

‘To count for nothing’: Poverty beyond the statistics

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Abstract: Beyond the statistics that tend to dominate much public debate, a focus on the *experience* of poverty, drawing on psychosocial analysis, reveals its relational as well as material nature. The article explores this understanding of poverty with reference to the impact of the discourses that shame and Other ‘the poor’ who ‘count for nothing’. It argues for acknowledgement of the agency of people who live with poverty and the structural constraints and insecurity within which it is exercised. This, together with a human rights perspective, premised on a belief in human dignity, can help to frame counter-discourses of recognition and respect. The article ends with some brief reflections on implications for policy and the politics of poverty.

Keywords: Agency, dignity, human rights, insecurity, Othering, poverty, psychosocial, recognition, respect, shame.

All too often political debate about poverty hangs on statistics and the measures used to compile them. Statistics are of course very important: not least to hold governments to account with regard to historical and cross-national trends, as well as to illuminate how some groups (and also geographical areas) are affected more than others—be it on lines of age, family or employment status, ethnicity, disability or gender (although the statistics are not illuminating on this last category). The starting point of this article, however, is that we need to move beyond the statistics, if we are to understand the *experience* of poverty. It will then explain how my own understanding developed to embrace the relational and symbolic as well as the material.

¹This article is an expanded version of the British Academy Lecture 2015 and draws on Lister (2004) and on material that will be used in the second edition.

The material—lack of the material resources needed to meet minimum needs, including social participation to paraphrase the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s (JRF) working definition, which reflects Peter Townsend’s pioneering work—is widely regarded by social scientists as the stuff of how we *define* poverty. But when we also *conceptualise* poverty in relational and symbolic terms, it changes the angle of vision to provide a more acute sociological and social psychological understanding. Crucial here is to appreciate the ways in which people living in poverty are shamed and ‘Othered’. Acknowledgement of their agency, within structural constraints, and also a human rights perspective offer counter-discourses or narratives (Krumer-Nevo & Benjamin 2010: 693) to this process of Othering. The article will conclude with some brief reflections on possible implications for policy and poverty politics.

THE LIMITATIONS OF STATISTICS: TOWARDS A RELATIONAL–SYMBOLIC UNDERSTANDING OF POVERTY

A preoccupation with statistics has contributed to a confusion between measures and definitions. This is reflected in the common claim that the official definition of poverty in the UK is 60 per cent of median income, followed by criticism of its inadequacy as a definition. It is, of course, inadequate because it is a measure not a definition. Measures are but imperfect attempts to operationalise definitions.

Research suggests that low-income statistics tend to leave the general public cold, although statistics that paint a picture of hardship and deprivation do have more impact (Fabian Commission 2005; Castell & Thompson 2007; Hall *et al.* 2014). As Paul, a contributor to a recent ATD Fourth World collection, declares, ‘We have to step out from the shadows of statistics and come forward to present ourselves as more than just mere numbers’ (ATD Fourth World 2014: 55). Ruth Sidel put it beautifully: ‘Statistics are people with the tears washed off’ (1992, quoted in Featherstone *et al.* 2014: 95). A social science that ignores those tears is arid. The paradox is that, in our preoccupation with counting ‘the poor’, we blind ourselves to how they constitute what Jacques Rancière describes as ‘the category of people who do not count’ (2001, quoted in Tyler 2013: 173). The title of this article paraphrases Joseph Wresinski, founder of ATD Fourth World, a human rights organisation working with people in severe poverty: ‘The greatest misfortune is to know that you count for nothing, to the point where even your suffering is ignored’ (ATD Fourth World 2014, frontispiece).

That suffering is all too easily masked by ‘the abstract language of expertise’ (Featherstone *et al.* 2014: 150)—be it of the researcher or the professional. But, following Pierre Bourdieu (1999) and as part of a developing interest in the psychosocial and

the emotional, some social scientists are trying to understand social suffering, described by Liz Frost and Paul Hoggett as lying 'at the heart of ... the lived experience of the social damage inflicted in late capitalist societies on the least powerful, and the intra-psychic and relational wounds that result' (2008: 440).

Frost and Hoggett refer to the 'relational wounds' suffered by the least powerful. Robert Walker, also drawing on psychosocial analysis, explains that poverty is 'relational in the sense that the experience of poverty is determined by others as well as by the self' (2014a: 120). It is relational at both the societal and the interpersonal level (including interactions with officials and professionals). At the societal level, Tess Ridge and Sharon Wright note that poverty is experienced within a 'framework of social relations and public and policy discourses about poverty [transmitted and embroidered by the media] which can impose shape and meaning on that experience' (2008: 3). Those social relations are constituted by inequalities such as those of social class, gender, 'race' and disability. Carol-Ann Hooper and colleagues, in an in-depth study of 'living with hardship', note that 'the material and social dimensions of poverty are interwoven throughout, but recognising the social dimensions (how people are perceived and treated by others) makes issues of diversity increasingly significant to understanding the experience of poverty' (2007: 18).

It is the 'shape and meaning' of that experience that is the focus here. As social scientists we can bring a rich analytic repertoire to our conceptualisation of poverty, but one thing I learned from listening to people living in poverty themselves is that we also need to ground that conceptualisation in *their* lived experience. That learning was aided enormously when I served on an independent Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, half of whose members had direct experience of poverty.² It was there that I really came to understand how poverty is experienced as a shameful and corrosive social relation as well as a disadvantaged and insecure economic condition.

These insights encouraged me to write a book on the concept of poverty (Lister 2004). I then combined this more bottom-up perspective with the more top-down, using in particular work on recognition by the political theorists Nancy Fraser (1997, 2003) and Axel Honneth (1995). Fraser's notion of 'symbolic injustice', 'rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication' (1997: 14) was especially helpful in conceptualising what I had learned on the Commission. More recently, empirical support has come from an important cross-national study by Walker and colleagues. This led to the conclusion that 'despite massive differences in

²The Commission, which sat 1999–2000, emerged out of a participatory consultation process conducted through the UK Coalition against Poverty's Voices for Change project. The Commission was asked to identify the barriers to the participation of people in poverty in decision-making that affected their lives and to make recommendations for change (see CoPPP 2000; Lister 2002).

material conditions, the psychosocial experience of poverty is very similar and is much shaped by the shaming to which people in poverty are exposed and the stigmatizing and discriminatory practices to which they are frequently subjected' (Walker 2014a: 197).

SHAMING AND OTHERING

This has been described as 'the poverty–shame nexus', shaped by 'dominant discourses' (Jo 2013: 516). It is through the lens of discourse—as articulated through language and images—that this article will explore the 'poverty–shame nexus' and the process of 'Othering' that drives it. Othering describes how the 'non-poor' treat 'the poor' as different. It is a dualistic process of differentiation and demarcation that draws a line between 'us' and 'them', which establishes, maintains and justifies social distance. As Andrew Sayer explains, 'othering is likely to support and be supported by relations of economic inequality, domination and social exclusion, and indeed to be stimulated as a rationale for these' (2005a: 59). The process is closely associated with, and reinforced by, the related social processes of stereotyping and stigmatisation.

A vivid account of what this can mean is provided by Vivyan C. Adair, an American who describes herself as a 'poverty class scholar'. She describes her and her sister's childhood:

Our dirty and tattered clothing; posture that clearly reflected guilt, shame and lack of a sense of entitlement; scars and bodily disease; and sheer hunger, marked us as Others among our more fortunate working-class neighbours and colleagues ... Other students and even our working-class teachers read us as 'trailer trash', as unworthy, laughable, and dangerous ... We were ... shamed and humiliated in our ragged and ill-fitting hand-me-downs, our very bodies signaling our Otherness. (Adair, 2005: 823)

This may be an extreme example, but it brings home how the process of Othering can be experienced in a very bodily way. The reference to 'trailer trash' also underlines how Othering operates as a discursive practice, which shapes how the 'non-poor' think and talk about and act towards 'the poor' at both an interpersonal and an institutional level. It can have the effect of denying the Other the 'right to name and define themselves' (Pickering 2001:73). By and large, the language and labels used to describe 'the poor' have been articulated by the more powerful 'non-poor' who, Imogen Tyler argues, are denied 'representational agency' (2013: 26). Mark Peel, author of an insightful Australian study, reflecting on the pejorative terms used to describe people in poverty by 'some of our most respectable citizens', concludes that 'somehow poor people have never quite become part of a common humanity. Other

people always want to push them out ... To treat poor people so harshly you have to see them as unlike you in a very fundamental way' (2003: 10).

Poverty discourses are rooted in history. The most obviously demeaning examples are the deeply stigmatising labels of 'underclass' and 'welfare dependant', which echo the historical categorisation of the 'undeserving poor' and the Victorian 'residuum' which referred to sewerage waste as well as the city poor. Adair's reference to 'trailer trash'—together with 'white trash' (a common label in the United States)—points to an important connection made by a number of analysts. Bev Skeggs, for instance, observes that the term serves to associate the working class (or at least certain sections of it) with 'waste, excrement, sewerage, that threatens to spill over and contaminate the order of the nation' (2004: 103–4). In her analysis of disgust and its role in the Othering process, Tyler also makes the link, via the related abusive term 'scum', with the more recent label of 'chav'. Although 'chav' is not quite coterminous with 'poor', it carries the mark of the 'underclass' (Jones 2011). Indeed, the website *chavscum.com* was set up so as to taunt 'Britain's peasant underclass that are taking over our towns and cities' (Gillies 2007: 26). But, whereas Keith Hayward and Majid Yar (2006: 14) argue that the 'underclass' label was deployed to mark a pathological relation to *production* (and I would add *reproduction*), chav stigmatises what are deemed culturally impoverished or 'vulgar' forms of *consumption*.

The chav also marks a racialisation of poverty. This is not the racialisation typically associated with inner-city poverty in the US, where the 'underclass' represents 'a crude synonym for inner-city blacks' (Katz 1989: 234), mired in 'welfare dependency' (Giles 1999). Rather, it is the poverty of the 'white trash', which, Skeggs observes, 'racializes the working class so that distance can be drawn from other forms of whiteness' (2004: 103). Poor trash are contaminated—not pure—white.

Behind these obviously derogatory labels applied to people in poverty there lies a deeper problem of 'representational agency' (Tyler 2013: 26) in the very word 'poor'—and even more so 'the poor', which objectifies and distances, so that the term is used here in 'scare quotes'. People in poverty themselves are often reluctant to wear what is perceived as a stigmatising label, with its connotations of inferior as in 'poor quality' (Castell & Thompson 2007; Batty & Flint 2010).

Jan Flaherty, in her illuminating Ph.D. study of how people experiencing poverty talk about it, concluded that, given people were open about their financial struggles, 'it was not an attempt to hide their circumstances that caused people to reject the idea that they were in "poverty"; it was the word itself and the connotations that its recognition brought' (2008: 209). Recent JRF research found the same (Shildrick & MacDonald 2013). In both studies, there was a tendency to see 'real' poverty as existing 'elsewhere'—in particular, in developing countries, reflecting an understanding of poverty shared with the wider population. Insofar as it was acknowledged that

poverty existed in the UK it was identified with an inability to manage and failings in personal behaviour in contrast to a more ordinary ‘normalisation of everyday hardship’ that described their own lives (Shildrick & MacDonald 2013: 289). One consequence was a tendency to ‘Other’ other people living in poverty. As Elaine Chase and Robert Walker describe it, ‘by striving to distance themselves from ... humiliating and negative constructions of “the poor” ... people who sense being defined as the ‘Other’ appear to distance themselves from the label by passing it to “others”’ (2013: 752–3; Batty & Flint 2010).

These multilayered processes of Othering are reinforced and to some extent shaped by media representations, which often portray those in poverty as ‘strangers in our midst’ (Katz 1989: 7). This is particularly the case in liberal welfare regimes such as those of the UK and US (Albrekt Larsen & Dejgaard 2013). An analysis of print media coverage of benefits claimants confirmed the bias towards negative representations (often reflecting political and policy discourse) and found evidence ‘to support the idea that negative media coverage is linked to stigma’ (Baumberg *et al.* 2012: 3).

The new phenomenon of what has been described as ‘poverty-porn’ television has been criticised by many as objectifying people in poverty ‘for the gratification of others’ (Scott-Paul 2013). Tracey Jensen argues that

it does not only play on existing shameless curiosity about poverty, it also positions the lives of the poor as a moral site for scrutiny, something to be peered at, dissected and assessed. It reinvents the underclass for the purposes of welfare reform ‘debate’ ... It presents the ‘others’ on the screen as dysfunctional in their choices and behaviour, as well as presenting a dysfunctional welfare state which rewards such ‘lifestyles’.
(2014: 4)

Too many programmes are premised on and perpetuate what most social scientists view as the myths of ‘workless communities’ and ‘intergenerational worklessness’, all too often propagated by politicians also. Even ‘sympathetic Othering’ can serve to widen social distance by emphasising difference or evoking pity (Lister 2004: 116).

Thus, overall, the Othering of ‘the poor’ means that they are typically targets of, at best, the non-poor’s pity or indifference and, at worst, their fear, contempt, disgust or hostility, ‘to be helped or punished, ignored or studied’ (Katz 1989: 236) but rarely treated as equal fellow citizens. As a consequence, people living with poverty often feel shamed, stigmatised and humiliated. Shame has been described as the ‘premier’ or ‘most pernicious’ of emotions (Scheff 2003: 239; Walker *et al.* 2013: 216; Sayer 2005b). Walker and colleagues’ research demonstrates how the ‘poverty–shame nexus’ causes ‘social and psychological pain’ (2013: 230). They also found that the manifestations of that pain are gendered: women ‘may more often find themselves in settings where they are exposed to poverty-related shame, be it due to domestic budgeting, child rearing

or a lack of hygiene. Equally, men may find that their poverty reduces their ability to meet socially constructed norms of masculinity' (*op. cit.*: 217). Earlier research illuminates how children can find the pain particularly difficult to bear, as it 'penetrates deep into their social relationships', with clothes acting as a symbolic signifier (Ridge 2009: 29).

Sayer's observation that 'to experience shame is to feel inadequate, lacking in worth, and perhaps lacking in dignity and integrity' (2005b: 954), with damaging implications for self-respect, is confirmed by research (Chase & Walker 2013; Baumberg *et al.* 2012) and by people living in poverty themselves. As a participant in a UK Coalition against Poverty workshop put it, 'You're like an onion and gradually every skin is peeled off you and there's nothing left. All your self-esteem and how you feel about yourself is gone—you're left feeling like nothing and then your family feels like that' (UKCAP 1997: 12).

AGENCY: A COUNTER-NARRATIVE

We can identify two, interrelated, ways in which contemporary poverty scholarship and activism are helping to combat dominant Othering narratives and to create 'counter-narratives' (Krumer-Nevo & Benjamin 2010). The first is through recognition of the agency of people living in poverty—of their capacity to act—which challenges the characterisation of 'the poor' as passive objects be it in the benign form of the helpless victim or the malign spectre of the lazy, work-shy welfare-dependant languishing on benefit. That said, a number of words of caution are in order.

First, agency has to be contextualised within the structural constraints and opportunities that frame people's lives. Class inequalities and social divisions, notably of gender, race, disability and age—shape and mediate the experience of poverty. For example, a recent JRF evidence review of gender and poverty by Fran Bennett and Mary Daly (2014) demonstrates not simply its unequal incidence but also that cause and effect are deeply gendered. Keeping sight of the structural context helps us to navigate the fine line between acknowledgement of the agency of people in poverty, including their capacity to make mistakes and 'wrong' decisions, just like the rest of us, and blaming them for that poverty.

Conversely, there is a risk of romanticisation. Not all agency is necessarily constructive either for the individual or for others. Agency can be expressed through acts of violence, for instance, which can themselves represent a response to shame and humiliation (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010: 133). Moreover, the flip side of idealising agency (and similarly resilience [Daly & Kelly 2015]) can be that those who do not manage to exercise it effectively, perhaps because of depression or malnourishment,

may then face even greater contempt, thereby aggravating feelings of failure and shame (Hoggett 2001; Greener 2002). Indeed, one of the insights from Walker and colleagues' study is that the corrosive effect of shaming and Othering on a person's self-worth can itself stunt 'their agency and overall self-efficacy' (Walker 2014a: 65).

It is also worth emphasising that agency should not be understood as quintessentially individualistic. I have encountered resistance to the concept in Japan because of its individualistic connotations. Yet, agency can be collective as well as individual. Moreover, as David Taylor has argued, 'the capacity to act is not simply an individual resource, but is contextual and depends upon the ability to mobilise self in the context of and with others—it is relational' (2011: 787).

The capacity to act can be expressed in a number of ways. I have proposed a typology (see Figure 1) of agency based on two continua: from the more 'everyday' to the more 'strategic', reflecting the consequential strategic significance for people's lives of the choices they make (vertical axis) and from the more personal to the more political (horizontal axis) (Lister 2004). The taxonomy categorises actions not actors, so that any one individual could be exercising all four forms of agency, identified in the quadrants as 'getting by', 'getting (back) at', 'getting out' and 'getting organised'.



Figure 1. Forms of Agency Exercised by People in Poverty.
Based on Figure 6.1 in Lister (2004).

Getting by

'Getting by' stands in the everyday–personal quadrant of the taxonomy. Getting by can all too easily be taken for granted and not recognised as an expression of agency. Yet study after study demonstrates the hard work and skill that are needed (Lister 2004; Canvin *et al.* 2009). The sustainable livelihoods (SL) framework, developed originally in the international development context, uses the notion of a range of unequally distributed assets or resources as one factor in people's differential ability to cope with stressful circumstances.

By taking as its starting point the assets and capabilities of people living with poverty rather than what has been called a deficit model, the SL approach gives due attention to agency, but it does so within the context of the barriers and obstacles they face: in other words, structure (Perry *et al.* 2014: 19–20). Its proponents claim that it 'brings a greater understanding of the choices people make, as well as the vulnerabilities that can undermine their attempts to improve their situation' (Brill & Haddad 2011: 9). This is brought out well in a recent study of why people use food banks, which deployed an SL methodology. Resorting to a food bank was typically a response to a 'last straw' 'acute income crisis' but one which arose in the context of 'cumulative and compounding' life-shocks such as bereavement or illness, together with vulnerabilities that were 'the legacy' of earlier life-shocks and/or ongoing financial pressure (Perry *et al.* 2014: 29).

Such vulnerabilities reflect how getting by skates on the thin ice of *précarité* and insecurity—described as 'deep unpredictability' in one study (Parker & Pharoah 2008: 36)—without the buffer of savings to deal with shocks, however minor (Lister 2006). Analysis by John Hills and colleagues found that it was less the considerable volatility of income among low-income respondents that they found difficult to cope with than unexpected spending demands (2006: 67). Participants in a JRF study 'talked about managing their financial circumstances as if they were all walking tightropes that could start wobbling at any time' (CRESR Research Team 2011: 44). As members of ATD Fourth World (2005) put it:

Being poor is first about money: never having enough to repair the washing machine that just broke ... Worrying about when the next thing will come through and never having the spare money to solve the crisis. And then falling into debt because you didn't have enough to replace the broken fridge and now having to pay this debt forever ... Being poor is to dream that you will have one week when you don't have to worry about money, always dreaming.

This is corroborated by Kjell Underlid (2007: 73), a Norwegian researcher who concludes that 'The sense of insecurity [generally accompanied by fear and anxiety] is an existential verity for the poor in affluent welfare states'—more acute than the

insecurity faced more widely today, as documented in a Compass report (Orton 2015). Fear loomed large in the accounts of people who gave testimony to a Commission on Poverty, established by the Bishop of Leicester (Bishop's Commission 2015). A sense of fear, in the face of cuts to the welfare state, was similarly observed by the journalist Mary O'Hara: 'if there was one word to capture the mood during the months that I travelled the country', she writes, 'it was "fear" ... the more the shock waves of austerity were absorbed, the more initial fears about what might happen mutated into a daily dread about how to survive' (2014: 211).

The SL approach helps to illuminate the ways in which getting by and coping with this insecurity involve the exercise of agency. At a very minimum, coping or getting by is an active process of juggling and there is plenty of research evidence to this effect (Parker & Pharoah 2008; Flint 2010; CRESR Research Team 2011; Shildrick *et al.* 2012a; Perry *et al.* 2014). Much of the poverty literature describes everyday coping in terms of often complex and sophisticated 'survival' and 'budgeting strategies'. The Social Market Foundation points out that 'poorer households manage their finances at least as well as, and often more closely than, wealthier families' (Keohane & Shorthouse 2012: 55–6).

What is often overlooked is how time-consuming this can be. The time involved in managing life on a low income, often in response to unexpected events, was a 'striking theme' of one study (Hooper *et al.* 2007: 27). It is often women's time as they carry the main strain of eking out inadequate material resources as part of the work they typically do in day-to-day poverty management, often involving considerable self-sacrifice (Women's Budget Group 2005). Also, as Val Gillies' (2007) research illuminates, they often deploy considerable emotional resources in trying to protect their children. Two words are used over and over again in the literature to describe the personal resources that are drawn on in the struggle to survive: resilience and resourcefulness (see, for instance, Orr *et al.* 2006; Parker & Pharoah 2008; Canvin *et al.* 2009). However, the Sheffield Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research team suggests that 'endurance' better conveys 'the way individuals and households managed to negotiate adverse economic conditions rather than be overcome by them' and the 'sense of a dogged and constant battle' rather than 'an episodic brush with adversity' (CRESR 2011: 41–2).

Yet countless studies also point to the 'danger of painting too rosy a picture of women's resourcefulness that ignores the strain that it places on many of them' (Kempson 1996: 24). A vivid picture of this strain is painted by Linda Tirado (2014) in her blog and book, *Hand to Mouth*, where she also brings out how the purchase of small pleasures, which might be castigated as imprudent budgeting, contribute to getting by psychologically. Elizabeth Harrison observes that resilience 'is not a bottomless pit that can be continually replenished' in the face of economic shocks

(2013: 109). It can be difficult to tap into (often-depleted) personal resources when exhausted by the very struggle to get by and when overwhelmed by the feelings of demoralisation, hopelessness, powerlessness and lack of control that poverty can cause. This is particularly the case when poverty is associated with ill health, mental and physical, as it so often is. The contribution and costs of children's agency also need to be recognised. According to Ridge, they deploy their 'own strategies of survival—working, moderating needs, covering up, protecting their parents and making do', but these 'are often hidden and can be highly detrimental to children's wellbeing' (2009: 92).

What is hinted at here also is the work that goes into managing the shame associated with poverty. Indeed, the very fact of getting by is sometimes used as evidence of not being poor—another way of distancing oneself from the label 'poverty' (Skeggs 2005; Flaherty 2008). Walker points to the need 'to be seen to be coping' as one of a number of, not necessarily conscious, 'techniques for managing the shame' (2014a: 122 & 121). Those akin to 'getting by', which perhaps might be labelled 'getting through', included keeping up appearances so as to 'appear "normal"' and withdrawal from social relations and commitments so as to avoid being shamed. While the latter can be a way also of saving money, the former can be costly, as brought out in a study by Kathy Hamilton. She found that 'individuals initiate strategies to avoid the social effects of stigmatization and alleviate threats to social identity' in particular through 'conspicuous consumption, with emphasis on ensuring children have access to the "right" brands'. Although, paradoxically, she shows how these coping strategies 'fuel further stigmatization' (2012: 74). This is a good example of Amartya Sen's argument that, while avoidance of shame lies at the absolute core of poverty, the means of doing so are relative to particular societies (1983: 161).

As already argued, agency has to be understood in the context of social relations; social networks can represent social resources that buttress personal resources in getting by. Again, it is mainly women who sustain social support networks in disadvantaged communities (Daly & Leonard 2002; Hooper *et al.* 2007; CRESR Research Team 2011; Daly & Kelly 2015). Through social networks of relatives, friends—and to a lesser extent neighbours—people can give each other material, practical and emotional support. This is explored in a longitudinal JRF study, which underlined that 'critically important also was the reciprocal nature of support' (CRESR Research Team 2011: 112). In other words, drawing on social resources is often an *active* process of giving as well as receiving. But this can also mean that in some cases poverty itself can act as a barrier to forming and sustaining social networks and there is often a reluctance to seek material help from family or friends where reciprocity is difficult (Hooper *et al.* 2007; Perry *et al.* 2014). For some the stress of poverty is thus compounded by social isolation (Parker & Pharaoh 2008; Perry *et al.* 2014). An

ongoing longitudinal qualitative study of the impact of social security cuts in Newham in East London reported that it was ‘noticeable’ that those not able or willing to access networks, found it much harder to cope and ‘were more worried about a financial emergency arising’ (Roberts *et al.* 2014: 22).

Networks can—depending on their nature—also help people get out of poverty: for instance, by providing informal childcare support for lone parents or by helping people find work. However, often it is low-paid, insecure work that does not offer a route out of poverty (Shildrick *et al.* 2012a). Moreover, where networks are cut off from the world of work, it has been suggested that they can hold people back, either because of ‘downward-levelling’ peer pressure (Forrest & Kearns 1999: 9) or because of a reluctance to move to find work for fear of losing the very social networks that help them get by (Johnston *et al.* 2000). Thus, ‘the neighbourhood for poorer people has more often served as an arena for “bonding” social capital that enables people to “get by”, rather than as a platform for “bridging” social capital that enables people to “get on”’ (Kearns & Parkinson 2001: 2105, cited in Shildrick *et al.* 2012a). In this context, social networks can be a source of casual work in the informal economy, which can represent a way of augmenting resources in order to get by, motivated by ‘need not greed’ in the experience of Community Links³ (Katungi *et al.* 2006).

Getting (back) at

Undeclared paid work has been interpreted by some analysts, notably Bill Jordan (1996), as a form of ‘everyday resistance’, which I have labelled ‘getting back at’. The term ‘everyday resistance’ was coined by James C. Scott in the context of peasant economies to refer to ‘the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups’. Unlike more institutionalised forms of resistance, it is ‘informal, often covert, and concerned largely with immediate, de facto gains’ aimed at ‘survival’ (1985: 29 & 33). I was initially sceptical, but having read Scott and more of the literature on social security fraud, it does seem reasonable to interpret some, though certainly not all, of it in this way. Where there is resentment against the system and, as has been found, ‘a sense of informal paid work providing a kind of social justice’ (Katungi *et al.* 2006: 27), this suggests an element at least of resistance.

Other forms of resistance against the perceived injustices of the benefits system have been identified by American analysts. One, Yvonne M. Luna, investigated how single mothers used both overt and covert forms of resistance ‘to minimize the pejorative constructions associated with a welfare identity’ and to fight back against their treatment (2009: 441). She argues that ‘although forms of resistance vary, they

³Community Links is an inner-city charity running community-based projects in East London aimed at developing new ways of working locally and achieving social change nationally.

provide marginalized groups with a sense of empowerment. Women with the pejorative welfare identity find ways to neutralize the stigma and contend with the system. Examples are oppositional culture, avoidance, withdrawal and dissociation. In addition to the emotional benefits of resistance, it offers practical ways to survive poverty' (*op. cit.*: 456).

Neutralisation of the stigma associated with poverty can operate at the symbolic/cultural level through 'discursive resistance' (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2006: 485; Sayer 2005a: 134). Attempts at discursive resistance also take various forms and are not necessarily totally successful given the weight of the Othering processes. An example of 'discursive resistance' is provided by a recent ATD Fourth World project: the *Roles We Play* collection of portraits of people living in poverty is a deliberate attempt to counter negative stereotypes through recognition of their contribution. As Alison explains,

this is a platform for ordinary people—people who live fulfilling lives, valuable lives, whether they're on benefits or not or whether they're disabled or they've got children, people who have incomparable struggle in their lives—to tell it in their own words instead of being labelled by people who don't really know but who cast negative judgement on people who they believe aren't contributing to the economy. (ATD Fourth World 2014: 2)

Tirado's blog and book (2014) can be read as an act of discursive resistance and an expression of the anger at the treatment of people in poverty identified by researchers such as Peel (2003) in Australia and Walker and colleagues in their cross-national study. But the latter found that that anger tended to be expressed through 'muted resistance' and 'frustration', typically giving way to resignation 'with respondents feeling that the forces against them were too great to be meaningfully challenged and that mere survival, or the attainment of decency, required all the energy that they had at their disposal' (Walker 2014a: 127 & 128). In contrast, Tyler writes of how, in France, 'responses to the daily humiliations of abjection in the *banlieues* ... manifested in riots' and other acts of violence (2013: 41). Also, citing a Guardian/LSE study, she argues that the British rioters of 2011 were in part responding to 'their sense of being invisible, of being stigmatized' (*op. cit.*: 204).

Getting out

The interplay between agency and structure in shaping individual 'trajectories' of poverty is at the heart of the contemporary theorisation of the dynamics of poverty, which has been facilitated by the establishment of longitudinal data sets that trace the same individuals over time. This shows that poverty is not necessarily a long-term sentence but may be short term or, all too frequently, recurrent (Jenkins 2011; Hills 2015).

The poverty dynamics research has been hailed as encouraging a perception of people in poverty as active agents in their own lives. However, such studies tend to be quantitative, providing an overall picture at the impersonal macro-level. Invaluable as they are, what they cannot do is provide insights into the ways in which these dynamics reflect the agency of the individuals involved or the toll that the struggle to get out of poverty can take on them and their families. Here, micro-level qualitative longitudinal studies can make an important contribution (Corden & Millar 2007; Millar 2007).

An example is a study by Jane Millar and Tess Ridge of how lone parents who had moved into paid work and their children ‘negotiate the everyday challenges of sustaining low-income employment over time’ (Millar 2007: 537). They found that family ‘was arguably the most important resource’ in sustaining employment. In particular, ‘the children were engaged in a complex range of caring and coping strategies not only to manage the changes in their lives but also to support their mothers in employment’ (Millar 2007: 540; Ridge 2007). In other words, trying to get out of poverty through paid work involved the active agency of both mothers and children.

A body of research into recurrent poverty from the JRF, and in particular the work of Tracy Shildrick and colleagues, throws light on how difficult it is in today’s insecure labour market for people to get clear of poverty, ‘even when they possessed strong, resilient work motivation and biographies that showed them putting this into practice with repeated engagement in jobs’ and/or education (2010: 14). The barriers to escaping what has been dubbed ‘the low-pay/no-pay’ cycle are often just too great. They include structural barriers, such as the nature of the jobs available and problems with childcare and transport, and personal barriers, such as ill health and lack of confidence (Crisp *et al.* 2009; Goulden 2010; McQuaid *et al.* 2010).

Such barriers can serve to stifle aspiration and optimism among both adults and children. As MacDonald and Marsh observe of the young people they studied in a highly disadvantaged, de-industrialised area of North East England: ‘In this historical context of class and place it is perhaps not surprising that young adults who have experienced the most tangible conditions of poverty described their biographies and imagined their futures in terms which emphasised—not the confident, exciting choice-making hypothesised in some contemporary social theory—but fatalism, lack of choice and powerlessness’ (2005: 213). More recent research by some of the same team in Middlesbrough and Glasgow similarly found that negative labour-market experiences among older workers could lead to ‘a sense of resignation and fatalism ... despite their valuing of employment’. Nevertheless, the researchers questioned the assumption of many politicians that the problem lies in ‘poverty of ambition’. They found that ‘despite their long-term worklessness, parents actively strove for better for their children ... and young people ... clung to normal, conventional aspirations for jobs and hopes for their futures’ (Shildrick *et al.* 2012b: 32 & 35). As a number of

studies show, the real issue is the difficulty in realising aspirations when lacking the personal, cultural and other resources needed to overcome the daunting obstacles (Seaman *et al.* 2005; Smith 2005; Gillies 2007).

Moreover, the sheer grind of poverty can undermine strategic as well as everyday agency. The very strain of getting by can mean that the future is 'framed in terms of hours and days rather than years' (Daly & Leonard 2002: 117). Or, in Tirado's words, 'poverty is bleak and cuts off your long-term brain' (2014: xviii). The energy required to exercise strategic agency can just be too much. Paradoxically, benefit cuts aimed at getting people into work can make it harder. The Newham study found that 'by forcing people into stressful situations where day-to-day survival becomes a priority, they are eroding people's readiness ... to seize opportunities' (Roberts *et al.* 2014: 5).

All this means that the dividing line between everyday and strategic agency can blur. This is brought out in an evaluation of Sure Start's role in empowering parents by Fiona Williams and Harriet Churchill (2006)⁴. In it they develop a more finely grained version of my taxonomy to include, for example, 'getting better at everyday living' (through, for instance, developing confidence and skills), which can also contribute to getting organised, my label for strategic political/citizenship agency.

Getting organised

Macro-level surveys suggest that poverty tends to be associated with relatively low levels of collective action. This can encourage an image of 'the poor' as lacking political agency, which is not surprising given the toll poverty takes and the obstacles to 'getting organised'.

The focus here is on those obstacles associated with subjectivities and identities, using David Taylor's (1998) distinction between related facets of identity—ontological and categorical. Ontological identity refers to a person's unique sense of self. As already discussed, it can be injured by the shaming and Othering associated with poverty. Categorical identity refers to a sense of belonging or sameness with others, which contributes to a sense of collective identity. A number of interrelated factors work against the development of a categorical identity among people in poverty.

First, 'poor' may not even be part of a person's *individual* identity. Poverty represents a socio-economic position rather than a personal defining characteristic. As ATD Fourth World observe, people living with poverty 'do not want to be seen only in the context of their poverty' (1996: 40). Second, the ascription of a category such as 'poor' does not necessarily translate into a sense of *collective* categorical identity. This

⁴Sure Start centres provide integrated early education, childcare, healthcare and family support services for children aged under four and their families.

is partly because we are not talking about a homogeneous or fixed group. And partly it reflects the reluctance to identify with the label. ‘Proud to be poor’ is not a banner under which many are likely to march. Moreover, the divisive ‘ripple effect’ of Othering of people in poverty by people in poverty impedes solidarity and collective action (Chase & Walker 2013: 752; Walker 2014a: 131). Thus categorical identity is blocked by what might be understood as an attempt to protect ontological identity so that people ‘can vindicate themselves as valid social beings’ (Chase & Walker 2013: 752).

However, there are other categorical identities around which people in poverty can get organised, such as mothers, older people or local residents. The constraints are nevertheless considerable, including both a lack of relevant resources and institutional barriers. Nevertheless, a minority of people living with poverty (especially women) do ‘get organised’ to try to effect change, even if not necessarily under the banner of poverty. There have been a few examples picked up by the media in recent months: most notably a group of young lone mothers in Newham, calling themselves Focus E15—‘accidental activists’ (Hyatt 1992) who fought eviction notices and started a campaign for social housing. Jensen applauds ‘their refusal to be stigmatised and the way they have ... managed to unify’ usually disparate groups (2014: 2; Beard 2014). One account suggested that the social space their occupation created ‘appeared to take away people’s shame, allowing many to talk openly about their forthcoming evictions, sanctions from the job centre and visits to the food bank’ (Kwei 2014).

Another community group, based in Salford, has formed explicitly to challenge the shaming of benefit claimants especially by the media. Calling themselves the Non-judgemental Integrity Compassion and Equality group (NICE for short), they organised a public meeting with the help of Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty. Raymond Wright, one of their members, told the meeting that ‘we want to show you that we are all worth much, much more than [the media scrounger stereotypes] and stand up to those who want to put us down’ (*The Independent*, 21 July 2014).

RECOGNITION AND RESPECT: A COUNTER-DISDISCOURSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

By refusing to be shamed, these groups are challenging the Othering to which they are subjected through counter-discourses that demand recognition, respect and dignifying treatment. As a young unemployed woman told a National Poverty Hearing,⁵ ‘I just

⁵This was a national hearing where people with experience of poverty were able to speak out, organised by Church Action on Poverty.

feel angry sometimes that people are ignorant to the fact that we are humans as well and we do need to be respected' (Russell 1996: 10). The need for respect was one of the main messages conveyed to the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power (CoPPP 2000). It illustrates very well Richard Sennett's argument: 'lack of respect, though less aggressive than outright insult, can take an equally wounding form. No insult is offered another person, but neither is recognition extended; he or she is not *seen*—as a full human being whose presence matters' (2003: 3, emphasis in original). This is reflected in the words of an informant cited by Simon Charlesworth who said he felt as if he were treated as 'a zero' and that 'that "nothing at all" value is a destroying experience. I am invisible' (2005: 304–5).

The reference to invisibility exemplifies what Clemens Sedmak (2013: 559–60), citing Avishai Margalit, calls 'blindness to the human aspect' in the disregarded Other in an essay on poverty and dignity, part of a British Academy collection exploring the 'power of the concept of human dignity' (McCrudden 2013: 1). As the editor Christopher McCrudden observes, Sedmak is emphasising 'the importance of relationality ... in our understanding of dignity' so that 'socio-economic rights would be rethought, for example, as protecting relational aspects of human flourishing in order to maximize the recognition and protection of our dignity' (*op. cit.*: 39).

This is indeed how some anti-poverty activists around the world have embraced a counter-discourse of human rights in recent years (Donald & Mottershaw 2009). In the US, for example, the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign was formed 'to raise the issue of poverty as a human rights violation'. Larry Cox and Dorothy Thomas found that human rights offered 'an affirmation of human dignity and equality that resonated powerfully' with impoverished communities (2004: 11). By strengthening political agency and counteracting the shame of poverty, the language of human rights has made it easier to develop a collective identity with others living with poverty. It helps to counter the process of Othering because it emphasises what we share as human beings rather than what separates us (Lister 2013).

In the UK, for all the aspersions cast on human rights, an evaluation of a British Institute of Human Rights poverty and human rights project observed how for participants 'a form of alchemy took place: people's lives and their view of themselves were transformed', as people saw themselves 'often for the first time, as human beings who are worth something just by dint of being human and who are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect' (Amh Consulting 2011: 11 & 15).

According to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, a human rights conceptualisation of poverty 'gives due attention to the critical vulnerability and subjective daily assaults on human dignity that accompany poverty. Importantly, it looks not just at the resources but also at the capabilities, choices, security and power needed for enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other

fundamental civil, cultural, political and social rights' (<http://www.unhchr.ch/development/pov-02.html>). This formulation reflects the increasingly influential capabilities approach developed by Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000) with its focus on what people are able to be and do: the kind of life people need to be able to achieve in order to flourish. It also speaks to one of the demands of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign for 'power not pity' (Lister 2013). Oxfam, indeed, conceptualises poverty as 'a state of powerlessness in which people are unable to exercise their basic human rights or control virtually any aspect of their lives' (Hocking 2003: 236).

VOICE AND THE EXPERTISE BORN OF EXPERIENCE: TOWARDS A NEW POVERTY KNOWLEDGE

An important element of this powerlessness is lack of voice—not being heard as well as not being seen. Having listened to people living with poverty in Australia, Peel concluded that 'they need to be trusted, respected and heard'. And 'if they wanted one thing to change, it was that they be treated as knowledgeable, that outsiders should be expected to learn and listen' (2003: 179 & 168). Peel is here making a plea to acknowledge the validity and value of the expertise born of experience.

A remarkable experimental ATD project in France attempted to do just that by creating 'a dialogue and reciprocal relationship between ... three types of knowledge ... the knowledge of those who have lived in extreme poverty and exclusion, the knowledge of those who have committed themselves to working with the poor and academic knowledge' (Fourth World–University Research Group 2007: 4). An initial evaluation of this 'merging of knowledge' observed that the knowledge (*connaissance*) thereby created 'became a source of recognition/re-cognition (*reconnaissance*)' and that this 'reconnaissance' was perhaps the key to the whole project (Brun 2007: 466).

The participants learned of the commitment required 'to recognize the other as a human being and not as a *problem to be solved*' (Fourth World–University Research Group 2007: 431). Reflecting on the implications for citizenship and representation, the report contends that 'the knowledge that people who have experienced poverty can bring to the table is uniquely valuable, ... as long as they have the opportunity to think about what they and those around them experience. This does not exclude other types of knowledge, but these ... can never replace what is contributed and expressed by the poor themselves' (*op. cit.*: 426). The sociologist Alain Touraine acknowledged on the dust jacket that 'this encounter makes me realize that we need to replace abstract philosophy of the social with a concrete philosophy of persons who act'.

In developing such a philosophy, the participants helped to forge the kind of 'new poverty knowledge', grounded in the expertise born of experience as well as more traditional forms of expertise, called for by Alice O' Connor (2001: 292–5). This 'recognition and legitimization of knowledge grounded in practice, activism and experience' and 'the use of participatory methodologies that acknowledge and celebrate the presence of the people themselves' have been hailed as another counter-narrative that challenges dominant processes of Othering (Krumer-Nevo & Benjamin, 2010: 708 & 704).

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND POLITICS

Policy

So what happens if we use this 'new poverty knowledge' in the formulation of policy? What follows are a few signposts, starting with those provided by the cross-national research into shame. The researchers conclude from their analysis that 'in order to shift anti-poverty policies from being shame-inducing to dignity-promoting, policy reform should start with a critical evaluation of its framing' (Walker & Chase 2014: 152). They also suggest that 'a move towards dignity-based policies must be rooted in changing the foundational discourses shaping the policy-making process, as much as in the design of policies themselves' (Pellissery *et al.* 2014: 197).

With regard to specific policies, the challenge posed to policy-makers is 'to find ways of shame-proofing' them, in view of the finding that 'policies and programmes have the potential to either *heighten* or *lessen* the shame that people feel as a result of living in poverty (Walker, 2014b: xi; Pellissery *et al.* 2014: 179, emphasis in original). The delivery of benefits and services all too often heightens shame, thereby reducing their effectiveness (Gubrium & Lødemel, 2014: 211). The UK researchers were repeatedly given examples of how 'the process of claiming benefits became dehumanising' (Walker & Chase, 2014: 146). Similarly, Mel Bartley, in an earlier study of resilience, notes that 'the message that users are not valued, and indeed mistrusted, permeates many facilities in hard-pressed areas ... too often the way the services are provided is disrespectful of people's lives and experiences' (2006: 22). She highlights in particular 'not being listened to' and argues that 'treating user groups and individual clients as a legitimate source of "welfare wisdom" and incorporating their views is essential' (*op. cit.*: 23).

This is the philosophy that underpinned many Sure Start programmes. An evaluation found that an important key to parents' 'empowerment' was respectful treatment—engaging with them 'in an open, accessible, informal, non-judgemental

way, listening, respecting and learning from parents' own experiences' (Williams & Churchill, 2006: 1). Respectful treatment can be encouraged by the development of a human rights culture premised on respect for the human dignity of service users. According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, such a culture 'can have a transformative function', but 'it requires a change in attitude and culture' (EHRC 2009: 14, 15). Poverty activists argue that this culture change must involve an understanding of what poverty means and of the damaging effects of disrespectful treatment. One tool is the involvement of people with experience of poverty in the training of professionals and officials, as pioneered with social work students (Perry 2005).

This involvement is indicative of another key plank of a human rights approach to poverty, which, according to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'requires active and informed participation by the poor in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of poverty reduction strategies' (OHCHR 2002: para. 10). Participation acknowledges agency and the expertise born of experience. However, in practice it can all too easily be phoney rather than offering genuine voice and power: 'the ultimate disrespect' as the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power was told (CoPPP 2000; Roets *et al.* 2012).

Walker and colleagues' cross-national study supported the contention that shame is more likely to be associated with provisions confined to 'the poor': 'selectivity', they found, 'often results in a heightened sense of moral superiority on the one side, and of stigma and social exclusion on the other' (Gubrium & Lødemel, 2014: 202). Their findings influenced the incorporation of the principle of 'respect for the rights and dignity' of social security recipients into the 2012 International Labour Organization Recommendation Concerning National Floors of Social Protection (Walker *et al.* 2012). One implication of this principle is the advice in the Recommendation that 'basic income security should allow life in dignity'. Yet, Minimum Income Standards research indicates that, for too many in the UK, benefits and wages are *not* sufficient to 'allow life in dignity' (Bradshaw *et al.* 2008: 3).

The politics of poverty

Demands for decent benefits and wages are emblematic of what has been dubbed a 'politics of redistribution' rooted in the struggle against socio-economic injustice. Such a politics remains vital in economically and socially polarised societies such as that of the UK. Yet, to quote Peel: 'if social justice is a response to poverty, it must be a response to poverty's psychological and emotional wounds, not just its financial consequences' (2003: 167). Such a response to cultural or symbolic injustice demands what political theorists have dubbed a 'politics of recognition', rooted in cultural or symbolic injustice.

Reading recognition theory alongside the narratives of poverty activists suggested 'a politics of recognition&respect' (Lister 2004: 186). However, whereas a politics of recognition is typically associated with the assertion of group difference, in the case of people living with poverty it is a struggle for recognition of and respect for their common humanity and dignity (Lister 2007). As argued by Nancy Fraser (1997, 2003), the struggle for social justice requires the integration of a politics of redistribution and of recognition&respect. So, for example, when low-paid workers demand a decent wage what is at stake is the *socio-economic* question of how much they are paid for their labour relative to others, the *symbolic* question of what that wage says about recognition of their worth, and both questions with regard to whether it provides for a 'life in dignity'.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

A politics of poverty that goes 'beyond the statistics' is premised on the belief that people in poverty count as much as anyone else. So long as the poverty debate is framed by politicians and the media in terms that treat people living with poverty as 'the Other', so that they continue to be shamed, the recognition and respect for human dignity required by a human rights perspective are unlikely to be achieved. Similarly, so long as the struggle for social justice for people living with poverty is waged without their active involvement and voice, it is likely to be ineffective. As even the World Bank has acknowledged, 'the poor are the main actors in the fight against poverty' (2001: 12). They cannot rely on the benevolence of the powerful to effect the kind of policies outlined above but they should be able to look to solidarity from other actors in civil society, politics, faith groups and academia. Among the last group, social scientists, in particular, have a role to play in enabling people in poverty 'to step out from the shadows of statistics' (ATD Fourth World 2014: 55) through the development of counter-narratives that portray them as fellow citizens with agency.

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