**Living on a low income during the cost-of-living crisis: exploring experiences and perceptions**

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**Abstract:**

Drawing upon data from Changing Realities, an online participatory research project collected between September-October 2022 and March-April 2023, this article generates new knowledge on the lived experiences of low-income families in the UK during this turbulent political period and particularly through the (ongoing) cost-of-living crisis. Utilising the work of Wright and McIntosh (2018), we articulate the ‘shared typical’ discernible of lived experiences of life on a low income during this tumultuous period. Findings provide new insights into how participants describe themselves as part of a collective, comprising parents and carers who shared similar experiences of life on a low income. However, in contrast they differentiated between themselves and those in positions of power and disconnected from their reality. In our discussion, we examine the implications of this and consider the broader understandings and realisations of poverty.

**Keywords:** participatory research, shared typical, lived experience, poverty discourse

# **1.0 Introduction**

Since 2020, a succession of overlapping socio-political ‘crises’ have contributed to a prevailing sense of uncertainty for UK residents. This includes what is now widely viewed as the mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic (see UK Covid Inquiry, 2023) including "Partygate'' (Caterall, 2022), consecutive destabilising resignations and leadership elections within the Conservative Party (Bale, 2022), as well as ongoing industrial unrest in both the public and private sector in response to concerns around pay and job security (Office for National Statistics, 2023).

Compounding these challenges, and perhaps the most significant source of uncertainty is the decrease in 'real' terms disposable incomes and the continuing cost pressures for essential resources the UK and many other countries face. This “cost-of-living” crisis has seen many people, already subsisting on low-incomes, pushed further into financial hardship (Kaufman et al., 2022). In response to the cost-of-living crisis, we have seen an injection of temporary measures and one-off payments proposed by politicians and policy makers as a mechanism to ease the current financial challenges of people in poverty (DWP, 2023). Despite such measures, poverty and the manifold negative impacts of poverty are worsening (Andersen and Reeves, 2022).

In this article we present findings from a long-running research programme Changing Realities, whereby parents and carers living on a low-income documented their experiences largely through online diaries kept between September 2022 and Spring 2024, a time of political uncertainty and scant policy mitigations to growing hardship. The focus of this article is thus formerly elected Conservative government who were in power throughout our data collection period. We draw on these diary entries to explore the shared typical (McIntosh and Wright, 2018) of experiences for low-income parents across the cost-of-living crisis. First, we examine how participants have described enduring the cost-of-living crisis and subsequent impacts, juxtaposing this with mainstream misunderstanding. Next, we detail the perceived hypocrisy of leaders and the shared frustrations at discrepancies in how people living on a low-income or in poverty are treated. All of this is encompassed by a prevailing agreement that the government is failing to listen to and act in the best interests of people living in poverty. In the discussion, we explore why it is useful to consider the insight this ‘shared typical’ can provide into the discursive construction of the causes and lived experience of poverty. Examining this phenomenon through the lens of the 'shared typical,' our objective is to explore the interplay between social policy, welfare politics, and the experiences and opinions of low-income families as expressed in online diaries. To begin, we detail our understanding of the shared typical and then set out the current policy context experienced by low-income families, including those involved in this research programme.

# **2.0 Background**

# ***2.1 Understanding the ‘Shared Typical’ of life on a low-income through recurrent crisis***

‘Lived experience’, a term which has gained increasing prominence in social policy research (Wright and Patrick, 2019), is understood to refer “not only to people’s experiences, but also to how people live through and respond to those experiences” (Boylorn, 2008: 490; cited in McIntosh and Wright, 2018: 454); it refers to the dynamic, situated nature of subjectivity (Prus, 1996). Firmly situated within this growing tradition of ‘lived experience’ scholarship, this article explores how people struggling to get by on a low-income articulate their ongoing navigation of and attempts to orient themselves through a period of significant uncertainty (McIntosh and Wright, 2018), and whether there may be a shared typical to these experiences.

McIntosh and Wright (2018: 462) found that within qualitative research exploring lived experiences, there exist "clusters of commonality and shared intersubjective experiences" which they describe as a “shared typical”. It is this ‘typicality’ that we can use as a starting point to better understand the everyday experiences of people in similar situations. This was further investigated by Wright and Patrick (2019) who aggregated two qualitative longitudinal studies to explore whether conditionality as a UK social security policy “involves living through a specific set of subjective sensations that can be identified as both *shared* and *typical*” (4: emphasis in original). Wright and Patrick (2019) found a shared typical of shortcomings and tensions related to intensive welfare conditionality (inter alia Welfare Conditionality Project, 2018).

This reading of lived experiences as potentially embodying a shared typical has similarities with Raymond Williams’ (1977) ‘structure of feeling’ as a way to understand the underlying emotions and cultural context that shape a society at a certain point in history. Alongside traditional analyses of economic and political dimensions, it is crucial to examine the emotional and subjective aspects of culture for a deeper understanding. Garthwaite (2016), Patrick (2017), Dwyer et al. (2022) and Wright (2023), amongst others, effectively demonstrate this by contrasting the lived experience of social security claimants with inaccurate policy narratives and inappropriate policy responses.

Kruks (2001) described how individuals in subordinate social positions have first-hand experience of that system, including an understanding of the position of the dominant. However, it is rare for the opposite to occur. We know the cost-of-living has impacted households living on a lower income hardest, mostly because of the sharp increases in gas and electricity prices (Cribb et al., 2023). Hence, it is important to consider how responses to this context have influenced and impacted people living on a low-income and in poverty who are, in comparison to politicians, routinely ignored in their economic position and subsequently in receipt of social security payments and temporary financial assistance to help with the cost-of-living crisis.

Understanding how political uncertainty may affect individuals and their socio-economic condition can provide new social and political insights. For example, Edmiston (2018), Patrick (2017) and Dwyer (2016) have brought attention to how changes to the social security system are restructuring and reimagining the essence and function of social citizenship. Here, we are seeking to consider whether there is a shared typical to participants' experiences and opinions on the cost-of-living crisis and on broader instability and political change since 2021.

## ***2.2 UK Policy Context***

Since mid-2021, the UK has experienced a decline in disposable incomes amid mounting cost pressures, commonly termed the ‘cost-of-living crisis'. This ongoing cost-of-living crisis can be ascribed to a confluence of factors: heightened inflation, trade disruptions stemming from the Russia-Ukraine war, and the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit (Francis-Devine et al., 2023). These factors have cumulatively contributed to an escalation in the price of basic essentials, whilst the UK has also been contending with a protracted stagnation in real wage growth since the economic recession of 2008 (Resolution Foundation, 2023). The impact of the cost-of-living crisis, has however, not been felt equally (Williams and Dienes, 2022). For households already living in poverty, attributable to both a decade of austerity policy (Cooper and Whyte, 2017) and the economic consequences of the pandemic (Patrick et al., 2022), the financial and emotional consequences of the crisis have been particularly severe (Kaufman et al., 2022).

This period of significant national and global crises has coincided with instability of Conservative leadership (Francis-Devine et al., 2023). The tenure of Liz Truss during the timeframe of participant’s excerpts in this paper is noteworthy, and proved short-lived owing to her controversial economic plan and subsequent reversal on tax policies, that plunged the nation into a financial crisis and triggered her resignation (Partington, 2022). The governmental response to the cost-of-living crisis has widely been deemed inadequate to mitigate growing hardship among low-income households (Brown et al., 2023; Bull et al., 2023). For example, the government has provided temporary and targeted policy measures to low-income households to reduce the negative effects of the crisis (DWP, 2023). This policy approach has been critiqued for providing inequitable support to low-income households (Work and Pensions Committee, 2023) and compounding, rather than relieving, uncertainty (Ray-Chaudhuri et al., 2023; Patrick et al., 2023). For instance, while those who meet the eligibility criteria can receive a £900 government support payment based on their income level (known as means-tested support). However, those whose income is just above the qualifying threshold do not receive any assistance. This policy context, alongside the broader deterioration of living standards in the UK (Andersen and Reeves, 2022; Institute of Health Equity, 2024), intimately influences the lived experiences of families living on a low income; whether there is a shared typical to these lived experiences is the subject of this article.

# **3.0 The Changing Realities Study**

We draw on evidence generated from Changing Realities, which is an online participatory research programme, documenting the lives of parents and carers. The research programme works with over 100 parents and/or carers who are living on a low-income across the UK. The project used a voluntary recruitment style inviting participants to sign up through the project website. The project was advertised through social media, distributing physical leaflets, and sending electronic versions to potential gatekeeper projects. Participants self-identify as living on a low income by describing themselves as ‘struggling to get by on a low-income’. The research received formal ethical approval from the University of York and is underpinned by an ethics of reciprocity and of care. This manifests as the time and attention to communicating with participants in their preferred format, the small thank you gifts and snacks that are sent out for meetings and around key dates, and where appropriate the openness of researchers with participants about themselves. We have written in detail about our ethics of care and reciprocity elsewhere (Power, Patrick & Garthwaite, 2024).

Participants share their experiences and perspectives by writing diary entries, attending group discussions, and responding to weekly video questions posed by participants themselves, the research team and project partners. Participants receive vouchers as a thank you for their contributions to various aspects of the project, this includes a £15 monthly voucher for writing more than one diary entry. As a research team, we have coded 2,101 participant diary entries which have informed a number of reports (see changingrealities.org/writings). Analysis in reports has been validated by participants, ensuring accuracy and co-producing recommendations for change. The impacts of living in poverty, generally, has been a significant theme across the reports. In this article we are focusing on how participants understand and respond to living in poverty amid the cost-of-living crisis, set against a wider backdrop of political and social crises.

## **4.0 Method**

We have selected a subset of online diary entries and responses to weekly research questions submitted when the project began (between September/October 2022) and then in March/April 2023 (when the cost-of-living crisis was causing severe hardship for households). The subset of online diary entries and responses to weekly research questions was systematically selected based on criteria that focused on lived experiences and perspectives on the cost-of-living crisis. These criteria aimed to ensure a representative sample capturing diverse perspectives and experiences. To achieve this, we employed a structured approach, considering factors such as the relevance of the content to the research questions, the diversity of voices represented, and the temporal context of the entries. Thematic coding was undertaken to identify and analyse recurring themes within the data (Braun and Clark, 2006), in light of the study aims. We include direct quotes from participants which were selected to represent consistencies in the data set. The selected excerpts provide a glimpse into the shared typical large number of diary entries that describe parents’ experiences, thoughts, and feelings during a time of political uncertainty.

This article features anonymised quotes with pseudonyms, the date of submission along with an indication if they are a diary entry (DE) or response to a research question (BQ). For the latter, we provide the specific question asked, participant response data and the shared typical response to the question to illustrate the commonality in reaction and response. The quoted participants, comprising 10 women and 2 men of varied ages are all parents with at least one child under 18.

# **5.0 Findings**

### ***5.1 (Shared) experiences of the cost of living***

The first excerpt, from Erik’s diary, provides a poignant insight into the challenges faced by people living on a low income during the cost-of-living crisis. Erik’s description of being unable to afford basic necessities is representative of hundreds of diary entries by participants during this period. The identified connection made between financial strain and mental health resonates with many parents involved with Changing Realities see Patrick et al. (2023) and Power et al. (2023).

1. …Not being able to afford the cost of heating and electricity to cook healthy meals has also had a big effect on my mental health, feeling that I am not able to care for my daughter in a way that I should be able to. There are also the appointments that I miss to try to get help as I simply don't have the money to pay for travel as the hospital I would need to get to is not within walking distance. I would not say at the moment that I have any sort of meaningful life largely being at home struggling to keep warm and eating very basic foods. (Erik W, March 2023 - DE)

As participants have persistently felt the adverse effects of the rising cost of living (Francis-Devine et al., 2023), media and political narratives have described the added pressures on households as a unifying rhetoric of “crisis” (Elsom, 2023; Lindsay-Watson and Seagar, 2022) concealing the everyday realities of enduring poverty. This has added to a general consensus, or shared typical, in diaries that the government lack a basic understanding of how life is for parents on a low-income and fail to listen to the people living in poverty (i.e. those with expertise borne from experience).

Participants wrote in their diaries about specific news stories related to Members of Parliament (MPs) who demonstrated ignorance of their situation. For example, in a speech to Parliament about food costs, MP Lee Anderson (2023) (Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party at time of writing) stated: “What we learned at the food bank was that people could not make a meal from scratch. They were struggling to cook a vegetable properly—to batch cook, to freeze stuff”. Gabbie shared her response to Anderson’s comments in her diary:

1. …You can eat well on a budget if you are careful. BUT... as Mr Anderson & the Government forget, people need a home where they can cook, have enough income to be able to afford food in the first place & fuel to cook with. Not to mention a safe appliance to cook on, the knowledge, skills expertise & good physical/mental health to be able plan ahead, purchase, transport & store food safely. Furthermore, access to the internet to shop around to get the best deals & have enough time & energy, especially if they are working more than one job, which for too many folk on a low income is a reality these days… woe betide if you have a child with neurodiverse needs who simply can't cope with your menu, no matter how healthy, due to taste/texture aberrations so rely on staple "beige" convenience foods & takeaways for their nutrition. (Gabbie S, April 2023 - DE)

Gabbie’s stacking of barriers to being able to cook stands in opposition to Anderson's comments and overly simplistic view of a complex problem. Gabbie illustrates her expertise by listing a whole host of reasons why Anderson’s implied suggestions are oversimplified and unfeasible, from broader ideas (such as having shelter) to more specific needs (such as accommodating neurodivergent children’s specific needs). Gabbie is thus challenging Anderson's position by (implicitly) accusing him of utilising a straw man argument, whilst also bringing to the fore the value of engaging with those who have lived experiences.

Similar comments to Lee Anderson’s have been shared by politicians during the cost-of-living crisis, for example MP Rachel McClean (at the time Safeguarding Minister) suggested that people on a low-income get a better job and work longer hours (Sky News, 2022) and Therese Coffey (at the time Environment Minister) (Burke, 2023) similarly advised people using food banks to work more hours. Such comments demonstrate an ignorance of and disregard for people’s lived realities or shared typical. Donnie, a lone parent working part-time, wrote in her diary:

1. I'm working and claiming benefits but the cost of living makes it impossible to feel secure… I feel worried and anxious… I turn on the news and listen to the disparity that is getting greater between rich and poor and then I think myself lucky we do not rely on purely the benefit system as we would fail... but then I'm angry at the lack of support and pure neglect from the government. (Donnie C, October 2022 - DE)

Donnie’s engagement with news coverage highlighting the widening gap between rich and poor demonstrates a heightened awareness of systemic inequalities and socio-economic injustices. Similarly, Lolarose, a lone parent unable to work due to repercussions related to domestic violence, describes why ‘advice’ from politicians like McClean and Coffey is impractical and fails to recognise people’s needs:

1. The cost of living, the cost of food, the gas and electric prices have just gone up here in my city 70%… Even as a qualified teacher and as a qualified coach. To get a job that suits me and so that I don't have to pay through the nose for childcare. And I know there is assistance, but not much, and I can't seem to find anything... (Lolarose J, March 2023 - DE)

Whilst participants have a shared typical in that the cost-of-living crisis has exacerbated existing inequalities, and increased financial strain and worries, participants are not homogenous. Their reasons for being in economic hardship are multitudinous, and as exemplified by Lolarose, they push back on the homogenisation of the poor as 'shirkers' who just won't work long enough hours. Participants highlight in their diaries a concern for the representation and understanding of their diverse lived realities; their narratives do not read as apolitical or apathetic, instead there is a clear desire across participant testimonies for the government to be more aware and responsive to the difficulties faced by people living on a low income.

Many participants voiced their frustration at the government's choice to implement short-term solutions for the cost-of-living crisis, overlooking the systemic challenges confronting people struggling to get by. Both Joe and Gabbie used the metaphor of ‘plasters’ when describing the one-off, flat-rate payments normalised during the economic crises:

1. …How can we make ends meet. The 100 pounds to help people who are on oil fuel is a drop in the ocean yet again, its just sticking plaster rather than a plaster cast that needs to hold us firm in our time of need. What can we do to make things better, I really don't know anymore. (Joe, October 2022 - DE)
2. Whilst Government interventions are needed & very welcome, surely instead of "sticking plaster solutions" on an ad hoc basis, it would be better if 1. Energy Companies were windfall taxed on excessive profits & 2. the whole Social Security system be redesigned so it works better for everyone. (Gabbie S, October 2022 - DE)

Whilst Joe’s entry is more reflective and Gabbie’s is a proposal, both similarly convey the insufficiency of government interventions in addressing the deeper structural issues underlying poverty and economic inequality. The diary entries exemplify a shared typical in the lived experience of the cost-of-living crisis for people in poverty, where participants perceived themselves (as parents living on a low-income) to be shouldering the burden of the cost-of-living crisis; while the government's response to the cost-of-living crisis was experienced as unpredictable and unhelpful, it largely negatively impacted the wellbeing of those in poverty and in receipt of this supposed support. However, participants were also aware of their own impotence in being able to impact government policy and this exacerbated a sense of uncertainty and collective distrust in government.

### ***5.2 The rules for us and them are different***

Participants' diary entries began in September 2022. At this juncture people in the UK had collectively encountered several years of chronic uncertainty and political tumult, as described above. The opening of project diaries and beginning of weekly research questions coincided with Liz Truss assuming office as Prime Minister. Truss’ premiership began with a commitment to fostering economic expansion during a period of considerable upheaval (Wilkes, 2022). Aurora and Isabella-Rose, both of whom are lone parents in receipt of in-work benefits, answered the research question “What do you think of the mini budget?”:

1. Mini budget is a big shock. Unable to cope with cost-of-living n now this budget is make me unable to breathe. What next? (Isabella-rose S, September 2022 - BQ)
2. What another shocker for the poorest people… Lovely for the wealthiest to get wealthier while us poor are constantly battling in our heads how we’re going to live. No longer a choice of any luxuries just a choice of necessities and what ones you’re going to have. (Aurora U, September 2022 - BQ)

In total, 27 parents responded to this question, all of whom described distress, shock, and anger at the budget, with no responses expressing positive reactions. In extracts from Isabella-Rose and Aurora, both participants express a concern for the future with Isabella-Rose directly asking “what next?” whilst Aurora details “battling in our heads” about how they will get by. In doing so, both highlight the profound anxieties and challenges faced by parents in poverty, particularly in relation to future planning.

Such expressions of anxiety underscore the pervasive impact of economic instability on the lives of people facing poverty, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive support systems and policy interventions to address multifaceted challenges. Rishi Sunak’s unopposed election as Prime Minister in October 2022, did not elicit economic stability nor mitigate the hardships many families continue to experience. The cost-of-living crisis has persisted, and the government has implemented several temporary measures which have offered only short-term and often unpredictable financial relief, leaving many people living on a low-income to still navigate severe and worsening hardship (Kaufman et al., 2023). Gabriel, a lone parent unable to work due to ill health describes what she endures while her children are not at home:

1. I'm absolutely freezing. I have two jumpers and a dressing gown and a blanket. The thermostat says 12 degrees. I am too scared to put the heating on even though people with multiple sclerosis should ideally be at 18/9 degrees all the time. I have to save the money given from the government for when it gets really cold. No chance I would use heating without kids at home. (Gabriel K, October 2022 - DE)

Gabriel's reluctance to put on the heating despite it worsening her physical health highlights the complex interplay between poverty, the cost-of-living crisis and health-related barriers to employment. She is rationing the Warm Home Discount Scheme, one of the temporary measures from the government, until the temperature drops even further and is thus unable to provide warmth and accompanying health benefits to herself.

Diary entries reflect the sentiments expressed by many other participants about the unequal distribution of policy consequences. This raises questions about the equitable treatment of people living on a low-income, emphasising the need for policies that safeguard the economic well-being and dignity of all people, irrespective of their income level (The Equality Trust, 2023).

1. I will receive the cost of living payment but it will not go far. My question to the government is - Why do we need a cost of living payment? The answer is simple. We aren’t getting enough money to survive and this is the governments way of trying to give out to us to deflect of the fact we have very little money to get us by. My money will be going on gas and electric and food… (Faith N, November 2022 - DE)

The pervasive scrutiny that anyone in receipt of social security faces is a well-documented and pervasive (Chase and Walker, 2013; Patrick, 2017) as alongside an intense moralisation of any entitlements they claim (Marsden, 2023). This stands in stark contrast to the apparently under-scrutinised sense of entitlement exhibited by those in power. A significant majority of parents in Changing Realities were in receipt of social security (both in work and out of work) and, through their diary entries, participants criticised a pervasive governmental double standard in the treatment of their own actions compared to those and other members of the economic and political establishment. Gabbie explained:

1. What is most galling is that Liz Truss, having been Prime Minister for such a short time, will be eligible for a taxpayer-funded Public Duties Cost Allowance… Because of her level of privilege & wealth, she will be sufficiently insulated against this sudden change in circumstances, which, quite frankly were under her choice & control whilst ordinary folk who make massive mistakes at work are usually sacked on the spot without a severance package & its enough to jeopardise their whole life. (Gabbie S, October 2022 - BQ)

As Gabbie describes, providing Truss as an example, those who have wealth and privilege are “sufficiently insulated” in contrast to “ordinary folk” even where it is clear that they have made “massive mistakes”. This profound lack of governmental accountability not only eroded trust in the government but also underscored the urgent need for reforms to improve and strengthen social security, which should arguably leave people feeling protected and insulated in times of crisis. This continued to be a theme in diaries from Winter 2022 to the Spring of 2023. Aurora, a lone parent working full time and in receipt of Universal Credit wrote in their diary:

1. The government has of course prioritised the economy. It is in their best interest to do so. As a family that lives well below the poverty line, we have borne the brunt of a system that has only punished the vulnerable. The majority being disabled, carers and/or single parent families… Social security is becoming slowly eroded. We have been given scraps in order to placate us and the wider society. (Aurora T, March 2023 - BQ)

Aurora's assertion that "the majority" affected by the system are disabled, carers, or single parents suggests systemic inequality and disproportionate hardship faced by these marginalised groups. This choice of language serves to highlight the prevalence of vulnerability within these communities and implies a critique of policies that fail to adequately address their needs. The use of “scraps” to describe the support provided by the government and the choice of “placate” both evoke imagery of inadequacy and tokenism. These words imply a sense of being undervalued and dismissed, with policies being implemented not out of genuine concern, but instead to pacify or quieten dissent. The use of such language underscores Aurora's frustration and disillusionment with the government's approach to social security and welfare provision. Like Aurora, many participants described how those living on low-incomes, many of whom receive in-work or out-of-work benefits, shoulder the consequences of government policies.

Bessie, a lone parent unable to work due to ill-health, wrote in her diary about perceived double standards in rules and regulations for politicians in comparison to social security claimants:

1. The wealthy divide is expanding. The rules for us and them are different. More news each day on how Tory peers are making extra on top of their MP wages. Yet if I had a wee job on the side, I would have to declare it and the wages would be deducted from benefits. (Bessie J, March 2023 - DE)

Bessie’s excerpt makes specific reference to the profound double standards applied to people in poverty and people in power: while it is acceptable for politicians to earn extra income on top of their parliamentary wages without consequence (Coates, 2023), much stricter rules apply to Bessie as a social security claimant. Bessie is in receipt of Employment Support Allowance (ESA), Carer’s Allowance and Tax Credits and although she struggles to get by each month, if she was to earn any additional income this would impact her entitlement to benefits. Bessie's language choice reflects a perception of economic strain and the need to seek additional income to make ends meet. The contrast between her modest description 'a wee job on the side' is markedly different to 'making extra on top of their MP wages’ and underscores the disparities in wealth and privilege that exist within society, highlighting the challenges faced by those living in poverty.

### ***5.3 Shared stigmatisation***

The sharp contrast between the expectations applied to people in receipt of social security, compared to those in power reinforces the well documented stigma of benefit receipt (Smith and Doolan, 2020; Tyler, 2020), a stigma which the majority of participants in Changing Realities are acutely aware. For example, Lili K wrote in their diary:

1. I would really like to know how other participants cope with talking about being poor? I feel there is a strong stigma attached to claiming benefit and not being able to work. I know our teenage daughter made up jobs for us when she was asked in a lesson at school as it was just too embarrassing for her to say "Mum has SMI and Dad is her carer and keeps her out of hospital". I find it embarrassing to tell anyone too. (Lili K, March 2023 - DE)

Articulating this question in a public diary entry for other Changing Realities participants, all of whom are living on a low-income, shows the sense of recognition of the stigma associated with living in and talking about poverty. The terms “strong stigma” and “embarrassed” convey the burdensome emotional labour associated with disclosing financial hardship and mental health issues, reflecting the internalised shame and external pressures people experience when confronting societal expectations. However, perhaps being part of a shared typical or collective through Changing Realities brings a sense of solidarity and community which helps to alleviate this (see Patrick et al., 2022).

# **6.0 Discussion**

Our analysis of diary entries written across 2022 and 2023 by parents and carers living on a low-income reflects the embeddedness of lived experiences in the contemporary socio-political context, articulated by McIntosh and Wright (2018: 459): “So, perhaps, we can understand lived experience as the stuff of mediation between intersubjective experiences and specific historical/temporal locations.” The lived experiences of parents and carers in 2022 and 2023 taking part in Changing Realities were intimately shaped by the interplay of intersubjective experiences and successive economic and political societal-level crises, in particular the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. Participants shared their perspectives as people living on a low-income, forming a collective united by common experiences. Despite differences across the cohort of parents in age, gender, benefit receipt, ethnicity, and location there was a clear shared typical in lived experience of this period of permacrisis and it is these commonalities which arguably “elevate the significance of lived experiences beyond the individual” (Wright and Patrick, 2019: 4). However, participants made a clear distinction between themselves and those in positions of authority who were situated as disconnected from their reality. This divide was apparent in their discussions of unequal policy outcomes and the presence of double standards.

Many parents described how, during this period, they were undergoing hardship due to the prevailing uncertainty and perceived this hardship to be disregarded by politicians and policy makers. Tomkins' (2020: 261) observation that “(i)n times of crisis… leaders who appear not to care risk triggering especially powerful anxieties about betrayal and abandonment”, provides a lens through which we can understand the emotional dynamics at play when political uncertainty and scandals unfold. The impact of political uncertainty and scandals on people's health and views on the political landscape is complex and can vary widely among individuals; in diary entries participants described themselves as: “shocked”, “scared”, “sick and tired”, “suffering”. However, there was a coherent theme of political uncertainty and scandals harming mental wellbeing and provoking disillusionment in government. The anxieties and emotions triggered by perceived hypocrisy and indifference from leaders can have far-reaching effects on both individual well-being and the broader social fabric, influencing people's perspectives of their leaders and their roles in society (Lister, 2021). The shared typical from participants' diaries was one of anger, frustration and deterioration of social cohesion.

Many participants vocalised their perception of political elite hypocrisy. In periods of crisis, such as the post-pandemic landscape, marked by political scandals and a cost-of-living crisis, the sentiments expressed in these diary entries become particularly pertinent. As Weinberg (2022: 323) asserts “(i)n crisis scenarios especially, political trust is symbolic of people’s faith in the capacity of leaders to look after their better interests”. Findings in this article highlight the absence of a role for people in holding the government accountable for its actions and ensuring their voices are heard. People were acutely aware of the difference in treatment of benefit claimants compared to those in power. This widespread scepticism underscored a broader disillusionment with the entire political landscape. Concerns about transparency, honesty, and the pursuit of the public interest were a recurring theme in diary entries and not necessarily aligned to a specific political party.

Finally, a significant portion of participants expressed a sense of disillusionment stemming from their perceived lack of government responsiveness to their concerns. More recent diaries entries (see Changing Realities living archive changingrealities.org/archive) echo this disillusionment and frustration of lived experience being negated by those in positions of power, their hardships understood, and they suffer as a consequence of this. Temporary measures have been a central feature of the former government’s approach to the cost-of-living crisis which are deemed by participants as highly flawed. This framing also obscures some of the structural and policy failures that have made certain groups especially vulnerable to price shocks (Dorling, 2018; Stuckler et al., 2017; O’Hara, 2015).

There is limited research considering the implications of political uncertainty, turmoil and crisis and the changing nature of this among people living in poverty. Research in this area is valuable as the structures, status differentials and lived experiences arising from state action (or arguably, inaction) “influence the ways individuals understand their rights and responsibilities as members of the political community” (Mettler and Soss, 2004: 61). Indeed, the relevance of lived experiences becomes particularly significant when such experiences are influenced and moderated by policies, discourse related to policies, and the operations of the social security system (McIntosh and Wright, 2018). In presenting quotations that reflect a shared sentiment or shared typical, we have provided a limited number of quotations from over 2,000 entries. However, the depicted commonalities illustrated extend beyond the individual’s uniqueness and specific circumstances, unveiling more widespread trends and similarities in how participants discussed poverty, inequality and the cost of living.

# **7.0 Conclusion**

In the wake the Covid-19 pandemic, political scandals, and the cost-of-living crisis, the political landscape in the UK has been marked by a significant degree of uncertainty in recent years. Findings in this article reflect common sentiments or a shared typical that helps us to understand, compare and contrast the lived experience of a range of people who vary in employment status, age, and location in the UK, but who are comparably in a similar situation. Doing so, the findings help to shine a light on dominant emotions of the time. They demonstrate that participants, who are parents and carers living on a low-income, have suffered as a result of this uncertainty which bred mistrust in government institutions. Diary entries highlight a pervasive governmental double standard in the treatment of actions and decisions, contrasting with the typical experiences of citizens or ‘ordinary folk’. For genuine change to occur, and to truly understand the shared typical, governments must heed and act upon the expertise borne from experience. As a first step, this can be achieved by engaging with participatory research and community consultations, creating advisory councils, and implementing participatory governance models. By institutionalising the insights from people with lived expertise, policies will better reflect the realities of those affected and lead to more effective and meaningful outcomes.

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