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**THE NARRATIVES OF HARDSHIP: THE NEW AND THE OLD POOR IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE  
2008 CRISIS IN EUROPE**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines poverty and hardship in Europe after the 2008 crisis, using household interviews in nine European countries. A number of findings deserve highlighting. First, making a distinction between ‘the old poor’ (those who lived in poverty before as well as after the crisis) and ‘the new poor’ (those who fell into hardship after the crisis), we show that hardship is experienced quite differently by these groups. Second, the household narratives showed that while material deprivations constitute an important aspect of hardship, the themes of insecurity and dependency also emerged as fundamental dimensions. In contrast to popular political discourse in countries such as the UK, dependency on welfare or family was experienced as a source of distress and manifested as a form of hardship by participants in all countries covered in this study.

## **1. Introduction**

The dynamics that impact on households’ experiences of hardship are important to study. For this, the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis provides an ideal context. Responses to the downturn, such as austerity measures, have adversely affected key macroeconomic indicators, in particular unemployment and growth across Europe (e.g. Della Posta and Talani, 2011). Many households who had comfortable lives before the crisis have since fallen into hardship through loss of employment and business failures. This had the effect of increasing the numbers of ‘new poor’ (e.g.

Serrano, 2013). Indeed, as Fallon and Lucas (2002: 22) argue, '[p]erceptions of these reversals are made worse by the prior experience of rapid growth in most instances examined'.

There is plenty of work in the literature that deals with issues surrounding long-term poverty (Korenman *et al.*, 1995), perpetuated by structural inequalities along the lines of ethnicity, education, housing, employment (e.g. Platt, 2009; Loveday, 2015) and other dimensions (e.g. Petit, 2010; Aghion and Howitt, 2002). However, there is much less on the impact of shifts in income status and the resultant effects on levels and dynamics of hardship in European households.

This paper examines the impact of crises on household welfare in the context of recent instability and the downturn by analysing the everyday narratives of low income participants, interviewed as part of an international research project in nine European countries. These included Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and the UK, which were heavily affected by the financial crisis (e.g. Holland *et al.*, 2011; Schafer, 2012), and Germany, Poland, Turkey and Finland which were somewhat sheltered from the worst of the crisis whilst containing a considerable population that experienced hardship both before and after 2008.

We make two important contributions to the study of crises, hardship and poverty. Firstly, we distinguish participants as 'old poor' and 'new poor' and show the differences in their narratives of hardship. Secondly, although much of the literature on poverty focuses on household incomes, consumption and material deprivations, the narratives in this research highlight a number of additional themes that are less conventional. In particular, living in poverty and hardship goes beyond material deprivations and involve insecurity and lack of autonomy through being dependent on others.

The rest of the article is divided into four sections. The next section establishes the scope, context and the approach of the paper. In Section 3 we draw attention to the differences between the 'new poor' and the 'old poor' and how they experience and articulate hardship. This is followed by a discussion of some old and new themes in the narratives of hardship before drawing conclusions from the overall discussion.

## **2. Scope, context, approach and data**

Qualitative research on poverty and hardship has tended to focus on the consequences of poverty, as well as the factors that may give rise to it. Some highlighted the importance of culture (e.g. Small

*et al.*, 2010; Carter, 2005), while others have examined the ways in which families are able to make ends meet (e.g. Edin and Lein, 1997). In this paper, we re-examine certain conditions of poverty in the context of the 2008 crisis. Note that we prefer to use the term 'hardship' over 'poverty' for two reasons. Firstly, the concept of poverty in academic literature is usually accompanied by some formal measurement which often tell us only one part of the story. For example, Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) found that their interviewees' accounts of poverty 'were usually very much at odds with objective measures' (p. 288). Our focus on European households' narratives of hardship aimed to go beyond material deprivations. In particular, the emerging themes in the household narratives such as insecurity and dependency as a form of hardship are often not explicitly considered as an aspect of poverty. Secondly, we used the term 'hardship' in our fieldwork and during the interviews in part due to the empirical finding in the literature that some "groups normatively defined as 'poor' actively deny these labels" (Milbourne, 2014: 567). Finally, hardship is a less value laden term that reflects circumstances rather than a description of people.

We use narratives drawn from household interviews to make sense of the continuities and discontinuities in their hardship after the crisis. Engaging with everyday narratives of crisis and hardship facilitates moving beyond national discourses and imagery that 'claim an objective critique of a monolithic event' (Knight 2012) and as such may not appear to have a direct effect on people. In contrast:

Narratives are an important expressive tool for people negotiating periods of dramatic social change. [They] condense historical experience into polytemporally meaningful moments (Knight, 2012: 3).

The narratives of households provide a personalised account of the nature of the crisis and a deeper insight into their circumstances by 'focusing on their own articulation of hardship and using the power of language to illuminate meaning' (Legard *et al.*, 2003: 138). For example, the intermediary processes of financial crises that are more tangible to individuals, such as changes in the labour market, could be better understood through a study of narratives illustrating the relationship between macro and micro processes, which in turn sheds light on the multiple dynamics of hardship and their impact on households.

Table 1. Key Information about Participants

COUNTRY	Location	Number of and Type of Household (HH)	Household Size	New / Old Poor
<b>GR</b>	Two towns in Athens	Single wo/d: 10; w/d: 2, Couple wo/d: 0; w/d: 12	1-2 members: 10, 3-4 members: 8, 5+ members: 6	8/16
<b>ES</b>	Madrid and La Mancha	Single wo/d: 5; w/d: 1 Couple wo/d: 0; w/d: 18	1-2 members: 3 3-4 members: 14, 5+ members: 7	5/19
<b>IE</b>	Two Towns in the Irish Midland	Single , w/o: 3; w/d: 5 Couple wo/d:4; w/d: 12	1-2 members: 8, 3-4 members: 8, 5+ members: 8	5/19
<b>UK</b>	East London Cornwall Pembrokeshire	Single wo/d: 10; w/d: 5 Couple wo/d: 1; w/d: 8	1-2 members: 14, 3-4 members: 8, 5+ members: 2	7/17
<b>PT</b>	A town in Lisbon and Santarém	Single wo/d: 4; w/d: 5 Couple wo/d: 3; w/d: 12	1-2 members: 7, 3-4 members: 9, 5+ members: 8	4/20
<b>PL</b>	Będzin & Silesia, Świętochłowice Racibórz	Single wo/d: 1; w/d: 5 Couple wo/d: 4; w/d: 14	1-2 members: 8, 3-4 members: 9, 5+ members: 7	-
<b>FI</b>	Two towns in Lapland	Single wo/d: 4; w/d:4 Couple wo/d: 2; w/d:14	1-2 members: 8, 3-4 members: 9, 5+ members: 7	-
<b>DE</b>	Saxony and Leipzig	Single wo/d: 8; w/d: 6 Couple wo/d: 6; w/d: 4	1-2 members: 18, 3-4 members: 4 5+ members: 2	-
<b>TK</b>	Istanbul and Ankara	Single wo/d: 5; w/d: 1, Couple wo/d: 4 w/d: 14	1-2 members: 6, 3-4 members: 6, 5+ members: 12	-

w/d: with dependents, wo/d: without dependents

The research material we used in this paper is based on harmonised, semi-structured interviews with a sample of 24 households in each of the following countries: Greece, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, the UK (directly and heavily affected by the crisis) and Germany, Poland, Finland and Turkey (less exposed to the financial instability). Interviews were carried out during October 2014-April 2015. Table 1 above provides the key information about the fieldwork.

One of the caveats in cross country studies like this is the heterogeneity of participants' living conditions in terms of social and institutional environment as well as individual resources. For example, welfare and social protection systems differ considerably across the countries covered in this study. On the one hand, we have Turkey with an obscure system of social assistance (Yenturk 2013), a clientelistic orientation (Metin 2011), patchy coverage and inadequate support. On the

other hand, we have Germany with good coverage and reasonably well resourced social protection system. While some countries such as Spain and Portugal have relatively young welfare systems others such as the UK has a long established welfare state going back to 1940s. Economic policies after the crisis also differed with Greece, Spain, Portugal, Ireland and the UK pursuing austerity measures in varying depth and breadth while in Germany, Poland, Finland and Turkey this was not the principal approach.

Moreover, house ownership diverged across the country samples. In Finland, Poland and Turkey, where 17-18 participants out of 24 owned their houses, very few of whom had mortgage. In the UK, on the other hand, two participants owned a house, one with a mortgage. In between were Ireland, Portugal (8) and Greece (7). A considerable proportion of participants were struggling with debt and repayments in the UK (15), Spain (13), Poland and Turkey (11), and Ireland (10). Limited ability to save was common across all the case studies, involving small savings for birthdays and unexpected outgoings: Portugal (5), Ireland (4), Finland, Poland and Turkey (3), Germany (2), Greece, Spain and the UK (1).

In the presence of such variety, our sample selection was based on a loose description of hardship, prioritising the difficulty to make ends meet at the time of interviews *despite* housing ownership or social protection in some cases. More specifically, the participants were from the households where all members were unemployed (who in some countries were in receipt of welfare support); or those that have some members in part-time or irregular work but struggled to make ends meet; or those with reasonable earnings but in hardship due to the larger size or special needs of their households.

A sub-set of participants in heavily effected countries has been identified as the 'new poor' who were previously relatively well off. These were generally professionals, people with businesses, or well-paid workers who later fell into hardship through job losses, business failures or austerity measures involving sharp reductions in salaries, pensions or high property taxes (as in the case of Greece). While we were able to identify a proportion of the participants as the 'new' poor in the more affected countries (ranging from 17 to 33 per cent of participants), this should in no way suggest that a significant proportion of the middle or upper income households are now the 'new poor'.

The initial interviews with 24 households in each country were conventional and lasted up to 2 hours. These were followed by photo elicitation interviews with 16 households selected from the initial sample. The second round of interviews required households to take pictures of their everyday lives as objects of discussion in the follow up interviews. Overall, 40 sets of interviews were conducted in each country. Participants were recruited through gatekeepers. Snowball sampling was used to access populations beyond those seen by the gatekeepers. Purposive sampling was used, using household type, gender, ethnic background and employment status as criteria (Barbour and Schostak, 2005, Richie *et al.*, 2003).

### **3. Differences in the narratives of ‘the new’ and ‘the old poor’**

Our results indicate that crisis began much earlier than 2008 for the ‘old poor’, emphasising that the downturn did not instigate but perhaps intensified their ongoing hardship. More interestingly, having long-term experience of hardship and poverty softened the effect of the crisis for these households. In particular, participants in less affected countries expressed crisis as a continuity in their hardship. In Germany and Poland, the financial crisis has had less impact than elsewhere but many households still feel the legacy of unification or transition to post-socialism. Hence, for them, there was no singular crisis but simply a continuation of struggle to make ends meet. Perpetuity of hardship irrespective of the ups and downs in the wider economic structure was also emphasised by many participants in Turkey, Finland and Poland as exemplified in the following:

‘Crisis had no meaning for me. I wasn’t a millionaire, I didn’t lose on investments, so this crisis had no impact on me.’ (Poland, HH<sup>1</sup>24: couple with 3 children, F: 35)

‘I don’t remember any time we had a normal life without hardship. We have to struggle for our survival. But whoever you ask here would tell you the same story. We are always in crisis.’ (Turkey, HH9: couple with 1 child, F: 42)

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<sup>1</sup>HH abbreviates household. F and M reflects the gender (with age) of the interviewee.

‘There has been no effect from the depression...(Finland, HH6: couple with 2 children, F:47)...The economic crisis has been going on here for the last 42 years.’  
(Finland, HH14: couple with 8 children, M: 42)

Some were affected by various other personal, structural or national/regional crises. In Turkey local or regional political conflicts, reflected by the forced migration of the Kurds or the flow of Syrian refugees, were either expressed as the main source of hardship or an additional burden over and above that caused by the crisis.

Another trajectory, which has been prominent particularly in Spain, Portugal and Greece, has been the rise in the ‘new poor’ (e.g. Serrano, 2013). Socio-economic crises are destabilising, particularly for those considered ‘new poor’, who experience a noticeable decline in living standards and do not immediately have the required knowledge to deal with their newfound hardship. For these groups, poverty (or the threat of poverty) is a crisis that may have no discernible end and as such produces significant anxiety (Cassiman, 2007: 61). For the ‘new poor’ higher living standards in the past provide fewer opportunities to equip themselves for dealing with a crisis of hardship:

‘Once you’re used to a standard of living, [...] and you drop down, it depends on how far you’re dropping down. [...] [Once] you’ve got things behind you, home etc, family, you know, the two cars, couple of TV sets... and then you lose that again it’s a bigger drop and you’re sort of ‘ah shit’ (UK, HH20: single, M: 40s).

Hardship is expressed more powerfully with greater frustration and a sense of injustice by those who have had recent encounters with it. The change in diets, children’s behaviour, interactions with others and strategies to cope with life’s challenges etc. are described in detail, reflecting an intimate understanding of the sharp contrast in their lives before and after the crisis. The research material shows that individuals with no experiences of hardship in the past tend to feel more vulnerable, more deprived and more stigmatized. In Greece, the severity the crisis seems to have neutralised some advantages of wealthier groups. This was the case for an upper middle class Greek participant who continued to work without pay and could no longer maintain her debt payments. She and her family had no previous experience of coping with hardship. As the main breadwinner

for the family, the sudden removal of income led her household into destitution. Losing social position was a trauma, leading them to hide their hardship and disconnect from social networks that may have provided a safety net.

The 'old' poor on the other hand are those groups who fit into more traditional understandings of hardship. The research team in Spain (Arnal et al. 2015), for example, reported that the hardship experienced by working-class households was not so much due to the crisis as to the vulnerable position they have occupied throughout their life in an increasingly unequal social structure. In these households, a strong dependency on labour market and institutional support rendered their resilience discontinuous for two reasons: firstly, the instability of the labour market and the growing precarity in employment conditions rendered family income unstable; and secondly, cuts and restrictions in social benefits made their socio-economic conditions more difficult.

The 'old' poor appear to be both psychologically and socially more experienced and hence prepared to face and endure further hardship. While they may be experiencing severe deprivation, they have been more able to overcome problems and difficulties in comparison to others who had no experiences of hardship in the past. The fieldwork highlighted how being in long-term hardship could lead to the accumulation of implicit knowledge and skills to cope with hardship, for example, by activating entitlements relatively quickly, using a wide range of shopping and budgeting strategies, seeking help and accepting assistance from people and institutions around them – and even knowing from whom to seek help in the first instance.

For the long-term poor, hardship was normalised. Yet, this normalisation was accompanied by some punctuations. A participant from the UK illustrates this in an otherwise 'normal' life in hardship: 'ten, twelve years ago we had a flood in the kitchen and [needed] to replace the floor. [It] has now become, [it] is at the bottom of the list' (UK, HH22). Because of the household's financial situation what was originally an emergency and unexpected expense has become part of life, indicating that hardship is sometimes narrated almost as a cycle, oscillating between periods of manageability and crisis.

Relatedly, older generations with past experience of poverty explained how this had taught them to cope with adverse circumstances. For some of them, the current crisis is "nothing... I walked bare foot, I walked hungry, and this was even before the war, right? [...] There was poverty back then." (Greece HH5). Many were concerned and worried not only about their children's lack of experience

of poverty but also the more difficult conditions in which they live (e.g. lack of secure jobs, unemployment benefits). This concern was reflected by one of the participants in the following way:

‘To be honest, I am worried about *their* [i.e. childrens’] future, I can manage, I was born poor and I will die poor, but what about them? I can’t even buy them flats! Where are they gonna live? What are they gonna do?’ (Poland, HH1: couple with 4 children, F: 50s).

While the finding about the moderating effects of past or continuing hardship in the face of new shocks is interesting it is important to point out that further research would be needed to fully understand the experiences and responses of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ poor. There are reasons to be cautious. This likely reflects one dimension of the whole question. For example, our data does not provide much insight into the comparative speed of recovery amongst households with different socio-economic status. It is quite possible that the ‘new’ poor may revive their circumstances faster than the old poor after the initial shock, assuming that they are better endowed with various assets and social networks. Indeed, the fieldwork in Spain revealed that while the crisis has had a strong negative impact on the life experiences and social wellbeing of middle class households, the decline in their quality of life is found to be compensated by an access to various assets and social networks.

#### **4. Some ‘old’ and ‘new’ themes in the household narratives of hardship in times of crises**

Although the narratives of hardship are shaped by the socio-economic and political context particular to each country, they often reflect considerable commonalities across Europe. Primary data gathered across the nine European countries contained some ‘old’ as well as ‘new’ themes, in the articulation of hardship. In particular, material deprivations (a prominent element of the poverty literature) emerged as one of the most significant aspects in the narratives of the participants. Households also voiced two other forms of hardship with distinctive features in comparison to material deprivations: feelings of insecurity and dependency. While these were discussed extensively in the context of labour markets and employment relations, they have not been a crucial dimension of poverty studies. It was useful to move away from an understanding of poverty based on single indicators (e.g. income or consumption) to a view emphasising varieties of material deprivations. It would be even more appropriate now to incorporate insecurity and

dependency not only as a condition giving rise to but as an integral element of poverty and hardship.

### *Comparative Understandings of Material Deprivations*

Economic hardship is the difficulty of maintaining one's basic needs (Werneke, 1979: 65; Heflin *et al.*, 2011). Many argue that there is a loose relationship between income and poverty (Whelan *et al.*, 2015: 358; Townsend, 1979), emphasising the importance of consumption for hardship (Kochuyt, 2004). As such, Whelan *et al.* (2015: 361), based on European Community Household Panel data, suggest that five major factors of deprivation take priority across Europe. These are: basic (e.g. not being able to replace broken goods, avoid arrears, heat the house), secondary (e.g. inability to afford non-essential white goods, being able to afford a car), housing facilities (e.g. not having a bath or shower, an indoor flushing toilet and hot running water), housing deterioration (e.g. damp and rot), and environment (e.g. pollution, space and light issues, vandalism). Although a 'material deprivations' approach is not standardised and is operationalised in different ways depending on researchers, discipline, dataset used, and research context' (Heflin *et al.*, 2011: 224) it is a considerable improvement upon methods that entirely rely on data with a single dimension.

Most of our findings chimed strongly with the existing literature on material deprivations. By far the most common way for households to make sense of their hardship was to articulate it as a lack of, or an inability to meet basic needs (such as food, housing costs, utilities such as heating, and healthcare costs), unexpected payments (such as needing to repair washing machines etc.) and cater children's wants in order to keep up with social norms.

The notion of crisis contextualised these in two ways: either it accentuated a household's inability to satisfy basic needs or, for those not used to hardship, this deprivation was the crisis itself. In the UK, for example, the sharp rise in the use of foodbanks reflect the scale transformation in the nature of material hardships. In 2014, one million individuals received food parcels from foodbanks (Trussell Trust, 2014) reflecting temporary spells of destitution and increases in the intensity of material deprivations after the crisis.

Most interestingly, the narratives in this research show that the participants make sense of their own reality and put their lives into perspective through diachronic and synchronic comparisons. In the previous section we mentioned the tendency for older generations to reminisce about their

greater hardship in distant past. Such diachronic comparisons are described in detail by Knight (2012). Our findings also show the importance of synchronic comparisons, involving others. This is in line with relativist views of poverty, i.e. what people cannot afford may not be absolute necessities but social norms (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2008: 598). Our participants expressed such comparative self-assessments in different ways. For some, the inability to keep up perceived standards and social norms caused significant distress. In particular, many parents articulated distress at their inability to meet their children's needs or provide occasional 'treats' (sweets, presents for birthdays) across all fieldwork sites. An Irish participant discussed the difficulty of holidays, highlighting how deprivation can be understood as relative to other households' ability to provide:

'[T]hey go into school after the summer holidays and all the friends - oh we were here, or we were here, and then my little one and another little girl 'we didn't go anywhere' and that's the whole time, so it does get to you after so many times of saying 'oh we didn't get anywhere, we couldn't go anywhere'' (Ireland, HH7: couple with 4 children, F: 39).

In this case, hardship is accentuated by others' perceived affluence and inability to conform to a social norm. A couple in Portugal expressed sorrow for never being able to buy a sweet or a small toy for their young children. Similarly, a Turkish participant highlighted the detrimental effect on his daughter, who is not able to have a computer of her own: 'I have two children, my daughter goes to secondary school. She wants a computer, I can't buy it. They see it in their friends, they also want it' (Turkey, HH13). For others, such comparisons represented a balancing act of putting life into perspective. Perhaps, this is a mental coping strategy, raising positive feedback to the surface of one's consciousness; i.e. 'I am doing better than some others with clear advantages in life or my circumstances are not as bad as some others'. For example, Madeline in East London said:

'Okay, for example, a friend [who] owns a house, his parents live in Richmond, he's a professional guitarist, life's looking pretty good from where I'm sitting right now but he was like, oh I had a terrible night's sleep, I was up with indigestion...another friend for example, who's in a terrible state, who probably always will be, he grew up with his dad always beating the living daylights out of him...his mum never once helped him and he's just completely screwed up, at

least I didn't grow up with that and it's like, you know, there's so many people who are a hell of a lot worse off than me...' (UK, HH4: single, F: 35)

Finally, comparison for some households was a means of distancing themselves from social groups who may be stigmatised or viewed negatively (e.g. poor, destitute). Both in Germany and the UK, there were participants who distinguished themselves from 'the negative other'. For example, for Darren, it was his residence in East London that was a source of discontent, driving his aspiration to move to a more affluent area:

'I just think there's a lot of f...ing scum in [XX town] ...I definitely don't want to be [here] in five years' (UK, HH12: couple with 1 child, M: 48)

In other cases, these comparisons were not necessarily an attempt to deny or downplay their hardship. Rather, it was an acknowledgement that although in a position of relative hardship they were not, in general, destitute. It was important for the participants who expressed this to demonstrate such awareness, like Sophie in Wales whose work at a food bank led her to realise that

'you're only ever a few steps away from the people that you're trying to help, really'. (UK, HH23: couple with 2 children, F: 40s)

### *Severe downturns and rising insecurity*

As Townsend (1979) argued, hardship is not simply about lack of material wealth, 'but rather the lack of resources to participate fully in society that resulted from a variety of resource allocation systems operating in society' (Tomlinson et al. 2008: 597), pointing to the multidimensional nature of poverty (Alkire and Foster, 2011). Employment, in addition to being a source of income, is also a means of participating in society, providing opportunities to develop one's own potential. We are reminded by Stiglitz et al (2009) that 'the right to security in the event of unemployment... that [is] beyond the control of each individual' is considered as a human right' by the 1948 *UN Universal Declaration of Rights*.

The rise in employment insecurity is not new but it has been intensified by the crisis. OECD (1997) provided one of the first assessments in this respect for the period 1991-1995. Although Doogan

(2001) argued against the views of rising insecurity in the UK, his study neglected the role of economic cycles and his evidence of rising long-term employment is time-specific.<sup>2</sup> Neither did he consider redundancies as part of a process in which insecurity is (re)generated nor the fact that being on long-term contracts does not necessarily provide a sense of security since jobs are lost when on permanent contracts too. Other studies showed that the length of the contract is not the only aspect of insecure employment. Low entitlements and protection, subcontracting and agency work, and a lack of unionisation are some other features (Burgess et al, 2013, Pulignano, et al. 2016). For example, in a longitudinal study, MacDonald et al (2005) focused on hard to reach young adults in Teesside in England, confined to the 'secondary labour market' with low paid and short term jobs (p. 881). These findings were extended in a more recent publication highlighting the low-pay, no pay cycle of work and unemployment within poor communities (Shildrick, et al. 2012). In the US, non-standard employment, contingent work and risk shifting from employers to employees are discussed as a route into insecurity (Mishel et al. 2007, Kalleberg 2009).

In another work, Standing (2011) considered growing labour insecurity to be giving rise to a new class called the precariat. This change is presented as a more structural transformation arising from institutional changes (e.g. weakening trade unions, labour market flexibility, dismantling of the public sector) and restructuring of global production (especially dislocation to China and India). While we agree with Standing's view of a secular rise in precarious employment, in our view, it is important to distinguish job insecurity associated with severe cycles and recognise the role of conjunctural economic changes. Severe downturns such as that experienced after the 2008 crisis can contribute to the insecurity of workers through direct job losses, the 'demonstration effect' amongst employed workers and further labour flexibility and cuts in welfare budgets, justified by a political discourse resting on a range of arguments (e.g. reducing public debt). In some cases insecurity may be transitional (i.e. once the recovery starts and new jobs are created the unemployed would be expected to be pulled back into the labour market) in others it may become structural through major institutional changes, making it much harder to re-enter, or consolidate one's position in, the labour market.

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<sup>2</sup> His analysis is based on two data points: 1992, when unemployment rates were significantly high (9.8 per cent), and 1999, when it had declined to 5.9 per cent. So his evidence reflected the effect of the economic expansion from 1992 to 1999.

The narratives of participants in this research have corroborated these tendencies in the countries covered here. Regardless of the position and fortunes of individual countries, employment and insecurity (of those with and without jobs) was impacted heavily by the crisis across the Europe. The direct effect of layoffs, their 'demonstration effect' and the insecurity caused by institutional changes reflected by the narratives of the participants in different ways. Foremost, they indicated that the crisis and lack of good employment opportunities created a sense of compulsion to take on whatever was available which in many instances meant working in less secure jobs, e.g. on a part-time or irregular basis without contracts. Many of those who were able to find employment experienced a degradation in employment status. In Portugal, for instance, Cláudia, a former estate agent, started to work as a cook on low wages, Teresa was a small business owner and now works as an attendant at a nursing home, while Carla went from being an ophthalmology technician to work on commission as a cab driver. In Greece, Vivi had worked as a sound engineer for many years in a local radio. After the crisis she lost her job, started working as an intern hairdresser with no contract and survived on informal hairdressing jobs in private houses all over Athens. Another participant in the UK with a professional job previously was compelled to take on informal work after being made redundant. He found work 'through a friend of a friend:

"Do you want some work, you come with me, you lay tarmac, I'll show you what to do, I'll pay you by the day at the end of the day" [...] No questions asked, no paperwork, no names, nothing' (UK, HH20: single, M: 40s).

The demonstration effect of redundancies involving others was expressed well by another participant from Poland:

"I've heard different dramatic stories. I am deeply affected by these stories. I am afraid it can happen to me. I have a job today, but tomorrow I may lose it."  
(Poland, HH10: single with one child, F: 40s).

The insecurity associated with irregular jobs, often with low pay and no protection, led people to go through cycles of poverty involving occasional short-lived 'escapes'. While it is possible to comprehend the effects of these conditions on household welfare, quantifying them is more difficult. One of the exceptions is a study by Berlofa and Modena (2012) who estimate the effects of insecurity on well-being in Italy (measured by loss of incomes due to temporary employment)

and find that the growth of economic well-being would be halved during 1995-2007 if insecurity were to be taken into account.

An aspect of hardship for those living with insecurity is planning for the future which is a constant challenge. Many participants discussed the difficulty of making any solid plans for the medium to distant future when present concerns could not be dealt with. Such short-termism is understandable considering the pressing nature of paying immediate debts such as bills, but it also highlights that the choice that is presented as available to households in hardship is not much of a choice at all. This is reflected by a tendency amongst younger people to postpone plans to have a family and avoid having children as expressed by a participant in Poland:

‘I’d like to have my own family one day but we don’t know what will happen in the future. When it comes to private life, it is difficult to have any long-term plans.’

(Poland, HH3: single living with mother, F: 60s)

These findings are in line with other studies in the literature. For example, Wolbers (2007), using large scale European graduate data, shows that insecure employment status in the labour market leads graduates to stay in their parental homes and postpone planning to build a family. Research by Modena and Sabatini (2012) also shows that women who are unemployed with unstable jobs cannot plan to have children.

In the presence of such insecurities, debt continued to be an important anchor away from and into hardship. This was particularly the case in European countries where over-indebtedness has led to an increasing burden regarding housing costs, regardless of whether a mortgage or rent was involved. For example, an Irish participant who had his own business found himself in financial trouble after the crisis as payments due to him ceased, resulting in significant household debt. The crisis in the UK has created a situation in which borrowing has become both unsustainable and unavoidable as people lost their jobs and could not afford repayments. For those who were more reliant on the welfare system, cuts in provision forced some households to rely on personal loans through overdraft facilities, credit cards and payday lenders, where available, as exemplified by the following participant:

A week before payday and you're like a bit skint, I'll get a pay day loan then you think, "Well... I'll get a big payday loan so I won't get 200 quid, I'll get 400" (UK, HH12 couple with 1 child, M: 48).

More importantly, the reasons for debt accumulation seem to have shifted after the crisis. While prior to the 2008 crisis household indebtedness partly reflected the desire of families and individuals to accumulate wealth through housing, post-crisis many participants have become indebted to keep up with the cost of living in an environment of higher unemployment, lower incomes and cuts in public spending.

#### *Dependence, re-dependence and inability to plan for future*

A final theme emerging in the household narratives is the expression of being dependent on others as a form of hardship. There is an established social policy literature about of the dependence of the poor on the welfare system. Dean and Taylor-Gooby (1992) provide an excellent analysis of this literature in relation to the debates on existence of an underclass (with elements of 'the loafers, semi-criminal and the feckless') as a distinct group from the 'respectable working class'. The discourse of dependency, seen as a choice by 'the underclass', has shaped the changes in the welfare systems in many countries over the last three or four decades and introduced a move away from citizenship rights to responsibility (Dean 1998). The 2008 crisis bolstered this neo-liberal tendency as demonstrated by the recent changes in the welfare regime of the UK:

'UK Coalition government's 2010 Green Paper, *21st Century Welfare*, and the White Paper, *Universal Credit: Welfare that Works...* marginalize the structural aspects of persistent unemployment and poverty by transforming these into individual pathologies of benefit dependency and worklessness' (Wiggan 2012: 383).

The welfare dependency discourse is generated and regenerated by media assisted offensives, depicting social welfare recipients as fraudulent and lazy scroungers feeding on the contributions of the hardworking members of the society. This has been particularly the case in the UK (Hancock and Mooney, 2013; Valentine and Harris, 2014). The lack of evidence for the welfare dependency discourse is discussed in an excellent paper by MacDonald et al (2013). Our fieldwork results

suggest that the stigma associated with being a welfare recipient was not only confined to the UK but also found in other countries such as Ireland, Germany and Poland.

'I am a vice-chairman of a housing commission [...] I know people who have jobs on the side and they are not poor, but they do not declare income so they can get benefits.'  
[Poland, Key Informant 2].

'But this [Hartz4]<sup>3</sup> comes with stigmatisation and being pigeonholed. This inferiority feeling, this is a very personal thing. [...] I don't like being a Hartz4 recipient. Not because I don't want to take the support but because it is shameful.' [Germany, HH11: single with 2 children, F: 30]

The findings contest this imagery in all countries covered in this study. It was clear that since the 2008 crisis and the subsequent downturn many people for the first time and some yet again had become dependent on the welfare system, the family and other social networks. However, this dependency was expressed as a source of stress in most instances.

'... people feel quite horrible about themselves, because of the stinginess that has seeped into society because the media is always banging on about welfare scroungers...I think one of the most common things that I hear is, "I've worked every day of my adult life and now that I've had this thing happen to me there's nothing to help me" and it's like people really feel like that they need to justify that they are actually a good person, they're not one of these benefit scroungers' (Key Informant, Foodbank, UK).

Moreover, being dependent on or having to support family has been discussed as a source of hardship. For example, younger participants expressed feelings of uncertainty regarding their own lives or an inability to move on because of their dependence on family. Some had to move in with parents and endure a process of *re-dependence*. Others talked about the need to contribute to household finances at the expense of their own autonomy and independence, sometimes involving deliberate delays to start a family of their own. In this sense, hardship is shown as a collective phenomenon; an individual's hardship has a knock-on effect, encompassing the household. An Irish

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<sup>3</sup> The reformed social welfare provision in Germany.

participant, for example, explained how he felt in a state of limbo with respect to his housing situation:

'I was thinking ... it's about time I get going, you know, but then ... the rent [his mother's] will be the same anyways you know, and if she's half struggling now with me paying the money to her, what's she going to be doing after? And then me getting by on what I have on my own wouldn't really work either, so it's a tough situation, it's a hard situation' (Ireland, HH12: single living with mother, M: 48).

In this narrative we note a schism between a desire for autonomy and the restrictions on individual freedom placed upon by ties of kinship and the associated responsibility for others. Another Portuguese participant exemplified her re-dependence, reporting that she was 'dependent' on welfare benefits and financial support from her son to make ends meet. This complex interdependence between individuals and institutions within and beyond the household adds an extra layer of complexity to the lives of those living in hardship, which is described in participants' narratives.

## **5. Conclusions**

In this study, we investigated the impact of the 2008 crisis on the basis of the narratives of hardship, using harmonised, semi-structured interviews in nine European countries. Our contribution is the distinction we make between households that were in long-term poverty and those that fell into it after the crisis, using categories of 'new' and 'old' poor. An important result arising from our research is that hardship is experienced in substantially different ways by the old and the new poor. Poverty for the 'new poor' is a more cataclysmic development. Two aspects of this change is worth highlighting: a) the sudden loss of 'social status' and how they experience it, and b) how they tackle their new circumstances. The greater contrast in the lives of the new poor before and after the crisis often enabled them to express their new circumstances with a heightened sense of awareness about their deprivations. Some of them felt more vulnerable and stigmatised, and hence hid their difficulties, whilst others expressed frustration. More interestingly, 'the new poor' appeared not so well-equipped to cope with the effects of hardship in comparison with 'the old poor' for whom it

is a normalised experience. On the other hand, the resilience of the old poor is tested by rising precarity and the roll-back of welfare provision. Whether the new poor may recover their circumstances faster, using some of their advantages (e.g. social networks and better skills) is a question that remains to be answered.

Moreover, the narratives revealed a number of old and new themes in the way hardship has been articulated by households. In particular, it was clear that participants made sense of their hardship through diachronic (past versus current poverty, intergenerational poverty) and synchronic comparisons (own poverty in comparison to wealth/poverty of others). The latter highlighted the importance of social norms and intensified or dampened the feelings of hardship depending on the socio-economic position of the subjects of comparison.

Finally, the narratives of the participants in this research show that lack of income and material deprivations are not the only manifestations of poverty and hardship. Being dependent on the welfare state or family has been expressed as a source of distress and hardship by most participants. This is in contrast to the 'dependency discourse', reflecting welfare recipients as lazy and opportunistic individuals, exploiting the system to the detriment of others. This together with labour market insecurity deprived participants' ability to plan future and live with autonomy.

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