

Children's perspectives on economic adversity: A review of the literature

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*CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES ON
ECONOMIC ADVERSITY: A REVIEW OF
THE LITERATURE*

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Editors

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Abstract

This paper reviews some of the recent qualitative literature on children's perspectives on economic disadvantage. The idea of asking people who experience disadvantage about their own situations is still a relatively new one in the social sciences, and the idea of asking children about their own perceptions of economic and social disadvantage is even more recent. Nine analyses, all published since 1998, and all of them involving in-depth interviews or groupwork with children aged between 5 and 17, are examined in detail. Most of these studies develop frameworks based on the 'new sociology of childhood', which emphasises the social construction of childhood and children's agency in the context of child-adult relations. The nine studies cover a number of issues related to economic disadvantage, including exclusion from activities and peer groups at school and in the community; perceptions of 'poor' and 'affluent' children; participation in organised activities outside of school hours; methods of coping with financial hardship; support for parents in coping and in seeking and keeping employment, and aspirations for future careers and lives.

The analysis is organised under two themes - social exclusion and agency. Both are important from a child's perspective. The research examined here shows that what concerns children is not lack of resources *per se*, but exclusion from activities that other children appear to take for granted, and embarrassment and shame at not being able to participate on equal terms with other children. The research also shows the extent to which children's agency matters, first for themselves, to make sense of their situation and to interpret it positively or otherwise; second, for their parents and families, to help them cope with financial and other pressures through engaging in domestic work and caring, not making demands on parents, and protecting them from further pressure where they are able; and third, for policy: initiatives to reduce children's exclusion must take account of children's own perspectives on their situation.

On the basis of the nine papers analysed, the review argues that economic disadvantage can lead to exclusion in a number of critical areas, including schooling, access to out of school activities, and interaction with peers. But the review also finds that children use their agency creatively to reduce the impact of economic adversity on them and their families. However, they can also turn it inwards, leading to them lowering their own aspirations, excluding themselves from a range of activities, or engaging in activities that attract social disapproval. The review concludes with a discussion of the ethical and practical challenges associated with conducting research with children, and with a summary of issues that still remain under-researched.

1 Introduction

The scientific examination of poverty has a long history across several branches of the social sciences. But it is only in relatively recent times that adults have been asked by researchers for their own perspectives on poverty (Chambers, 1997; Ruggeri Laderchi et al., 2003). The aim of this review is to describe some important themes that are emerging from the growing literature on children's perspectives on economic adversity. Nearly all of the existing studies of children's perspectives on poverty have been published in the most recent ten years. Nonetheless, as this paper shows, the nine studies that make up the raw material for this review constitute a coherent body of research, with considerable consistency in terms of analytical frameworks, themes examined, and findings. One of the main themes that emerge from these studies, which analyse the perspectives of children aged between 5 to 17 years, is that children's views matter, for understanding children's own behaviour, for understanding how children interact with family, peers and institutions, and for developing effective policy responses to the challenges that economically disadvantaged children face, at home, at school and in the wider community.

The children who participate in these studies are not always 'the most disadvantaged' in every respect. In particular, most appear to enjoy close relations with at least one parent, and closeness to family protects them from many of the worst effects of economic disadvantage. Children who are experiencing neglect and abuse, who are homeless or living in care, and who cannot rely on the support of their families (and who for the most part have probably experienced economic disadvantage) are likely to face greater challenges in their daily lives and as they grow up (Kruttschnitt et al., 1994; Scott, 2006). While it is important to acknowledge that family poverty is sometimes accompanied by other forms of deprivation including homelessness, abuse and neglect, this literature review cannot adequately deal with the complex issues involved – they require separate detailed analysis, and review of a different literature that focuses more specifically on the issues in question.

It is now widely accepted that children have a right to be heard – this is clearly stated in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). A considerable body of work emphasises the importance of consulting with children, and methods for effective consultation (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005; Save the Children, 2003; 2004). In cases of family law and child protection, legislation in several countries states that children must be consulted (see for example, Community Services Commission, 2000, Neale and Smart, 1999). A number of governments have also put in place survey instruments to regularly assess children's perception of their socioeconomic wellbeing (see UNICEF-IRC 2005). As with all participatory or client focused research, some is likely to be tokenistic, while some has a more substantive intent (for a full discussion see Hart 2001). But regarding poverty, it appears that a different ethic has applied, to both adults and children. Lister (2004) speaks of the 'Othering' of poor people, where the discourses, attitudes and actions of the non-poor can have a profound impact on how poverty is experienced. Among these attitudes are an assumption of passivity and lack of agency on the part of the poor. 'Othering' is also arguably imposed on children, who are likewise assumed to be passive and subject to the will of adults. (James et al., 1998; Qvortrup, 1994) The studies reviewed in this paper show that while both childhood itself and economic disadvantage constrain social engagement, children adapt to and

endeavour to manage these constraints. The studies show that many children respond to economic disadvantage with resourcefulness and optimism. But some also respond with anxiety, pessimism and reduced ambition.

There is an important policy purpose to these studies. Children's perspectives are used to identify the most important issues that the children themselves associate with economic disadvantage (Ridge, 2002; van der Hoek, 2005). Children's perspectives are also used to inform on the long term impacts of early socialisation of children into socially stratified societies (Backett-Milburn et al., 2003; Sutton et al., 2007; Weinger, 2000). They show school as an important setting for poorer children's social engagement, and the positive effects of some policies, such as school uniforms, which tend to reduce the impact of economic differences between children (Ridge, 2002; Roker, 1998; Wikeley et al., 2007). They also show how children are important actors in their parents' decisions and ability to seek and remain in employment. Many children appear to go to considerable lengths to support their parents' engagement with the labour market (Ridge, 2007a).

1.1 The approach in this paper

The approach in this review can best be described as sociological. This is appropriate because sociology has led the way with the construction of childhood as a space for agency and creativity, and the conceptualisation of children as both 'being' and 'becoming' – that is, not just future adults but present human beings, with their own perspectives and preferences (Qvortrup, 1994). Until fairly recently, the dominant approach in all the social sciences (and greatly influenced by developmental psychology) was to consider children as empty vessels to be filled, with arguments raging around the contexts in which they were filled, and who filled them (James et al., 1998). Economics has generally had little to say about children as active agents, and has tended to assume that households have a single preference and utility function formed by its adult members, and that children are either consumption goods or an investment in the future (Becker, 1981; Donath, 1995; Levison, 2000); although consumer research has long understood that children can influence household consumption decisions (Wang et al., 2007). The new sociology of childhood has actively sought to understand children's agency through their interpretation of and responses to their environments (Qvortrup, 1994). Most of the studies of children and poverty reviewed here explicitly place themselves within this perspective, drawing extensively on the work of leading experts in the sociology of childhood, such as Qvortrup (1994), Corsaro (1997) and James, Jenks, et al. (1998).

One of the key themes running through the sociology of childhood is unequal power relations between adults and children, and how particular qualitative research methods are needed to develop a real understanding of children's perspectives and preferences. In line with this theme, all nine analyses reviewed in this paper are qualitative, involving small samples of children (and sometimes their parents too). This is not to dismiss the value of quantitative research on children. Ridge (2002) includes in her book an extensive analysis of a quantitative survey of 700 respondents aged 11 to 15 years to examine their perspectives on school, and Beavis et al (2004) survey Australian school age children's aspirations for their future careers. However the qualitative work is particularly useful in developing an understanding of children's own perspectives on the complex dynamics in their everyday lives, and their relationships with family, friends, school and community.

The first aim of this paper is to summarise and synthesise the main themes in the research. This is the function of Section 2, which introduces and briefly discusses the nine studies that form the basic material for this review. The second aim of this paper is to discuss the research in two specific contexts: the social exclusion of children, and the institutions and people that exclude them (Section 3); and children in economic adversity as agents, and the forms of agency that they adopt (Section 4). Section 5 looks at some of the methodological issues for doing research with children that emerge from the studies. Section 6 concludes with a discussion of the implications for future research – what we can learn from these studies, in particular the policy lessons, and what is missing.

2 Studies of children’s perspectives on economic adversity

Research that focuses on children’s perspectives of their economic adversity is a relatively new field. The raw material for this review comprises nine analyses that were readily available. Also discussed in this section are two recent reviews of similar literature that provide useful synthesis and insights into children’s perspectives on economic adversity.

2.1 The studies

Three criteria have been used to select the studies included in this review: first, they focus primarily on children’s (defined as aged less than 18) perspectives on school, family and social relations in the context of low incomes, poverty or economic disadvantage. Some, however, also include parents’ perspectives. Second, the research is qualitative. This seems, at this stage, a necessary condition for understanding children’s views, since quantitative research techniques using highly structured interviews may appear premature in a field that is still comparatively new, and where the explicit aim of the research is to understand better children’s own perspectives (Ridge, 2002).

Third, the studies chosen are concerned with children’s perspectives on economic disadvantage in rich countries. While there is also a growing literature on children’s perspectives on issues relating to economic disadvantage in developing countries, many of these studies are less concerned with schooling, a key focus of the rich country studies, than with child labour (Bessell, 1999; Harpham, 2005; Iversen, 2002). Clearly, many of the conclusions emerging from this review are relevant to children in low and middle income countries, just as many of the findings from these latter countries are also relevant to children in rich countries. However, I believe that the incorporation of papers on the perspectives of children in both rich and developing countries requires separate analysis.¹

Studies from a broad range of sources were chosen. Six concerned children in the UK, and one each children in the US, Australia and the Netherlands. Three were published in respected academic journals (Backett-Milburn et al., 2003; Ridge, 2007a; Weinger, 2000) or were widely cited (Ridge, 2002; Roker, 1998). Two Australian analyses

¹ Such an analysis is currently underway. The author is involved in the production of a themed section in the journal *Social Policy and Society* (due to be published in 2010) that will explore children’s perspectives on economic disadvantage in both rich and developing countries.

(Taylor and Fraser, 2003; Taylor and Nelms, 2006) were part of a longitudinal study of children growing up in Melbourne. Also included were three working papers (Sutton et al., 2007; Van der Hoek, 2005; Wikeley et al., 2007) not (yet) widely cited elsewhere. Table 1 briefly summarises some of the characteristics of the nine studies. Samples were small. Some were localised to a particular area of a city (Backett-Milburn et al., 2003; Taylor and Fraser, 2003; Weinger, 2000), while others sampled children in both urban and rural areas (Ridge, 2002; Wikeley et al., 2007), or in several regions of the country (Roker, 1998). In general, an attempt was made to sample boys and girls in equal numbers, but only one study (Van der Hoek, 2005) sampled a significant number of children from ethnic minority groups. In six of the nine studies, parents as well as children were interviewed, and in five (Backett-Milburn et al., 2003; Sutton et al., 2007; Taylor and Fraser, 2003; Taylor and Nelms, 2006; Weinger, 2000; Wikeley et al., 2007), the perspectives of middle class children as well as those of poor children were obtained. Most studies made policy recommendations.

2.2 Major themes

In terms of themes covered, the nine studies can be placed into three groups. In the first group, four of the studies (Ridge, 2002; Roker, 1998; Taylor and Fraser, 2003; Taylor and Nelms, 2006; Van der Hoek, 2005) have a general and exploratory character to them, and examine a wide range of issues relating to children's own experiences of and perspectives on living in low income families. Roker (1998) examines nine major issues, including children's family incomes, personal finances, friends and social lives, family relationships, health, school, crime, and future aspirations. Ridge (2002) focuses on children's family relations, income sources, school, fitting in with friends, and sources of social exclusion. Taylor and Fraser (2003) and Taylor and Nelms (2006) also focus on family relations, school and friends. Van der Hoek (2005) investigates the mechanisms employed by children to cope with living on a low income.

The second group includes three studies, all of which explore differences between poorer and middle class children (Backett-Milburn et al., 2003; Sutton et al., 2007; Weinger, 2000). Weinger (2000) has both middle class and poor children describe middle class and poor children's lives in the abstract, by showing the children photographs of opulent and run-down looking homes, and asking them questions about who might live there. Backett-Milburn, Cunningham-Burley et al. (2003) record children's perspectives on material differences and social relations, again focusing on differences (and some similarities) between poorer and richer children, and speculating how these might feed into longer term inequalities in health outcomes. Sutton et al. (2007) explore poor and middle class children's attitudes to social difference.

In the third group, two studies focus on quite specific questions. Wikeley et al (2007) consider how children develop educational relationships with adults outside of the school setting. Ridge (2007a) examines what children in low-income lone parent families think and do when their mothers take up employment – perceived attitudes of other children, changes in family income, household work and child care, and changes in their relationships with their mothers.

Across the nine studies, the following three themes emerge quite strongly. First, it is usually not poverty *per se* that hurts, but the social exclusion that accompanies it; second, children are active agents, and use a variety of strategies to cope with living on low income; and third, families are central to children's lives – children both contribute to and draw on family strength as a source of resilience. The first two themes are discussed in greater detail in Sections 3 and 4, while the third theme runs through both sections. These themes also emerge, although with different emphases, in recent review articles on children's perspectives on poverty by Attree (2006) and Ridge (2007b), both of which draw attention to the profoundly social costs of children's poverty. In addition, Attree (2006) emphasises how many children in economic adversity have limited aspirations as a result of their poverty. Ridge (2007b) highlights the types of material possessions that appear to have an impact on children's social exclusion – clothing is particularly important, but so are the tools of virtual networks – mobile phones, computers, etc. The present paper complements these recent reviews by placing an accent on the themes mentioned above: social exclusion, agency, and the role of family.

Table 1 Characteristics of the studies included in this review

| | Roker (1998) | Weinger (2000) | Ridge (2002) | Backett-Milburn et al. (2003) | Taylor and Fraser (2003) / Taylor and Nelms (2006) | Van der Hoek (2005) | Ridge (2007a) | Sutton et al. (2007) | Wikeley et al. (2007) |
|------------------------------|---|--|---|---|---|---|---|--|---|
| Aim of study | To describe young people's experience of growing up in family poverty | To explore low and middle income children's views on class and friendship choice | To study how poverty and social exclusion affect children's perceptions of their social and familial lives. | To examine children's views on processes that impact on inequality and health | Two waves in a long term study tracking children as they grow up in a Melbourne suburb. | To examine the strategies children employ to cope with poverty. | To explore perspectives of low-income children before and after mothers' return to work | To explore two contrasting groups of children's views and experiences of social difference | To examine impact of out of school educational relationships on young people's learning |
| N children | 60 | 48 | 40 | 35 | About 40 each wave | 65 | 61 | 42 | 55 |
| Age range | 13-18 | 5-14 | 10-17 | 9-12 | 11-12 / 15-16 | 6-16 | 8-14 | 8-13 | 11 & 14 |
| Parents surveyed? | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes ^a | No | No |
| Sample type | Poor children | Middle class and poor children | Poor children | Middle class and poor children | Mostly low income, some well off | Poor children | Poor children | Middle class and poor children | Middle class and poor children |
| Where | UK | US | UK | UK | Australia | Netherlands | UK | UK | UK |
| Specific policy conclusions? | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |

Notes: a. Parents were interviewed for this study, but their views are not reported on.

3 Social Exclusion

In the economics literature, poverty or economic adversity is usually defined as a state in which a person or household has low or inadequate material resources according to some absolute or community-based criterion. More recently, poverty has been widely recognised as multidimensional in nature and manifested by inadequate capabilities or functionings “to lead a life one has reason to value” (Sen, 1983, 1999), or in terms of social exclusion (Room, 1995; Atkinson, 1998). While both concepts are designed to encompass wider issues than economic disadvantage, they are nonetheless commonly used in debates about material poverty (see Ruggeri-Laderchi, 2003; Wagle, 2002). The concept of social exclusion in particular appears to resonate with children. Economic adversity as experienced by children can be intrinsic and absolute, for example when there is not enough food in the house to eat (this sometimes happens to children in rich countries too – see van der Hoek 2005). But in rich countries it is more often a problem of relativity – having less in material terms than is considered adequate according to community criteria; or a problem of exclusion from participation in activities and institutions that are considered normal in the community. People can be excluded from processes and institutions for a number of reasons, including racism, discrimination against people with disabilities, geography, and institutional inertia. However, the common thread running through the nine papers examined here is exclusion associated with economic disadvantage.

Atkinson (1998) identifies three characteristics inherent in most definitions of social exclusion. First, it is a relative concept. People are excluded from a particular community or society, at a particular place and time. Unlike with material poverty (which can but need not be relative), it is not possible to judge whether a person is excluded by looking at his circumstances in isolation from his immediate community. Put another way, Katz (2005) (citing Room, 1995) characterises the difference between poverty and social exclusion as a “move from a distributional to a relational focus”. The second element identified by Atkinson is dynamics. Not only are people’s current situations important (as can be the case with poverty), but also their prospects for the future. This is particularly relevant for children who are both ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ (Qvortrup, 1994).

Atkinson’s third element is agency. Social exclusion is a *process* that requires continual conscious or unconscious reinforcement by actors in a community, resulting in “a discontinuity in relationships with the rest of society” (Katz, 2005). The examination of a person’s failure to achieve inclusion has to be concerned with identification of the actors (including possibly the person himself) causing exclusion. It is this emphasis on process that to a large extent differentiates the social exclusion approach from Sen’s capability approach (Ruggeri-Laderchi et al., 2003). As this review shows, notions of process are central to children’s lives, in the family, at school, and among peers.

Sen (2000) makes a useful distinction between *active* and *passive* exclusion. Active exclusion is the result of a deliberate act (for example a law that reduces access to schooling for children of irregular migrants). Passive exclusion on the other hand, may occur as a result of failure to recognise or address implicit barriers, such as hidden costs associated with education, even though there is no deliberate intention to exclude. The exclusion resulting from these apparently benign policy regimes is,

nonetheless, real. Moreover, Sen warns of the danger that tolerance of passive exclusion may foster accommodation to more active measures over time.

3.1 Poverty and exclusion among children

All three of Atkinson's characteristics (relativity, dynamics and agents of exclusion) are addressed in the nine studies covered in this review. Examples of Sen's active and passive exclusion are also readily apparent. Attree (2006) states that "for children living in low-income households life can be a struggle to avoid being set apart from friends and peers." (p.59) Children often feel left out (passive exclusion) and report being picked on (active exclusion) because they do not possess some things that other children appear to take for granted. Several studies argue that this problem of exclusion increases in children's perception with age (Ridge, 2002; Roker, 1998).

Ridge (2002) draws up a comprehensive list of material possessions and capabilities that can result in the exclusion of poor children from two domains in particular – school and social networks. School came across strongly as a locus of exclusion, something also apparent from the Australian longitudinal study (Taylor and Fraser, 2003; Taylor and Nelms, 2006). 'Dress down days', when children could wear their own clothes to school, caused anxiety among some children who did not consider that they had any decent or fashionable clothes, and were afraid of being teased or laughed at by the other children. Uniforms, on the other hand, were seen as having a protective effect – reducing differences among children, although some parents worried about not being able to afford the 'full' uniform (Taylor and Fraser, 2003). Poor children also regularly missed out on school trips that required a parental contribution. The impact on children was two-fold: first, being excluded from the actual trip, and second, "the people who are left behind in the school are the people who are looked down on." (16 year old boy quoted in Ridge 2002, p.74).

Wikeley et al. (2007) show how poverty also affected children's participation in organised out of school activities. First, poorer children were more reliant on school provision of extra-curricular activities, while middle class children tapped into a much wider range of activities. Second, transportation costs, particularly in rural areas, restricted young people's access to many activities (a point echoed by Ridge, 2002). Third, poorer children often had complex family lives that demanded significant amounts of their free time, for example visiting step-parents, or caring for younger or disabled siblings. There was also a tendency for some children to isolate themselves, which Wikeley et al. (2007) interpret as face-saving – covering inability to participate for financial reasons with a seeming indifference.

In addition, poverty appeared to contribute to children's exclusion from social networks. Ridge cites an Irish study which reports that children who did not have the 'right' clothes were fearful of being bullied or rejected by their peers. Missing out on holidays appeared to be particularly difficult for some children (Van der Hoek, 2005). On the other hand, both Roker (1998) and Backett-Milburn, Cunningham-Burley et al. (2003) report some children asserting that material possessions were not important in themselves:

Many children suggested such differences [in ownership of material possessions] would only matter if you allowed them to, or if the person concerned used differences to personal advantage. Similarly,

if other non-material factors such as personality and popularity, clear markers of social status, were not assured in the person making the claims to be better off they would not be taken seriously. (Backett-Milburn et al., 2003, p.617)

Nonetheless, studies including Roker (1998) and Ridge (2002) point to the possibility that many children living in poverty did indeed lack the confidence and personality to over-ride looking different and having less, and therefore felt vulnerable to teasing, bullying and other forms of exclusion.

3.2 Agents of inclusion and exclusion

As noted above, one of the key assumptions that underpin the concept of social exclusion (and one of the things that sets it apart from poverty or deprivation) is that (active or passive) *actions* by people and institutions have the impact of including or excluding adults and children from what is considered normal in a community or society.

Micklewright (2002) draws up a useful incomplete list of potential actors who exclude children: government and its agents, the labour market, schools, parents, other children, and the children themselves. To this a further source of exclusion may be added – neighbourhoods, and the people living in them. It is also important to recognise that if these actors have the power to exclude, then they may also have the power to include. Many of these actors engage in multiple transactions with children, some of them inclusionary, and some less so.

Government and its agents are important agents of inclusion in society at large through redistribution of resources towards low income families, and through provision of universal services such as public transport, health and education. Several of the studies note the positive impact of such services on children in low income families.

Governments can also exclude particular people, through social policies that promote a particular welfare ethic or ideal family type, or through a particular type of service delivery. Most of the studies equate surviving on income support payments with poverty (indeed, some define their poor populations according to receipt of a targeted benefit or other service), and most make the further leap of linking poverty with children's exclusion. Some studies (Ridge, 2002; Roker, 1998) argue that in order to reduce exclusion among children, income support payments to families need to be increased. In a study of exclusion associated with disability, Dowling and Dolan (2001) also make the point that many social services aimed at children in general exclude children with disabilities, and that services aimed at children with disabilities do little to reduce their and their families' exclusion.

It is not only institutions that can include or exclude, but also individual service providers, sometimes with and sometimes without the explicit or tacit approval of their managers. Lister (2004) argues that "the manner in which welfare is administered can degrade its recipients and act as a warning to others." (p.117) Most of the studies reviewed here lack a perspective on the extent to which individual service providers (other than teachers – see below) can exclude economically disadvantaged children and their parents, by stigmatising them, or by ignoring their

needs and requests. This may be because parents, being the principal point of contact with bureaucracies outside of the school, may be able to shield their children from stigmatising experiences. However, the issue of children's perspectives on the wider welfare state is not well covered by the current research, and is a potential subject for further study.

The labour market includes many children, often from quite a young age, but sometimes exploits them, particularly through payment of very low wages, as Ridge (2002) finds in her study. Both Roker (1998) and Ridge (2002) attest to children's real contributions to the household economy through giving at least some of their earnings from casual work to their parents. Micklewright (2002) argues that children can also suffer from their parents' exclusion from the labour market (which can in turn be the result of lack of maternity leave or suitable child care provision), and that young people are often excluded by employer 'short-termism' which makes firms less willing to invest in employees long-term. Smyth (2002) points out that 'credential creep' implies employers may increasingly demand formal qualifications for even fairly basic jobs.

Of the nine studies, only one (Ridge, 2007a) develops a strong labour market perspective. Ridge shows the considerable efforts to which some children go to support their parents in work, particularly through care of siblings and domestic chores. Equally, she reports children's dissatisfaction with poor quality after school child care services that are arguably aimed at serving the interests of the labour market rather than those of the child.

Neighbourhood quality can influence children's inclusion or exclusion. One third of the Roker (1998) sample reported being a victim of crime, and many spoke of their own involvement in crime as something that everybody in the neighbourhood participated in. Some of the Backett-Milburn, Cunningham-Burley et al. (2003) sample refer to areas where they live, or nearby areas as unsafe. Sutton et al. (2007) note that there were fewer out of school activities in the poor estate in their study, compared with the middle class estate. Ridge (2002) on the other hand notes how children in close knit rural communities feel that their poverty is exposed for all to see, heightening their sense of stigma and exclusion.

Neighbourhood or community can be an important factor associated with economically disadvantaged children's exclusion if they live in the midst of more affluent children (Ridge, 2002). Stanley, Ng and Mestan (2007) argue that children's social exclusion can be invisible to the community and to policy makers where it occurs in the midst of plenty. And while whole communities can be deprived compared to the national average in terms of a range of indicators, it may also be the case that economically disadvantaged children who live in deprived communities enjoy a greater sense of inclusion with their peers than economically disadvantaged children who live in more affluent communities (Sutton et al., 2007).

Schools are clearly agents of inclusion in the first instance, in that they bring children together. The importance of school as a place where children from low income families meet their friends is underlined in several of the studies (Ridge, 2002; Taylor and Fraser, 2003). However, schools can also be agents of exclusion – literally, as Micklewright (2002) points out in the case of exclusions (sending home children for unacceptable behaviour) and expulsions, but also because they may fail to teach some

children adequately, or because of policies that exclude children from some activities because they do not have the means to pay for them, or policies that stigmatise children who access income tested school services. This type of exclusion figures prominently in several of the analyses. Ridge (2002) points out that in the UK expulsions and suspensions are much more common among children whose families rely on means tested income support payments than among other children. Such children moreover, appear to have worse relations in general with their teachers, and are less concerned about doing well at school. As reported above too, many children also feel keenly the stigma of lack of money at school, often as a result of deliberate or unthinking school policies and practices (Roker, 1998; Ridge, 2002).

Parents, as Micklewright notes, “have an enormous influence on the well-being of their children. One implication is that parents must be a major potential agent for their children’s exclusion.” (2002, chapter 3) He suggests that parents can exclude their children by not bringing enough money into the household, by failing to spend their money wisely, by failing to take an interest in their children’s education, or by failing to take adequate interest in their children’s health, nutrition or social development (or conversely, parents can promote inclusion of children by paying due attention to these aspects of their development). While parental failures may be inadvertent or unintended, and greatly exacerbated (or ameliorated) by other factors, the point remains that parents can be agents of exclusion. This argument fits well with Mayer’s (1997) thesis that children’s life chances are not principally governed by their parents’ incomes, but by other factors relating to parenting practices and parents’ psychological well-being.

Interviews with parents in the reviewed studies generally found that they were keen to do the best for their children (Taylor and Fraser, 2003). It also shows that children, rather than blaming their parents for their poverty, offer support and cooperation in their struggle to survive together (Ridge, 2002; Van der Hoek, 2005). Roker (1998) also notes that “very few of the young people mentioned that their relationship with their parents was affected by the family’s limited income.” (p.29) In general, family functioning is not dealt with in the studies. Although children in the Roker (1998) study do refer to family violence and other indicators of poor family functioning, this study like the others does not analyse in depth overlaps between economic adversity, family relations and family functioning. Rather, families emerge from the studies as protective institutions, softening the impact of economic adversity for children. Nonetheless, as van der Hoek (2005) argues, children may also feel the pressure of economic disadvantage, because many parents confide in their children about money worries, and because of arguments and disagreements that may arise within the family over money.

Other children come across in the studies as the main includers and excluders of children in the studies reviewed, not least because of the importance children themselves placed in fitting in, and in being included in their peer group. Exclusion of poor children by non-poor children, and how it is ingrained from an early age, is the main theme running through both Weinger (2000) and Backett-Milburn, Cunningham-Burley et al. (2003). Sutton et al. (2007) emphasise the antagonism that children often felt for children in other socio-economic groups. Roker, Ridge and van der Hoek all report on children being bullied, teased or otherwise excluded as a

consequence of their poverty (although clearly bullying is seldom simply associated with economic disadvantage). As a 13 year old Dutch girl reports:

I don't think I have nice clothes. I want those clothes that are in fashion. At school there is often said something about it: 'you dress out of fashion' and 'you look stupid'. It's not nice to hear such things. (Van der Hoek, 2005, p.28)

This however was not apparent in the Australian study (Taylor and Fraser, 2003), where children reported being bullied for a number of reasons, but not the result of their poverty.

Exclusion of economically disadvantaged children by other children is problematic in many senses. While it occupies a huge area of exclusion in children's own perception, none of the studies make policy recommendations directly on this issue. Changes in some practices at school as proposed by Ridge (2002) would undoubtedly help. But the real solution to exclusion of children by other children is probably more a cultural shift to develop a more caring and inclusive society. In terms of policy, this represents a longer-term and more challenging undertaking than the introduction of concrete measures to raise family incomes or promote employment of parents.

And while exclusion of children by other children as a consequence of economic adversity is well covered in the studies reviewed, evidence of exclusion as a consequence of *prejudice* is more notable for its absence, with the exceptions of Taylor and Fraser (2003) who report exclusion of children from non English speaking backgrounds. The lack of evidence of other forms of prejudice in these studies may reflect the (relative) homogeneity of most of the samples. The possibility that some children could be doubly disadvantaged by economic hardship and prejudice from other adults and children as a consequence of their disability or ethnicity should be an important motivating factor for the examination of the perspectives of children from different groups at risk from exclusion.

Finally, children can also exclude *themselves* (for example from school, from interaction with peers). Micklewright (2002) notes a number of forms of self-exclusion, including truancy from school and drug addiction. Certainly, there is an element of voluntarism in children's decisions to miss school or take drugs. But agency in these circumstances should perhaps be interpreted in the context of constraints (including poverty and adult authority) that may greatly restrict freedom of action in a range of domains that are considered more legitimate. Arguably, self-exclusion by children may follow some form of exclusion by others more powerful, or, as Wikeley et al. (2007) argue, may be some children's means of interpreting a negative experience (exclusion due to lack of resources or other reasons) as a positive choice (not wanting to belong).

Attree (2006) highlights another form of self-exclusion that children and their parents in the samples engage in, that is also directly related to their economic disadvantage: they often had few aspirations to engage more in life in the present, or to improve their situations in the future. In the Roker (1998) sample, parents' aspirations for their children are modest (for example, to get any job) while children's own aspirations often appear unrealistic, especially when their engagement in school is considered. In addition, children exclude themselves from some activities because they do not want

to pressure their parents into giving them money that they cannot afford, so they simply do not ask (Ridge, 2002; Van der Hoek, 2005). In contrast, children whose parents have recently found work and whose family incomes have increased find themselves going out more, and engaging in more activities (Ridge, 2007a). The ingenuity of children and their parents (for example in organising inexpensive holidays) can also promote greater inclusion (Van der Hoek, 2005).

4 Children as agents

The idea of children as agents has been widely applied only relatively recently in the social sciences. Irwin argues that “prior to the 1980s children were constituted as incomplete, requiring socialisation to become adults. This adult centred perception of childhood frequently meant that children were objectified, written about but rarely consulted.” (2006, p.17) Economics has often characterised children as objects of their parents’ consumption, or as subjects of human capital investment (Donath, 1995). While some economists have attempted to open up the family to analysis (for a review, see Browning, 1992), children have generally been subsumed within it, and the family is assumed in classical economic thought to have a unitary utility function (Becker, 1981; Donath, 1995).

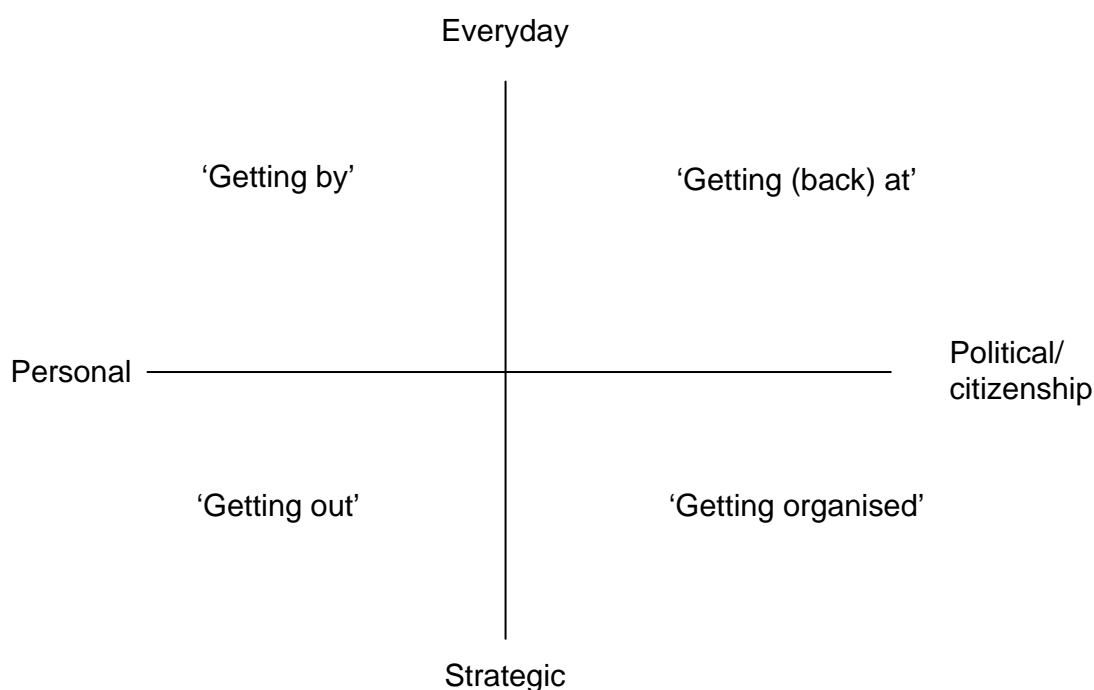
Sociology too has long ignored children as persons, but focused instead on their socialisation into society. Until quite recently, the only discipline that appears to have taken childhood seriously as a separate subject for study and analysis is that of developmental psychology which introduced a popularly accepted ‘gold standard’ of child development (James et al., 1998). This is now changing. Zubrick, Silburn and Prior argue that recent methodological breakthroughs and new developments in human genomics and neuroscience highlight the need for a more integrated understanding of the interplay between the behavioural, social and biological aspects of development, particularly in early childhood and adolescence (2005, p.162). It is now increasingly accepted that children are not passive observers of their own development, but social actors who seek to interpret and shape it.

Outside of the social sciences, some idea of children and agency has always been present - in Great Britain and Australia the minimum age of criminal responsibility is 10 years. And entrepreneurs have long recognised children’s economic power, as witnessed the proliferation of advertisements for toys in between children’s television shows, and the careful placement of candies near supermarket checkouts within reach of small hands. Yet it is only in the past 15-20 years, with the signing by most countries of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the emergence of serious debate on the evolving capacities of the child, that the idea of children as full members of society, not just as adults-in-waiting, has been subject to serious analysis. National and international agencies have become more receptive to the voices of children on a number of issues, for example their experience of social service provision (Aubrey and Dahl, 2006), foster care (Community Services Commission, 2000), and domestic violence against women (Irwin, 2006). The UNICEF website notes that “for the first time in G8 history, young people shared their views with G8 world leaders” at the June 2006 summit in St Petersburg (www.unicef.org).

Children’s agency needs to be understood in the context of dependence on, and submission to the authority of adults. Within the confines of this relationship, some agency is sanctioned or positively encouraged, while some agency can also be

understood in terms of rebellion against adult and parental authority. Lister (2004) identifies four types of agency that are relevant to the analysis of poverty which she places along two axes, everyday-strategic, and personal-political/citizenship, as shown in Figure 1. The everyday-strategic axis differentiates between those actions a person undertakes to make ends meet today, and those to improve living standards over the longer term. Some longer term strategies may cause greater hardship in the short term. The personal-political axis refers to those actions that are aimed at improving one's own situation, and those that aim at wider change. It is worth examining how children in adverse economic circumstances might utilise the four types of agency proposed by Lister.

Figure 1 Forms of agency exercised by people in poverty



Source: Lister (2004), Figure 6.1

Getting by stands in the everyday-personal quadrant of Lister's typology in Figure 1, and includes the many little things that people do in order to cope with everyday situations, for example prioritising daily expenditure, and juggling resources. Lister indeed makes the salient point that this form of agency is so commonplace, it is often only noticed when it breaks down. Ridge (2002) and van der Hoek (2005) provide examples of what some children do to get by in the face of economic adversity: for example, saving pocket money and birthday money, taking advantage of informal and ad-hoc opportunities to earn some money, helping parents with housework and child care, reappraising their daily situations in a more positive light, and not complaining to parents about lack of money (on the other hand, Roker (1998) reports that lack of money was a cause of family conflict among some of her sample).

There is also a considerable literature on the social resources (friends, family, community) that many people call on in order to help make lives in poverty more liveable (see for example Narayan-Parker and Patel, 2000). In her review of children's perspectives on poverty, Attree (2006) argues that children "adopted strategies within

their immediate families, in the wider family network, and outside the family sphere, to maximise their means.” (p.60) Although Roker (1998) states that a third of the sample in her study said that lack of money did not affect their social lives, my reading of the literature (which is slightly different to the literature covered by Attree) suggests a picture of reliance on and support for family (coupled with a wish not to overburden parents), but a reluctance to show weakness and dependency to peers – thus avoiding engagement in a range of wider social resources. This is explicitly brought out by Taylor and Fraser (2003), who show that children in low income families are significantly less likely than other children to spend time with their peers outside of school; and by van der Hoek (2005) who argues that poorer children often exclude themselves in order to avoid confrontations or embarrassment with their peers. On the other hand, Wikeley et al. (2007) show how children living in a poor estate in their study participate widely in spontaneous street play, in contrast to middle class children, who tend to engage in more formalised activities, or visit each others’ houses. Street play can be seen as a positive and creative response to economic disadvantage since it is enjoyable for the children, and costs little. However, its visibility means that children are exposed to a number of risks, including being victims of crime, and accusations of anti-social behaviour (Backett-Milburn et al., 2003; Wikeley et al., 2007).

Getting (back) at in the everyday-political quadrant of Figure 1 is characterised by Lister (2004) as the channelling of anger and despair that may accompany poverty into activities and lifestyles that signal resistance to bureaucratic and social norms – for example borderline non-compliance with the petty rules and obligations that may accompany welfare receipt, outright social security fraud, petty crime, engaging in confrontational behaviour, vandalism, graffiti-writing, or taking drugs to excess. These “isolated acts of resistance” usually take place in a context where such behaviour is to some extent tolerated, either out of understanding for the poor person’s situation, or because many other people in the neighbourhood are engaged in similar activities.

Lister (2004) on the other hand highlights ‘getting back at’ as a form of adaptation to circumstances that challenges the view of poor people as passive and lacking agency. However, this form of agency, which is arguably common among children and young people in general, and not only those who experience economic adversity, suggests (to my mind) a response to powerlessness in relation to society and the formalised world. As noted in Section 1 most children are placed in positions of powerlessness – subjection to adult authority is one widely understood characteristic of childhood. Most do not respond with seriously disruptive or illegal ‘getting back at’ agency. But when they do respond in this way, it is not always clear whether it is the powerlessness of childhood and testing the limits of adult authority, or the powerlessness of poverty that provokes the response.

Getting out is the officially sanctioned response to poverty in the rich societies represented by the studies under review, particularly if it involves taking up employment, or improving one’s employment prospects through education or training (although it could also conceivably involve re-partnering). This form of agency is located in the personal-strategic quadrant of Figure 1. Lister (2004) notes that “individuals exercise their strategic agency in negotiating these routes [education and employment] but the routes themselves are forged by structural and cultural factors,

which can assist or obstruct the exercise of that agency.” (p.145) Piven (2001) emphasises the *political* character of these assisting and obstructing factors, for example how they are influenced by welfare reform that has taken place in most rich countries since the mid-1990s. “When public income supports that undergird wages are rolled back, workers are inevitably less secure, and it becomes easier for employers to roll back wages and restructure work. It’s as simple as that.” (Piven, 2001, p.28). According to Piven, therefore, the purpose of welfare reform is to encourage getting out through increasing the relative attractiveness of low-wage work.

As discussed in Section 3, moreover, the will to ‘get out’ may depend to a very large extent on aspirations, and preferences that may be adapted (or revised downwards) to economically straitened circumstances. This is both a human reaction to difficulty, and a way of coping with that difficulty. Van der Hoek (2005) characterises it as ‘positive reappraisal’, while Attree (2006) characterises it as becoming resigned to living in poverty. Roker (1998) also hints at the role of constrained or adapted preferences in lowering children’s aspirations for themselves. In the language of the Capabilities Approach (Sen, 1999), adaptation of the will to ‘get out’ is in itself an indicator of capability deprivation – the loss of freedom to choose between desirable alternatives.

Lister (2004) makes the point that for some people, for example lone parents, barriers to ‘getting out’ are often significant, and here, Ridge (2007a) suggests that children’s support can make a real difference – through engaging in greater self care, care of siblings and home production, and through giving parents emotional space to recuperate after the working day. Pocock and Clarke (2004) make a similar point with regard to Australian children with working parents. However, this research is silent on the negotiation that may take place between parents and children over ‘getting out’ – for example how children’s views (as well as parents’ perceptions of children’s needs) influence parents’ decision to look for work, accept a particular job, or quit one.

Getting organised is placed by Lister (2004) in the strategic-political/citizenship quadrant of Figure 1. She argues that this is often a particularly difficult type of agency for poor people, in part because of the ‘othering’ process that objectifies them as passive. Perhaps the most important part of ‘getting organised’ relates to the factors that prevent people from engaging in it “... where the problem of poverty is typically individualized and blamed on ‘the poor’ by politicians and the media, it is likely that those affected will make sense of their situation in individualized, often self-blaming terms, and look for individual rather than collective solutions” (Lister (2004, p.150) citing Lyon-Callo (2001) and Dean (2003). Poor people as a group, moreover, are often disorganised because they do not wish to identify with each other. ‘Proud to be poor’ is not a banner under which many are likely to march” (Lister, 2004, p.152).

Like poor adults, all children experience ‘othering’ to a greater or lesser extent simply because of their status as children. Moreover, they are for the most part explicitly excluded from political processes, and while they may sometimes be listened to regarding issues that directly affect them *as children*, they are not generally considered to have a voice in big-picture politics or in community activism. One potentially fruitful avenue for future research might be to understand better how children support (or otherwise) their parents’ involvement in community issues, and their engagement with public and state agencies.

4.1 Conclusion

The literature reviewed here suggests that the treatment of children as passive by researchers, policymakers and service providers is inappropriate. However, their agency is still in many senses restricted – more everyday and personal (mostly ‘getting by’ and ‘getting (back) at’), and less strategic and political (many children will help their parents ‘get out’ and ‘get by’, but many also appear to have limited aspirations for themselves). The dual focus of children’s agency is worth noting: both to help themselves in coping with their daily lives, and to help their parents in their struggle to improve family finances and functioning

A number of knowledge gaps remain. Current research does not address how children and their parents negotiate important transitions (‘getting out’), such as parents’ taking up of employment, even though this often explicitly depends on children’s active cooperation. Nor is it apparent from the existing literature what roles age and other indicators of maturity play in a child’s agency, but presumably children employ different tactics and strategies at different ages. For example, the typology of evolving capacities of the child drawn up by Lansdown (2005) would tend to foster expectations that consultation and negotiation that goes on between child and parent is likely to vary considerably according to the age of the child.

There also is a need to understand better the influence of structural and cultural factors that facilitate or inhibit the use of different types of agency by children. In this respect a better understanding of how and why children adopt particular coping strategies might be revealing (van der Hoek, 2005). Importantly, these factors may not always be the same for children and their parents, for example because of their different social environments. Addressing this issue would require an explicitly multi-cultural approach to the research, assuming from the outset that culture and ethnic background can play a role in how children utilise agency in response to economic adversity.

5 Doing research with children

Expertise in the social sciences is necessary in order to conduct scientifically robust research on poverty. But the very process of acquiring that expertise may disable the researcher in a number of important respects. Chambers (1997) argues that (i) extended education when young, coupled with delayed responsibility in the real world, (ii) working in organisations with fellow professionals with shared values, and (iii) the ambition to do well within their professional discipline, create a considerable distance between professional researchers and the objects of their research, who are invariably poor or disadvantaged in some respects. To a large extent, professional research concerns itself with quantifiable phenomena, such as income or consumption.

Chambers’ argument, that poor people themselves are distanced from the whole poverty definition and measurement process, which is simplified in order to satisfy the requirements of administrators and academics rather than to address the real needs of the poor, is arguably amplified in the case of children. Children are excluded by tradition, by authority and by dependency first from adult worlds (James et al., 1998; Qvortrup, 1994), and then from the even more rarefied worlds of the academic and the policymaker. The challenge, central to the task of understanding children’s

perspectives on poverty, is to break down the double barrier of distance that disables professional researchers and policymakers: professionalism that differentiates them from poor people in general, and the authority and remoteness of adulthood that separates them from children. In this section, we are particularly concerned with the second barrier, for arguably, in breaking this down, and in recognising the diversity that exists among children, we will also be going quite some way towards dismantling the first barrier. We also consider briefly some of the ethical issues associated with research with children.

5.1 Research techniques with children

The research agenda is changing. As Bessell (2006) argues, citing Hill (1999), top-down approaches to research whereby adult experts set and control the agenda are now being challenged by approaches based on genuine respect for a child's view of her social world. Mason and Urquhart (2001) draw the distinction between 'Adultist', 'Children's Rights' and 'Children's Movements' models of participation by children in issues of child protection, child welfare and research with children. In the Adultist model, which assumes in its pure sense a clear dichotomisation between adulthood and childhood, adults set the agenda, identify children's needs and use professional knowledge as the basis of their decision-making. Children are viewed as passive and developmentally incomplete 'becomings' whose views may be sought, but then filtered through adult eyes. Under the Children's Rights model, adults still largely set the agenda in that they take the initiative in extending rights to children, but children themselves are viewed as competent social actors, where competence is understood in terms their evolving capacities, which may be reflected broadly in terms of experience as well as age. This model recognises the uneven balance of power between children and adults, suggesting the need for strategies which promote symmetry between them, for example through reflexivity on the part of both adults and children. Under the Children's Movements model on the other hand, exemplified to some extent in the work of Biggeri, Libanora et al. (2006), children themselves seek to set and remain in control of the agenda and use it to effect political change.

Although none of the studies reviewed here discusses research techniques in great detail, most would appear to fit in Mason and Urquhart's (2001) Children's Rights model. The studies mostly appear to adopt a dynamic approach to the research, where all children are asked about some particular issues, but space is made in the research process to incorporate children's perspectives on a range of issues outside of the interview schedule. For example, Weinger (2000) structures her conversations with children around their thoughts on the sorts of children who would live in opulent, middle class and poorer looking homes. Ridge (2002) adopted a flexible approach, allowing space for children to talk about a wide range of other issues relevant to them. Roker (1998) puts considerable stress on ensuring children were relaxed and comfortable with the research process, taking care for example that children did not feel intimidated with the interview setting. In her studies, Ridge (2002; 2007a) states that children were interviewed alone, with no other adult present. Alone among the nine studies, Sutton et al. (2007) state that they explicitly adopted a participatory approach, where children set the agenda or the research, and were involved at every stage of the process.

A considerable literature proposes different methods for overcoming the inequitable balance between researcher and child. Barker and Weller (2003) outline a number of

different techniques for engaging children in the research process, including allowing children to take photographs (disposable cameras are cheap and simple to use); drawing (putting children in control); diaries (a personal account of one's life, but perhaps better with older children); and questionnaire interviews and focus groups. All these different techniques have both advantages and disadvantages. The usefulness of photography as a technique, for example depends on the child's interpretation of the photograph. Most of the nine studies reviewed here use as their main method semi-structured interviews, while one (Sutton et al., 2007) uses a wide variety of play-based techniques, evolved with the participation of the children themselves. Another study (Backett-Milburn et al., 2003) also employs some alternative techniques including drawing in conjunction with interviews, but does not appear to draw on results from these other techniques in the written research.

It is not clear, however, how much children in the nine studies were involved in the research *process*. Sutton et al. (2007) report that research results were fed back to children for comment, but it seems that other studies did not do likewise. The NSW Commission for Children (2005) argues that a crucial part of involving children in research is engaging them through the whole research process, so that they participate in determining research priorities, and in evaluating the ongoing research, for example through advisory groups that consider each stage of the process. This peer group evaluation as used by Sutton et al. (2007) is arguably useful, not only in terms of mobilising children's interest in the research, but also in ensuring that it remains child-centred, and relevant to children's most important concerns.

5.2 Ethics

While most research has (or should have) social implications, the process of primary research that involves gathering information from human subjects can also have direct impacts on the people involved. For this reason, most research institutions have developed strong procedures for ensuring that research follows ethical guidelines. Bessel (2006) discusses three important ethical factors that need to be considered in the design of child-centred social research. First, the researcher should take into account children's capacity to take decisions, and the research should be cast in an appropriate way for the children at whom it is aimed "The burden of responsibility is no longer on the child to demonstrate his or her capacity, but on the researcher to develop techniques that recognise and support children's capabilities." (Bessell, 2006, p.45).

Second, consent cannot be treated unproblematically. Children, particularly young children, cannot be assumed to give consent in the way that adults do. Citing Boyden and Ennew (1997) Bessell states that it is not consent or assent that should be sought from children, but informed dissent. For example, a rights-based approach would suggest that a child's failure to protest should not be interpreted as consent or assent. (Bessel, incidentally, is particularly scathing of the draft Statement on Ethical Conduct in this regard, since it appears to allow researchers to over-ride children's objections to participating in the research in some circumstances, such as if parent consent is forthcoming). Third 'The Best interests of the Child' must be paramount. The singular 'Child' precludes a utilitarian argument that the research will benefit all children as a way of justifying ignoring an individual child's wish not to participate. Rather, the researcher must at all times remain alert for signs of withdrawal of consent

(including implicit withdrawal), and also for signs of risk of harm to the child resulting from participation in the research.

These are high standards, and it is difficult to discern from the published studies how they perform in these respects. Certainly, some allowed their research designs to take explicit account of children's capacities (Van der Hoek, 2005). In all cases it is reported that parental consent was sought, and it is usually added that children's consent was not assumed, but also actively sought. Some studies also showed particular concern about consent throughout the research process (Ridge, 2002; Roker, 1998). However, the implications of 'The Best Interests of the Child' did not appear to be explicitly considered (or at least written about) in any of the studies. This may be because it is genuinely difficult to do so, since the researchers, the children themselves and their parents may not fully understand what is in their best interests at a particular point in time. However, it is also the case that 'best interests' principles are intrinsic ethical research guidelines that are followed by many research organisations. They may therefore be implicit in the research process. One lesson from this review might be that researchers should be more *openly* reflexive about the processes of their research, particularly in relation to the child's consent, and to how the researcher perceives the child's best interests.

The adoption of high ethical standards in research suggests a potentially high refusal rate, from children and their parents. This also raises the potential problem of bias in achieved samples. One study of the nine reviewed in this paper notes the extreme difficulty encountered in developing a sufficiently large sample (Backett-Milburn et al., 2003). It is also notable that none of the samples appeared to include families with multiple problems. Such families may have been inadvertently excluded by the researchers, or excluded themselves from the samples.

6 Discussion: what do we know and what is missing?

This concluding section summarises findings from this review in four parts – what we have learned; policy conclusions; what we still need to know; and implications for future research with children.

6.1 What have we learned?

The key substantive issues arising from the papers covered by this review relate to social exclusion, agency and family. Economic disadvantage impacts on children in particular because of the social exclusion that often accompanies it. Some of this exclusion can be addressed in policy terms. Some is arguably more difficult to deal with. Children themselves are resourceful, and respond to their situations by interpreting their environments and choosing courses of action that can materially improve their personal and family situations, and help them cope with economic adversity.

Heterogeneity among children: Children are important actors in their own and their families' lives, and their perspectives should not be ignored. They are also, just like adults, heterogenous individuals, and it is important that research reflects this.

School is one of the most important social settings for economically disadvantaged children, not least, as Ridge (2002) points out because lack of money limits their

opportunities to meet with friends outside of the school setting. Yet it can also be a difficult place, not least because of school bureaucracies that can add to the stigma and exclusion experienced by many poor children through for example subtly identifying those who receive help from the school because of their family's low income, or through inadequate provision for poorer children to participate in extra-curricular activities organised by the school.

Children exclude children. This is clearly one of the most important aspects of economic adversity from children's perspective. While children in some studies state that economic resources are not a key determinant of inclusion or exclusion, children in other studies report being bullied, teased and excluded in other ways because they do not have the 'right' clothes, for example. In some respects, schools can reduce the bullying and teasing. But much of it may be outside of direct policy control. The studies of Weinger (2000), Backett-Milburn, Cunningham-Burley et al. (2003) and Sutton et al. (2007) suggest that differentiation on the basis of social class is ingrained in children from an early age and subtly reinforced by parents who may at the same time profess to wanting their children to make friends with other children from a broad range of backgrounds.

Families often protect children from the worst impacts of economic adversity and exclusion, and children in turn act to protect their families, through home production, economic support (for example giving parents money earned through part time work) not making economic demands, and giving emotional support to parents who are under stress, and taking care of younger siblings, especially while parents are at work. Strong families promote resilience among children and young people. Children use their agency not only for their own immediate ends, but also to support their parents, to help them cope with the stresses and strains of economic adversity, and to help them in their return to the labour market. Ridge (2007a) documents the considerable lengths to which some children will go in order to offer both practical and emotional support to their mothers who are returning to the labour market after a period of non-employment.

Agency: children act for themselves in a number of ways. 'Getting by' and 'Getting out' agency is often seen by adults as acceptable forms of child agency. 'Getting (back) at' agency, on the other hand, which may be characterised by negative or destructive behaviour, and which may be aimed at adult authority and restrictions, is likely to be seen as less acceptable. A relatively high proportion of young disadvantaged people may be involved in crime (Roker, 1998), and a wide literature suggests that economic disadvantage can be associated with a range of destructive behaviour, including abuse of drugs (Spooner and Hetherington, 2004). In addition, children as agents can act to accept their situation without seeking to improve it or to get out. As Attree (2006) puts it, many poor children become resigned to living in poverty, while others interpret their situation in a more positive light (Van der Hoek, 2005).

6.2 Policy conclusions

The research shows that much can and should be done to support children and their families in economic adversity. Most of the studies call for an increase in public social transfers for families, to reduce the income gap between poor people and the

rest. In addition some of the studies make quite specific proposals, some, but not all, of which are relevant outside of context of a particular country.

Reduce stigmatising school bureaucracy. Ridge (2002) makes some particularly strong points in this regard. First, school uniforms can act as an equalising agent among children thus protecting them against exclusion. But this is the case only if poor children can afford to buy the same uniform as other children, and they should be enabled to do this in a non-stigmatising way. Second, extra curricular activities, now an important part the school experience for many children, need to be made accessible to poorer children. In the UK schools cannot legally charge parents for trips, but can only ask for a contribution. Many parents nonetheless regard the contribution as compulsory, and any help offered by schools as very conditional. Third, schools should not make it easy to identify who receives in-kind support through the school, for example free meals or textbooks or other items.

Increase opportunities for social participation outside of school. Many children are excluded from meeting friends outside of school because they cannot afford to do many of the things that their friends are doing, or even the transport costs to go and meet their friends. Both Roker (1998) and Ridge (2002) point to the need for cheaper provision of leisure facilities for young people, and Ridge (2002) particularly emphasises the benefits of a cheap public transport policy for young people.

Address children's clothing needs. Ridge (2002) argues the need for special grants to help children and young people dress adequately. She sees this as especially significant since children point out the central importance of clothing for peer group respect.

Improve support for working parents. Ridge (2007a) argues that a key issue for children whose mothers return to work is the quality of care they are placed in, and a child centred approach is needed to ensure high quality care for children of all ages.

6.3 What do we still need to know?

Agents of inclusion and exclusion. While much of the research touches on structural and other factors that serve to exclude children, there is perhaps space for a more explicit analysis of the agents and gatekeepers of children's inclusion/exclusion – who they are (a tentative list is offered in Section 3 of this paper), children's own awareness of them, who they act for or discriminate against, and policy levers that can reorient them, or reduce their influence.

Children's exclusion by other children, a particular case of the 'agents of exclusion' problem, can perhaps best be characterised as a structural problem in society, which the studies reviewed here expose but do not adequately explain. Particularly useful in this regard would be examples of communities or societies where the exclusion of some children by the majority is minimised, and an understanding of what factors can help in this regard.

Ethnic and other minorities. A small body of sociological research examines how children from different ethnic groups respond to economic adversity, by themselves and in support of their families (see for example Song, 1996). Given that many children from minority backgrounds may face double exclusion because of their minority status and because of their poverty (and may on the other hand also benefit

from strong ethnically based community support) it is important to further consider this issue.

Children of different ages. Although several studies reviewed here do look at differences between younger and older children, they appear to find remarkably little to report; and although some studies include children as young as five or six, little or nothing is said about this younger age group. Since the evolving capacities of children for reflexiveness and action are likely to be associated with age (and since children's rights to be consulted on matters affecting them increase as they mature), there is a need in future research to examine more closely how children of different ages perceive economic adversity.

Parents' transitions to work. More research is needed on how children influence parents' decisions regarding employment. Ridge (2007a) shows how children support parents who have made the decision to return to work. However, it is also important to know what happens to parents who do not return to work, and the negotiation processes that may take place between these parents and their children regarding employment.

Multiple disadvantages. Most of the studies reviewed are concerned with children in economic adversity. However, it is likely that many children in economic adversity experience multiple problems. Wikeley et al. (2007) observe that children who experience economic disadvantage often have complicated and diffuse family lives that involve frequent visits to step-parents and care of siblings, sometimes leaving little free time for other activities. It is important to better understand the impact of multiple disadvantage on children.

Family functionality. Support between family members comes across as one of the strongest features of the studies reviewed, and this is clearly a huge positive for many children. But the studies present little evidence, from the children's own perspectives, of what happens when family relations are under strain. Irwin (2006) shows for example the enormous impact that domestic violence has on children. Arguably financial and other strains may exacerbate problems of family functioning, so more general research may be needed on how children cope with economic adversity in the context of family strain, which may be manifested in neglect or abuse of children.

6.4 Pointers for future studies and policy

The studies reviewed here provide useful lessons for a future studies into children's perspectives on economic diversity. These perhaps can be summed up as follows:

- Children's standpoints are important for understanding poverty as it affects children and their families, and the effectiveness of policies to support them. However, the challenges attached not only to obtaining children's views, but also to involving them as co-researchers in the entire research process, while at the same time paying attention to their rights and best interests, are considerable (although not insurmountable), requiring both care and reflexiveness on the part of the researcher.
- Children, like adults are diverse and heterogenous, and research that seeks to obtain their views needs to recognise this. Of importance in this respect are

likely to be age, gender, family type, ethnicity, indigenous status, disability, and location. Location matters because urban/regional/rural experiences for children of low income are very likely to differ, particularly if many of their peers are also experiencing economic disadvantage or if only a few are in such circumstances.

- The family setting is central to our understanding of children's perspectives on their poverty. At the same time, the research needs to be sensitive to situations where families are divided or in distress, or where parents and children do not perhaps display mutual support and common interests.
- Policies aimed at parents, as well as those aimed at children, impact on children in several ways – on their self-esteem, their economic independence, and their well-being at school, for example. It is possible also that children's actions within the family may influence parents' responses to policies aimed at them (for example relating to employment). Children's perspectives may offer important clues about parents' responses to policy initiatives, including the trend in many OECD countries to encourage or coerce all single and partnered parents into paid employment.
- Children's perspectives may also reveal stigmatising and exclusionary aspects of community services that are not apparent to the service providers.
- School is an important setting for children, and it is possible that much could be done at the level of the school to improve the experiences and outcomes of children facing economic adversity. It is important therefore for part of the research to focus on the school setting, for example the way schools categorise and potentially create divisions among children.
- Among children's greatest concerns is their exclusion by other children. Research that seeks examples of successful inclusionary initiatives in school or community settings, and which identifies children's resilience in the face of adversity (what Margot Prior 2002 calls 'solid kids') could provide pointers for policy led responses to this particularly difficult issue.

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