'Ain't I a human being?': self-documentation of living in poverty in the face of the abandoning state

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How is life in social isolation seen from the viewpoint of people who experience persistent poverty? Given the systemic denial of self-representational agency from those living in poverty and the neoliberalisation of the welfare state, this article turns to those who remained invisible to either the media or the state during the pandemic. In line with current tendencies to prioritise the voice and lived knowledge of people in poverty, we provided our interlocutors with a specifically designed diary tool to allow them to share their mundane experiences and thoughts at their own discretion. Using these diaries of women and men in poverty, and complementary interviews, this article unpacks the ways our participants deal with and understand their everyday relationships with the absent state, mostly welfare and education. Based on the themes that emerged from our interlocutors’ journals, our findings reveal the Janus-faced abandoning/monitoring state that they routinely confront. We then demonstrate how they are constantly chasing the state, struggling to receive the support they lawfully deserve. At the same time, being subjected to practices of state monitoring and surveillance often results not only in mistrust but also in withdrawing almost altogether from the welfare services and social workers, and turning to alternative support networks. We conclude by offering two insights that accentuate, on the one hand, what we and our diarists already know, namely that they count for nothing. Still, on the other hand, the act of self-documentation itself reveals the representational agency of those brave diarists who refuse to forsake their worthiness as citizens.

Key words poverty • Israel • Coronavirus • welfare state • self-documentation

Introduction

In Israel, as elsewhere, the outbreak of COVID-19 has re-configured the ‘ordinariness’ of home–work–travel, first with the almost complete halt to international travel, and then by imposing a policy of social distancing and consecutive lockdowns that minimised the frequencies of leaving the home. For the middle class, these ‘irregular times’ came as both a shock and a blessing. While confronting a new reality of working from home, at best, or being sent on furlough or made redundant, at worst, many were indulging in the opportunity to slow down and pause with their families. The media, both social and mainstream, were rife with images and reportages of the sort, painting the pandemic as a hiatus in the globalisation commotion. Yet, for families who were already struggling with poverty, these images could not be further away from their own crisis of irregularity. Not only do they lack a financial cushion to rely on, they were also unable to utilize the meagre support offered in regular times through either state or civil society mechanisms. A call to one of our team from a lone mother was a lucid illustration to the frustrating limbo in which she was caught. She was unable to fetch food from the stores because public transport was limited, yet being ineligible for a credit card she could not buy groceries online. That woman was not alone; some 73.6 per cent of people who experience poverty reported in May 2020 that their economic situation had worsened (Krumer-Nevo and Refaeli, 2021: 426). That phone call urged us to ask how is life in social isolation seen from the viewpoint of people who experience persistent poverty.

Given the denial of ‘representational agency’ (Tyler, 2013: 26) from those living in poverty, and in light of the considerable public attention to middle-class working people, we turned to those who remained invisible to either the media or the state also during the pandemic. In line with current tendencies to prioritise the voice and lived-knowledge of people in poverty (Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin, 2010; Krumer-Nevo, 2020; Lister, 2021; McKenzie, 2022: 36), we provided our interlocutors with a specifically designed tool to allow them to share their mundane experience and thoughts at their own discretion. Being aware of the danger of Othering (Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin, 2010: 706), we embarked on this project with a research team consisting of three academics and two activists, who themselves are women who experience poverty. As explained later in the article, their role as researchers helped to eliminate the potential alienation between the interlocutors and researchers and added critical value to our research process and analysis.

The poor, Tyler proposes based among others on Jacques Rancière and Beverly Skeggs, ‘are those mute masses who through their abjection constitute the conditions of knowledge itself’ (Tyler, 2013: 173). Being denied self-representation, stigmatisation renders them ‘included through their exclusion, [thus] securing, constituting and legitimizing the hegemonic politics of the state’ (Tyler, 2013: 174). By choosing the self-documentation method we sought to prioritise the concerns of our diarists as they emerged from their journals, consciously privileging their discourses over hegemonic and elite stigmatising discourses. Based on these diaries, as well as in-depth interviews and constant telephone communication, we illustrate a picture of life in poverty during the pandemic. One theme, on which this article focuses, is their conflicted relationships with the state.

We begin with a brief picture of how the rise of the neoliberal welfare state has impacted the lives of those who experience persistent poverty, and how COVID-19
further aggravated their social risks. The article’s main part consists of two sections, the first explains the self-documentation tool and the place of the activists in the research team, and how these tools contribute to a better understanding of life in poverty in the face of the abandoning state. The following, empirical section shows how the various state–society configurations are experienced, felt and given meaning by people living in poverty in times of pandemic. We thus unpack the ways our diarists deal with and understand their everyday relationships particularly with the welfare services. We conclude by suggesting that their ways of coping with the current crisis are telling about the failure of the neoliberal state to contain the social risks, after decades of commodifying welfare.

The state, the welfare state, and welfare in Israel

The modern welfare state and the poor

The welfare state is perhaps the most potent manifestation of the modern state. Since the 1940s, almost every state – old and new, and particularly capitalist democracies – was re-structured based on a new logic of welfarism (Esping-Andersen, 1990). With the intensification of globalisation of both capital and labour during recent decades, social provision has not ended, yet its logic has changed from universalism to particularism. Social policy, which during the Keynesian era was premised on the principle of social inclusion, has been subordinated to the imperative of workfare (Lawinski, 2010; Streeck, 2017). The state thereby distanced itself from society, recognising only ‘individuals and families’, whose fate and social risks had now been privatised (Cooper, 2020). Under neoliberalism, individuals are to be homo economicus, responsible for their own provision (Brown, 2015: 41–42). Consequently, the state reappears as a regulatory force that, while failing to oversee the privatised welfare apparatus, emerges even more strongly in the lives of those who do not conform to the neoliberal ideal – the poor (Tyler, 2013). This relationship is mostly mediated through the role of social workers.

The expansive scholarship on the welfare state and, more specifically, on the relationships between social workers and those who seek their services tends to study each population separately. Recently, both streams have become increasingly interested in the affective aspects of the actual interaction between social workers and social services users, focusing specifically on how either side attempts to manage these complex relationships by exerting agency and awareness. Yet, in reality, awareness does not necessarily suffice. For example, Strier, Nouman and Kantarovich (2022) found that despite the introduction of Poverty-Aware social work programmes, many social workers still marginalise, or plainly disregard, service users’ lived knowledge. This, they argue, is ‘reflective of the unequal power relations that exist between social-service systems and people living in poverty’ (p. 910). Structural power imbalances shape the social worker–services users’ interaction, and as Timor-Shlevin (2022) argues, either Othering or recognition of users by social workers operate concurrently. Moving on to users, Benjamin (2020) showed how mothers who live in poverty negotiate access to social services, demonstrating, again, the various affective and pragmatic paths they may take when dealing with the agents of the dwindling welfare state. As we demonstrate later in the article, our interlocutors’ diaries reveal similar dual feelings towards social workers as well as myriad ways to engage with them and with the state during the pandemic.
The welfare state, poverty and COVID-19 in Israel

The Israeli welfare regime has its roots in the exclusively Jewish pre-state Zionist organisations. After 1949, despite its ideological commitment to build a social democratic welfare regime, relying upon and even extending the Beveridge report, the nascent welfare state extended differential practices of exclusion and inclusion, prioritising the Zionist nation building interest. This had translated into a regime of favouritism of those whose welfare was vital in the eyes of the state, mainly Jewish Ashkenazi settlers, and the exclusion of those whose welfare could have been forsaken, Jewish Mizrahi immigrants and Palestinian citizens. By the 1970s, some, but not all, of the national and ethnic barriers to welfare were removed and welfare became relatively universal during that golden era of welfarism in Israel (Rosenhek, 1999; Doron, 2003).

There is little, if any, controversy among scholars about the impact of the rise of the neoliberal welfare state. Since the early 2000s, various governments enacted policies aiming to deregulate the labour market, privatise and liberalise the financial markets, and decrease public expenditure. The first to take the hit of that assault on welfare were working lone mothers and families with three children or more whose child allowance was cut by some 55 per cent between 2001 and 2006 (Mei-Ami, 2008; Lavee, 2021). During this decade, the share of families with a working breadwinner among poor households had risen from less than 45 per cent to almost 60 per cent (Stier, 2011: 159). More recent data show that some 18 per cent of families live in poverty, and an additional 8.5 per cent live just above the poverty line (Swirski et al, 2019). Between 2003 and 2016, the share of these households had not changed significantly from a total of 27.7 per cent to 26.6 per cent respectively (Swirski et al, 2019), which keeps Israel ranked with high incidents of poverty internationally (NII, 2018: 41). Approximately two-thirds of poor families live in persistent poverty, among them, more than half are either working, employed, or have two or more wage earners in their household (NII, 2018: 39, table 15). A continuous state of austerity together with a polarized, unequal labour market maintains poverty as a real experience for some 470,000 families and 842,000 children who lived below the poverty line in 2018 (Gal et al, 2019). Similar patterns emerge when observing the state of working lone mothers. About a quarter of lone parent families, of which 84 per cent are headed by women, are living in poverty (Hasson et al, 2021). Indeed, while more than 90 per cent of lone mothers are working, they can hardly make ends meet.

Where the state was rolling back, the third sector has stepped in, growing at a fast pace since the 1990s. A closer look at Latet (literally, to give; est. 1996, https://www.latet.org.il/en/) may illustrate the diminishing role of the welfare state. With an estimated budget of NIS166 million (£39.5 million), some of it comes from the state budget, Latet has become a huge umbrella welfare organisation estimated to reach some 80,000 households in need in 2020.

In recent decades various governments had made pretentious declarations regarding the need to reduce poverty. The most publicised was in 2013 when the Minister of Welfare, whose party emerged from the social protest of two years earlier, initiated a public committee to combat poverty (Krummer-Nevo, 2020). Later reports from Taub (Gal et al, 2019) and Adva (Swirski and Dagan-Buzaglo, 2014) research centres suggested that the vast majority of the committee’s recommendations were never adopted or implemented and that overall the poverty rate has remained stagnant in
the last two decades (NII, 2018). Globally, economic and ethnic inequalities resulting from neoliberal welfare policies have been dramatically exacerbated by COVID-19 (Strier and Shdaimah, 2020). As states and societies were coming to a halt, in Israel and elsewhere people who were experiencing persistent poverty had to re-adapt to a reality where even the meagre assistance of the state or of the third sector was beyond their reach (Krummer-Nevo and Refaeli, 2021; Roll et al, 2022).

During the course of the lockdowns, the incidence of poverty rose sharply (Endeweld et al, 2020). Citing the Latet 2020 report and CBS data, Roll et al (2022) observed increases in the share of households living in poverty, from 20.1 per cent to 29.3 per cent, and in food insecurity and the number of families reporting financial hardship. By comparing various financial hardships – such as changes in households’ expenditure on mortgage, utility, credit card and food – this research found that ‘respondents who were unemployed prior to the pandemic were more likely to experience all measured hardships’ (Roll et al, 2022: 15), and likewise low-income households more generally. Indeed, a survey that was conducted close to the end of the first lockdown (in May 2020), found that 68.3 per cent of those living in poverty had their income reduced compared to 49.3 per cent of those who were not living in poverty (Krummer-Nevo and Refaeli, 2021: 426), while the former also suffered more mental distress (Krummer-Nevo and Refaeli, 2021: 427). Those who experienced poverty also reported in greater rate about being in need of loans or assistance from family and friends. Similarly, Roll et al (2022: 17) concluded that

the government support provided during and beyond the pandemic may not have been enough to ensure the financial stability of more vulnerable households. Considering that economically and socially disadvantaged households fared worse before the pandemic and may have been affected by the pandemic to the greater extent, more equitable policies may be needed to address the differences in hardship experiences in Israel.

A recent report of the State Comptroller on the functioning of local municipalities during the pandemic pointed to a lack of coordination and communication between their various agencies, resulting in them failing to locate those who were in need of assistance (State of Israel, 2021). Thus, the National Insurance Institute, the Ministry of Social Equality and the Ministry of Finance were unable to obtain data or utilise their databases due to inadequate procedures of inter-ministerial reporting. Furthermore, there is an apparent consensus among the directors of the various social services departments, the report goes on, that concentrating effort on nutrition initiatives was disproportional, given the abundant challenges they were facing during the crisis. Indeed, social services had already suffered continuous cuts in resources and personnel prior to the pandemic (Ben-Ezra and Hamama-Raz, 2021: 1552). Hence, the scarcity of social workers and resources had resulted in a failure to attend to the needs of children and youth at risk, the disabled, or victims of domestic violence, the number of which rose exponentially during the lockdowns (Carmon, 2020; Nouman, 2021). Eventually, despite attempts to adjust to the COVID-19 challenges (Ben-Ezra and Hamama-Raz, 2021; Nouman, 2021), social workers remained ‘largely invisible’ (Alston and Chow, 2021: 1526). For those who are living in poverty this meant less or no state assistance than usual.
Research design and methodology

The research team

It is no longer contested nor specifically innovative to acknowledge that the subjective experiences of those living in poverty must inform the ways scholars address and explain poverty (Salamon, 2010; Schweiger and Graf, 2014; Daly and Kelly, 2015; Benjamin, 2020; Krummer-Nevo, 2020; Lister, 2021; Beresford et al, 2021; McKenzie, 2022). Still, awareness and empathy do not necessarily suffice in mitigating the gap between the researcher and the research participants. Nor is being reflexive about patronising assumptions that may result in missing out important aspects of the reality of those who experience poverty (McKenzie, 2022). Daly had already warned us of adopting practices and lacking reflexivity regarding such practices that ‘include the selection of one-sided research questions, missing or false comparator groups or biased interpretations of research findings’ (Daly, 2018: 568). Indeed, opening up to the narratives of people who experience poverty reveals their multifaceted character. Yet, ascribing to them resourcefulness and resilience, ‘just like any other people’, still leaves the researcher in the position of assessing how ‘adjusted’ and ‘deserving’ her research subjects are (McKenzie, 2022: 33). To avoid these pitfalls, we sought to establish a reflexive and participatory procedure which ‘disrupts the interviewer–interviewee dynamic commonly used in qualitative interviewing’ (also Hall, 2019: 148; Simpson Reeves, Parsell and Liu, 2020: 447).

More specifically, in our research procedure and analysis we seek to mitigate the interviewer–interviewee gap while acknowledging and respecting the lived knowledge of our interlocutors and how they narrate their own experience (Hall, 2019; Krummer-Nevo, 2020). This is achieved, first, by the unique composition of our research team and, second, by devising an online self-documentation tool that enables our participants to share their subjective life-knowledge as and when they see fit. Together, as we explain later in the article, these two methodological strategies shape how we devise our research and interpret the data.

Based on prior acquaintance and collaborations, we formed a research team comprised of two political activists who themselves experience poverty and three academics. This collaboration allows us, similarly to Hall’s method of ‘co-presence’ (Hall, 2019: 159–63), to create trustful relations with our interlocutors and to allow them to safely share their own thoughts and feelings. Indeed, the activists have used their networks to recruit participants to the research, and they were conducting the initial interviews with the volunteers, thus providing the latter an easy access to the research that sidesteps the power relations between academics and those who live in poverty (Daly, 2018; Hall et al, 2021). Still, their contribution has been far greater. While the activists were not part of the diarists, their own lived knowledge and intimate knowledge of our diarists’ lives has proved valuable when we set the research goals and the initial guidelines for the interviews, and even more so, when we analysed the data. In this manner, beyond ‘listening to life-knowledge’ our dual method offers participation, and besides voice it gives room (Patrick, 2020). To this goal, we provided our interlocutors the means to narrate their life experiences on their own terms by way of self-documentation (Herron et al, 2019; Karadzhov, 2020; McKenzie, 2022).
The participants and self-documentation

I thought it would be right that occasionally you ask me some questions, but it's not. It makes things difficult for me. It forces me to confront all the feelings/thoughts, some of which I suppress in order to survive. (Elinor, 22.4.2020)

Documenting one’s life is not straightforward a task, let alone if this life is already in peril. The pandemic had created new challenges to participatory research, calling for creative methods of distant participation. For the researched this entailed engaging in a research study ‘during what is already a highly stressful and uncertain time when normal routines are disrupted’ (Hall et al, 2021: 9). Yet, we saw it as important to shed light on life in poverty at these times, and so we approached potential diarists, first, based on prior acquaintance and later through an open call on Facebook, which serves as a major arena for people in poverty to network, seek help or mobilise for political action. In approaching them we explained the purpose of our research to hear first hand about the specific challenges that arise from the new, unprecedented condition of isolation. Because of our prior acquaintance with the volunteers we did not conduct full interviews with them, as some were part of the networks of our own team activists while some had already been interviewed for our other research projects. We familiarised them with the self-documentation tool that would allow them to document their experiences and thoughts directly from their mobile phone. We went over the open-ended guidelines (see Appendix A) which relate to anything from mundane hardships in getting the shopping done, having their children cope with online learning, or seeking assistance from state agencies, to their thoughts and emotions about their daily life and frustrations at times of social isolation.

We recruited our interlocutors in two waves. In March 2020, we reached out to potential participants and published an open call on Facebook. Our prior acquaintance with most of the diarists proved effective in creating rapport (Hall et al, 2021: 8; McKenzie, 2022). Rejecting the arbitrariness of ‘objective measures’ (Tzameret-Kretcher, 2013), we left it for the volunteers to self-identify as being poor or as experiencing poverty. By early April, nine women volunteered to participate in this project. Each of the team was assigned to maintain regular contact with specified participants through the duration of the documentation. This one-on-one contact proved important as it created another channel for the participants to share their experience or to ventilate frustration, and also because of the objective difficulties in maintaining a diary (McKenzie, 2022: 35). Similarly to Hall’s moments of ‘quiet politics’, whereby decisions and actions may be inaudible but still politically meaningful (Hall, 2019: 144), for our volunteers, narrating their daily routines and rendering their private lives public was seen as an effort worth taking in order to make life in poverty visible and to possibly contribute to alleviating the burden. For this reason, Elinor, despite quitting the research, permitted us to use her journal, and Ronit, our most dedicated diarist, asked us to use her real name. So did some others who saw in this a way of giving poverty life and presence. Others requested that we use pseudonyms, which we respected (for full information on the diarists and a note on ethical procedures, see Appendix B).
In the second wave, after a short hiatus, some diarists dropped out and ten more joined the research. By January 2021, we used our specifically designed website in Hebrew and Arabic (whilepoor.com) as a digital diary. In this round we conducted semi-structured interviews with the recruits prior to them starting their journals. Based on our first round, we were aware of the limitations of using self-documentation, mainly because of its remittent usage and because occasionally the entries are laconic, but also because reiterating their daily experience only aggravates the diarists’ frustration. The transcribed interviews and the continuous contact with the diarists proved an important complementary resource therefore.

**Data analysis**

In order to avoid bias, the journals and the transcribed interviews were allocated between us so that we could each identify emerging themes. After discussing them, we grouped them into recurring themes as they relate to their daily experiences. For the purposes of this article, we extracted statements that pertain to how our participants described their relationships with the state either directly — when using, for example, keywords such as ‘social security’, ‘school’ and so on — or indirectly — usually when utterances were laden with emotions, taking into consideration the context of the utterance (see Crean, 2018). Among the recurring themes, we ask to highlight two types of interactions with the (absent) state: chasing the state mirage, and withdrawing altogether. Needless to say, these interactions are not mutually exclusive, as this transpires from the journals and interviews to which we now turn.

**Interacting with the absent state**

The participants in our study are experienced in dealing with the state’s welfare system, long before the pandemic. Most frequently, people in poverty reach out to the various agencies of the state, seeking assistance from the social workers at the local welfare departments of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Social Services, sorting out their allowances at the National Insurance Institute, or dealing with either the Housing Companies that are charged to maintain public housing, or the Ministry of Housing if they wish to retain their eligibility to public housing (currently, some 3,000 eligible recipients are long waiting to be housed) (Levy and Kohan Benlulu, 2019). Interacting with the state and its street-level bureaucrats is never an easy task, let alone for those who depend on the welfare state for their everyday livelihood. These understaffed bureaus are normally packed with people seeking assistance, yet as the pandemic erupted, when face-to-face services were halted to avoid social contact, the lives of most of our participants were severely worsened.

How do people in poverty cope with these hardships? Arguably, their practices and meaning-making processes manifest the dialectics of the Janus-faced abandoning/monitoring state that they routinely confront. Reading closely the personal diaries and the interviews, two main patterns reflect the confrontational relationships between those living in poverty and the state, both during the pandemic but even more habitually. Being abandoned by the state means that those, indeed mostly women, who experience poverty are cast in a perpetual struggle to receive the aid they lawfully deserve and to ensure that their rights are not being forsaken. At the same time, being subjected to various practices of state monitoring and surveillance...
often results not only in mistrust but also in withdrawing almost altogether from the welfare services. Thus, for example, women who live in persistent poverty fear that any sign of weakness will result in their children be removed by an order of the social worker (Kaplan et al, 2022). In the following, we discuss each of the two paths.

**Chasing the state**

People living in poverty need to constantly tend to and negotiate their access to social services (Benjamin, 2020). They must cope with the tiresome waiting for the state bureaucrats and be patient with the state (Auyero, 2012). This feeling of neglect is reflected in the words of Naomi: ‘The social worker, it’s been two years since I last heard from her. [She] won’t reply to any of my emails or messages’ (Naomi, Journal, 29.3.21). The coronavirus crisis however did turn life more difficult than before and made communication with the social services near impossible. Alice too expressed her frustration at the futile attempts to reach the social services:

I called today the customer service of the National Insurance Institute and [had a] chat with a representative | it’s been three months now that I am waiting for a reply from them about long term unemployment allowance | I tackle customer service [representative] who knows absolutely nothing, giving me cut-and-paste kind of answers,’please be patient’ | the allowance that was supposed to be paid in from November 1 until January 15 no one returns [to me] and explains | 3 months | why it is so overdue. (Alice, Journal, 20.1.2021; the sign | replaces the missing punctuation marks in the original entry)

Similarly, Jamal’s shares how his wife’s health needs are being completely ignored, expressing how useless the welfare services are in his eyes: ‘The Welfare? I applied for assistance in getting a mattress for my [disabled] wife in October. A mattress! To this day I did not get any response. They don’t have a budget’ (Jamal, Interview, 7.6.2021). Budgetary constraints aside, our diarists express how being brutally deserted by the state impacted them emotionally.

We are constantly being told that [the pandemic] is a war! War! War! But it turns out that this is just another stress, on top of an already existing stress. No one in the media has yet to interview those people living off of benefits, disabled people, single mothers, families who are now struggling even ten times more [than previously]. There is no doubt that if it weren’t for the activists, there would be so many children who would go hungry!!! Because the state just does not see them!! Because the National Insurance Institute, or the employment centres, and all the other institutions that are supposed to help you – they only push you around for a missing signature on a formal file!!! Plus, they also make tons of mistakes!!! There are months where you get absolutely nothing from them [no payments], because the employment centre would mistakenly report that you didn’t sign on the dole… even if you did! And now they make it your responsibility to get yourself a medical clearance [to ‘cover’ for the missing days]… Some people don’t even have an internet connection [at home] and they don’t know how to use the cell…
phone in order to register at the employment centre, these people just fall through the cracks. This is very very very bad!!!! And I don’t even bother mentioning the emotional well-being, which only gets worse, because everything is in such a mess. (Ronit, Journal, 24.4.2020)

Interestingly, some of our interlocutors translate these frustrating personal experiences into political structural explanations. Accordingly, lack of media interest, bureaucratic complications and an overall disregard of people in poverty have led to very real consequences, including hunger, zero income, feelings of loneliness, and severe emotional stress.

It is simply inconceivable to me that the welfare [system] does not make any contact, they know my case, but won’t even pick up the phone and call me? Really? Think about it. A human being. Does one’s dead body must rot and smell before someone even notices that he is dead? Where has basic human dignity gone? Are we just currency for the welfare system? Aren’t we human beings too? Or are we merely a number? Ain’t I a human being?

Yes, you are getting money for taking care of me, but then it so happens that I self-defecate while lying on the sofa, and nobody even knows. The physician ordered I’d visit his clinic, he said you should come, even if it means taking a cab, because we need to figure out what to do. I told him ‘I just can’t make it’. [...] Human dignity is completely lost in this country. (Sonia, Interview, 2.2.2021)

During the lockdown, as the social services were failing to attend to those in need, health-related issues also became harder to manage.

I thought about the dedicated coronavirus relief that [Prime Minister] Netanyahu has promised to grant the people. Unfortunately, I can already tell it’s not going to happen, it’s as if disabled people do not even exist, although we were severely affected. Not only did prices [of basic commodities] go up, but now we could only get our medicines and other necessities via home delivery, which adds up to the price. During lockdown we had also paid more for electricity because you can’t go out so the TV is constantly on, lights are turned on, in addition to many other things that the government alleges we were not affected by. But they don’t endure what we have to face; that every Shekel we have to spend is unjust, for we have nothing we can live off, besides the psychological harm, the troubling thoughts and constant fighting over where we could possibly save in order to simply survive for another month. (Jamal, Journal, 2.11.2020)

Besides lack of material resources, our participants protested about the lack of information available to them. It appears that the welfare services fail to publicise the benefits that they are entitled to, thus leaving our interlocutors helpless. To be sure, our participants seem to be well aware of their rights, and with time, some have become ‘managers’ of their own cases. Indeed, habitually not only do they learn the formal rules and regulations, they also develop tacit knowledge about the informal paths to make their claims, for example, knowing which clerk to turn to and how to interact...
with them (Benjamin, 2020). The coronavirus has made this informal tacit knowledge invaluable, as Ronit’s words indicate: ‘I have called the welfare, hoping to get a response. But no one answers over there. I have left numerous messages. Asking whether there are food assistance packages. My washing machine has broken, so maybe they could help?’ (Ronit, Journal, 3.1.21). A few days later she added: ‘I read somewhere on Facebook that they are going to distribute food stamps. I therefore called the social worker a few times to ask whether we are entitled to receive food stamps’ (16.1.21). Paradoxically, although Ronit heard about this programme through the grapevine, she still could not confirm this officially. Thus, lacking official information and unresponsiveness by the state and its agents manifests a double abandonment, whereby, the social workers fail them, but even when the state offers relief, this does not reach them. During the crisis, being proactive has become more difficult and more crucial than ever.

**Withdrawing from the state**

The existence of people in poverty routinely spans a space between the monitoring and the abandoning state. Through various governmental practices and multiple forms of social scrutiny, the state intensively monitors almost every aspect of lower income lone-mothers and people who experience poverty (Hertzog, 2014; Lavee and Benjamin, 2015). This in turn leads to a fear of what the state might do to oneself, to one’s children or to the family. This fear is not unfounded. People in poverty are required to deal with the constant threat of child removal, they are more vulnerable to accusations of parental alienation in court and to being subject to sexual exploitation (Lavee, 2021; Yona and Nadan, 2021). Thus, people in poverty, and particularly mothers, are simultaneously dependent upon the state and its agents while trying to evade its prying eyes. These affective entanglements come up in our data, often as an explanation for choosing to disengage from various welfare programmes, or refraining from contacting one’s assigned social worker, even though the pandemic has made it hard to get by without this assistance. Barbara says:

> So for me, to even set foot in the welfare agency after all I’ve been through with them, well, there is no way. I can assure you, and this is something I’ve shared with everybody: I shall not file a case at the welfare agency. They are the ones who have destroyed my life, they are the ones who have hurt my daughter, they even went as far as filing a lawsuit against us. They have tortured me, they have ruined our family, they have totally crushed me. No way am I ever going to file a case. I was told: ‘but why not? They will help you’. [But] I would rather have nothing to eat than to file a case at the welfare. (Journal, 7.6.2021)

The fear of the monitoring eye of the state also transpires in an interview with Ronit:

> I sometimes fear turning to the twins’ teachers, or the welfare, admitting we don’t have any food. That teacher. She keeps on nagging me that they must continue studying. But now, there are days when… How could they even study? You see? I don’t want to reveal it, but how could they possibly study if they don’t even have lunch? And I’m afraid to tell that at the school. (Interview, 3.10.2020)
A report of experts that was published during the first months of the crisis pointed out this problem of food and nutrition security (The Crisis Experts Team, 2020). When schools shut down, the state practically had left those children at their own mercy, or the mercy of alternative organisations. As Ronit explicitly elucidates, not only do her children suffer from the absence of adequate nutrition, it might result in sanctions by the state that would hold the parents negligible. So people in poverty, some of whom notably lost their informal means of provision, seek alternative paths for assistance. While some NGOs were still providing food packages, people needed to seek help through alternative networks. Particularly, these were individual activists who became critical in the economy of food and material support. As Barbara explains:

On that particularly hard day, I told myself: ‘what are you going to do?’ But then Sivan [an activist whose identity has been pseudonymised, authors], god bless her soul, [helps me] whenever she can. She made sure the pre-paid electricity meter is paid for, and she told me: ‘I shall help with electricity whenever you need. Just give me a call.’ I said: OK, but at a certain point you start feeling you are a burden. (Interview, 18.3.2020)

Jamal is totally relying on willing people for help. Asked if he bought face masks or Alco gel, he replied:

Yes, yes. I was given a package. I have a friend whose wife is a nurse. She came to visit us and saw that we don’t have masks. Two days later she came back with two packages and the gel. We couldn’t afford buying it ourselves. There is nothing I can do about it. But we shut ourselves. There is nothing we can do… this is what my life is. Poverty is the cruellest enemy. I am so mad about the state. […] A brutal rape incident they would not stop showing it on TV. But the poor? Nobody gives a damn. They show nothing. Once there were two or three demonstrations so they showed a one-minute piece on TV [where they depicted the poor] as if they are to blame. Nobody shows that they have nothing to eat, there are so many people [in this condition] and no one to help them, and they can’t even afford to buy bread [but] nobody talks about it. It’s the media’s fault too. […] nobody sees it, nobody knows. (Jamal, Interview, 7.6.2021)

While some participants were connected to informal networks of support, others were completely unaware of such alternative activist support circles and were not in the know. They were thus forced to rely on the already waning welfare provisions. Either way, alternative networks of support are extremely fragile. They require a lot of emotional labour and are neither consistent nor reliable, precisely because they are based on personal relationships. As Smadar notes:

I cannot take the bus [due to my medical condition]. How, then, am I supposed to take all the medical tests that I must take when I can’t even afford a Taxi? So now I must ask for this money as a gift. But I don’t want gifts. […] I want the state to take responsibility instead of me having to rely on private people. (Interview, 6.1.2021)
Moreover, such close-knit support networks necessarily make one constantly assess whether ‘it’s her turn now’ and whether by receiving support she might be unintentionally taking it away from someone else who may need it even more than her. Indeed, alternative support systems are based on the logic of charity and, as such, they foster feelings of shame and at times they discourage those in need to even seek them. Still, when push comes to shove, these individuals and networks are the only reliable source of support for food, school supplies, electricity and other basic needs. At times, women in need themselves become the activists who seek to solve not merely their personal problems. This is the case with Sonia who told our team member ‘luckily I am no longer shy and there are donors who walk with me all the way. [...] These ties that I have made are not only for myself. They are for me to promote, to empower, to help.’ Sonia demanded from the municipality to provide not only her daughter with a computer for online learning during the lockdown, but also for tens of children whose families experience poverty. Her activism drove the welfare services to ask her to form a WhatsApp group for single parents so that she could address their needs.

Discussion

The coronavirus crisis has caught the world at a time when the fate of globalisation has been challenged by the 2008 economic crisis and the subsequent political upheavals since 2011. At the wake of the pandemic, Arjun Appadurai who was one of the proponents of the promising moment of globalisation some three decades ago has offered a sober account of the new situation. Calling to re-assess the balance of power between globalisation and the nation states, he refrained from suggesting that this is the end of globalisation. Rather, he pointed to the ways citizens have become newly aware of their own power in securing the survival and prosperity of their own nation states, by following public health rules, and making economic and social sacrifices. Neither politicians nor citizens are likely to forget this rediscovery of the social power of ordinary people. (Appadurai, 2020)

Indeed, for us, the opportunity to perceive the coronavirus crisis through the eyes of those who live in persistent poverty proves to be telling on how the state should conduct itself for the benefit of its most vulnerable citizens. In the final analysis we want to offer two critical points.

First, the pandemic left bare the promise of the state to care for the welfare of its citizens in times of globalisation. Not only the poor but also citizens across society, let alone non–citizens, came to realise that despite its pretence to provide for everyone’s needs, the markets were left incapacitated in the face of the crisis. In fact, big and small businesses resorted to the state to salvage them and, of course, to take responsibility over their employees. Thus, states had rolled back in pulling their resources and capacities in order to maintain the social order during the forced halt to ‘normal’ life. However, for the women and men who have been living the failure of the state long before the pandemic, this was a continuation of their life in crisis, the main difference being almost complete lack of state support. Indeed, as the crisis rolled out their habitual mistrust in the state and its agencies seemed to be proved...
right. This mistrust had made some of our interlocutors relieved by knowing that at this time of crisis the state would let them be.

Second, in habitual times people in poverty manoeuvre between the state, civil society and the market, providing for themselves and their families. As the state focused on maintaining the social order and on finding a new balance in the face of the economic slowdown, those who are already forsaken by the state had to seek new paths for support. The journals thus reveal another disparity, within those who experience poverty. On the one hand there are those who may have social networks of mainly women activists who provide support, and on the other, those who do not have access to such networks. While it is hard to estimate the size of those who were left with merely nothing, a report of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Social Services may give an indication (Peleg, 2021). It estimated that the number of rough sleepers or homeless people increased by 27 per cent, and that 60 per cent of the 733 first-time seekers of state support in 2020 were already living rough before the pandemic. During the pandemic informal paths for getting by, such as collecting and selling of bottles, working informally, or even begging, were ‘closed’. For our diarists, this meant extra stress and frustration, reflected also in their stories of loneliness, hopelessness and anger.

Limitations and strengths

The strength of this research lies in its timing and design, being based on the unmediated lived knowledge of both the activist–researchers and the diarists during a state of emergency. In most studies, where the voice of the researched is heard through interviews, ethnographies or surveys, the researchers still remain in the position of setting the terms of the interaction. We, in contrast, hopefully avoid this, first, by calling for people to volunteer according to their own self-definition as experiencing poverty. Second, using the self-documentation tool allows the researched to control and choose when and how to share their thoughts and experiences. However, this method also poses some limitations. Since people who experience poverty have severe time limits, it was more difficult than we expected to collect consecutive journal entries. Notably, this is a finding in itself, which calls for further research. To the extent that the participants see this journal as a political means, which, as we showed, they do, it only reconfirms how difficult it is for people in poverty to act politically, mainly for lack of time and resources. A second methodological limitation is the relatively small number of volunteers and the self-selection procedure which make this research limited in scope. Therefore, any generalisation must be made with caution. Nonetheless, as we strongly believe in the capability of this method, we continue to gather data to allow us to extend our research for a longer period of time.

Conclusion

In this article we sought to shed light on how the welfare state under neoliberal capitalism endures a global crisis, and how this crisis is experienced, seen and reported by those whose lives the state has forsaken. The neoliberal state characteristically marks a shift away from the pretence to universalism and the constitution of difference as a means of determining who is a deserving citizen. Poverty has been responsibilised, and the ‘poor’ are undergoing processes of neoliberal Othering and stigmatisation.
manifested in the denial of their self-representation. This lack of representational agency has been our starting point. In conclusion, this study raises two, more general insights. The first concerns the poverty–state–crisis triangle. Based on our data, we contend that even at times of a society-wide crisis such as COVID-19, people in poverty know all too well that they still count for nothing (Lister, 2021). The failure of the social services to attend to their needs, at a time when alternative paths were closed, drove many of our interlocutors deep down, testifying once again to their social abjection (Tyler, 2013). Yet, these diaries tell us something more about the condition of life in poverty.

Lisa McKenzie writes in her introduction to the Lockdown Diaries (2022: 31), ‘Keeping a diary is an act of bravery: as writers reflect on their realities, their environment and their own thoughts and actions, they are often speaking truths that others don’t want to hear.’ The women and men who volunteered to participate in this research and to share their thoughts and fears and to expose us to their daily struggles were not mute, although the state refuses to listen to them. Their lives were nothing but ordinary, although the media preferred to celebrate the innovative ways in which the middle class had coped with the new social condition. They are knowledgeable and political and their willingness to document their lives was indeed an act of bravery and a statement of their view of themselves as worthy citizens in a society that continuously denies them a place.

Note
1 Corresponding author.

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Above all, we are thankful to the men and women who shared their thoughts, feelings and experiences for enriching us with their insights and perspectives. Your time and effort do not go unnoticed and we only hope that our work adequately reflects your experiences and stands up to your expectations. We also wish to thank the editors for their patience and interest in this work and for their and the reviewers’ insightful comments. As always, we are solely responsible for any errors.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Guiding questionnaire for the participants*

To our volunteers,

We are a research team made up of academics and activists who want to learn what life looks like in quarantine for those whose daily lives are dictated by poverty. In this journal we ask you to share with us your daily experience of life at home, your needs and difficulties, as well as your feelings and emotions, and more broadly we seek to learn as much as possible about the daily routine in these unconventional times.

To help with self-documentation, we’ve prepared a form with guiding questions that you are invited to fill in daily (or as often as possible). As you can see, the form allows you to upload sound or image files (at your wish) and you are also invited to document your routine in other means (from notebook to document in pictures or voice). We are interested in the most routine documentation possible — it can be a daily journal but it is up to you to decide what you feel and want to share about your routine and your thoughts on the situation. You can write briefly or at length (there’s no space limit) and you may attach voice or images files, or in any other method.

Thanks, the team

Part One (to be filled once per participant)

Personal details (Name, how many people are in your household, single- or two-parent family, your city, public/private rental, no. of rooms, eligibility for housing assistance)

Part Two (Journal)

Documentation is divided into subtopics (but you can write as you feel).

• **Home**: what did you do today at home? Did you shop? How? What did you cook? Who took part in the homemaking?
• **The children**: when did they go to bed and when did they wake up? What did they do during the day? Did they study? Did anyone help them in their studying? Did they play on the computer? In which room did they spend the day? How did they get along between them? Did they help you?
• **Money**: Did you buy anything today? Did the children ask you for money or anything to buy? Were you asked to make any payment today? Did you have any extraordinary financial need? Did you receive help?
• **Institutions**: Have you been in touch with any institution today (welfare or other)? For what purpose (if you’re keen to share)? Did you need anything particular? Have you been helped?
• **You**: How about yourself? Tell us about your daily routine. What has made you happy? What has been difficult? Who helped you? What has helped you? How did you sleep at night, and do you keep your routine? Has your day been different to other days? Tell us about a particular situation, happy or frustrating, different, interesting, anything that comes up.
• **Attachments**: You can attach any file (video, audio, text, photo)
* The questionnaire is translated from the Hebrew almost verbatim.

Appendix B

1. Ethics and procedures

This research has been approved by the Open University of Israel ethics committee. The volunteers were given a full explanation about the research goals and methods and were informed about their freedom to opt out at any stage or to ask that any or all of their materials would not be used.

2. Diarists cited in the article

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<th>Employment status</th>
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