). He felt excluded by his inability to achieve desired markers of adulthood, such as leaving his mother’s household. After living independently for a year, housing costs forced Brendan to ‘boomerang’ back into his mother’s house. He considered alternative housing strategies, such as house sharing, which were equally unaffordable. This was a shared experience among disadvantaged youth, as urban rents in Ireland rose rapidly (van Lanen, 2020b). Again, past narratives of his parents who were “living out by themselves at eighteen” and “starting families at twenty-two, twenty-three” contributed to him feeling stuck and “unable to spread his wings”. His desire towards traditional life-course progressions, a form of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), resulted in experiences of stuckness and exclusion.

Brendan’s past also shaped his anticipated future. Without a clear vision of what he wanted in the future, he felt “stuck in a rut”. His past work experiences played an essential role in his inability to remain dedicated to a specific career path or imagined future. Brendan felt trapped by his past and struggled to embody the hard-working neoliberal subject. In another resemblance of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), his ideal future existed of work, a partner, and a family; a traditional sense of adulthood. However, he was pessimistic about realising this scenario, for which he partly blamed his own lack of dedication. He expressed to be happy with “just a lucky job” that is “anything but answering phones or stocking shelves”. Brendan started to accept his current situation and imagine his future accordingly.

The anticipated future of Brendan is a form of accepting austerity (Hitchen, 2016). He accepted the reality of austerity, and while he preferred a different life-course, his main hope was to ‘go on with life’ as best as he could. In UK coastal towns, McDowell et al. (2020: 15) indicated such “resigned realism” among young men, “who have resigned themselves to precariousness as life’s defining feature”. In Knocknaheeny and Ballymun, too, male participants specifically embodied such an accepting attitude. Callum, for example, expressed;

I’d be looking for, just maybe, just survive pretty much, like, just enough to get me through the week and then just keep going, the standard living, minimum wage would be okay for me.

(Callum, Ballymun, 21)

This accepting attitude emerged out of local impossibilities to achieve desired futures, and predominantly the impossibility to secure a stable and sufficient income through employment. As a result, participants became weary about their employment prospects, sometimes strengthened by family experiences of getting by on low-skilled work and in adverse conditions (Hall, 2016). In this way, youth could cope with an unstable future by directing energies to parts of life where they felt in control (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar, 2019). Youth like Brendan and Callum did
not cope by internalising responsibility and hard work but by aiming to make do and get by and
developing an accepting attitude (Hall and Holmes, 2017).

However, not all participants with an accepting attitude developed bleak future imaginaries.
Sometimes, a getting-on-with-life attitude evolved to cope with austerity and an uncertain future.
This strategy aims to ignore or minimise austerity’s implications by “a way of retreating back to
the day-to-day” (Hitchen, 2016: 114). Getting-on-with-life attitudes emerged in participant narra-
tives that also outlined austerity’s structural impacts on their lives, suggesting it is indeed a
coping mechanism. Participants relativised the impact of structural deficits to maintain their con-
temporary and future wellbeing.

...money is not everything, happiness is happiness, [...] you don’t need money to walk down the road,
you know, and just go and enjoy the weather, you don’t need money to go out and meet a friend, have a
chat, you know, simple things in life that matter...

(Simon, 24, Knocknaheeny)

... it’s still go out and get drunk, no matter how much money [...], you still can go partying and get cans,
or you can still do whatever you want, you can still drink, it’s just an obstacle, but it’s not different, [...] you can still go out and play football, you can still go in and play Fifa in someone’s house, it’s still the
same thing. As much as money has made it harder...

(Owen, 20, Ballymun)

Both Simon and Owen stressed the continuous availability of low-cost pleasures and the con-
tinuation of previous pastimes to express the minimal effects of austerity on their wellbeing.
However, in their interviews, both also expressed austerity-induced hardship. Especially male par-
ticipants like Simon and Owen protected their sense of self and identity amidst falling welfare,
employment, and service availability by emphasising the marginal importance of material wealth
for their wellbeing. This narrative mainly emerged among young men, perhaps from gendered
notions of low-cost leisure in drink, sports and computer games. The tendency for women to
manage household finances might preclude such easy-going adjustments for young women
(Hall, 2016).

The final relationship Hitchen (2016) identified is anticipating austerity. In this case, individuals
prepare themselves for anticipated future budget cuts. These anticipation attitudes emerged predom-
nantly with female participants, potentially related to their contemporary roles or imagined futures
of responsibility for managing household finances (Hall, 2016). In a context of growing uncertainty,
these women would downwardly adjust their anticipated futures or entirely give up future planning
as futile.

It probably will be over, then in a couple of years it’ll probably happen again, you know, ‘cause that’s
just the way it goes, like.

(Maria, 21, Knocknaheeny)

I don’t know what’s expected of us, if you think about it, like, how can you do anything when you live
here, like, there’s nothing, there’s no housing, there’s no jobs, we’re in a recession, so, can’t expect any-
thing of us.

(Alice, 20, Ballymun)

Maria prepared herself for cyclical periods of prosperity and austerity, accepting it as “just the
way it goes”. For Alice, the lack of housing and work prevented any meaningful anticipations,
and she thus gave up on future planning. Such anticipated austerity extends its presence into
the future (Horton, 2016). But unlike Brendan, Maria and Alice faced anticipated future
uncertainty and uneventfulness with relative indifference and acceptance. In their narratives, they moved between anticipating future austerity and going on with life. Sometimes they gave up on future planning, while sometimes they had faith in a regular progression of their life--courses. However, regardless their relative optimism about the future, the anticipation of austerity and uncertainty made them sceptical about future planning, taking the future as it came. By anticipating rather than resisting austerity, youth accepts that social welfare and community spending can be sacrificed whenever political circumstances demand it (Diprose, 2014). As austerity becomes engrained in both real and anticipated futures, it becomes part of the horizon that shapes the future trajectories of policy, neighbourhoods, and individuals.

Brendan’s attitude seems the complete opposite of Sophie’s attitude, as he rejects rather than embraces hope in personal responsibilities and hard work. Nonetheless, both prepare for a future of continued austerity and neoliberalisation. However, rather than simply blaming their attitudes for their outcomes, these sections considered their narratives in relation to their personal and geographic circumstances. Geographically, Sophie’s location in Ballymun and Dublin might have provided better access to work and employability support (van Lanen, 2020a). At the same time, Brendan grew up in Knocknaheeny with fewer jobs and service opportunities. Personally, Sophie’s gender identity might be considered suitable for her community work by employers. At the same time, Brendan’s working-class masculinity might prevent a challenge to find employment in the care-related work that he enjoyed as a volunteer. Had their circumstances or past fortunes been different, so might have been their anticipated future.

Combining vignettes and interview excerpts from other participants aimed to disentangle the personal and structural elements of their narratives. Regardless of their individual adaptive and accepting attitudes, both Sophie and Brendan seem to accept a neoliberal future based on responsibility and merits. While Sophie relatively succeeded and therefore accepted this framework, Brendan was less successful and resigned in the face of it. Holdsworth (2017) states that in a cult of experience, the past shapes how youth anticipates their future. This narrative shifts responsibility from social structures and institutions to individuals. While the relatively successful might see this narrative confirmed, it can result in resignation for those unable or unwilling to succeed (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). Such narratives of personal resilience, Diprose (2014) argues, drive resignations via various mechanisms. First, a resilience narrative ascribes success to character traits and frames unsuccessful individuals as underserving, a mechanism visible in Sophie’s narrative. Second, while a narrative of individual responsibility can sound empowering, the devolution of risk might foster resignation when economic stability is not achieved, as Brendan’s narrative portrays. Third, the resilience mechanisms channel demands for change towards the acceptance of personal responsibility, which is clearly visible in both narratives. The challenge thus remains to develop anticipated futures, individual and collective, that break out of the framework that puts full responsibility on individual responsibility and hard work, anticipated futures that can shape alternative urban futures.

Conclusion

This paper employed the stories of Sophie and Brendan as vignettes to discuss how young adults from Cork and Dublin imagined and anticipated their future in austerity Ireland. In response to the disruption of transitions into adulthood and life-course developments by austerity (Hall, 2019a; van Lanen, 2020b), Sophie developed a narrative that embraced the neoliberal logic of personal responsibility and hard work. Simultaneously, Brendan’s narrative was one of resignation as he could not achieve his desired markers of adulthood – independent living, work, and starting a family. However, the contradiction between these adaptive and accepting attitudes hide their shared
normalisation of a competitive and experience-based personal responsibility for youth’s future (Holdsworth, 2017; Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). By synthesising these vignettes with interview data, this paper disentangled the role of personal, geographical, and gendered characteristics in their experiences, attitudes, and anticipated futures. To conclude, this paper provides three main contributions.

First, this paper demonstrates that austerity is a materialising force whose consequences extend beyond its already materialised impacts. Anticipated futures in austerity surface in everyday practices as they inform contemporary behaviour and attitudes (Hall, 2016; Hitchen, 2021). These anticipations are not just imagining more austerity (Horton, 2016); they result in re-imaginations of future life-courses with immediate impact in the present. Urban youth in Ireland face the present with an attitude based on their anticipated futures that either embrace or resign neoliberal subjectivities. This dominance of narratives of individual responsibility creates pressures to succeed and “run faster to stand still” (Holdsworth, 2017: 298), to work harder to provide a decent future. The energy this consumes might prevent youth’s capacities to resist austerity and imagine alternative futures (Diprose, 2014), thereby reproducing the competitive dynamics and precarious conditions many try to escape. This folding of the future into the present calls for increased geographic engagement with anticipated futures.

Second, this paper explores the entanglement of anticipated futures with lived austerity through the strength of narrative analysis. Starting from young people’s experiences and expectations illuminates the complex and sometimes contradictory narratives of living with austerity. Beyond presenting youth’s imagined futures, it engages the narratives they employ to make sense of their present and to plan their future. The vignettes of Sophie and Brendan show that these narratives critically inform their attitudes in relation to work, training and leisure, adding a critical understanding of how austerity reshapes places, lives, and life-courses. In this paper, narratives follow from semi-structured interviews that centre experiences expressed at a single moment. While providing valuable insights, recent events and experiences might influence anticipated futures and attitudes. Future research could expand by using innovative and longitudinal qualitative methods to uncover how these develop over time (e.g. Hall, 2021).

Finally, the synthesis of vignettes and interview data disentangles individual life stories that are embedded in structural experiences. Comparing and contrasting multiple participant stories to central vignettes can tease out the roles of location, class, gender, and personal history in the experiences of Sophie and Brendan. This paper looked explicitly at personal history, geographical location, and gender. However, this vignette-interview synthesis could include markers of differentiation such as ethnicity, sexuality or educational background. Furthermore, the presentation of this synthesis conveys both the personal and intimate nature of living with austerity and provides further nuance by relating it to similar experiences of other participants.

Overall, this paper stresses the importance of anticipated futures for understanding contemporary lived realities of austerity. This implies that well-intended employment and education initiatives fail to reduce urban inequalities if they only align to the anticipated futures of some. Urban governance dedicated to reducing socio-spatial inequalities should not just tackle today’s problems but create cities in which all youth can anticipate a worthwhile future.

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Note

1. Post Leaving Certificate courses are aimed at individuals who finished their secondary school and intend to either develop their skills or progress to higher education.

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