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Defensive optimism: parental aspirations and the prospect of state-enforced child removal in Britain

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Abstract

In 2010s Britain, expectations for parents living on low incomes to pursue aspirations for their children's upward social mobility converged with a concentration of forcible child protection interventions in so-called "deprived" neighbourhoods. This article explores the subjectivities of parents, mainly women, living on one such housing estate [housing project] in England by critically engaging Berlant's theories of optimism and intimacy. The overtly aspirational practices by which parents there sought better lives for their children are inseparable from those parents' attempts to dispel their fears of their children being removed. While the immediate prospect of child removal provoked one woman to forego an express will to retain custody, the remoter possibility of the same event incited others to comply with parental norms to which they did not subscribe or to reaffirm their existing parental aspirations ever more vocally. Conceptually the article argues that optimism can sometimes be defensive rather than aspirational, especially in the face of lawful expropriations, and that these two forms of

optimism – aspirational and defensive – may interact with and reinforce one another. The article extends Berlant’s analysis by showing the involvement of coercive legal force in the processes by which people cling onto hopes that wear them down. When faced with the possible expropriation of the object of an intimate attachment, people’s attempts to hold onto to that object may also involve reasserting the aspirations which the attachment makes possible. This suggests that research into optimism, aspirations and ethical self-formation has much to gain from careful attention to people’s mundane expectations of violence and loss.

Keywords:

parenthood, optimism, aspiration, defensive, legal coercion, child removal, child protection, social work

Amid austerity cuts, real wage stagnation, the aftermath of a global financial crisis, and an enduring discourse of meritocracy, Britain in the 2010s saw parents living on lower incomes urged to seek upward social mobility for their children. Recent decades had seen policy-makers increasingly consider “good parenting” to be a solution for material inequalities. Over the same period, professional social work interventions in childcare underwent a punitive shift. Many disadvantaged neighbourhoods featured concentrations of the state-sponsored capacity of social workers to remove children forcibly from their parents upon identifying a risk of harm to the child. These factors formed a predicament for many adults living on a housing estate (or housing project) in southern England where I carried out ethnographic fieldwork from 2012 to 2016. I give this housing estate the pseudonym of Woldham. The residents I met generally lived on low and precarious incomes. They seldom said they thought their own fortunes could improve by much. Yet they often expressed aspirations for their children to have better lives. At the same time, many residents, especially women, were highly preoccupied with the aforementioned prospect of forcible child removal – colloquially known as children being “taken into care.” It was a rare occurrence, but the residents guarded against it as they felt child protection social workers were predisposed to find them at fault.

This article shows that the overtly aspirational practices by which Woldham residents sought socio-economic betterment along generational lines are inseparable from those parents’ attempts to dispel their fears of their children being taken into care. It suggests that one way to understand the interaction between these two sets of practices is to conceptualise each in terms of optimism. The will for children not to be removed was an optimistic practice in its own right, albeit not one with a particularly bright future in mind. I introduce a concept of “defensive optimism” to refer to the distinct subjectivity at work. This allows an exploration of the interplay between on the one hand, under the banner of “aspiration,” a number of women’s

expressed concepts of good parenting and the bright futures they hoped their parenting would bring about, and, on the other, those same women's efforts to prevent their children being lawfully removed from their custody, described here as "defensive optimism." By looking at the interplay between aspirational and defensive optimism, the article shows that even a remote possibility of children being removed could incite and inform the aspirations parents expressed; and indeed, at times, it was part of what made certain normative ideas around "good parenting" so compelling. The article's main conceptual argument is that optimism can sometimes be defensive rather than aspirational, especially in the face of lawful expropriations, and that these two forms of optimism – aspirational and defensive – may interact with and even reinforce one another.

Let me outline these concepts. By "aspiration," I mean a kind of optimism that posits wants, desired ways of being, or visions of a good or better life and embarks on their pursuit in a future-oriented way. Aspirations, in this sense, have been studied by anthropologists researching matters as varied as ethical self-formation and anti-poverty programmes, by Laidlaw (2013) and Appadurai (2004) respectively (discussed below). Yet it is important also to appreciate the many varieties that optimism, hope, and desire can take (cf. Moore 2013), lest all optimism be assumed to be aspirational. The value of doing so is heightened by the status of aspiration as a normalised mode of optimism in many contemporary meritocratic frames of socio-political order, such as the UK, where propertyless people who claim welfare payments and/or live in public housing have experienced stigma and even punishment unless they overtly espouse aspirations for upward mobility (Allen 2013; Tyler 2013; Tyler & Bennett 2015).

Indeed, the academic understanding of aspiration has itself been enriched by situating aspirations alongside multiple other forms of optimism. The work of Lauren Berlant (2006, 2011) is instructive in this regard. Berlant observed the "declining traction" of mainstream

aspirations in the post-Fordist USA and western Europe (2011:174–189). This decline included, chiefly, the fraying of “good life fantasies” for “upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy” (2011:3) – fantasies ranging from norms for property ownership to heteronormative expectations about love. Berlant showed that as optimism’s normative mode of aspiration unravels, the forms of optimism multiply. In particular, building on psychoanalytic theories of attachment and affect, they famously described as “cruel optimism” the increasingly prevalent hopes that leave people ruined, yet onto which people nevertheless cling. Optimism, Berlant wrote, sustains our attachment not only to hopeful visions, but also to things we hold dear and hold close (2011:1–2). As well as a hopeful future-orientation, optimism is, in their reading, also the affective stuff of those attachments so vital they constitute extensions of oneself. From a queer-feminist perspective, Berlant (1998) also explored how certain kinds of intimacy become normative. Their theories thus provide a way to explore the intimacy and optimism in parent-child bonds beyond what is deemed natural or normal.

Drawing inspiration from the concern of many parents in Woldham for their children, this article complements Berlant’s analysis by describing complex interactions between optimism and the capacity of the law to expropriate. Child removal forms an anticipated “end of the world” here. The article’s main contribution to anthropological and wider research on optimism, aspirations, and visions of a better life is to show that where the object of an optimistic attachment is threatened with being taken away by the force of law, this prospect of loss may shape both the processes that sustain people’s optimism and the content of the optimistic visions they express. The article builds on rich anthropological research on state violence and subjectivity (Aretxaga 1997, 2003; Das 2006; Das et al. 2000; Biehl et al. 2007; Navaro et al. 2021; Navaro-Yashin 2012), extending that line of inquiry by focusing on

optimism as a particular mode of subjectivity in which compulsion and free self-formation intertwine.

When parents in Woldham perceived enforced child removal to be a prospect, even a remote one, they often expressed an optimistic will to defend against it happening. In a previous article, I developed a concept of “defensive optimism” to describe such “*non-aspirational forms of optimism ... that defend against unwanted eventualities, rather than positing a vision of a good, or better, life*” (Davey 2019a). Hence as the editors of this special issue write, “optimism, unlike hope, can be described as *non-aspirational* and can take the form of perseverance come what may” (this issue). As I have written previously, defensive optimism often operates on the basis of the spatial proximity or distance of the would-be portents of legal force, such as social workers or also (for those with debt repayment problems) bailiffs or debt collection letters (Davey 2019a). Defensive optimism involves willing things to remain as they are, rather than necessarily to become somehow better (Davey 2019a). Hence, defensive optimism is often present-oriented: whereas aspirations involve an imagined vision of the future progressively overriding a present-day scenario, defensive optimism entails an imagined vision of the future *affirming* someone’s perceptual vision of their here-and-now whereby what exists will not be taken away (Davey 2019a, 332). My concept of defensive optimism is similar to Povinelli’s “stubbornness,” the act of “register[ing] affectively the knowledge that the world is built to run you over so that others can build their houses on and out of what remains” (Povinelli & Johansson 2018). She describes this as “Not hope. Not not hope” (ibid.). Unlike Povinelli, I do characterise my interlocutors’ defensiveness against the world running them over as optimistic. This is because, as I argue, their defensiveness was inseparable from their aspirations. So while I separate aspirational and defensive forms of optimism analytically, most often they co-existed

in the lives of my interlocutors. Defensive forms of optimism could feature aspirational aspects, and vice versa.

In exploring parents and their optimism, this article focuses mainly on women. Hence it explores “the maternal,” which has a “varied and ambivalent place in feminist histories” (Fannin & Perrier 2016, 390).¹ I follow Perrier and Fannin’s call both to “revalorise the maternal” (here, in the face of its classed stigmatisation) and to deconstruct “the over-association of femininity with maternal identity and labour” (2016: 384). The article does not seek to characterise women’s labour primarily as reproductive (Mezzadri 2019). Instead, it draws on feminist arguments that the naturalisation of motherly love has aided a patriarchal association of so-called “reproductive” labour, including childcare, with womanhood (Federici 1973, 2004). Rather than treat as universal the normative emotional bonds that culturally underpin contemporary gendered allocations of childcare, the article explores the contingent social processes that shape the way primary caregivers sustain emotional attachments to their children.

The rest of the article has three parts. It outlines the context of parenting in Woldham and its classed governance in the 2010s UK, partly in terms of a cultural valorisation of aspirations for upward mobility. Following that are two ethnographic sections. Taking the story of a woman who suggested the pseudonym “Tallulah,” the first explores parental aspirations that formulate ethical ideas, including helping to provide socio-economic betterment for children and protecting children from harm. In the second ethnographic section, I compare Tallulah’s story with that of another woman, here named Shirley, to explore the defensive optimism of parents’ strenuous efforts against enforced child removal and how this interacted with the parental aspirations they avowed.

Parenting and its governance in Woldham

The Woldham estate in the 2010s featured a spatial concentration of precisely the childcare practices that the early-twenty-first-century British governance of parenting concerned itself: parents with children under five years living in “deprived” areas. During my fieldwork, I lodged with a divorced social housing resident in his fifties in a medium-rise block of flats. I stayed there for fourteen months in 2012-2013, followed by multiple stays afterwards. I visited residents in their homes and attended community events. As a pretty resolutely childless gay male researcher, then in my late twenties, I was struck by the fact all but one of the adults I met had children. This owed partly to the estate’s unusual history. Woldham had originally been built as “married quarters” for British Armed Forces personnel. It was passed over to civilian use in the 1990s following defense cuts and a national shortage in public housing. A new population arrived into a neighbourhood that had few public gathering spaces and few amenities but for a primary school, a social club and a few playgrounds. Half of households were public housing tenants and a third private renters. Ninety-six per cent of the neighbourhood’s population identified as white British, a high level even for the mainly white-British city (91 per cent) of which Woldham forms part. The estate continued to be populated (and repopulated) by young families, in the main with one or two children.

I spoke to around twenty-five households semi-frequently. Among them, household composition often changed over the four years during which I visited frequently. Residents sometimes paid lip-service to a nuclear family ideal, but in practice household forms were shifting and extensive. Many couples who had had children together cohabited, especially among those with younger children. Some couples formed reconstituted families with children from previous relationships. None were married (with wedding costs sometimes given as a reason) though a few were engaged. In other homes, one parent (usually the mother) lived with

her child or children, though the term “lone” parent occludes non-co-residing partners and collaborative childcare arrangements (Koch 2015). Through all this variety, children resided with their mothers except for a few cases: one where a father took full-time care; one where a lesbian couple lived with one of the women’s five-year-old grandson, as his mother was in drug rehabilitation; and one where a woman’s children had been taken into local authority care.

There was a variety of labour and livelihood practices among women in Woldham. Most of the women I spent time with had pre-school-age children, entailing long childcare hours that (given unaffordable childcare costs) led many to forego paid employment. Some stated as their occupation on Facebook “Full-Time Mummy” or posted memes such as “Yes I work! I’m a full-time mum!” as an implied retort to accusations of welfare-scrounging. Others worked part-time, for instance in a newsagent or as a cleaner or teaching assistant, while some volunteered unpaid to gain experience and/or as a compulsory part of government back-to-work schemes. Some women undertook informal livelihood activities, e.g. as occasional carers, selling cheap tobacco, or trading or pawning possessions. Many if not most claimed some form of social security benefit.

This situation meant residents’ gendered expectations around employment and childcare often differed from hegemonic or “middle-class” expectations in Britain that women should balance higher education and career with family life (Adkins and Dever 2016; Tyler 2008; Walkerdine et al. 2001). Yet, Woldham was like Britain more generally in that a hetero-patriarchal allocation of childcare to women by default persisted, often reckoned through “natural” emotional bonds thought to emerge through pregnancy (Dow 2017; Faircloth 2013). Men were involved in childcare (cf. Dermott 2008), but an explanation of why this was strictly necessary often accompanied them doing so.

The women I met were keenly aware that the professionals involved in their children's development, such as teachers, health visitors, and social workers, were on the lookout for the parents slipping up. Their awareness of this echoes feminist sociologists' insight that cultural indicators of class difference in Britain include differential moral evaluations of women's parental and reproductive practices (Allen and Osgood 2009; Jensen 2010; Tyler 2010; Skeggs 2003; Skeggs 2005; Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001) – with “the fecund young working class mother” ascribed with values of excess, waste, leakage, immorality, abjectness and unruliness (Skeggs 2003). In contrast to “attachment parenting” among the middle class, which pursues a purity of emotional connection between the (implicitly female) parent and her infant (Lee et al. 2014; Faircloth 2013), poorer young working-class women's emotional attachment to their children was often held to be defiled by a self-interested pursuit of material gain (Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001). For instance, several home-owners in Woldham told me, “some [young] women round here only get pregnant so they can claim benefits and get a council flat.” This reflects a stigmatisation in Britain of teenage pregnancy and lower-income parenting (Gillies 2007; Jensen 2010). The “chav mum” stereotype in the early twenty-first century exemplified such stigma (Tyler 2008). While primarily applied to poor white women, the term is complexly racialised: it “foregrounds a dirty whiteness” supposedly polluted by proximity to non-white people (Tyler 2008:25).

The stakes of this morality of parenting were high, since professional judgements of bad parenting could in extreme cases lead to the enforced removal of children from their parent's custody. The UK police gained legal powers in 1889, in response to moral panics by child welfare charities, to obtain warrants to enter homes and to make arrests if they suspected ill-treatment or neglect of children (Clapton, Cree & Smith 2013). In the mid-twentieth century, state-provided child protection services focused on prevention and support (Clapton 2020,

81,89). However, as Clapton writes, from the 1980s there was “a contraction of statutory sector services and the replacement of preventative social work ... with a concentration on investigation and monitoring” (2020, 81). A similar shift took place in the United States (Roberts 2012). Four times as many parents came under investigation in 2013/4 than in 1991/2, yet without a corresponding rise in identified neglect or abuse (Clapton 2020, 91). Thus UK child protection is “dominated by a rescue mind-set that is suspicious of parents” (Clapton 2020, 89). Take the Government’s advice to social workers from the time of my fieldwork: “A desire to think the best of adults and to hope they can overcome their difficulties,” it said, “should not trump the need to rescue children from chaotic, neglectful and abusive homes” (cited in Clapton 2020, 90). This punitive shift has been challenged by social work scholars as engendering “a state that is experienced as both intrusive and neglectful, especially by the poor” (Featherstone et al. 2018: 2).

Indeed, child protection interventions feature complex classed and racialised disparities. In the UK, “family socio-economic circumstances [are] a primary driver” of child protection, with children in the “most deprived” decile of neighbourhoods ten times more likely to be subject to an intervention than children in the “least deprived” decile (Bywaters et al. 2020: 204, 210). In terms of ethnicity, among children under local authority care, white children are under-represented (74 per cent of “looked after” children, compared to 79 per cent of children overall) as are children of South Asian heritage (4 per cent, compared to 10 per cent), whereas there is an over-representation of children of “mixed” ethnicity (10 per cent, compared to 5 per cent) and Black children (7 per cent, as against 5 per cent) (Department for Education 2021). In settler-colonised societies, like the US and Australia, Black and indigenous families experience child removal disproportionately in a legacy of the removal of children from parents during enslavement and colonisation respectively (Roberts 2012, Motta 2016).

Alongside recent shifts in child protection, in twenty-first-century Britain politicians and policymakers increasingly looked upon aspirations as a cure for socio-economic disadvantage. The language of class fell out of favour in British parliamentary discourse in the 1990s, after which “aspiration” gained an intensified valence. New Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown (2008-2010) declared an aim to “create an age of aspiration” featuring “an expanded middle class,” while Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron (2010-2016) pledged “to build an aspiration nation” for “those who strive to make a better life for themselves and their families” (cited in Allen 2013, 760). Cameron’s government “evoke[d] aspiration as some kind of panacea for inequality with pledges to ‘combat ... intergenerational cycles of poverty’ by ‘raising the aspirations’ of working-class families” (Allen 2013, 761).

This political valorisation of aspiration often focused on parenting. New Labour (1997-2010) introduced policies to end poverty by encouraging benefit claimants and social housing residents to help their children to become upwardly mobile (Gillies 2007). This followed Giddens’ call to shift away from supporting adults economically towards what he called “the social investment state” (Powell 1999, 15) with public expenditure on tackling child poverty and the early years of childhood. 3,500 “SureStart” Children’s Centres were created in “deprived” neighbourhoods in England and Wales partly to improve poorer residents’ “parenting skills.” These reforms dismantled earlier “affiliations between social democracy and feminism which aimed to support women as mothers” through welfare and state-funded nursery care (McRobbie 2013: 128; quoted in Fannin & Perrier 2016: 385).

This governance features a deterministic conception of “parenting” as bundles of generic skills, believed to be both a cause of and a remedy for social problems ranging from unemployment to rioting (Lee et al. 2014, 9; Jensen 2018). The Coalition Government, for instance, launched a half-billion-pound scheme after the 2011 England riots to “turn around” so-called “Troubled

Families” (Jensen 2018). As Gillies writes, this governance is based on a belief that “working-class parents must be taught how to raise children who are capable of becoming middle class” (2007, 7). It follows the right-wing “cycle of deprivation” theory, first popularised by Keith Joseph in the 1970s, which holds that deprivation exists because poorer families and single mothers pass on bad cultural values to their children (ibid.). While contemporary British governance around “parenting” is framed in gender-neutral terms, it overwhelmingly targets women, often through appeals to biological connection (Gillies 2007; Jensen 2018).

The norm for social mobility to be achieved through childcare on the Woldham housing estate is illustrated well in a comment by a community worker employed by one of the public housing providers there. She told me:

“Often when you go into somewhere as a community worker, you feel the community’s sense of injustice. You get this feeling from people that they know there’s a better life out there; they know that there’s more opportunities. But they just can’t access them for some reason. So there’s that sense of— you can feel their frustration and their passion and kind of saying ‘I want a better life. I want to make changes. I want things to be different for my children.’ It’s a really tangible feeling, not so much in relation to them, but for their children. But when I came [to Woldham], there was none of that. You didn’t get that sense. Which means they either feel fine, or they don’t even— they’re not— there isn’t that awareness that there is something that they should be wanting, if that makes sense.”

The community worker’s expression that residents lack an “awareness that there is something that they *should* be wanting” (my emphasis) perfectly captures the normalisation of aspirational parenting in Britain. The community worker diagnosed a deficiency in aspiration among

Woldham residents, which she considered morally problematic even if those residents did not find it problematic themselves. For her, the residents' very desires were errant. She noted a dulling of their senses, an ignorance of opportunity, an insularity of hope, and a mystification of real interests, not unlike the Marxian idea of false consciousness though geared towards private enrichment rather than collective liberation. Local professionals termed this "apathy."

In the ethnography that follows I refer back to the community worker's statement. I reflect critically on her words by showing that they inadvertently stigmatised poorer working-class parents who supposedly failed to "aspire." In doing so I support Frederiksen's (2017) recognition of non-aspirational (or perhaps more-than-aspirational) ways of life. I am obviously not saying that Woldham residents should instead have been satisfied with their lot. Instead, I criticise the community worker's insistence that residents ought to seek goodness in their lives primarily through a transgenerational pursuit of economic success of a form that would necessitate a spatial, social and affective separation from their kin.

Parental aspirations

I visited Tallulah Blue in October 2014, after the main period of my fieldwork, and told her I wanted to write a chapter of my doctoral dissertation about parenthood. "Oh god," she said, with half-joking dread at how I might represent her performance as a mother. Tallulah had relocated aged sixteen from her native Scotland to the southern English city where she now lived. She found work in a frozen foods factory and moved into a privately rented flat in Woldham where she and her partner Rodney were living at the start of my fieldwork. Three years after moving, she became pregnant with their first child. Their second child arrived three years later, and their third after another four years. Once their first child was born, Tallulah left employment in order to raise their children, occasionally working as a cleaner. Rodney worked as a forklift driver, sometimes doing removal (i.e. house-moving) jobs, before becoming

unemployed in 2011 amid the UK's economic recession. Once their youngest was a toddler (after my fieldwork) the couple took over a small removal company (a British term for a moving company) as a family business, with Tallulah also working shifts at a nearby social club.

Tallulah formed her own aspirational vision of good parenthood on two ethical principles: first, to enable her children to have better; and second, to protect her children by being nearby to them. I discuss these two principles in turn. In expressing the first principle, Tallulah told me: "I don't wish that my own life was different, but I do wish better for my kids. That's my excuse for spoiling them." This wish had a clear socio-economic component. By "better," Tallulah meant several, interrelated things: first, that she wanted them to have better things during their childhood than she herself had had as a child, including but not limited to the presents and material provisions with which she would spoil them; second, that their future lives be better than the one to which Tallulah had, for herself, now acquiesced; and, third, connecting the first and second, that her children not be deprived during their childhood of things necessary to their access to bright and happy futures. Tallulah wanted her children to be successful at school and in employment. She did not seek upward mobility in her own life, but would pursue it trans-generationally. Indeed, in the eyes of most people I knew in Woldham, and contradicting the community worker's observation (above) about local parents' "apathy," upward mobility was something that could primarily be achieved by virtue of one's parenthood rather than in the course of one's own lifetime.

As with most adults on the estate, Tallulah had been encouraged by sleight of meritocratic principle to consider herself as having failed in life – namely as having failed to become successful or affluent. A similar feeling was borne out among other Woldham residents in their frequent claim that Woldham was a "shit" place to live. Tallulah had come to see her present-

day lack of money as the result of educational failure when younger. Her partner, Rodney, told me that Tallulah felt her own progression along a path of increasing success in work, life, health and happiness had been derailed by her difficulties at school, prefigured by troubles at home:

“You know, the first couple times you came down here, Tallulah was saying: ‘That could have been me. If I had tried harder at school, I could have been well educated. And look at where we are now.’”

Tallulah thus appraised our initial encounters in terms of missed opportunity: educational successes and slip-ups were the terms in which she understood disparities in economic privilege. The thought made me uncomfortable – not because I felt she could not have been “well educated”; she could have been. But for Tallulah to have done so would have been testament to a much greater achievement than that which my own educational career, including several years at a private school, had involved. I felt she underestimated the advantage I had gained from class privilege. Tallulah had implied that she was ultimately responsible, in the idiom of educational achievement, for the difficulties of her financial situation and the inadequacies, as she saw it, of her domestic life. Her partner Rodney expressed a similarly meritocratic mind-set when he asked me, with uncharacteristic sheepishness, whether I thought an economically privileged start in life provided advantages for later career success. He seemed hesitant to have his suspicions confirmed when I said I thought it did. Perhaps he was wary that he might be making excuses for himself and somehow showing a lack of individual responsibility. At least in terms of what people would say in my company, meritocratic principles were virtually doxic.

If “better” meant present-day provisions and bright future possibilities, then its inverse was “deprivation.” Although “deprivation” is often taken to mean poverty or social problems, in

Woldham – whose residents and professionals alike were equally familiar with the specific governance done in its name – deprivation meant failing to give children a good start in life. “Deprivation” in official indices comprised not only economic measures, such as whether parents were unemployed, but also measures of the conduciveness to health of the child’s upbringing and domestic environment, such as whether parents were smokers or had diagnoses of depression; hence such indices being compiled by NHS Health Visitors. Conversely, the health of the child was the focus of official promotional pronouncements about good parenting, for instance with posters in the local community centre encouraging breastfeeding, smoke-free homes, and healthy eating.

In the discourse of “deprivation,” children who lived on housing estates were paradoxically seen as being out of place in their native environments, lacking the surroundings appropriate to their proper development.² That being so, it fell upon their parents to counteract that deprivation by pursuing aspirations for the children’s betterment. As primary or sole caregiver, a woman could thus find herself personally obliged to negate the effects her economic hardship might have for a child’s future – in order words, to single-handedly undo the effects of class inequality. Woldham was widely described, in official, journalistic and lay commentary, as a “deprived estate.” Yet the ascription of “deprivation” did not always resonate for residents. On one of my first attempts to meet residents, a barwoman at the social club had asked me why I had chosen to study Woldham. After I explained I was volunteering at a local debt and benefits advice service, another woman surmised: “He thinks we’re deprived.” We continued to talk as I fumbled to express my discomfort with the term. The barwoman remarked on the lack of children’s playgrounds then, widening her eyes in unpleasant surprise, said: “Maybe we *are* deprived.” She seemed possibly affronted; the word itself seemed like an accusation.

For neighbourhoods so described, like Woldham, the discourse of aspiration featured a norm for spatial mobility, both on an everyday basis and in terms of grown children moving away. Wanting your children to have “a better life *out there*” (as the community worker said, in the earlier quote) was the condition for professional approval of your parenting. By and large, this meant escaping the estate. Thus local community professionals expected upward social mobility for Woldham residents to take a form where grown children would leave home and move cities. The community worker confirmed the micro-geographic basis of aspiration when she later complained, to attest to Woldham residents’ insularity and apathy, that residents spent their free time visiting relatives around the estate for cups of tea and “don’t want to have to go further than the Square [the nearest row of shops] or Tesco’s [the nearest supermarket].”

This norm contrasted with the everyday reality for many residents. It was fairly commonplace in Woldham for extended families to reside in the same neighbourhood or nearby. For Rodney, the fact his parents lived in his natal neighbourhood in the same city – three miles from Woldham, or forty minutes by bus – was an inconvenient distance. Many of my interlocutors referred *in the particular* to extended kin of their own or their neighbours who resided nearby and who, for instance, assisted with childcare or provided personal and emotional support. Having kin nearby often had a positive value for those practising or desiring it. When this practice was referred to *in a general sense*, however, this was usually by professionals and local home-owners and with a note of disdain. For instance, an amateur historian who owned a home in Woldham told me the area’s social housing residents and welfare claimants comprised “seven tribes” of extended kin networks.³ Living near kin was seen by most professionals and many home-owners as a barrier to accessing a world of opportunity, of a piece with apathy, backwardness, ignorance, defeatism, a poverty of aspiration, and a lack of self-esteem. Conversely, people often referred to adult children moving to other cities (i.e.

neolocality) as a way of noting achievements: for instance, Tallulah was immensely proud of the fact that her brother was based at an army barracks in Edinburgh when not serving in Afghanistan. My point here is not to suggest that there is something characteristically working-class about neighbourhood-based extended kin networks, especially not in any timeless sense (Mollona 2009). What is salient is rather the terms on which people's parenting practices were judged. The condition for an ascription of positive value was for a parent to pursue a scenario of upward mobility that would entail a separation of parent and child in social, cultural and spatial terms (Allen 2013; Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001).

Tallulah avowed such aspirations, but not without reservations. A poem called "The last time," which Tallulah re-posted on Facebook, outlines the pain for parents of children growing up. "Don't forget," the poem goes, "There is a last time for everything." It urges parents to see through the monotony and exhaustion of childcare in order to savour their children's need for them, given how it will wane. "You will yearn for just one more day," the poem cautions. It indicates the expectations of loss in commonsense conceptions of parenthood. Such expectations, I would suggest, may partly depend a wider cultural confounding of "natural" child development with success-based norms for neolocality. Having extended kin nearby in adulthood might mitigate such a loss, as Tallulah indicated when lamenting that leaving Scotland had left her isolated. Hence, echoing Argenti's point that verse may enable the expression of "unutterable" parental misgivings (2011), the sentiments in Tallulah's poem may allude partly to her ambivalence about securing "better" for her children in socio-economic terms. This echoes Walkerdine et al.'s observation that working-class UK parents, while supportive of their daughters' ambitions for career success, were also "secretly terrified" about the possible pains and defeats of pursuing them (2001:208), as well as Leinaweaver's account of the "lingering discomforts or anxieties" expressed by poor parents in the Peruvian Andes

whose decision to give their children to richer families “although [seen as] an essential and often beneficial strategy, [was] often overlaid with a wash of sadness” (2007:172).

The aspirations described so far follow the main usage of “aspiration” in twenty-first-century British political discourse, referring to individual- or household-level ambitions for upward mobility. For Woldham residents, such aspirations would specifically mean no longer receiving out-of-work benefits nor residing in public housing. This narrow meaning of aspiration has rightly been criticised as a “rhetorical device that seeks to whitewash” neoliberal policies by depicting “class inequalities ... as the consequence of individual choices” (Tyler and Bennett 2015, 6-7). But aspiration as an analytical concept in anthropology has a wider meaning, too. Appadurai writes that aspiration refers to a range of “wants, preferences, choices and calculations” beyond socio-economic betterment alone (2004, 67). These “are never simply individual” for they are “formed in the thick of social life” and “form parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from larger cultural norms” (Appadurai 2004, 67). For Appadurai (2004), a reduced “capacity to aspire” among poor and subaltern people, in the sense of their ability to articulate wants, needs and choices, is linked to the persistence of poverty. However, as the foregoing ethnography highlights, pressurising people to aspire can levy “psychic and social costs” (Allen 2013: 760), including stigma (Tyler 2013).

Aspirations, in this broader sense, feature in processes that pursue virtues or visions of “the good life.” Such processes are implicitly future-oriented, since they comprise a commitment to improve a present-day situation through efforts to build towards something better. Crystallising a surge of anthropological research in the 2010s on ethics, Laidlaw (2013) argued that the formulation and pursuit of a virtue or a vision of the good life (rather than its realisation) are constitutive acts of human freedom (see also Robbins 2013). The conscious thought involved in reflecting on a potential course of action, Laidlaw argued, constitutes a “reflective freedom”

central to ethical life (ibid., 102, 104, 149, 177). In the recent anthropology of ethics, the category of “aspiration” itself is not always strongly emphasised, let alone “optimism,” but the practices observed strongly resemble aspirations. Laidlaw writes that one of the constituent aspects of “subjectivation and ... self-formation” according to Foucault is “teleology,” which concerns the questions, “what is the mode of being the subject aims to achieve? What kind of being does the ethical subject aspire to be...?” (Laidlaw 2013, 103-104). Hence, aspirations – specifically concerning self-formation – are integral to an anthropological “analytic of ethical reasoning and practice” (Laidlaw 2013, 104).⁴

The second ethic that informed Tallulah Blue’s parental aspirations (again, in this broader, ethical sense of the word), alongside wanting better for her kids, was to protect them from harm by being nearby to them. Tallulah once swore, “If anyone does anything to my babies, I’m like a she-lion.” She told me, “I just try to be the opposite of what my mum did,” saying her mum was “always in the pub.” Aged eight, she had stepped in to take care of her younger sister and her baby brother, Liam. She said of her siblings: “I didn’t have a choice. I raised them.” Where she had found absence and neglect in her mother’s practices, she replaced these with proximity and protection. Tallulah’s parental ethic of protection was part of an aspiration she expressed about what kind of parent she wished to become, along with its possible effects on her children’s futures. Talking about her protectiveness thus expressed an aspirational form of optimism.

For Tallulah and for other parents in Woldham, conversations about the profound difficulties of protecting children from harm or distress could convey poignant emotions for both the reteller and those listening, myself included. For instance, one evening Tallulah said she had not had a single night apart from her youngest child in the year since his birth. Her friend Sarah said, “You have to trust other people to look after him, girl.” On hearing this, Tallulah blushed

as her eyes teared up a little. On another occasion, she spoke of her elder son experiencing night terrors. She said, “I’ve asked him if anything’s wrong and he says ‘I’m fine.’ I’ve seen him when he’s been sleepwalking and he just stands there crying.” Tallulah paused and pursed her lips as if to contain sadness. “But then you can’t ask him about it,” she added, “because he doesn’t know he’s done it.” Similarly poignant discussions took place at a weekly support group I attended for parents of children with “additional needs,” such as ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and ASD (autistic spectrum disorder) in Woldham’s community centre, run by a local resident. The members of the group, mainly women, told me it was normal for someone to “get emotional” during its meetings. One day, two women were matter-of-factly telling a newcomer to the group about useful sources of assistance. The new member grew tearful and blushed as she confessed, “I almost killed him the other day.” Another woman sat back and smiled drily, “I almost kill mine every day.” Others proceeded to tell the newcomer about an organisation called Carers’ Hub, as the woman discreetly brushed away a tear.

I would not assume the poignancy of such expressions to be natural or universal (see Scheper-Hughes 1985), nor for that matter class-specific. Approaching emotions anthropologically as “as much an index of social relations as external manifestations of individuals’ inner states” (Dow 2017, 99), casts these moments of poignancy as socio-culturally shaped responses to situations in which parents’ attachments to their children were at stake. In Woldham as in many other places, protecting children was constitutive of many primary caregivers’ ethical subjectivity, in that it informed the kind of parents they aspired to be. Berlant’s (2011) claim that optimism is an attachment, not only a disposition or mood, encourages us to consider this ethic of protection as a component of parents’ attachment to their children. In this light, a

perceived potential failure to protect a child could amount to feeling that your attachment to the child was in jeopardy.

My observation draws on Berlant's point that intimacy is amplified by "its potential failure to stabilise closeness," which "make[s] the very attachments deemed to buttress 'a life' seem in a state of constant if latent vulnerability" (1998:282). Intimate attachments, they write, become expressive when jeopardised, shifting from "stable tacitness" to "eloquence" when "persons sense that their definition of the real is under threat" (1998:287). The words of the parents' support group members reflect Berlant's point, when the group members told me they sometimes "get emotional" in discussing the difficulties they experienced raising their children. Impediments to an avowed parental commitment to protect children from harm or distress, in short, in these cases elicited emotiveness on the part of the parent. I make this point to understand women's parental emotions as emergent in complex socio-cultural processes, rather than natural or universal. I return to the same point below when I discuss Woldham residents' responses to the possibility of state-enforced child removal.

Defensive optimism

In June 2013, Tallulah Blue told me she had heard of a woman in the area having her flat raided by the police because of petty crimes the woman's boyfriend was suspected to have committed. Tallulah was distressed by the news. She told me:

"Her babies! If [the woman] got caught with anything on her, you know they'd take her kids away from her. I would never let anything happen to any of my children. My kids are the most important thing in the world to me. All my children, including [my younger brother] Liam. I raised Liam since I was eight years old. I raised him."

Tallulah's response to the news of the raid expressed a similar aspiration of protectiveness as I discussed above. But "aspiration" as a kind of optimism – namely, that which springs from the "reflective freedom" of ethical self-formation (Laidlaw 2013) – cannot adequately convey the form and texture of the optimistic passions Tallulah conveyed here. To characterise the optimism that responds to the possibility of coercive force primarily in terms of freedom would be, at best, to tell only half the story. Instead, as outlined in the introduction, the term "defensive optimism" may be better at conveying how parents respond when the prospect of children being removed from their custody enters their horizons of possibility. This optimism is defensive in the sense that it defends against the prospect of coercive force, willing for it not to happen. This section thus moves from parents' aspirations to consider their defensive optimism against enforced child removal, before exploring how the two forms of optimism interact.

It was quite ordinary in Woldham for conversations to feature references to someone's children being removed by social services. A neighbour said one day in passing, on mentioning social workers: "No one should have their kids taken away, no one." Another woman in Woldham had her three youngest children removed from her custody and placed into foster care in the north-east of England, only for social services to stall on providing contact information for several weeks. She said: "I feel like I'm being punished for being a parent." A father at the parents' peer-support group (mentioned above) cautioned the other parents that asking social services for help was "the worst thing that you can do" because once they had you "on their books" they no longer needed to have serious concerns before intervening. He elaborated: "I'm worried that if I ask for more help, they'll say I'm not coping and take my kids off me." This father's expressed reasons for avoiding social workers are an instance of defensive optimism, rather than simply a fear, since they imply a will to prevent the feared outcome. The distinctive form of optimism he expressed, like with Tallulah's vow "never [to] let anything happen" to

her children, sought less to pursue some bright future for their children than to prevent their forced removal.

Tallulah generally expressed little to no expectation that her own children might be taken away, but it remained a recurrent concern. In February 2013, Tallulah said a social worker had come round to her house one night after a couple, whose son was staying over at Tallulah's, had an argument on the street. The police had arrived with a social worker to take the boy home. Tallulah had banged her head in the utility room, and answered the door with blood "pouring down my head." Her partner Rodney said, with cool indignation: "So they're obviously thinking I'm beating her up." "I don't know how they think they can just come round here like that," said Tallulah, her indignation more expressive. "To just come round knocking on the door." Tallulah was offended that child protection workers had so readily deemed them worthy of suspicion. She expected ambiguous outward displays – a minor wound, an on-street argument – to be taken, by police or social workers, as grounds for a suspicion of wrongdoing, in this case of domestic violence. She felt that social workers were motivated to find her protection to be inadequate. They did not need to cast aspersions explicitly for Tallulah to hear such aspersions loud and clear: she assumed that social workers would assume her to be at fault.

Tallulah's fear is understandable given that child protection intervention rates in Britain are exponentially higher in neighbourhoods ascribed with a high level of "deprivation" (Bywaters et al. 2020), and given also a professional discourse of good parenting that – as I showed in the previous section – held poorer working-class women single-handedly responsible for overcoming the effects of class inequality (Gillies 2007; Jensen 2010, 2018). A combination of gender- and class-based stigma more diffusely was also part of this context (Skeggs 2003). Hence, when social workers visited Tallulah, to borrow a phrase from Aretxaga (2003), they

incarnated “the ghostly, persecutory power of the law” to sanction violent expropriations. As a result, like other parents in Woldham, in the hope of avoiding any risk of losing her children, she sought to evade the attentions of child protection social workers altogether. This was no small matter, given that social workers’ surveillance could be triggered by concerns from schoolteachers, health visitors, housing officers, and others.

One could take Tallulah’s defensive optimism around police and social workers as a separate matter to her usual parental aspirations. Indeed, by and large, Tallulah undertook her parental practices with the removal of children by social services as no more than a remote possibility; the appearance of social workers at her front door served as a reminder of a prospect she ordinarily dismissed. But what difference did it make to Tallulah’s parental aspirations that she expected social services, should she run into them, to see her in such a bad light? How freely elected are ethical pursuits when merely being seen to slip up entails enforcement? And what happens when aspirations encounter apprehensions of lawful violence? It is hard from Tallulah’s case to tell, since she undertook her parental practices relatively uncoerced. But in another case – that of a woman, named Shirley, who more keenly felt the prospect of her children being removed – the interplay between parents’ aspirations and their defensive optimism against the potential removal of their children is clearer to see.

Shirley was a mother of several children, had separated from her husband, had once or twice been hospitalised in a psychiatric ward and was an ex-girlfriend of my then-flatmate, Frank. When she and her son visited Frank, I learned that she was being assessed by social services regarding her adequacy as a parent. Frank told me they often “had a cuddle” when they met up, but on this occasion they refrained from doing so. Shirley said she did not want social services to find out, via her son, that she was seeing anyone. She told me: “It will affect whether the Social [a catch-all term for welfare officials] can take them away or let me keep them, how

well I come across to them.” Frank later explained: “Things aren’t quite ironed out between her and her ex. She’s worried if she gets with someone else then he could use it against her when they’re deciding whether she can keep the kids.” Thus, although separated, she refrained from romantic relationships. Shirley regulated her behaviour through social services’ eyes, as she perceived them to be. She substituted highly conservative moral standards for her own: were it not for being assessed, she implied she would act differently. Some might ask whether Shirley’s perception of social workers’ standards was over-cautious, but this must be seen in relation to the magnitude of the risk she was trying to avoid; and of course I may have been privy only to fragments of her story. In any case, however, the prospect of coercive state power had evidently fostered in Shirley an instrumental relation to the perceived standards of good parenting by which her custody of her children might be granted or denied.

In contrast to Tallulah’s expressiveness about her parental aspirations, for Shirley, the prospect of having her children removed elicited in her a momentary disinclination to voicing her parental ethics. People in Woldham sometimes summed up such a disinclination to professing one’s ethics with the truism, “You can’t argue with them,” usually said while talking about run-ins with the authorities (Davey 2019b). Shirley implied that social services’ assessments of her parental adequacy were not worth explicitly arguing with. Paradoxically, then, in seeking to do right by her children, Shirley refrained from expressing her own ethics of parenthood. It was clear she had not internalised the dominant standards of conduct by which she felt she would be judged, for she made it clear she was doing something she would not do were it not for the risk of her children being removed; her conduct was dominated by her direct expectation of coercion. Ceding an explicit ethics, Shirley’s expressed optimism as a parent was not aspirational. The defensive quality of her optimism – her implied will to prevent the removal of her children – came to the fore.

I saw Shirley a few weeks later at a pub-based pool team that she ran locally for several teenagers and which she invited me to join. We had a cigarette outside and she told me she had become resigned to her kids being taken away. She said: “I would rather assume it’s gonna happen. Then at least if it does, I’m prepared for it.” She stared dead ahead and took her cigarette from her mouth: “They say I’ve not been looking after them properly.” Shirley explained that social services had said her house was not fit for her children to live in but that her landlord would not sort out the damp on the walls. In Shirley’s case, which is situated at the extreme edge of state intervention in parenting, even her explicit desire to keep custody of her children became inhibited as the prospect of their forcible removal grew. This was her analysis, too, not only mine: she said she “assume[d] it’s gonna happen” to spare herself the grief.

Shirley’s aversion to making ethical assertions in defence of her motherhood is similar to alienation, in Jaeggi’s sense of “not only what prevents us from living well but also, and more important, *what prevents us from posing the question of how we want to live*” (2014, 31). This form of alienation comprises a suspension of explicit ethical reasoning. In conditions of alienation, Jaeggi writes, “the question of the good life in general is no longer compelling” (2014:31,380). Shirley’s alienation involved her becoming averse to expressing her view on both what it meant to be a good parent and what future this could create. This does not mean she stopped fulfilling her obligations as a mother. Rather, she felt she could not argue her case. In this defensive scenario, a parent’s efforts to maintain a psychological, social and spatial attachment to their child could leave the parent somewhat detached from explicitly envisaging brighter futures for their child or even what would constitute good parenting. For Shirley, this eventually gave way to pessimism.

Shirley's progressive muting of her aspirations for and attachment to her children recalls Scheper-Hughes' (1985) study of maternal indifference amid infant death in Brazilian favelas. However I would differ from Scheper-Hughes' rather normative suggestion that maternal detachment, while understandable in dire circumstances, evinces insufficient affection for children.⁵ Shirley's case indicates that where the anticipation of loss is incorporated into the everyday practice of motherhood, then, in ethnographic terms, loss is not opposed to motherhood but at its heart. The expectation of loss directly informed Shirley's subjectivity as a mother, rather than somehow diminishing it. The same point holds generally for women who form their parental aspirations partly in response to the prospect of forced removal, as I outline now.

While for Shirley the increasing likelihood of her children being taken away led her to become resigned, with Tallulah Blue the far remoter possibility of the same outcome had the opposite effect. As the quote at the top of this section showed, Tallulah took the prospect of child removal as a provocation to reassert her ethics as a parent. She said how important her kids were to her and how she would always protect them. She responded, that is, by professing her parental aspirations. The difference in these pre-emptive responses to child protection interventions is worth trying to understand. I wrote in the previous section that women in Woldham sometimes expressed poignant emotions when their own protection of their child was somehow impeded or jeopardised. Like those moments, when Tallulah told me of her friend nearly having her kids removed by social services and when she then vowed "never [to] let anything happen" to her own, she poignantly reaffirmed her commitment to protect her children by never allowing them to be taken into foster care. As with the earlier instances, Tallulah's statement reflects Berlant's (1998) claim that intimate attachments are incited to speak when imperilled. Berlant argues that this is because the anticipation of losing the object

of an intimate attachment can paradoxically also propel that attachment onwards. Intimacy, they write, is “formed around threats to the image of the world it seeks to sustain” (Berlant 1998:288).

Of course, Tallulah’s attachment to her children and her ethics as a parent had a diffuse socio-cultural derivation. But, when Tallulah spoke so emotively of her protectiveness here, *this expression of her parental aspirations was incited by apprehending the possible removal of her children* by social services. This prospect threatened her attachment to her children, as well as the parental ethics and optimistic visions bound up in that attachment. It informed her reaffirmation of maternal care (i.e. her kids being “the most important thing in the world”). I am not advancing a hard-and-fast rule here: after all, Shirley became resigned when she perceived it likely that her children would be taken into care. Rather, I am describing what happened in the far-wider-spread situation in which forced child removal is more a remote possibility than a probability: the anticipation of children being removed could at times amplify the emotiveness and vocality of the parental ethic of protection. This suggests that the reflective freedom that Laidlaw (2013) deems central to ethical life cannot be understood well in circumstances like these if taken in isolation from the prospect of coercive force.

The relation between psychological attachments (of parents to their children) and aspirational visions here is complex. According to Berlant (2011), optimistic attachments can include attachments to other humans, as well as to non-human objects and immaterial visions of the good. The above ethnography suggests that parents’ affective attachment to their children was, in these cases at least, the social and material ground for their aspirations as parents – both their hopeful visions for bright futures for their children and the more proximate future-visions of the kind of parents they themselves wanted to be. In this way, parents’ affective attachments to their children, their attachments to the futures they envisaged for their children, and their

aspirations for themselves as parents were tightly interconnected. It follows that aspirations arise more freely when custody of a child is not in question, and that optimistic energies latch onto defending against child removal when it is. And yet aspirations and defensive optimism may interact. In certain moments the defence against coercive loss can involve either instrumentally adhering to highly conservative standards of conduct, as in Shirley's case; or, more ambiguously, it can involve an amplified expression of already-avowed parental aspirations, as for Tallulah.

There are varying degrees of freedom and domination at play: Tallulah was less directly dominated in her conduct and her subjectivity as a parent than was Shirley; but nonetheless an element of coercion existed. Tallulah's vow "never [to] let anything happen" to her children was a somewhat-free formulation of a parental virtue. But it was also defensive: she formed her subjectivity as a parent with explicit reference to the possibility of coercion. Tallulah's pledge to prevent her children from being taken into foster care implied she would be willing, for the sake of protecting her children, to cede somewhat an explicit parental ethics and to assume or at least approximate the moral standards upheld by social services. Thus the invocation of the Social's coercive capacity prompted a momentary alienation in the way Tallulah defined her parental obligations. Because Tallulah considered social work professionals to be predisposed to find her at fault, "never let[ting] anything happen" to her kids meant not putting a foot wrong. As things stood, there was no upper limit in her aspirational pursuits at which her defence against coercion would finally be discharged.

Conclusion

Most of the women I met in Woldham ordinarily dismissed any fears of enforced child removal in their day-to-day lives. But those fears were re-elicited by mundane encounters with (or even mentions of) child protection social workers able to administer the removal of children with legal force. An institutionalised denigration in Britain of non-upwardly mobile working-class childcare practices, including a discourse of “deprivation” (Gillies 2007, Jensen 2018, Tyler 2008) and a concentration of the monitoring of childcare practices on neighbourhoods thereby stigmatised (Bywaters et al. 2020), informed Woldham women’s expectation to be found wanting should such encounters occur. In moments like this, the women’s expressed ideas about being a good parent generally became secondary to (or even wholly subdued in favour of) defending against the possibility of coercive intervention.

Defensive optimism, in short, can involve an alienation from questions of “the good” (in this case, questions of good parenting and of children’s bright futures) for the sake of maintaining an affective, social and spatial attachment to the object that may be taken away (in this case, a child). And yet at other times, defensive optimism in the face of forced child removal elicited a reaffirmation of parental aspirations. Indeed, since judgements about whether a parent was pursuing aspirations for their children’s upward mobility *were part of the value scheme* by which social workers and others formed evaluations around child welfare and neglect, consequently those parents who did not espouse aspirations for upward mobility were perhaps more likely to have their parenting criticised by those able to trigger child protection interventions. In such conditions, every aspiration was potentially, if ambiguously, also a defence. Extending Berlant’s analysis of people’s attachments to hopes that wear them down (i.e. cruel optimism), the foregoing ethnography shows that when faced with the possible expropriation of the object of an intimate attachment, people’s attempts to hold onto to that

object may also involve reasserting the aspirations which the attachment makes possible. Defending against expropriation can thus be part of why people maintain hopes that have become cruel.

The complexity of the interplay between aspirations and defensive optimism highlights the value of taking people's defenses against coerced dispossession into account when trying to understand the stakes of their expressed ethical commitments and their hopes and aspirations for the future. The study not only of optimism in all its heterogeneity but also of aspirations and processes of ethical self-formation in their own right, therefore, has much to gain from careful attention to people's mundane expectations of violence and loss. The concept of cruel optimism, too, can be beneficially enhanced by considering the interaction between coerced dispossessions and the psychical attachments that in Berlant's reading are optimism's ground. The distinctive forms of optimism expressed by parents in Woldham arose from their being virtually obliged to aspire for upward mobility while simultaneously confronting a potential deprivation – the enforced removal of their children – so overwhelming as to refute casual ascriptions of deprivation to their estate.

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¹ As this implies, this paper is based on my engagements with parents, rather than with children themselves. This does not undermine the active role played by children in their own development and in the way parents raise them (Lancy 2014). Indeed, as Barker (2019) observes, children may often become actively involved in sustaining ideologies of hope for adults.

² See Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) on class-based judgements in developmental psychology.

³ Home-owners in Woldham generally considered themselves apart from the population of Woldham, as far as my research went.

⁴ This link between aspiration and ethics primarily reflects the limitations of existing anthropological writing on ethics, rather than any intrinsic link between the two, since one can easily imagine ethical stances that are, in fact, accompanied by deep pessimism.

⁵ Scheper-Hughes (1985) describes maternal detachment as a “pathogenic” form of motherhood, for instance because some mothers facilitated some infants’ deaths by withholding already scarce foods. She describes the techniques those mothers develop as beset by “emotional scarcity.”