

London | *Catalyst*

Helping the sick and poor  
of London since 1873

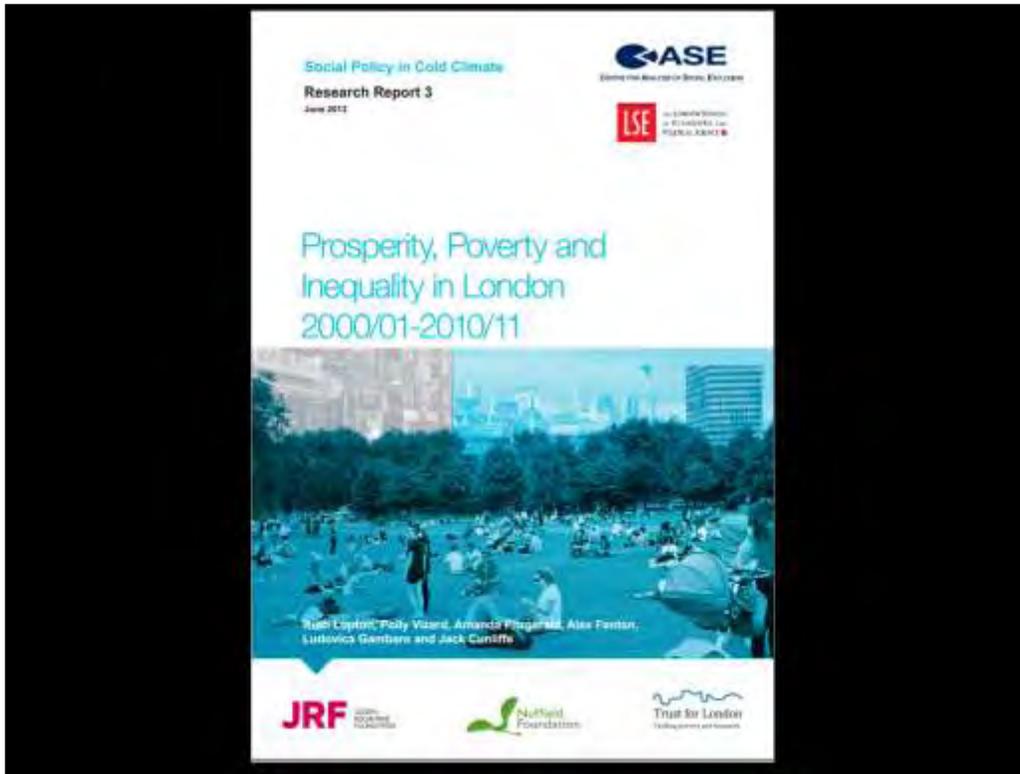
# The deserving and the undeserving today

Annual General Meeting  
4 July 2013

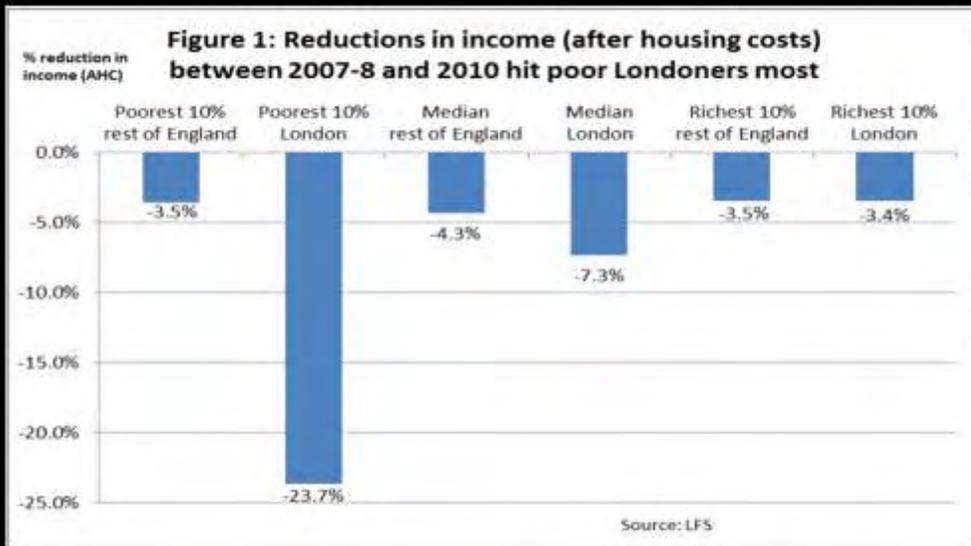
Thank you very much for inviting me to speak  
this afternoon

- Impoverishing effects of austerity
- Biological effects of biography
- Redress

I am going to talk first about the all too obvious impoverishing effects of austerity; then about the biological effects of an impoverished biography; and end with a few words about what we do to provide at least some redress to the dreadful predicament of those on the losing side of current policy.



On Monday, this report featured on the local London news for very good reason- because it reveals how hard poor Londoners are being hit by current austerity policies.

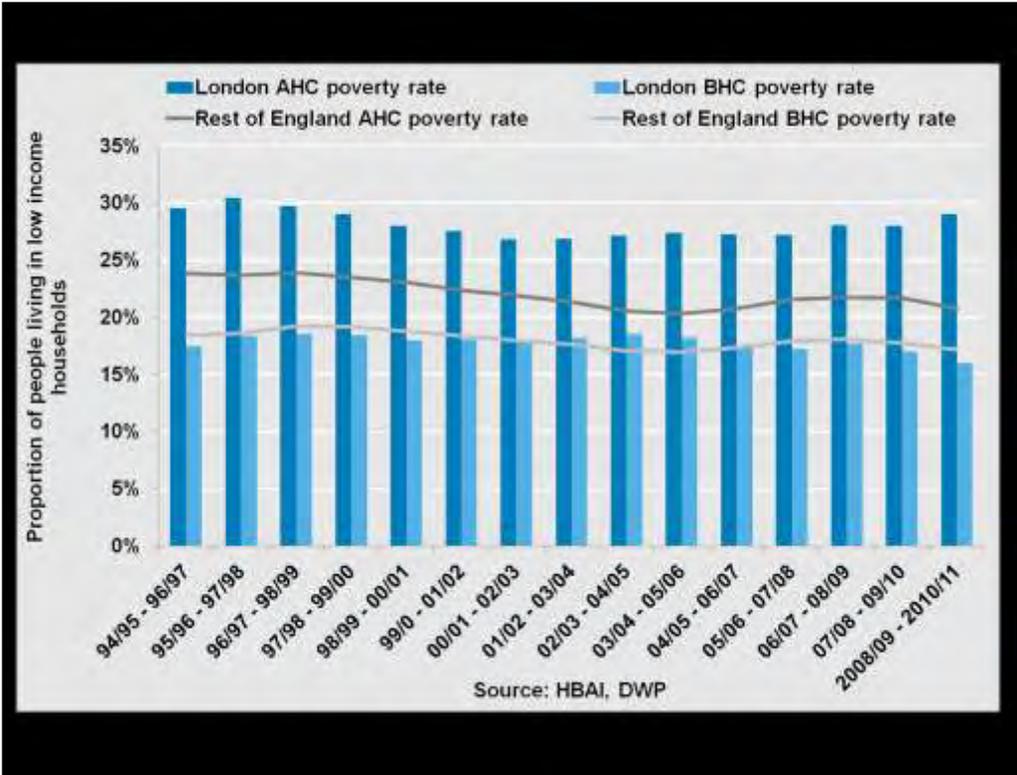


While the incomes of people in the top tenth of the distribution were affected to much the same extent whether they lived in London or elsewhere, net incomes among those in the bottom tenth fell by a startling 24 per cent in real terms in London compared with only 3.5 per cent nationally.

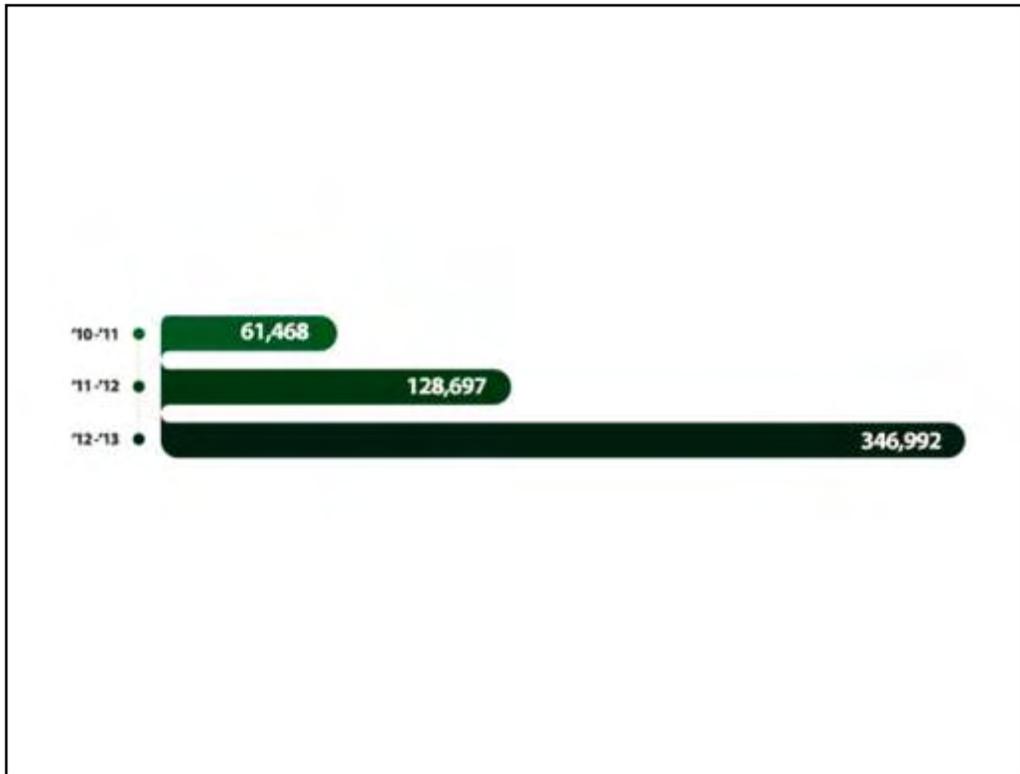
As a consequence, the '90: wealth in the Capital, which was already high (at 199) in 2006/8 had soared even higher by 2010 (to 215). This means that the poorest person of the richest 10 percent of the population consumes 215 times as much

as the richest person of the poorest 10 Percent. This was in 2010- it is almost certainly much worse by now.

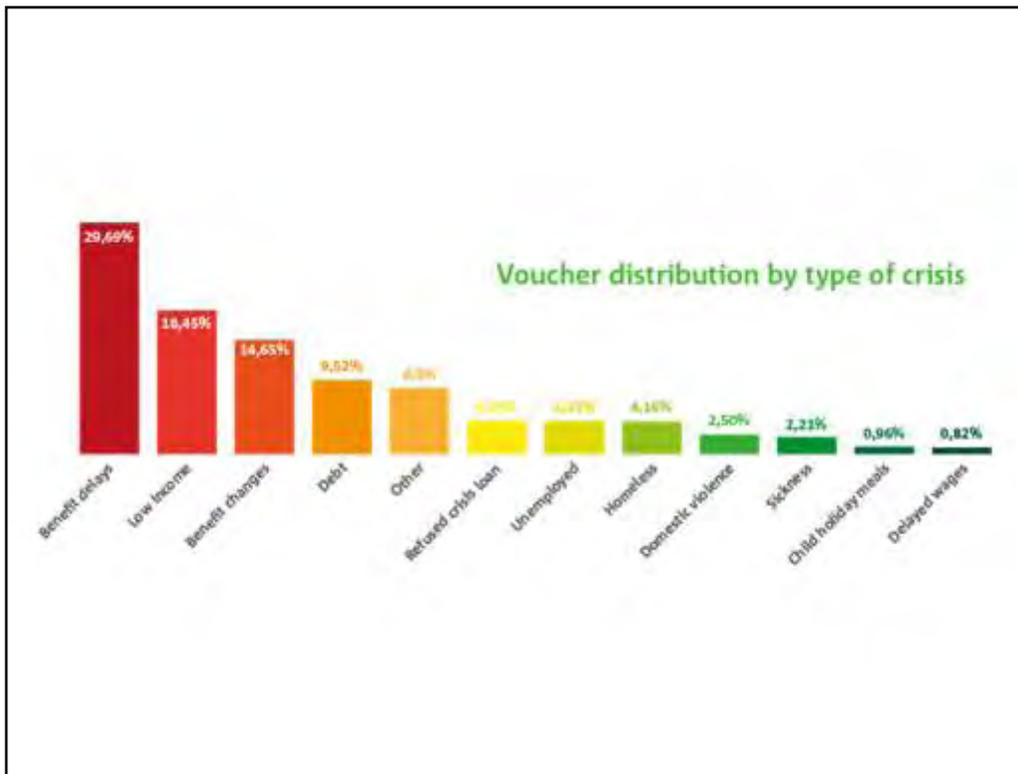
This is what Nobel economics laureate Joseph Stiglitz has described as "to the pipe dream of "trick supposed to follow from allowing the rich free reign to make more money.



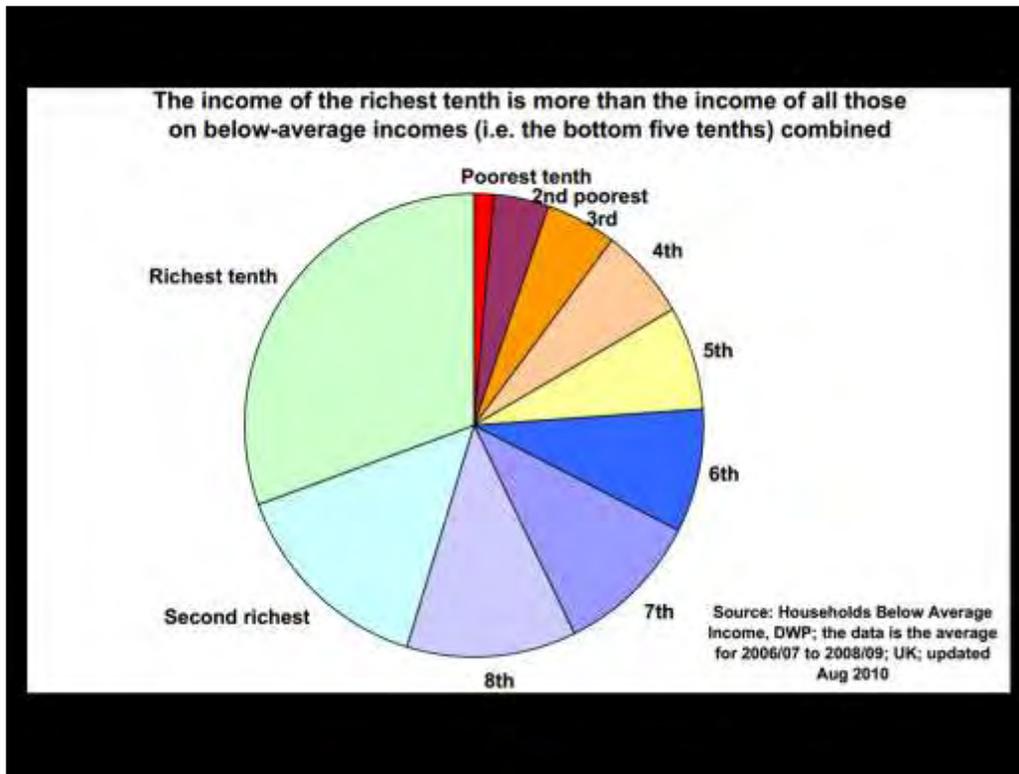
This shows the huge contribution that housing costs are making to the increase in poverty in the capital- the pale blue lines show poverty levels before housing costs which are in line with the rest of the country and the dark blue lines show the levels after housing costs- far outstripping the rest of the country.



This comes from a report of the Trussell Trust showing a 170% rise in numbers turning to foodbanks in last 12 months



Only four per cent of people turned to foodbanks due to homelessness; 30% were referred due to benefit delay; 18% low income and 15% benefit changes (up from 11% in 2011/12). Other reasons included domestic violence, sickness, refused crisis loans, debt and unemployment.



This shows just how unfair our society has become and remember that for each stepwise reduction in income, we see a corresponding worsening of health and life expectancy.

# structural violence

This is structural violence on a massive scale  
- The poorest 50% have less than 5% of financial or property wealth. The richest 10% have 40% of income wealth, 45% of property wealth and 65% of financial wealth.



Structural violence is defined by the medical anthropologist Nancy ScheperHughes as-

- violence that is permissible, even encouraged. It refers to the invisible social machinery of inequality that reproduces social relations of exclusion and marginalization via ideologies, stigmas, and dangerous discourses attendant to race, class, sex, and other invidious distinctions. Structural violence “naturalizes” poverty, sickness, hunger, and premature death, erasing their social and political origins so that they are taken for granted and no one is held accountable except the poor themselves.

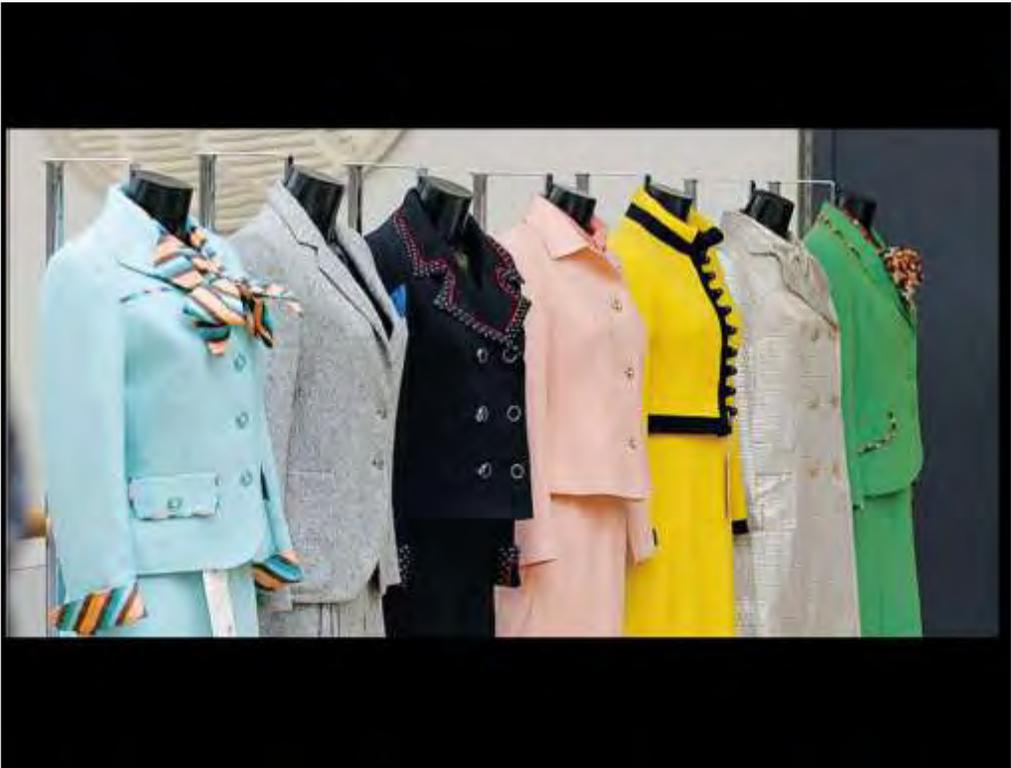
Scheper-Hughes N.

Dangerous and endangered youth: social structures and determinants of violence. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 2004; **1036**:13-46.

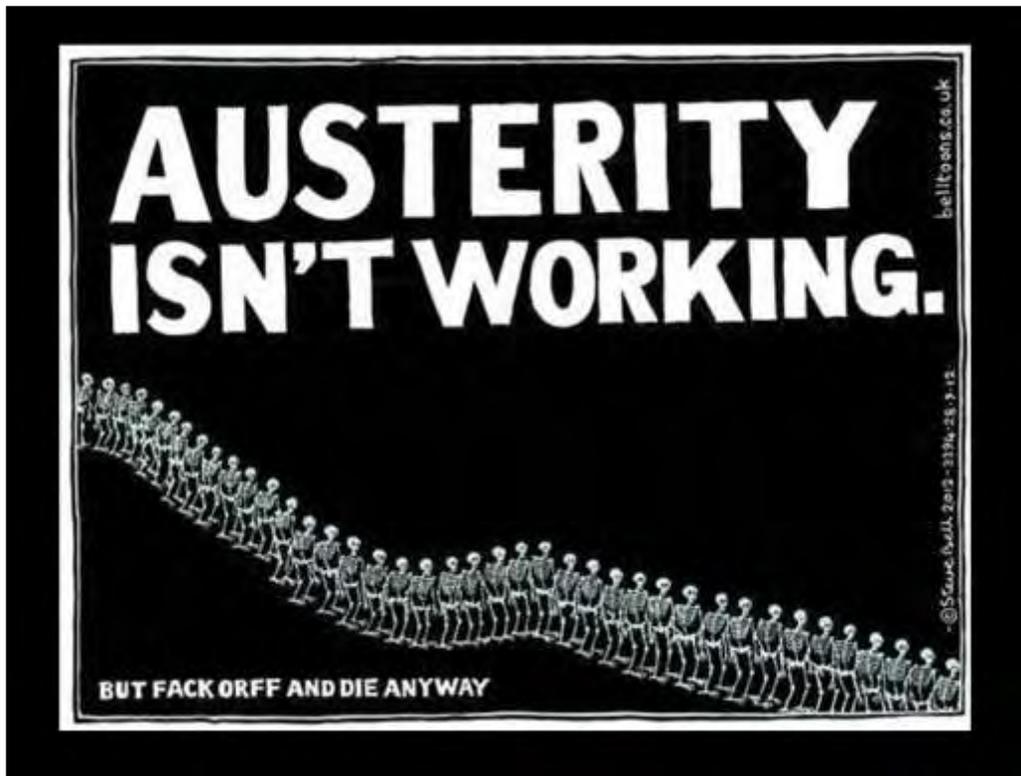
Today, across Europe, structural violence is being ratcheted up by the ideological imposition of austerity while nothing is being done about the failure to regulate financial institutions that was the real cause of the economic crisis.



This is the poster that is widely believed to have won the 1979 election for Margaret Thatcher – in those days conservative politicians at least pretended to be concerned about unemployment



Her government marked a nadir not only for fashion but for the politics of hope, inclusiveness and social solidarity



This is a recent cartoon from Steve Bell of the Guardian- graphically depicting the health effects of the latest round of structural violence.



And the victims- those at the bottom of the socioeconomic pile are being subjected to a vicious campaign of demonisation-these are the lies that are presented almost daily in our right-wing press

1. 'They' are lazy and don't want to work
2. 'They' are addicted to drink and drugs
3. 'They' are not really poor – they just don't manage their money properly
4. They' are on the fiddle
5. 'They' have an easy life
6. 'They' caused the deficit

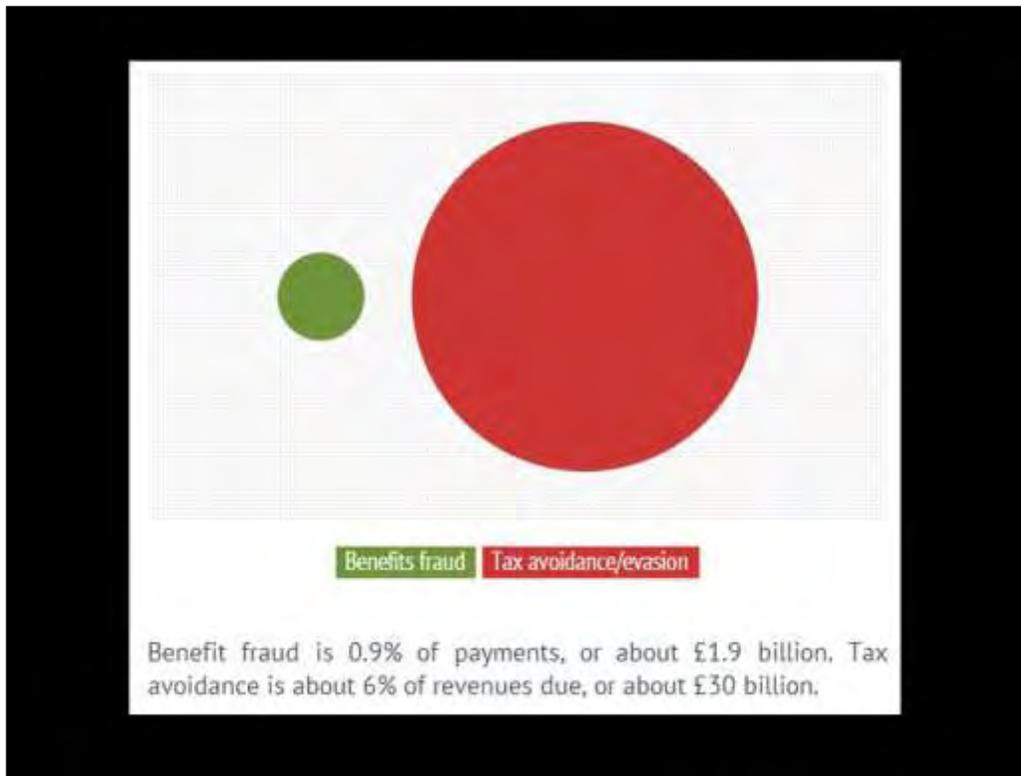
<http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/truthandliespocketguide.pdf>



The Joseph Rowntree Foundation published a study in December testing whether there were three generations of the same family that had never worked. Despite dogged searching, researchers were unable to find such families. If they exist, they account for a minuscule fraction of workless people. Under 1% of workless households might have two generations who have never worked about 15,000 households. Families with three such generations will therefore be even fewer.

The graphic shows this broken down. Importantly, families experiencing long term worklessness remained committed to the

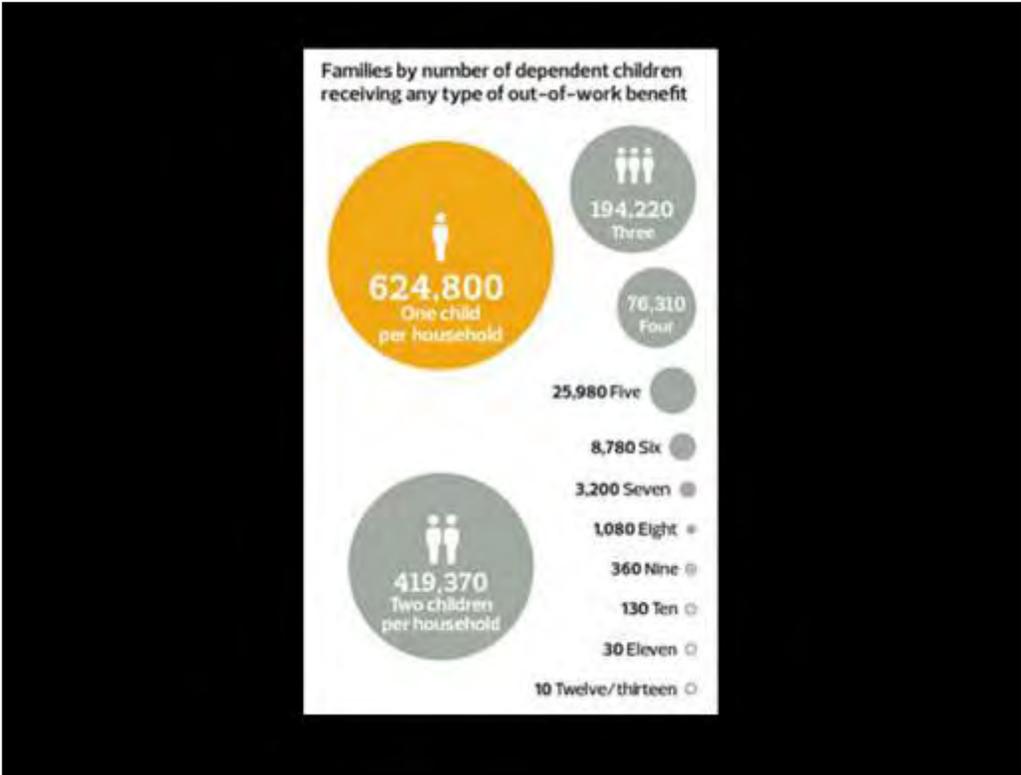
value of work and preferred to be in jobs rather than on benefits. There was no evidence of "a culture of worklessness"- values, attitudes and behaviours discouraging employment and encouraging welfare dependence in the families being passed down the generations. The long term worklessness of parents in these families was a result of complex problems (particularly related to ill-health) associated with living in long-term and deep poverty. In an already tight labour market, multiple problems combined to place people at the back of a long queue for jobs.



Benefit fraud by the poor accounts for 1.9 million pounds, while tax evasion by the rich amounts to 30 billion pounds.

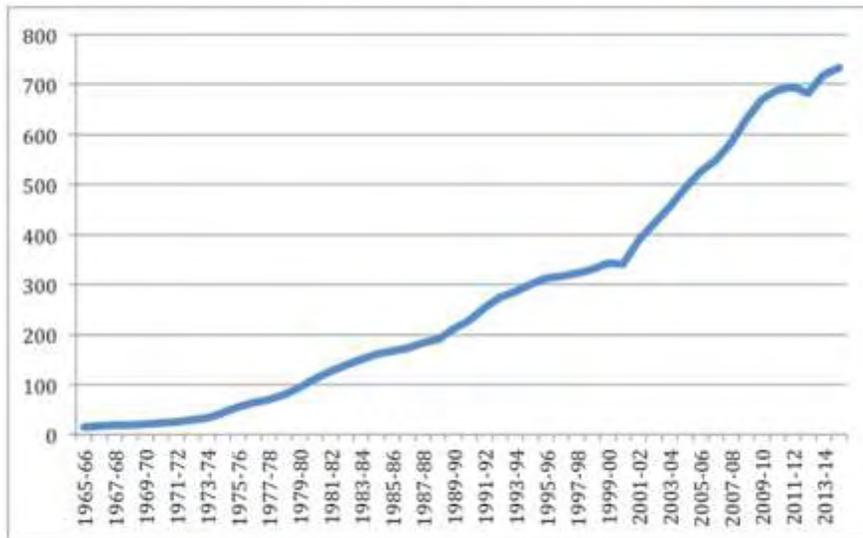


And only 4% of people claiming out of work disability payments do so because of alcohol or drugs.



There is also a myth that those claiming welfare benefits have large families and again this has no foundation in truth the vast majority having only one or two children.

Figure 1: Public Spending in 'nominal (cash) terms 1965-66 to 2021-15 (£ billion)



Source: based on HM Treasury [\[1\]](#)

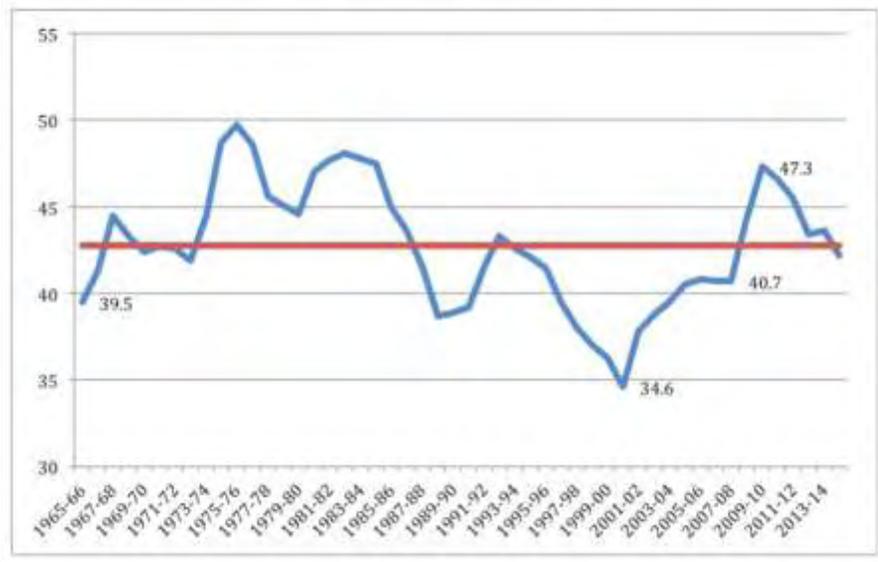
The most sinister myth is that the economic crisis was triggered by unsustainable levels of public debt- using data such as this which shows public spending in nominal cash terms over the last 50 years

Figure 2 Public Spending in Real-Terms (2011-12 prices)(£ billion)



This looks much less bad when corrected for inflation and disappears altogether

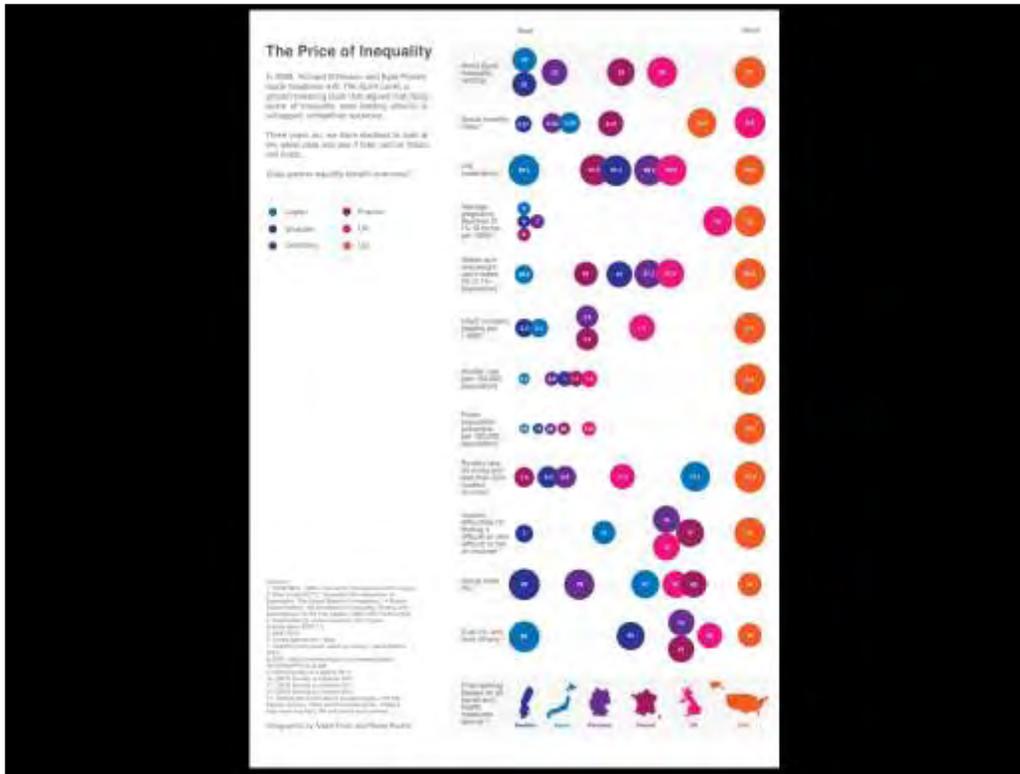
Figure 3 Public Spending as a percentage of GDP (1965-66 to 2014-15)



When public spending as a proportion of GDP. This has averaged just under 43% of GDP for the past 50 years.

It has swung between as high as 50% (under Labour 1975-76) and as low as 35% (also under Labour in 2000-01).

The myth of unsustainable debt is being used as a deliberate smokescreen for the imposition of ideological policy operating in the interests of the rich.



Welfare cuts make socioeconomic inequality worse and this graphic from the Equality trust shows the correlation between inequality and a whole raft of health and social problems- social mobility, life expectancy, teenage pregnancy, obesity, infant mortality, murder rate, prison population, the proportion of those living on less than 50% of median income, voting rates and trust in others.

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On to the biological effects of biography

## Loss:

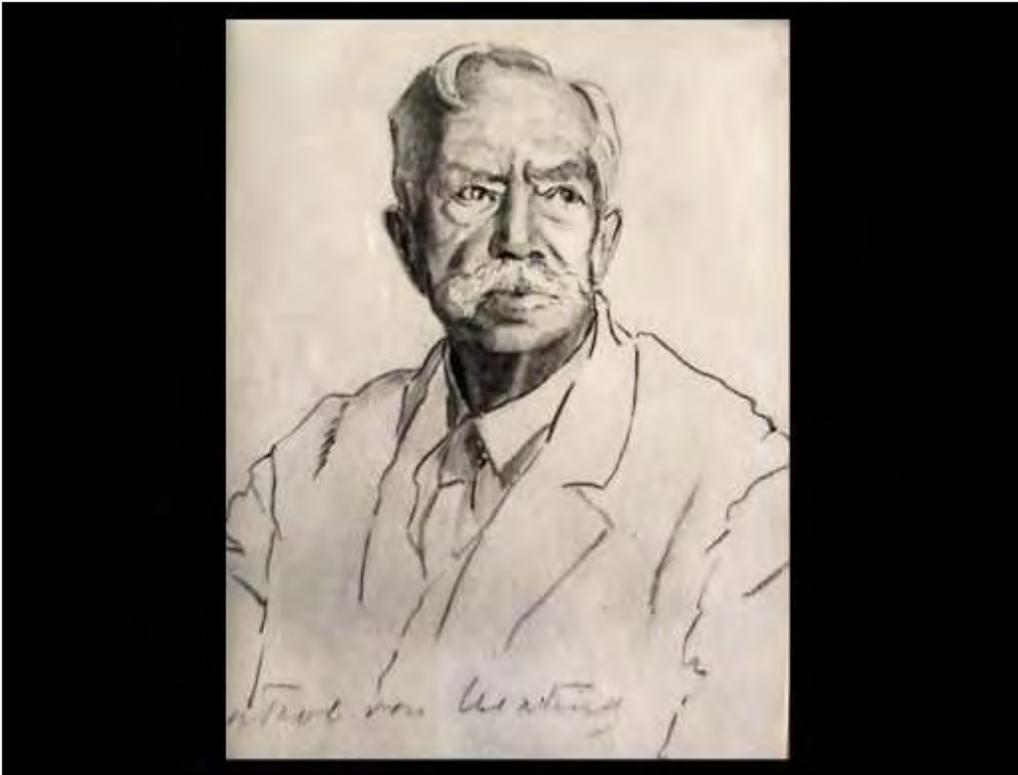
- Home
- Work
- Hope
- Opportunity
- Life story

The structural violence of austerity causes loss of home, work, hope, opportunity and anticipated life story.



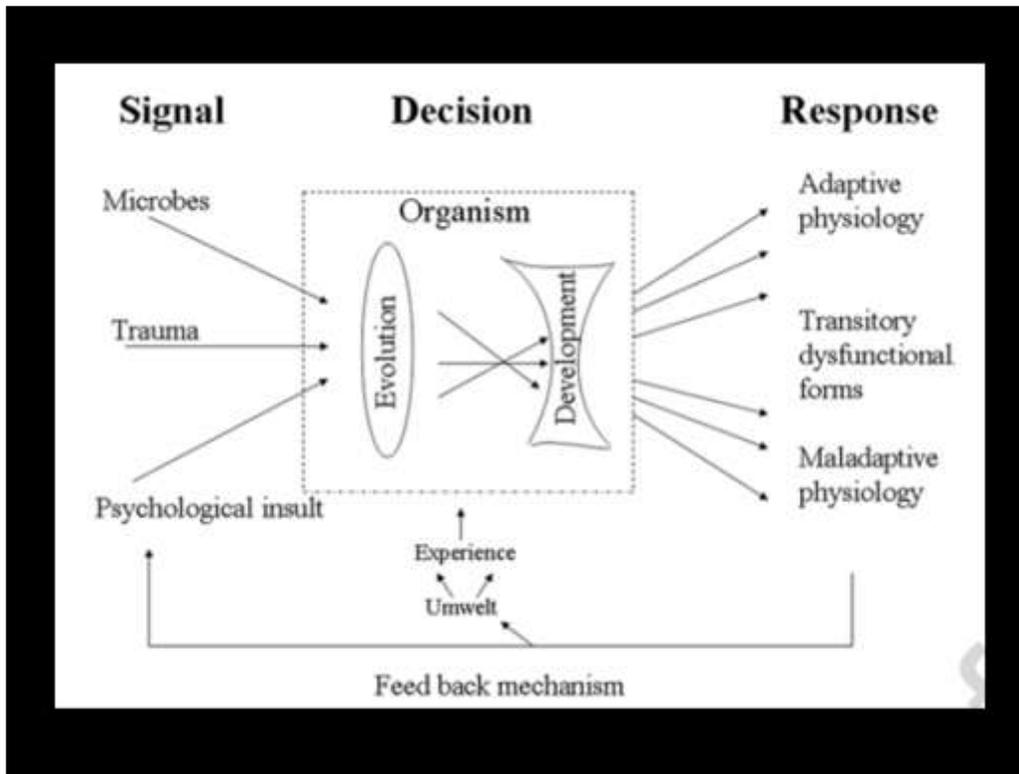
I found this astonishingly important word painted on the side of a railway bridge in the deprived part of London where I used to work.

Loss of hope leads directly to loss of health  
- and it does so because



Human beings are not simply passive consumers of disease and injury.

This is the Baltic German zoologist Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944) who was the first person to point out the fundamental significance of the meanings that animals, including humans, attach to their environment and experience.



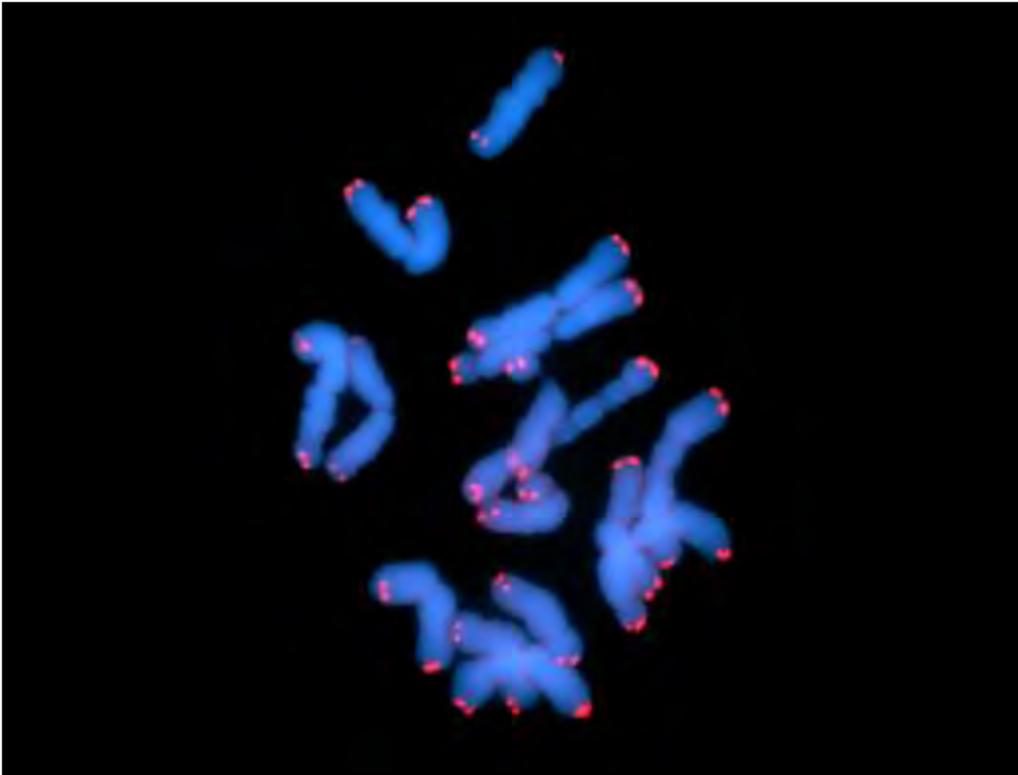
He argued that each individual is the result firstly of modification undergone by the species during evolution, here represented by the convex lens, but secondly, and at least as importantly, of adaptation occurring within the individual during the course of each particular life the concave lens. The evolutionary resources of the individual, including its genetic makeup, are modified by individual, subjective interpretations of life experiences, especially in early childhood. The meanings attached to these experiences alter epigenetic expression, the circuits of the central nervous system, the immune system and the endocrine system, so that various forms of trauma and psychological stress have a profound effect on the individual's physiology. The response may turn out to be usefully adaptive, transitorily dysfunctional, or maladaptive. And, these then feed back to alter both what von Uexküll termed the Umwelt- the way the world is subjectively experienced and the way the body responds to subsequent challenges.

Norwegian microbiologist Elling Ulvestad agrees

- as culture is shaped as a cooperative effort along the generations, the human organism is always and without exception a lived body in which history and biography are woven together with interpersonal meaning as well as individual purpose.

Elling Ulvestad

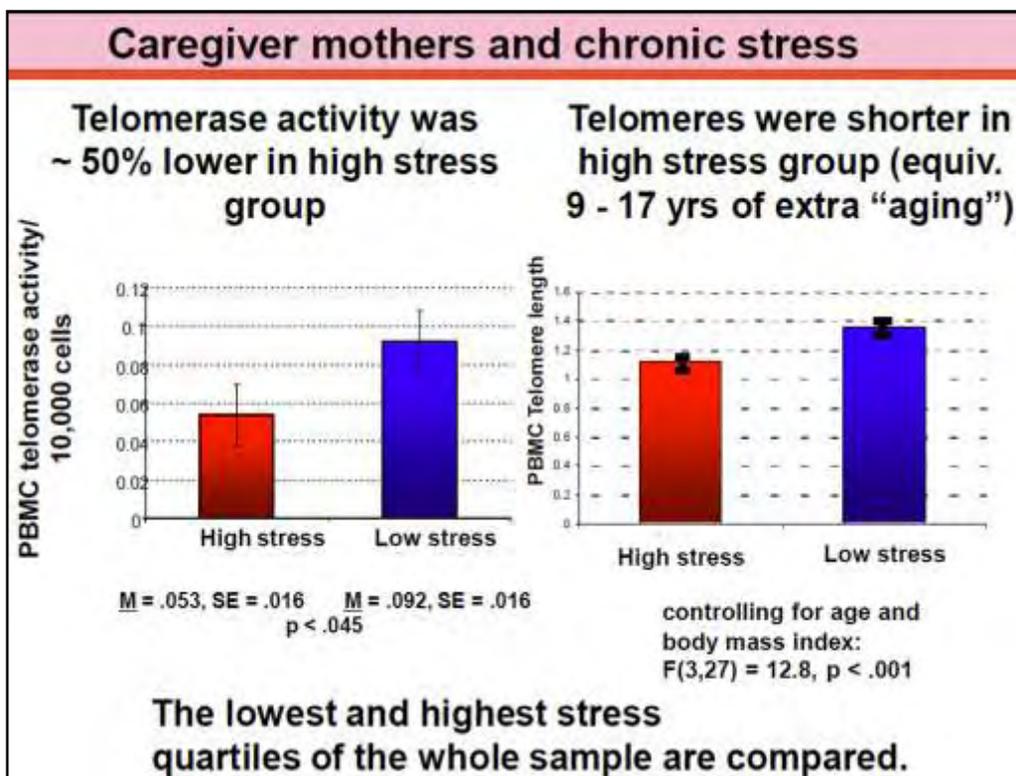
Psychoneuroimmunology - the experiential dimension.  
*Methods Mol Biol* 2012;934:21-37.



We are slowly beginning to understand some of the biological mechanisms in play. One concerns the epigenetic regulation of telomeres. Chronic stress damages and erodes telomeres and by this means seems to precipitate premature ageing in those affected. Telomeres shorten with age in all replicating somatic cells. Thus, telomere length can serve as a biomarker of a cell's biological (versus chronological) age. A strong association between chronic stress and shortened telomeres has been shown for the caregivers of people with Alzheimer's disease, for women after chronically sick children and women exposed to intimate partner violence.

Telomerase increases telomere length and low telomerase levels have been shown to be

associated with smoking and significantly greater abdominal adiposity, higher resting heart rate, fasting glucose, LDL and total cholesterol and total/HDL cholesterol ratio.



This is one of the slides from Nobel lecture - detailing the effects of stress on telomerase and on telomere length and we can see that the high stress group had telomere shortening equivalent to 9-17 years of accelerated ageing.

This seems to explain much of the great difficulty that health service professionals face in trying to improve the health status of the poor, the damaged and the traumatised patients for whom we care.

## the deserving and the undeserving sick

Today, to a considerable extent the nineteenth century concepts of the deserving and the undeserving poor have been replaced by those which draw very similar distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving sick the latter being those whose poor health is caused by their freely chosen lifestyle – the more we understand about how biography modulates biology, the less this notion of lifestyle disease is defensible.

The French novelist – Emmanuel Carrère – puts it this way

## Redress:

- Advocacy
- Attention

We must act as witnesses and advocates and we must pay real attention to the sick and suffering. It seems little but it could turn out to be much.

That's why I'm so stunned by people who claim that we are free, that happiness can be decided, that it's a moral choice. For these cheerleaders, sadness is in bad taste, depression a sign of laziness, melancholy a sin. Yes, it is a sin, even a mortal sin, but some people are born sinners, born damned, and all their courage and best efforts will not set them free. These people who are damaged at the core are as cut off from the rest of humanity as the poor are from the wealthy.

Emmanuel Carrère  
*Other Lives but Mine*, 2009

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So lastly – how can we respond to these worsening circumstances which are way beyond both our individual control and, for most of us, beyond our field of expertise

For many months, the political and financial aspects of the crisis have filled the headlines. However, behind those headlines, there are many individual human stories that remain untold. They include people with chronic diseases unable to access life-sustaining medicines, persons with rare diseases who are losing income support and forced to care for themselves, and those whose hopes of a better life in the future have been dashed see no alternative but to commit suicide.

McKee M, Karanikolos M, Belcher P, Stuckler D. Austerity: a failed experiment on the people of Europe. *Clinical Medicine* 2012; 12(4): 346-50.

You know these people you listen to their stories every working day

## Speak truth to power

And at every opportunity we need to tell those stories to those in power the stories belong to people who have no voice but, for better or worse, some of us have a voice. We must learn from journalists who always anchor stories about scientific research or social policy in the story of an individual they know the power of the anecdote. These stories embarrass and discomfit those in power, and they can change policies.

Now to the attention we pay to suffering



This is John Berger's drawing  
- who writes

- no true effort of  
attention is ever wasted  
even though it may  
never have any visible  
result, either direct or  
indirect.

Simone Weil  
Letter to Joë Bousquet  
Marseille, May 12, 1942

And in a world increasingly obsessed with measurement and recording, this remains absolutely true.



The philosopher Iris Murdoch follows on from Simone Weil

I have used the word 'attention', which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent.

Iris Murdoch  
*The Sovereignty of Good*, 1970

The task of attention goes on all the time and at apparently empty and everyday moments we are 'looking', making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important cumulative results.

Iris Murdoch  
*The Sovereignty of Good, 1970*

I think everyone will recognize peering efforts - and how much they help

Yet - this is all very difficult and perhaps increasingly difficult to sustain-



And this is the wonderfully wise old man John Berger – and he recognises the importance and power of naming

... they know too that what they have been subjected to in their lives is intolerable. And the naming of the intolerable is itself the hope. When something is termed intolerable, actions must follow. These actions are subject to all the vicissitudes of life. But the pure hope resides first and mysteriously in the capacity to name the intolerable as such.

John Berger  
*And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, 1984

Simone Weil also touches on the enduring presence of hope in terrible circumstances:

At the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being.

Weil S. *Human Personality* (1942-3).

**'You do not interest me.'  
No man can say these  
words to another without  
committing a cruelty and  
offending against justice.**

Weil S. Human Personality (1942-3).

Our patients seem not to interest too many of our political masters- it is our responsibility to make sure that their stories cannot simply be ignored.



THANK YOU