

## **Revolting talks of migrant workers and community organisers: A UK community psychology perspective**

Jenny Fisher, Rebecca Lawthom and Carolyn Kagan

Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom

### *Abstract*

The United Kingdom's neoliberal agenda has been theorised and commented on widely, notably around the austerity measures, worklessness and the Big Society. We respond to the call of the special issue, in centralising the importance of work for community engagement and individual identities. To explicate this we draw upon two areas of externally funded research undertaken with migrant workers and trainee community organisers to explore how individuals within these communities can be positioned as abject citizens. We engage with Imogen Tyler's (2013) notion of revolting subjects to conceptualise the ways in which the particular positionings of subjects as revolting occurs within an English context. The paper engages explicitly with a critical community psychology stance to reflect on the consequences of the neoliberal agenda on paid and unpaid work within communities. We add to the call for community psychologists to explore, critique and challenge the current neoliberal codes that positions migrant workers and deprived communities as "revolting subjects".

The neoliberal political agenda continues to be the subject of global academic commentary, debate and research, notably in the United Kingdom (UK) around the issues of austerity, citizenship and volunteering (Lister, 2012). Neoliberalism continues to shape the

political landscape across the globe resulting in significant shifts in the ideological foundations of societies (Baillie-Smith & Laurie, 2011). Amin and Thrift (2002) and Massey (2004) argue that this neoliberal agenda is experienced in diverse ways across geographical and cultural divides. In this paper, we seek to explore the consequences of this political agenda on marginalised individuals and communities in England under the current Conservative-led coalition government. We do this through the use of existing research that we were involved in between 2010 and 2012 in the North of England. In drawing on two distinct areas of work with Chinese migrants and community organisers, we explore this research in the context of existing literature and from a critical community psychology perspective. The literature used in this paper crosses academic disciplines and mirrors our own location as researchers working in an inter-disciplinary space (psychology, critical community psychology, social geography, sociology and social policy).

In writing this article, we centralise Imogen Tyler's (2013) recent monograph "Revolting Subjects" which explores social abjection in neoliberal Britain. In her work, social abjection is theorised as related processes. Exploring the experience of being is for Tyler (2013) about the way in which life is valued and counted, whereas issues to do with belonging are characterised by political life and participation in it – whether one has a status, or can vote for example. Tyler (2013) weaves together political parables to illustrate ways in which a bottom-up picture of neoliberal Britain impacts on inequality and injustice for communities and individuals. An overall intention of the book is to make "a small contribution to the development of a new political imaginary for these revolting times" (Tyler, 2013, p. 18). Her work is timely for our discussion of Chinese migrants and community organisers, with Tyler's (2013) focus on citizenship, migrant illegality and poverty as a means of exploring social abjection for those who lives precarious lives. These issues of citizenship, migration and poverty continue to resonate with community psychologists as evidenced by this special issue

and a call by Coimbra et al. (2012) to commit to, “[c]ritically reflect on the concept of community...to consider who is being ‘othered’ by being placed outside of ‘community’ through our talk, thought and action” (p. 135).

In this article, we respond to the above appeal to community psychologists through a critical discussion of community, social justice, poverty, citizenship and social abjection, focused on Chinese migrants in the UK and community organisers. We do this within a framework of globalisation and Community Psychology, and alongside the current UK austerity measures that include the policy narrative of the Big Society. To set the scene, we briefly map globalisation and critical community psychology. We then outline the current UK austerity measures the Big Society policy agenda as well as provide an overview of the two areas of work that inform our discussion: Chinese migrants and community organisers. From this, we draw out four areas of discussion that analyse the consequences of the UK political agenda on marginalised communities. The first three themes concern the precarious nature of paid employment, citizenship and voluntary work, the management of citizenship, and they are followed by a discussion of the concept of “cruel optimism” (Wacquant, 2008). Drawing on thinkers outside of community psychology for analysis enables the usage of concepts such as cruel optimism and social abjection, to add different perspectival lens to the work. In the final section of this paper, we draw some conclusions and make argue for continued interest by community psychologists in communities and “revolting subjects” (Tyler, 2013).

We recognise that neoliberalism as a term is commonplace in academic work and can be contested. In this paper, we contextualise it as based on the principle of the central importance of “the market in ordering society and defining value” and as linked to a political agenda to reducing government spending on health and welfare among other areas (Kagan & Burton, 2005, p. 308). The effects of neoliberalism are being felt across the globe as the invisible elbows of the market become more evident. Market demands in more affluent global

North settings often require labour and goods from global South poorer countries. Moving goods and mobile labour involve often low paid work, separated families, and working in the hidden economy. In short, there are human impacts to global market forces – ones which unfairly fall in the global South. As our use of neoliberalism needs clarification, it is also helpful to define marginalised communities for the purpose of this paper. Using an explicit critical Community Psychology lens, we see Community Psychology practice as being rooted in values around stewardship and social justice. In order to share psychology and engage in meaningful practice, we position Community Psychology as directly working with those who are in some way excluded or diminished by the social, economic and political system. We now turn to a brief overview of Community Psychology and globalisation as part scaffolding of this paper.

### **Community Psychology and Globalisation**

Community psychology is an approach which differs in practice and tone across the globe. Not only has community psychology sought to understand the person in context, but it also sought to set itself up as a value-laden discipline – in contrast to mainstream psychology that had often set itself up as value neutral. Among the values it commonly sets itself are: valuing diversity, promoting participation, promoting empowerment (choice) and hearing from the ground up (voice). However, since it became formally codified as “community psychology”, some critics have argued that the frame of reference has become the orthodoxy as its stated values have been absorbed by the dominant economic and political systems of neoliberalism and consumer capitalism. This is, for some of us, where the adjunct ‘critical’ has come from. Thus, the term critical community psychology is a less utilised term, although it is evident in particular accounts, notably Kagan, Burton, Duckett, Lawthom, and Siddiquee (2011), Coimbra et al. (2012) and Fryer, Duckett and Pratt (2004). If we take a UK-informed

definition of community psychology, it offers a framework for working with those marginalised by the social system that leads to self-aware social change with an emphasis on value based, participatory work and the forging of alliances. It is a way of working that is pragmatic and reflexive, whilst not wedded to any particular orthodoxy of method. As such, community psychology is one alternative to the dominant individualistic psychology typically taught and practised in the high income countries. It is community psychology because it emphasises a level of analysis and intervention other than the individual and their immediate interpersonal context. It is community psychology because it is nevertheless concerned with how people feel, think, experience and act as they work together, resisting oppression and struggling to create a better world (Burton, Boyle, Harris, & Kagan, 2007).

Whilst there are global variants of community psychology, there is much overlap around the following three issues. Firstly, a concern with social justice centred around access to knowledge and resources, and secondly, a commitment to working with people based on collaboration as opposed to intervention. In addition, there is a focus on valuing others and respecting that everyone brings different knowledge and skills, and transformation rather than amelioration, in other words, a view of long-term sustainability rather than short-term change. We argue that this approach is one, which not only recognises globalisation, but can work successfully in understanding how globalisation operates differently in global spaces.

Furthermore, there are many different ways of conceptualising the concept and processes of globalisation (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 2005). The International Monetary Fund defines globalisation as “the process through which an increasingly free flow of ideas, people, goods, services and capital leads to the integration of economies and societies” (Köhler, 2002, p. 1). Globalisation can be defined as a “compression of time and space never previously experienced” (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 742), with positive consequences on economics, political connections and social connections. However, it can also be disruptive,

and is frequently an adjunct to neoliberalism. These processes of social and economic change have contributed to the increasing global North-South divide in health and mortality, living standards, working conditions, human security, access to justice and human rights protection. In this paper, we heed the work of Raewyn Connell (2007) who has been advocating the utility of Southern Knowledges, those that challenge and reconceptualise implicit social science thinking. Whilst the work we talk about in this paper centres on the global North, we recognise the impetus for migrant work coming from global North need for southern labour, similarly roots of community activism and conscientisation originate from Latin American contexts (for example, Freire, 1972, Martín Baró, 1994, and Boal, 1979). We advocate the need, as does Connell (2007) to open up thinking between the global North and South, rethinking ways in which family, community or work are conceived of. All of these taken for granted terms are highlighted in the research studies utilised below.

### **Austerity and the Big Society**

The establishment of the current UK Coalition government in 2010 has given rise to unprecedented austerity measures that can be traced back to the national and global financial crisis that began in 2007 (Clarke & Newman, 2012). Within the UK, austerity has been politically reframed from an economic issue to a problem that can be blamed on the welfare state and its dependents (Hall & O'Shea, 2013; Lister, 2012). The prevalent solution to the fiscal crisis is a retrenchment of the state, and cuts in welfare, within a neoliberal discourse, and “[a] common thread running through the neoliberal hegemonic project is therefore intact as the new government starts to unveil its approach to resolving the challenge of weak citizenship” (Davies, 2011, p. 21). Cuts in public sector spending, the retrenchment of the state and a narrative of abject others who are dependent on welfare are not unique to the UK, as evidenced by Wiggan (2012). Walker (2013) argues that psychologists have failed to

comprehend the impact of austerity on individuals from a ‘social, economic and political’ position and continue to “medicalise, personalise, and “treat” them regardless of their precursors” (p. 55).

Alongside the austerity measures, has been the introduction of the Big Society. A critical and in-depth analysis of the Big Society and its components is not the main focus of this article. However, it is useful to provide a brief overview. David Cameron (2010, online), Prime Minister of the UK, defined the Big Society as a “guiding philosophy – a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control.” The agenda concerns devolution of power to local communities, increases in state accountability, and attempts to re-engage individuals in decision-making and democracy. Volunteering is a central tenet of the Big Society, as the policy seeks to encourage individuals and communities to deliver and run previously led public services. Programmes and policies aligned to the Big Society include the Community Organisers Programme (we return to this later in the article), a Big Society Bank, launch of a ‘Big Society day’, and new funding for neighbourhoods to enable development of groups and enterprises (Cabinet Office, 2010). Taylor (2011) positioned the Big Society as a significant tenet of policy, and according to Lister (2012), the Big Society is concerned with moving previously paid work in the public sector to the unpaid and informal sector, and means “work for free” (p. 331).

Generating social capital and belonging within communities underpins the Big Society ideology, although the emphasis is about an individual’s responsibility, and not that of government to build the Big Society (Westwood, 2011). While the Big Society can signify a changing landscape of civil society, it is important to highlight that the Big Society was introduced alongside significant public spending cuts (Alcock, 2010). Within the context of a significant withdrawal of local government funding by central government, it has been suggested that the Big Society is a “cover” for the cuts in spending on public services and

support for the voluntary and community sector (VCS) (Alcock, 2010). While there was a reference to the Big Society in Prime Minister David Cameron's Christmas speech in 2013, the Big Society is receding from political discourse (Bunyan, 2013), yet continues to be explored in academic work (Corbett & Walker, 2012; Lister, 2012).

### **Chinese Migrants and Community Organisers**

This paper explores the consequence of the current UK neoliberal agenda on particular marginalised communities and the ways in which communities are positioned through a neoliberal lens of "revolting subjects". Through the use of our work in two areas, Chinese migrants (Lawthom et al., 2013), and community organising, we draw on previous research that was located in the North of England and took place under the current coalition government. To inform our later discussion, we outline the work in both areas. We recognise that the projects differ in many ways, including the community settings, cultural issues, and funding of the work, however, they exemplify neatly the ways in which work, even unpaid work, is aligned with good citizenship and citizenship depends upon an ability to work. Both projects were undertaken utilising a community psychology perspective. We commence with the Chinese migrant project.

The Chinese migrant project was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation<sup>1</sup> and developed out of an alliance between a Manchester-based Chinese social enterprise and researchers based at Manchester Metropolitan University including two authors of this paper, Lawthom and Kagan. Undocumented migrant workers are confronted by a number of issues including forced labour, which was the focus of the research. Forced labour has been defined by the International Labour Organisation ([ILO], 1930, online) as, "[a]ll work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily." The ILO (1930) notes that there are six indicators of



forced labour. These are threats or actual harm to the worker, restriction of movement and confinement, debt bondage and denying wages or excessively reducing wages. The final two are withholding passports and other identity documents and threat of denunciation to authorities. In the work, we adopted a community psychology stance and framed questions of labour around individuals and their networks (family and economic). Using a co-researcher and participatory approach, the project explored the journeys that Chinese migrant workers had made and the agency that facilitated these journeys. Working collaboratively with a Chinese social enterprise, the research, including the thirty-five narratives, analysis and dissemination, provided a legacy of knowledge. As well as exploring work experiences (notably precarious employment and forced labour), the focus of the research moved in line with the organisation's and participants' agenda to a discussion of journeys that Chinese migrant workers had made and the agency that facilitated these journeys. This change in direction caused some tensions between funders (concerned with work experiences) and researchers, and different research stories were fore-fronted for separate audiences. Here we do not provide the findings of the research as these will be discussed in later sections. However, the overall findings can be found elsewhere (Lawthom et al., 2013). We now turn to the other area of work that we draw on in this paper, a government funded project of employing and supporting four community organisers.

In 2010, the authors were invited by Locality<sup>2</sup> to participate in a tender to lead the Community Organisers programme, a central tenet of the Big Society policy initiative (Taylor, 2012). On award of the funding, Manchester Metropolitan University became one of the first eleven hosts of community organisers. The community organisers programme aimed to recruit five hundred trainee community organisers who would in turn engage and support 4,500 volunteer organisers. The over-arching aim of the programme was to “identify community leaders, bring communities together, help people start their own neighbourhood

groups and give communities the help they need to take control and tackle their problems” (Cameron, 2010, online).

As the case with the Chinese migrant workers project, it is not our intention to provide a full description of the project. Warren (2009) and Bunyan (2010) provide a detailed outline and analysis of community organising including its history in the United States. Taylor (2012) and Bunyan (2013) explore some of the challenges and opportunities of the Big Society funded community organising programme. In this article, we draw on our experiences of hosting community organisers in the North West of England between 2011 and 2012, to develop our discussion of the consequences of a political agenda on marginalised communities. The Community Organiser programme as funded by the current Coalition-led UK government is located around the notion that social change can be mobilised from the ground upwards. Following assimilation with the programme and the training (the majority of which was provided by Re-generate Trust<sup>3</sup> and based on their model “Root Solutions, Listening Matters”), we recruited four community organisers who were all ex- Manchester Metropolitan University students. The community organisers selected the areas for their work as community organisers and unlike other hosts, we directly employed the community organisers. Hosting the organisers was a learning process and in this paper we draw on our ethnographic research and verbal interactions with all those involved. We acknowledge that the datasets for the two projects that inform this paper are dissimilar in many ways, yet there are commonalities in terms of researchers, location and the centrality of community psychology. Both projects also focus on work – paid, sometimes in the “shadow” economy and volunteering as ways that engender citizenship. We now turn to the four themes for our discussion of the consequences of the UK political agenda on marginalised communities, beginning with the precarious nature of paid employment.

*Precarious Work for 'Abject Others'*

According to the New Economics Foundation (2013), precarious employment is increasing and is a central effect of the austerity measures. We use Shildrick, MacDonald, Webster, & Guthwaite's (2012) definition of precarious work in that it is part-time, limited and poorly paid. For the previous New Labour UK government and the current Coalition government, work is considered the main exit from poverty (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013). However, studies show that employment fails to lift disadvantaged people experiencing social abjection out of poverty (New Economics Foundation, 2013; Shildrick et al., 2012).

Throughout Europe, and within a neoliberal agenda, there has been a reduction in minimum wage levels, an increase in zero hours' contracts and public sector employment (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2011). For the Chinese migrant workers, our research found that on the basis of their migration status, they were subject to exploitative work that was not compliant with business or employment regulations. Finding low paid work was not challenging and was in the main, facilitated through social networks (Lawthom et al., 2013), yet the precarious nature of the work was evident. Some workers were debt bonded or forced at times through housing or the need to maintain an income for family members. Further, mobility was an essential component of keeping employment. The research evidenced a wider political context for Chinese migrant workers of labour flows, familial pressures and political processes, in which they were embedded. Commentators such as Skrivankova (2012) and Dwyer, McCloud, and Hodson (2012) have argued that the conceptual status of individuals and work is very fuzzy. Skrivankova (2012) advocates a continuum that explains the complexity of the exploitative and precarious environment on workers. The continuum maps both experience and possible interventions, forefronting the concept of decent work as the desired standard. The continuum approach demonstrates that paid work – often held up as a gold standard and one to which all

should aspire to- comes in very many different forms with different outcomes for individuals involved. Precarity is very much a way of life for many workers, the abject others, in this rather hidden economy.

Turning to the community organisers, the very nature of their one year projects was precarious. While they are not abject others themselves, their work with individuals in deprived neighbourhoods was with those who could be considered to be abject. The community organisers were employed on a one year contract, and while we acknowledge that we were involved in the pilot stage of the programme, sustainability of role was an issue faced by the community organisers. This impacted on their work with communities and engagement of volunteers, as they were unable to plan for the future. Precarious work continues to be a challenge for community-based positions in the UK due to the austerity measures. Towards the end of the year of hosting community organisers, the UK government allocated funding of £15,000 (around \$27,650 AUD) for another year of employment. However, this was subject to the community organisers finding a match of the same amount from a community organisation. The following section considers the impact of the neoliberal agenda on issues of citizenship for marginalised individuals and communities in the UK.

### *(Not) Becoming a Citizen*

Tyler (2010) asserts that “British citizenship has been designed to fail specific groups and populations” (p. 61) and this is the focus of this section. In her article, Tyler (2010) draws on Butler and Spivak’s (2007) discussion of abject others who have become failed citizens. In the UK, the concept of citizenship has endured political changes and continues to form part of government discourse. In the previous section, we discussed volunteering as precarious ‘work’, and here we continue to frame volunteering but within the notion of citizenship. As Lie, Baines, and Wheelock (2009) confirm, citizenship continued to be associated with

voluntary work and employment. Under the former New Labour Government (1997 – 2010) “active citizenship” was a central aspect of policy framed around community engagement and volunteering, and the rewards of voluntary activity were a central part of the discourse to encourage volunteering. Lie et al. (2009) position citizenship as “practice as well as status” (p. 703) and this is a useful lens for this section. Here, we discuss voluntary community organising as practice, and migrant citizenship as status.

As we stated earlier in this article, community organising partly originated from the United States (US). Dorling (2011) in his discussion of the endurance of inequality in the UK, contrasts public sector spending for the UK with that of the US. It is estimated that by 2016, government spending on public services will be lower than in the US for the first time since at least 1980. However, in 2011, when the Community Organisers programme was launched, the UK’s spending on public services was at least three per cent of Gross Domestic Product higher than that of the United States (Taylor-Gooby & Stoker, 2011). Traditionally, US citizens live in neighbourhoods where there is no safety-net for difficult economic times and individuals are expected to contribute to community services (Putnam, 2000).

Community organising, for Alinsky (1989) and his legacy organisations, was designed to campaign for and provide public services. The landscape has been different in the UK, where we expect to have public services provided for society. Citizenship in the UK has been framed by the current coalition government as a relationship with the state as provider of services within a Big Society that “needs big citizens who are civic minded, neighbourly and prepared to work for the common good” (Sullivan, 2012, p. 145). Furthermore, it is considered by the government and the UK media as connected to formal employment as evidenced by the continuing use of the terms “skivers” and “strivers” (Williams, 2013). The community organisers we hosted were given targets to strive toward, including numbers of people to talk to, numbers of volunteers to recruit. This passing on of work, here volunteering,

was difficult. Community Organisers were working in disadvantaged areas where potential recruits were themselves involved in job searching. Embedded within a political agenda, to combat worklessness and reduce the cost of welfare, is a focus on volunteering as a means of connecting unemployed individuals to society (Baillie-Smith & Laurie, 2011; Baines & Hardill, 2008). However, this connectivity was difficult to promulgate in asset poor settings. This argument around connection, was a central tenet of the previous New Labour UK government and continues within the discourse of the Big Society (Jensen, 2013).

Migrants need to earn citizenship (Kelly & Byrne, 2007). The ways in which citizenship were talked about in the Chinese project were often ill-informed (Kagan et al., 2013). The newly arrived workers were sometimes coached by snakeheads<sup>4</sup> around UK entry behaviour, and ways to get in (documentation and identity forgery). From the outset, miscommunication existed around how to obtain status and secure it. In interviews conducted with migrant workers, the interviewer would begin with a very open question – “tell me about your story”, at times to be met with, “which one? The one I tell to authorities?” The poorly understood ideas about getting sponsored, remaining illegal or giving birth as ways of ensuring citizenship, all circulated round the predominantly Chinese speaking community. The work agenda was mobilised by all, in order to pay back debt, and there was a lack of understanding about how processes of asylum and refugee work. Status and the markers of this permeated daily life for these, in practical ways around work, housing and health yet it remained a nebulous concept. In interviews they talked about applying and not hearing back from authorities, taking advice from fellow undocumented migrants and having children as security. The UK was sometimes mooted as a fair place and one where rights are advocated. The irony of arriving in a country where borders were managed perhaps echoed some of the difficulties they had experienced in China around the hukou system. This allowed a certain proportion of rural workers to enter urban spaces for work. The experience of not becoming a

citizen in the UK was a concern for many, although quotidian practices of work and family remained uppermost. Tyler (2013) notes that “citizenship is not simply a description of status, but a productive concept which pivots on a distinction between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ and endlessly produces ‘moral objects’ at the periphery of the body politic” (p. 191). The Chinese informants wanted to be legally recognised, pay taxes and become citizens, despite the barriers they faced.

### *Controlling Citizenship*

In this theme, we explore the way in which citizenship becomes the way in which people are included in or excluded out of society. The processes of inclusion and exclusion necessarily centre on the idea of borders and marginality- who is allowed to be a citizen and how is citizenship attained? In the Community Organiser project, the trainee organisers were asked to work in disadvantaged communities, with a strong focus on areas of high deprivation and low social capital (Locality, 2011). The explicit aim here was to mobilise people within these identified areas, seen as ‘in need’. Whilst poorer communities are often idealised or vilified (Bunyan, 2012; Tyler 2013), we see elements of both in this approach. The Community Organiser project sought to create a neighbourhood army to solve problems, drawing on ideas of social capital. However, these communities were also positioned as being in need and requiring a structured approach to build community. Trainee community organisers were given targets to listen widely, build community-holding teams through recruiting volunteers and then begin appropriate identified projects. We have explicated some of the tensions in using this approach elsewhere (Fisher, Gaule, Lawthom, & Kagan, in press).

Utilising a grassroots approach is both participative and enabling, in line with the capacity building approach of community psychology. However, the model of citizenship implicit here is one of unpaid work. Trainee organisers had targets to recruit nine volunteers

(unpaid workers), who had to commit time to the project. This proved difficult for trainee organisers we were supporting, and led to organisers feeling as if they were policing or controlling borders of voluntary work. Volunteers often wanted to help but could not commit the time required, due to regimes around looking for work, improving one's work position, adding to ones' Curriculum Vitae, caring or studying. In the first round of data collected by the community organisers, the aim was to conduct community listenings with residents in the community. Working in largely urban or semi-urban areas of mixed populations, the trainee organisers noted the nature of the concerns as both trivial and concerning. On the trivial side, there was much disgust with litter and dirt, a finding that resonates with public consciousness around certain deprived neighbourhoods.

On the concerning end, and as fifty of the first cohort of trainee organisers were black and minority ethnic identifying, residents complained about difference, the need for separate schools and places where different groups could meet unfettered by others (meaning not their own). Here abject populations (those construed as different) are seen to threaten the common good. It is plausible that residents in explicating these issues wanted community organisers to exert some "hygienic governmentality" (Berlant, 1997, p. 175). Had community organisers worked on some of these rather difficult issues, they would have been working towards a notion of a good society, marked by separate schools and living areas. The tensions of the community organisers in building citizenship through stronger communities capture the problems inherent in the approach of community organising (transplanted to the UK from the US context) and further, the wider issues of a neoliberal agenda.

For the migrant workers, the issues of becoming citizens were clearly fore-fronted. Work precarity and their position in the economy was compounded by their citizenship status. Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos (2008) note ways in which subjects enact escape routes through subversion. To elude being captured, one strategy is to adopt a more mobile



form of life. Irregular migrants need to be clandestine and may burn identity papers, forge papers or documents. This autonomy of migration is about becoming imperceptible. Indeed, this position on the margins was well documented in the accounts obtained in the Chinese migrants worker project. Working in partnership with a Chinese social enterprise, we gave a human face given through rich accounts of work, family and precarity – an approach Tyler (2006) calls “close-up technologies” (p. 194). Whilst the strong accounts given were those of resilience and coping, we noted the absence of emotional reporting or discourses of pity (Lawthom et al., 2013). Despite their experiences of being positioned in particular precarious situations, involving engaging in long hours on below minimum pay, living in debt bonded housing, hot-bedding, informants still desired citizenship. The routes to this were uncertain and there was much evidence of inaccurate and outdated information. An alleged route was to have a child born in the UK, a belief that this guaranteed legality for the mother, although of course as Tyler (2012) notes, reproduction does not secure citizenship. The plethora of names for migrant mothers; ‘maternity tourism’, citizenship tourism’, ‘anchor babies’ attests to the beliefs about the ‘uncontrollable and debilitating ‘invasion’ of migrants’ (De Genova, 2007) and presents a picture of the conniving reproductive migrant who perverts citizenship and nationality norms (Lentin, 2004). Some informants who were long staying saw little possibility of becoming citizens and were pinned to a life where remittances to China needed to be sent in order to save face. Remittances enhanced life back in China but did little for the worker, sometimes providing for distance families with little connection. McClintock (1995) notes that for those excluded, who are “obliged to inhabit the impossible edges of modernity” (p. 172), the border zones are spaces of survival not transgression. This was certainly demonstrated in our accounts where people’s daily struggles were those of mundane routine and remaining below the radar.

### *Cruel Optimism*

In exploring abjection, Wacquant (2008) has noted the ways in which symbolic and material violence that characterize the processes of human waste production: labour precariousness, which produces:

...material deprivation, family hardship, temporal uncertainty and personal anxiety ; the relegation of people to decomposing neighbourhoods in which public and private resources are dwindling; and heightened stigmatization in daily life as well as in public discourse. (pp. 24-25)

The violence can be seen in both projects, although visible in different ways. For the Chinese workers, to be abject in terms of citizenship means not being in possession of the right kind of paperwork, being unable to produce the right kind of evidence, or economic capital to secure leave to remain. Indeed, “migrant illegality operates as a figurative prop in support of the wider theatre of neoliberal governance” (Tyler, 2012, p. 73). This abjection can be linked to what Berlant (2011) terms cruel optimism. Whilst mobility and escape may be desired routes for the affluent, Berlant (2011) juxtaposes this with anchorage. The ways in which stability is created, through conditions such as laying down roots, feeling safe, creating family and home, belonging are all desires which are redolent of “cruel optimism”. Informants in the project wanted to belong, to put down roots, to extend families and many of them had managed to do so-despite precariousness of work and status. The UK offered for some the possibility to have more than one child, and to enable women not to work, men needed to take on more work to pay back increased debt to snakeheads. Tyler (2012) notes that these very desired conditions of stability “feed, fuel and sustain people in precarious survival strategies” (p. 73). Bauman (1998) argues that whilst the rich cosmopolitan minority is able to freely travel across global spaces, the poor majority, to escape the discomforts of their localised existence and the

ghettoes of their lives, are prepared to take huge risks. The Chinese forced labour project was ostensibly about work, and in particular forced labour although few informants identified as such or fitted neatly into the category. Informants put up with being abject, with being outside the system as it afforded them some relative freedoms and ability to improve family life chances back in China. Working with an explicit community psychology lens we wanted to disrupt the tragic, needy forced labourer and explore the agency workers showed. We produced a Chinese and English anthology that featured excerpts of accounts of workers in the project- this was left in public spaces in order to raise consciousness and create a legacy for the Chinese partner organization. This exercise worked as part of the dissemination strategy and in line with the UK impact agenda, which mandates that research should have demonstrable economic or social value. Critics position this impact agenda, as another market driven plank of the neoliberal agenda. The workers accounts, however, exemplify the cruel optimism of being an abject other, the remnants of identity and citizenship are sublimated with a need to remain in the UK.

Tyler (2012) writes of the trafficking (forced and unforced migration) which is largely hidden. She notes the ways in which the industry trades and profits in human misery and desire, and works as a distinctly neoliberal form of state crafting. This is a highly private market where trade and transaction remain hidden, apart from rare moments of rupture, where abject migrants are discerned through whistleblowing, campaigns, and activism. It is hoped that the engagement in partnership working and the revealing of such stories from this community figure as one such rare moment of rupture (Kagan et al., 2011).

The abjection in the community organiser project is more subtle. Here, organisers were deployed to Wacquant's (2008) decomposing neighbourhoods to listen, to mobilise and to change. Working in neighbourhoods under the banner of being an unknown entity, a community organiser (indeed a largely unknown term in the UK), trainees were catapulted in

areas to persuade people to take control amidst a landscape of cuts, budget restrictions and austerity. There is something of a liberal rhetoric offered by the Big Society whereby democracy is deepened through enhanced or improved citizenship – the allure of working for the good of one’s community to improve the community. This volunteering, and morality occur at just the point when resources are cut and inequality widens (Dorling, 2011). The identified poor who require mobilising are the same people who need to work harder, claim less and now volunteer. The positioning of the poor as undeserving, as Chavs<sup>5</sup>, is of course part of a wider discourse (Jones, 2008). Nussbaum (2004) notes the way in which disgust has been used as a “powerful weapon in social efforts to exclude certain groups and persons” (p. 107). This occurs and is mediated by revolting aesthetics (Ngai, 2005), whereby representation and presentation shape experience. With disabled women in Australia, Soldatic and Meekosha (2013) showed how victim discourse becomes an attack on sloth and undeserving welfare scroungers, and public consent shifts from liberal forms of welfare to disciplinary workfare regimes and heightened stigmatization. In mobilising poorer people to act (albeit in limited forms) can community organisers be seen to be part of a wider disciplinary practice?

### **Conclusions**

In the UK we are now nearing the end of the current Coalition’s term of parliament, and the austerity measures are expected to increase. The New Economics Foundation (2013) has asserted that the Big Society philosophy and programme have not provided an alternative to state provision of services in economically deprived areas. Through drawing on our involvement as embedded researchers within two externally funded projects, we have explored how people in deprived communities and migrant workers can be problematised within a consideration of the current policy landscape of austerity and neoliberalism. Central

to Imogen Tyler's (2013) seminal work that inspired us to write this article is the "question of how states – states of being (human life) and states of belonging (political life) – are made and unmade" (p. 20). Fine (2012) uses the term "revolting times" to describe the current global inequalities, and in this article we have discussed how austerity and the notion of citizenship intersect in a narrative of "revolting subjects" (Tyler, 2013). Baumann (2004) asserts that neoliberal states, are characterised by 'wasted humans', at the borders of these territories. We argued here that migrant workers and community organisers are positioned formerly as wasted humans and latterly as agents to police or model idealised forms of citizenship. The Big Society, is now, in the main, absent from political and societal discussion. As a concept and policy, it relied on available time and financial resources to enable people to volunteer, and yet the austerity measures have reduced people's available resources for social action.

Community psychology positions itself as an approach that works from the ground up to achieve social justice. The two projects that we have drawn on in this paper were informed by a community psychology perspective and the work took place within the everyday of communities. Whilst the focus has been on migrant workers and community organisers, it can be seen that the abjection extends more broadly those who are politically and economically disenfranchised, such as young people, disabled people and asylum seekers. Both examples have shown the ways in which a neoliberal governmentality can regulate people's lives both socially and culturally (Gill, 2008). We have attempted to attend to issues of social action, community organising and individuals and communities who are "othered". This paper does not consider the detail of the research methodology utilised within the two projects, but responds to a call for a critical consideration of those who live in revolting times as abject others.

## Notes

1. A British social policy research and development charity that funds a UK-wide research and development programme.
2. Locality – an organisation based in the UK that involved the merger of the Development Trust Association and the British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres.
3. For more detailed information concerning ‘Root Solutions, Listening Matters’ look at the RE-generate Trust website, <http://www.regeneratetrust.org/>
4. A snakehead is a term given to individuals who arrange and facilitate the passage of people from their home country to another country. The travel facilitator arranges journeys and documentation.
5. Chavs is a pejorative term leveled at poor working class or underclass with connotations of poverty, loutish behavior and limited aspirations.

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**Address for correspondence**

Jenny Fisher

[J.Fisher@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:J.Fisher@mmu.ac.uk)