‘I mean we’re not the richest but we’re not poor’:
discourses of ‘poverty’ and ‘social exclusion’

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‘I mean we’re not the richest but we’re not poor’: Discourses of ‘Poverty’ and ‘Social Exclusion’.

By

Jan Flaherty

A Doctoral Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of
Doctor of Philosophy of Loughborough University

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Abstract

While people in poverty have long been included in social policy research the purpose has principally been to discover their experiences of poverty, with little attention paid to their own conceptualisations of poverty and social exclusion. This research used focus groups and in-depth individual interviews to explore the discourses of poverty and social exclusion with people identified as experiencing poverty, although this was generally a label they rejected. Due to recruitment through Sure Start Children’s centres the sample of respondents were predominantly mothers of working age, although a number of men and non-parents also took part. The study, therefore, is not a representative sample of all people who may be associated with poverty but is an in-depth examination of some.

Respondents reproduced many mainstream poverty discourses, including scepticism of real poverty existing in Britain and the othering of people who might be seen as ‘poor’. ‘Poverty’ was formulated in extreme and ‘absolute’ terms and was perceived as occurring ‘elsewhere’: another neighbourhood, another country or historically. Dis-identification with ‘poverty’ was therefore accomplished in a number of ways, from its ‘absolute’ conceptualisation through to strategies of distancing and the presentation of socially positive subjectivities, such as ‘good parent’ and paid worker. In this way participants dis-identified with the characteristics and the label of ‘poverty’ but without denying economic and material hardships. People’s discursive power therefore resided in their ability to renegotiate the label of poverty as one that was inapplicable to them and to redefine their difficult economic position in terms of ‘managing’. The active concept of ‘managing’ allowed respondents to feel in control of their resources, however modest, and by extension maintain control over their choices and their lives. Not managing equated with failure and thus with ‘poverty’. The fact that respondents described themselves as managing meant that by definition they were not in ‘poverty’ as they perceived it.

‘Responsibility’ was also a key concept to emerge, deployed by respondents to avoid social censure for their own economic circumstances whilst simultaneously reproving others for theirs. The research also found that the majority of respondents had not heard of ‘social exclusion’ and did not perceive of themselves as excluded. As such, it was a concept that had little resonance for people in the study.
It is argued that the use of the word ‘poverty’ within a British context needs to be rethought if it is to have relevance for people experiencing socio-economic marginalisation. Alternative constructions within a human rights framework, such as a minimum living standard, may achieve greater recognition with people currently defined as experiencing poverty and as such lead to tangible demands for change.
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Introduction

This thesis addresses a neglected area of poverty research in Britain, that of examining the discourses of poverty and social exclusion deployed by people identified as experiencing poverty by standard policy measures. Relatively little research work has focused directly upon people’s own definitions and talk around poverty, choosing instead to focus on the material reality or measurement of poverty. How the phenomenon of ‘poverty’ is constructed within a particular society, however, relates to how it is represented, controlled and problematised and further, how ‘solutions’ are created. If the voices of people defined as living in poverty are discursively excluded from the characterisation of ‘poverty’ terminology, the process of conceptualising it becomes one of imposed categorisation rather than one informed by experience. It is a case of the ‘non-poor’ defining what ‘poor’ is. This research is not an attempt to invalidate the conceptualisations, knowledge and insights of those without lived experience of poverty but instead proposes an inclusion of the language of ‘poverty’ by people defined as such.

The presumption of what ‘poverty’ is and where to find it has led to the inclusion of people in poverty research who would not define themselves in such terms if they had been asked and, indeed, may well feel disrespected to be described as ‘in poverty’.\(^1\) It is therefore important to explore how the conditions identified by researchers as poverty and social exclusion are spoken about by respondents and in what ways descriptions may differ and why. The approach taken in this thesis builds upon the research conducted in this area (Beresford et al, 1999; Galloway, 2003) and contributes to a body of emerging literature that is concerned with people’s understandings of their situations and lives in ‘poverty’ (Bennett, 2004; Burnett, 2006; Lister, 2004; The Poverty Alliance, 2004). Unlike many studies in the arena of social policy however it utilises the approach of discourse analysis. The type of discourse analysis chosen for this study focuses on language in use as well as examining the material and social context encountered. By looking at understandings of what ‘poverty’ is perceived to be and the consequences of its construction in different ways, in addition to the descriptions of what may commonly be called ‘poverty’, the significance of what ‘poverty’ means and what it means to say one is in ‘poverty’ can be revealed.

\(^1\) This study is not absolved from such a criticism.
Research Questions

The thesis examines discourses of poverty within a historical and contemporary context. Social exclusion is also explored, largely because of its adoption in political and media discourse in the decade and as a favoured phrase of New Labour governments. A Social Exclusion Unit was established in 1997, closing nine years later to give way to the current Social Exclusion Task force, based in the Cabinet Office. The term ‘social exclusion’ is associated with income poverty but is, in government terms ‘more than income poverty’, relating to being unable to participate fully in normal social activities, or to engage in political and civic life. Due to the ubiquity of the phrase in political life and within the media and its close associations with poverty it seemed important to examine if it had any resonance for people in the study.

While poverty discourses are placed within a historical context the main focus of the research however examines how people defined as living in poverty talk about ‘poverty’, ‘social exclusion’ and the alternative descriptions utilised for their circumstances. In this way the study is exploratory rather than definitive and the research questions reflect this, examining:

- Whether, and to what extent, self-definitions of poverty might deviate from mainstream perceptions of poverty and social exclusion?
- Whether people accept or reject the label of poverty and what alternative descriptions may be used instead?
- What are peoples’ understandings of social exclusion and does this terminology have any resonance for people defined as experiencing social exclusion (or poverty)?
- How relevant is social exclusion as a concept to people in poverty?
- If, and in what ways, do mainstream discourses of poverty act as agents of either inclusion or exclusion?
Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into three sections. The first section consists of a comprehensive literature review in three chapters, of which the first chapter examines the significance of discourse analysis in looking at the issue of poverty. The second chapter begins with a brief historical overview of the discourses of poverty and charts past and current hegemonic discourses of poverty. Chapter Three examines previous empirical research which has attempted to ask people about their understandings of poverty and explores the potential difficulties with poverty terminology, especially for those people regarded as socially excluded, in poverty or 'poor'.

Section two contains the main body of empirical research in five chapters and begins with Chapter Four detailing the research journey: the research design, methods and analysis chosen and why these were appropriate. Chapter Five looks at respondents' accounts of everyday life and difficulties faced, descriptions that on the surface look like 'poverty' although this was a classification rejected by respondents. Chapter Six then explores the significance of 'poverty' and poverty terminology for respondents, how poverty is constructed by them and how such constructions generally serve to distance them from a label of poverty. Chapter Seven looks further at the 'poverty' discourses of respondents, focusing on the notion of responsibility in relation to their own and others' material and economic circumstances. The chapter also discusses how respondents used the term 'managing' to define their position in terms of coping and therefore of not being in 'poverty'. Chapter Eight moves on to explore subjectivities, both those made available within a description of poverty and those that are forged by respondents.

Reflections is the theme of the third section, looking back in two chapters at the overall outcomes of the study. Chapter Nine looks at discourses emerging from the research, the similarities between respondents' talk and mainstream discourses and also aspects of discourse that might be expected in a discussion around poverty and social exclusion but that are absent. Issues and questions around the dilemma of using a 'poverty' label are looked at and alternatives discussed. The concluding chapter draws the themes and outcomes of the thesis together, explores the practical implications of the thesis and offers some suggestions for future research and practice.
Section I: Literature Review
Chapter 1: Exploring Poverty through Discourse

Introduction

The research focus of this study is concerned with the discursive formation of ‘poverty’ and ‘social exclusion’ by people deemed to be in poverty rather than the material reality and consequences of poverty. This chapter lays the groundwork for this discursive exploration and will examine the significance of discourse in the construction of different poverty ‘knowledges’. In order to illustrate the importance of the discursive in poverty research some constructions of poverty past and present will be outlined but these various discursive constructions of poverty will be examined in greater detail in Chapter Two. The relationship between hegemonic poverty discourses and the consequences for the self-identity of people in poverty will also be examined here. This chapter will conclude by raising the question of the possibility of poverty discourses outside current hegemonic understandings of poverty.

Why Discourse?

A diversity of discourse analytic approaches exist, ranging from those that focus purely on the data of social interaction, such as conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992) and discursive psychology (Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1996) to those that look at discourse in context and adopt an explicitly political stance (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1993). Foucauldian discourse analysis is concerned with discourse (language in use), subjectivity and practice, in addition to the material conditions in which discourse occurs (Willig, 2001b: 107) and it is through this perspective that ‘poverty’ will be considered below. Each methodological approach maintains a specific understanding of what ‘discourse’ is and it is this understanding that subsequently shapes the research process. What these analytic perspectives hold in common is the belief that discourse is more than merely description – discourse is active in constructing particular versions of reality.

2 These different approaches to discourse and their analytical stance are examined in more detail in Chapter Four.
A Foucauldian understanding of discourse is one that includes, but moves beyond, linguistic representation and perceives discourse as 'a system of representation' and as practice (Hall, 1997: 44). Indeed, discourse and practice are one and the same (Parker, 1992: 17). One definition of a Foucauldian understanding of discourse is that it constitutes 'a corpus of statements' whose organisation is 'regular and systematic', the rules of which 'de-limit the sayable', thus demarcating the boundaries of a particular subject and how it can be meaningfully understood and talked about (Kendall and Wickham, 1999: 42; Hall 1997: 44). As Young notes, the effect of discourses is to make it 'virtually impossible to think outside them'; to do so is to go beyond the limits of understanding and reason (1981: 48). Consequently, while the potential exists for an assortment of meanings in discourse there is in fact a 'scarcity' in what can be thought and said within a particular milieu (Young, 1981). However, while the nature of a discourse is that it excludes and delimits what may be said it is regarded as productive: of social practices, identities and 'truth'. Discourse produces 'knowledges' about a particular object or phenomenon, such as poverty. Thus, although boundaries to discourses exist, it does not follow that a discourse is ever 'closed' or that different ways of understanding are prevented from occurring. As Kendall and Wickham (1999) note 'the possibility of innovation in discourse is always present within any discourse itself and within tangential or succeeding discourses' (1999: 41). Control over discourses is not totalising or without contradictions. Indeed, one aspect of discourse is that it will always contain some counter-discursive elements (Kendall and Wickham, 1999: 41). As such, dissenting or resistant discourses can be brought into being. However, although the potential of alternative discourses is ever present, this does not imply that the formation of discourses other than the hegemonic have an equal chance of achieving 'truth' status. As Willig points out certain discourses become 'entrenched' (Willig, 2001:107) and seen as common sense or the 'way things are'.

Another feature of discourses is that they are fluid and so interact with other 'normative' discourses, informing one another and sharing terminology. Accordingly, poverty discourses are interrelated with discourses about the material, behavioural, moral, individual and structural expectations of a particular time (Carabine, 2001), creating a particular 'truth' about modern poverty in Britain. However, although existing within an overarching poverty discourse, particular 'narratives' about poverty constitute their own discourses or ways of constructing the phenomenon of poverty: what it is said to be, who the 'poor' are and why
they are ‘poor’. Which ‘manifestation’ of poverty becomes ‘true’ has a bearing on how the phenomenon of poverty is represented, regulated, and how ‘solutions’ are constructed.

Access to discourse is not equal. Because discourses define not only what it is legitimate to say but also who can say it, only certain ‘truths’ about poverty, primarily those of the ‘non-poor’, come to constitute a discourse of poverty. Since discourses make available ways of seeing and ways of being, they are strongly implicated in the exercise of power (Willig, 2003: 171). As Foucault notes, there is a ‘rarefaction’ of the speaking subjects, ‘none shall enter the order of discourse if he does not satisfy certain requirements or if he is not, from the outset, qualified to do so’ (Foucault in Young, 1981: 62). The parameters of the poverty debate in Britain have rarely included people in poverty; they are the subjects, not the architects, of hegemonic discourses. Indeed, throughout history people in poverty have largely been seen as a ‘social problem’ in themselves, rather than their economic condition alone being the problem, and, as such, have been denied the legitimacy to speak. Thus, particular ways of seeing and thinking about poverty, constructed by those without lived experience of poverty, come to constitute the truth about ‘poverty’. The ability of dominant discourses to make themselves ‘true’ in a very literal sense can be seen in an example from modern America. In the United States (US) the public imagination identifies ‘the poor’ as overwhelmingly black (Hartigan, 1997). In statistical fact however, the majority of the US poor are white\(^3\). This indicates that discourses can be ‘untrue’ in actuality but still have the power to make themselves ‘true’ within the world of the social.

Clearly, the ability to make a particular discourse ‘true’ is linked to the exercise of power. While Gans (1995) does not use the term discourse, his analysis of the labelling of those in poverty is germane. He considers the role of legitimators (such as researchers, experts, politicians and so forth), whose use of a ‘new’ label justifies its application. Thus the power to name ‘the poor’ and indeed create new descriptions about them and their situation comes from those with the discursive authority to do so. ‘The ever-present participants in all these processes are the labelled, the poor people who are the silent, unasked, unwilling targets of the label’ (1995: 21). So, while alternative descriptions about poverty and ‘the poor’ may exist, including those articulated by people in poverty themselves, these operate within the

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\(^3\) Data from the US Census Department (2007) shows that 36.5 million people in the US lived below the official poverty line in 2006. Of these, 9 million people self-identified as Black and 24.4 million as white. The remaining number identified as Asian, Hispanic, and Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander.
limits of hegemonic discursive formations of ‘poverty’ and as such may not be accepted or even recognised as discourses about poverty. For example, in Poverty First Hand one group interviewed considered that apologising for having something of quality, like a ‘decent lawnmower’, identified as their ‘luxury’, was poverty (Beresford et al, 1999: 61). However, the complexities of this definition, involving cultural and psychological aspects, would not be seen as a definition recognisable within most mainstream discourses of poverty. Indeed, it is this lack of recognition of what poverty may or may not be that reinforces the hegemonic discourses prevalent in a UK context. As Foucault notes:

> It is always possible that one might speak the truth in the space of a wild exteriority, but one is ‘in the true’ only by obeying the rules of a discursive ‘policing’ which one has to reactivate in each of one’s discourses. (1981: 61)

For Parker (1992) it is a mistake to adopt a Foucauldian position that sees power and knowledge as unavoidably entailing one another. He argues that if we always view them as such, ‘we would lose sight of the ways in which discourses that challenge power are often tangled up in oppressive discourses, but are no less valuable to our understanding of relationships and possible future relationships for that’ (1992:18). Thus, the emergence of alternative discourses of poverty which may contradict the mainstream is always possible, including discourses used by those for whom it is a lived reality.

Pecheux (1994) also critiques Foucault’s rule-governed notion of discourse and argues that everyday discourse ‘is marked by a profound interpretive ambiguity’ (in McNay, 1994: 82). This position is eloquently summed up by McNay and is therefore quoted at length:

> A logically stabilized discursive space forms a ‘cover’ over the heterogeneous regions of the real. This cover is not understood as a kind of ideological deception or mystification. Rather, in order to cope with the conflicting and diverse exigencies of everyday life, ordinary people – ‘pragmatic subjects’ – have a need for logical homogeneity or a semantically normalized world. Thus the boundaries of the logical cover coincide with the multiplicity of ‘things to be known’, the diverse and conflicting reserves of accumulated
knowledge which are necessary for ordinary people to negotiate the threats and obstacles of everyday life. In order to study these multiplicity of things to be known, it is necessary to recover the ambivalence and heterogeneity of everyday discourse. The recognition of the constitutive heterogeneity of everyday language leads to an understanding of utterances as always carrying the 'virtual presence' of the other, the mark of the ambiguous other meaning (1994: 83).

It is with an awareness of this ambiguity that other ways of seeing and knowing may be found in relation to multiple understandings of poverty and one that this research endeavours to explore.

'Poverty' and Discourse

'Poverty', then, is discursively constructed in various ways across cultures and within different historical periods. Thus 'poverty' is not necessarily a matter of material and economic deficiency, as generally and currently perceived in the UK, but is differentially constituted across time and place. While presently in Britain the US and many European countries, finances, especially income, are central to a discourse of poverty, other cultural understandings do not necessarily incorporate a financial element in an assessment of poverty. As Webster and Engberg-Pederson (2002) assert, what may be labelled 'poverty' covers a diverse range of experiences and processes of marginalisation: 'Vulnerability, isolation and humiliation are dimensions that might capture the hardship endured by specific groups better than the lack of income' (Webster and Engberg-Pederson, 2002: 2). An understanding of 'poverty' as discrete from finances is also illustrated in a discussion on concepts of poverty with the 'impoverished' Adivasis, a tribespeople in the mountains of India. Although they identified themselves as people with no money they did not see themselves as 'poor'; for them this did not equate to the same thing, 'The commonality of view in this case meant that a different discourse of poverty existed' (Marcel-Thekaekara, 1999). A further example of an alternative construction of poverty can be seen in the definition of 'being poor' offered by Rahnema:
In many cultures of the world, poor was not always considered the opposite of rich. Other considerations such as falling from one’s station in life, being deprived of one’s instrument of labour [...] lack of protection, exclusion from one’s community, abandonment, infirmity or public humiliation defined the poor. (Rahnema, cited in Allen and Thomas, 2000: 11).

Similarly, within the religious texts of Judaism a multitude of descriptions – and therefore constructions – about ‘the poor’ are to be found:

A midrash lists no less than seven words used to describe people struggling with poverty: Ahni indicates one who suffers. He is called evyon because he longs (mita'ev) for everything; misken because he is despised by all, rash because he is dispossessed (mitrosheš) of property; dal because he is detached (medulal) from property, like a kind of lowest threshold. [Leviticus Rabbah 34:6] (Rosenn, 2003).

An historical outline of poverty is offered by Coll (1969), which reveals that the medieval Christian church promoted the view of the poor man as an honourable person and thus was a position without shame. Such attitudes served to ensure the dignity of the person despite their material circumstances (Coll, 1969: 2). Other discourses of poverty, which conceptualised the state of being poor as virtuous and therefore of high status, have also appeared at certain points in history (Walter, in Waxman, 1977: 56).

Indeed, whilst extreme hardship may be evident, ‘poverty’ may not exist conceptually for those it describes in the same way as it does for the describers. This is observed by Enberg-Peterson in his study in Burkina Faso, in which he notes, ‘Poverty is an outsider’s concept that has little resonance in Burkinabe society’ (Enberg-Peterson, 2002:175). Thus the development discourse in the country does not talk of ‘the poor’ or of poverty but instead recognises that some groups, such as women, are ‘extremely burdened’ (Engberg-Pedersen, 2002a: 174).

It is also the case that ‘poverty’ may be avoided – not because it has little resonance – but because of political expediency. It has been well documented that despite a rise in poverty
and inequality during the Thatcher governments, the word ‘poverty’ was effectively removed from the political lexicon and working groups on inequality were either terminated or experienced a change of title, hence the research Group on Poverty Study became the working group on Work Incentives and Income Compression (Hills, 2004: 94). Such an overt attempt at denying the reality of poverty by obliterating it from language and text indicates the influence of discourse for ways of thinking and talking about issues; in this case issues the government wished to disregard. New Labour took the opposite approach at the end of the 1990s when ‘poverty’ was re-embraced by the new government. Indeed, an assessment of poverty and inequality in the UK claimed, ‘It is one of the current government’s greatest achievements that poverty is no longer a dirty word’ (Paxton and Dixon, 2004: 8). By reintroducing the word into the political lexicon at a senior level the government displayed a belief that poverty existed, rather than a citizenry with differential incomes, and by doing so highlighted a situation that demanded attention.\footnote{However, New Labour’s commitment to tackling poverty targets certain priority groups, such as children and older people, rather than adopting an across the board moral stance against poverty per se. In addition, the first two years of a New Labour government centred on a discourse of social exclusion above that of poverty.}

As Hall (1997) notes, different discourses arrive at different moments. These ‘new’ discursive formations generate new ways of thinking and speaking about subjects and situations, in this case, poverty. However, as noted, it is the prevailing, political, academic and public discourses about poverty which are significant in formulating what poverty is said to be and who is culpable. As argued by Dean and Melrose:

> It is modernity itself that has constituted poverty as a social problem. Through a variety of discourses – popular and political, professional and academic – poverty is constructed as an issue of social concern, as the subject of technical knowledge, and as an object of political regulation and control (Dean and Melrose, 1996: 26).

Thus, it is within discourse that poverty can be identified as ‘problematic’ and as a social, moral or individual problem. But whilst new ‘poverties’ may emerge, people in poverty are largely excluded from the conceptualisation and legitimation of particular hegemonic discourses of the ‘poverty’ that gains sovereignty. Central to the significance of discourse in
the formation of ‘poverty’ therefore is the question of whose understanding of poverty is being promoted.

A ‘Poor Identity’?

A central point about the significance of discourse when examining the construction of poverty is that subjects ‘represent’ a discourse (Hall, 1997: 56). Consequently, a person defined as ‘poor’ or, more pejoratively, as a member of the ‘underclass’ for example, embodies a discourse about poverty as it is constructed within that particular historical context. As well as subjects ‘representing’ a discourse, discourses also offer ‘subject positions which have implications for subjectivity and experience’ (Willig, 2001: 107). Indeed, the nature of discourse means that subjects can ‘only exist meaningfully within the discourses about them’ (Hall, 1997: 55). Such a corollary leaves little room for manoeuvre for people positioned within a negative discourse about them, such as people defined as ‘poor’ or in poverty. As Gans (1995) observes, contemporary poverty discourse has few words to describe the ‘deserving poor’ but many labels for the so-called ‘undeserving poor’ (1995: 22). This demonstrates a cultural and linguistic understanding about poverty that is overly elaborated in negative perceptions around people in poverty or those seen as socially excluded. People in poverty are often subject to the representations, definitions and stereotypes of the more powerful as their own discourses of poverty are not heard in characterising the parameters of ‘poverty’ and ‘social exclusion’. As Øyen notes:

The people at the bottom layer are seldom able to defend themselves and change the stereotypes created for them. That is the very character of their lowly position. Those above have more impact on the public discourse. That is the very character of their position (2002: 2).

Although people in poverty are not a standardised group, media representations generally present a one-dimensional picture; often conforming to negative stereotypes about ‘the poor’ based on notions of deservingness. Research of the US media has also shown that many stories depict poverty as a danger to the community, focusing on crime, deviancy, and gangs; in essence, creating a distance between ‘them and us’ (Bullock et al, 2001). In one US study significant bias in the representations of welfare recipients was found in cable news and
entertainment shows (Sotirovic, 2001). Sotirovic (2001) proposes that ‘this type of media reduces the reality of poverty to caricatures and provides little perspective to help audiences understand complex individual and social situations’ (2001: 766). Furthermore, she argues, ‘perceptions of reality, regardless of their accuracy, are consequential for individuals’ judgements and decisions’ (Sotirovic, 2001: 750) and as such how poverty and ‘the poor’ are understood. Champagne (2001) argues more forcefully that media accounts which focus on particular geographical areas, such as poor housing estates, often highlight ‘the extraordinary’ (such as criminal activity) and by doing so do ‘symbolic damage’, stigmatising areas and communities. Additionally, Hartigan (1997) remarks upon a tradition that isolates and pathologises the lives and speech styles of the poor (1997: 43). Representations of difference are created between people in poverty as compared to the ‘non-poor’. One prominent example occurred with the emergence of an ‘underclass’ discourse in Britain during the 1990s, the representations made through this moral discourse of people in poverty painted a picture of dysfunction, criminality and familial disorder and positioned the ‘underclass’ as different from the rest of ‘us’ (Haylett, 2000, 2003). Accordingly, media representations of people in poverty produce a distorted reality, subject to stereotypes and othering, but one that has implications for people’s attitudes toward poverty and implications for how people in poverty perceive themselves.

In addition, people in poverty rarely feature in media representations on issues outside of their poverty. Thus to be a ‘poor person’ effaces other aspects of self that might take precedence in people’s self-identity (see Lister, 2004: 151). On the infrequent occasion that people in poverty do appear outside of their ‘poor’ status they are often the objects of ridicule. For example, daytime talk shows are one arena in which the voices of low-income men and women are heard nationally but the general image presents them as dysfunctional and very often as figures of fun (Lott and Bullock, 2001: 202). The complex lives of people in poverty are thus translated into identifying characteristics via representations in the mainstream media. A poverty ‘identity’ is established in the popular imagination, if not in actuality.

Without the power to control the discursive construction of their own social position and ‘identity’, people in poverty are most often discursively positioned negatively and passively

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5 Welfare recipients were identified as people experiencing poverty within this study.
within dominant discourses about them. The hegemonic terminology around the state of poverty has connotations for social and individual worth, or more accurately in the contemporary West, worthlessness, and this may account for the rejection of ‘being poor’ found in much of the research conducted with people with experience of poverty (Beresford et al, 1999; Dundee Anti Poverty Forum, 2003; Corden, 1996).

However, locating the subject as a by-product of discursive formations has been criticised as offering nothing but an agentless position (see McNay, 1994). Caution, therefore, must be exercised in ascribing too little discursive power to people experiencing poverty. One study, which specifically explores talk and challenges the notion of the subject as merely a pawn in discourse is Kingfisher’s (1996) research with female welfare workers and welfare recipients. She concludes that the women in her study were not simply subject to powerful systemic forces but were, ‘active agents engaged in exercising whatever power they had to create meaning in their worlds...’ (Kingfisher, 1996: 157) including the formation of their identities. She proposes that the women welfare recipients:

...do not simply internalise the views of the welfare system or society at large concerning their self-worth or place in society; rather they interpret these views. In so doing they create and impose their own meanings, of which some may in certain ways accommodate those external images and others resist them (Kingfisher, 1996: 8).

It is through discourse then that notions of poverty are formulated but also where they may be contested. Hence, while mainstream representations about poverty are overwhelmingly negative, they are also the sites where accounts of poverty can be challenged and reformulations generated.

An additional point to be made in respect of a ‘poor identity’ is that care needs to be taken when discussing ‘people in poverty’. Poverty, as noted above, is not a homogeneous phenomenon. As Castro and Lindbladh (2004) illustrate from their examination of how residents in ‘poor suburbs’ talked about their area ‘in the context of the de-industrialised society, the former working-class communities have suffered a symbolic transformation into places of social deportation, where people have nothing in common but their lack of economic, social and cultural capital’ (2004: 261, emphasis added). The point to be taken
here is that while straitened circumstances may be a common denominator it does not form the basis of a ‘collective categorical identity’ (Lister, 2004: 151). Accordingly, we must be cautious of transforming discrete experiences into generic ones.

**What Changes Could Occur at the Level of Discourse?**

As established in the discussion above although discourses may be reinterpreted the hegemonic discourse and representations of poverty are overwhelmingly negative. Indeed, such representations are themselves a form of discursive exclusion; one that creates a social distance between people in poverty and those who are not, and lessen the possibility that more accurate or positive representations may emerge. Despite the illusory nature of dominant representations they have repercussions for the self-worth and identity of people in poverty. Is there scope then for other ways of talking about poverty? Rimstead (1997) argues that it is the absence of contesting discourses that limits the possibility of alternatives:

Exclusion of the poor from society is naturalized not only in discourse and narrative form but also through the absence of widely disseminated counternarratives that could convincingly contradict exclusionary attitudes. Although the poor have been described as having their own culture or subculture, it is both muted and isolated, having less access to public discursive space than the discourses on the poor generated by the non-poor (Rimstead, 1997: 256).

A discourse, however, is never hermetically sealed and accordingly offers alternatively constructed understandings of how ‘poverty’ and ‘social exclusion’ might be constructed by those who experience it. Counter-narratives are not necessarily absent; they may just be unrecognised as discourses of poverty, obscured by the pervasiveness of mainstream discourses. Additionally, although people in poverty have been traditionally presented as passive they are not unreflexive about their circumstances. As studies show, (Beresford et al, 1999; Kingfisher, 1996; Ridge, 2002) people in poverty may well be influenced by hegemonic discourses but these discourses are not unproblematically accepted by those they claim to describe. Indeed, as Ferguson (2003) argues, reflexivity has a direct relevance to the lives of the socially excluded and people in poverty (2003: 200). The extent of
engagement with members of these groups in constructing what ‘poverty’ means will be explored further in Chapters 2 and 3.

Conclusion

In summary, discourse constructs how an issue can be thought about, indeed, what makes it an ‘issue’ at all. Different poverty discourses frame the concepts, representations, understandings and thus the causes and solutions of poverty in alternative ways. While multiple discourses may exist, only certain discourses become influential and it is these that largely shape our understandings of ‘poverty’ and ‘social exclusion’. Such mainstream discourses are overwhelmingly ones which exclude those in poverty themselves, both in the representation of ‘poverty’ and by means of legitimating who can define a discourse of poverty – generally the ‘non-poor’. The prospect of counter-narratives to the hegemonic presentation of poverty has been raised and it is recognised that within the ambiguity of discourse alternatives are always possible. This does not suggest that the discourse of people in poverty is in any sense a more authentic discourse but exploring how people in poverty articulate their own circumstances may offer a challenge to our contemporary concepts of poverty and social exclusion.
Chapter 2: Mapping the Discourses of Poverty

Introduction

Academic knowledge of the conceptualisations and lexicon of ‘poverty’ by people identified as a nascent area of social science research. In order to understand how poverty discourses may be formulated it is necessary to consider how ‘poverty’, social exclusion and related terminology are currently articulated within culturally dominant ways of speaking about ‘poverty’.

This chapter will examine hegemonic discourses of poverty and being ‘poor’ — the prevailing ways of talking about and conceptualising poverty — and how people in poverty may be positioned in particular ways by these discourses. Before examining contemporary poverty discourses a brief historical account of the continuities and transformations of ‘poverty’ will be examined. This is in order to explore how the boundaries and language of a discourse may mutate and thus begin to operate in a different way. It will also illustrate how ‘the subject who operates within a discourse, or on whom the discourse operates’, in this case ‘the poor’, may alter positions within particular discourses of poverty (McHoul and Grace, 1993). This historical outline does not endeavour to be a comprehensive account but more a context for examining succeeding discourses, providing a background for understanding ‘poverty’ today.

The Changing Designation of Poverty: A Historical Overview

[In Tudor England there were two kinds of poor, God’s and the Devil’s... (Youings, 1984: 279)]

The following historical summary looks at some general changes in the category of ‘poverty’ over the centuries. Of primary interest are the social differentiations that emanate from a discourse of poverty and the turn towards a moral discourse of ‘the poor’. When talking
about a discursive history of ‘poverty’, a qualification needs to be made that the designation ‘poverty’ is not necessarily the same phenomenon, either in terms of material reality or lived meaning. Indeed, even our current notions about what ‘poverty’ is in contemporary society remain contentious (see Chapter 3). Nevertheless, some consistencies may be noted. One such example is the central, and obvious, demarcation between ‘the poor’ and the ‘non-poor’ followed by the categorisation of ‘the poor’ themselves; primarily the partitioning of people in poverty into ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ camps. Such distinctions can be traced from poverty discourses of the Middle Ages to contemporary discourses relating to poverty and social exclusion.

While the oft-quoted ‘poor’ being always with us may have a kernel of truth it has always been a different ‘poor’. As discussed previously ‘the poor’, if identified at all, have alternatively been an object of approbation (in early Christian doctrine) or condemnation throughout the centuries. For a large part of the Middle Ages legislation governing the poor was the remit of the church rather than the state (Coll, 1969). The Christian teaching that poverty was not a condition to be remedied, ‘but the spur to the exercise of humility, the practice of charity and the striving of grace’ (Steadman-Jones, 2004: 83) illustrates that religion and poverty were intertwined both in doctrine, in teaching the place of ‘the poor’, and in practice, through officiating and delivering poor relief. While Christian teaching meant that the destitute had a right to assistance under the poor laws there was nevertheless a greater sympathy for those who were seen as poor through no fault of their own – widows, the old and the sick – rather than the able-bodied ‘idler’, who was encouraged to work (but only if work was available) (Coll, 1969). In post-bubonic plague England however a distinction emerged between the outsider and parish members and the former outsider ‘in-need’ now became the ‘vagabond’, who was prohibited from parish relief (Coll, 1969: 4). Coll (1969) argues that this period marked a shift in which able-bodied poverty became criminalized with the consequence that, ‘for more than 200 years the problem of poverty was intimately and formally linked to the problem of vagrancy’ (ibid). Thus, while some form of taxonomy of ‘the poor’ had existed prior to this differentiation, between the impoverished outsider and the impoverished insider, this was a fundamental break in the perception of a ‘good’ and ‘bad’ poor and the beginnings of judgements founded not merely on need alone in determining who was entitled to relief or not. A record of ‘the poor’ in Kent in 1598 documents the ‘impotent poor’, consisting of the old and sick, in addition to the ‘respectable’ poor, consisting of married, able-bodied couples with children, people ‘short of food’ and
mobile labourers, the latter seen as idle vagabonds, punishable by whipping (Youings, 1984: 278). The fairly undisputed category of the deserving, ‘impotent poor’ and those who were poor because of lack of work was further complicated by the latter category being divided along the lines of those who refused labour when available, producing such categories as the ‘slothful poor’ and the ‘alehouse poor’ (Dean, 1991: 25), and those who were unable to work through illness or disability. While the needs of ‘the poorer sort’ (Book Of Orders [1587] in Youings, 1984: 276) were still spoken of as a homogeneous group, the ranking of ‘the poor’ had begun to develop.

A further discursive shift took place during the 17th century, when the influence of Calvinism changed attitudes relating to poverty (Coll, 1969). Whereas in the high middle ages need and poverty were seen as arising from misfortune, this altered in the 17th century when the accumulation of personal wealth became a virtue (Coll, 1969; Youings, 1984). The Calvinist doctrine equated wealth with success and therefore, ‘poverty – but most particularly, dependency – came to be regarded as a failure of character’ (Coll, 1969: 7). An additional change in discourse about ‘the poor’ occurred in the late 18th century. Steadman Jones (2004) explores the consequences of enlightenment thinking in France and England in constructing poverty as something that could be solved rationally; the aim of which was ‘...to make possible a programme which dispensed with the poor law and broke down the traditional notion of poverty into a number of predictable problems to be expected in the lifecycle of the average citizen’ (Steadman Jones, 2004: 62). Poverty was thus a state occurring at particular stages in life, such as childhood or old age. This way of thinking meant that ‘the poor’ were not seen as morally different but as individuals affected by life events. He notes that such thinking was part of a growing trend, beginning in the 1740s, to integrate the poor within civil society, the emphasis being on the commonality of mankind – ‘on the humanity of the poor and their capacity to participate in the culture of their more fortunate contemporaries’ (Steadman Jones, 2004:63). This progressive development ceased in the 1790s however, when the perceived extremism of the French revolution became fully known, resulting in a harshening attitude towards ‘the poor’ (ibid).

The construction of ‘poverty’ via a genealogical analysis has been explored by Dean (1991; 1992) who identifies the policing of poverty in the 17th and 18th centuries as a means of viewing ‘the poor’ as ‘an object of observation, comparison and information collection’ (Dean, 1992: 227). He also notes a discursive shift in the governance of the poor at the end of the 18th
century in which discussion about them became framed in moral terms and on the moral foundations of relief (Dean, 1991). Before this time, however, the category of ‘the poor’ was not a simple one and not without ‘moral’ judgements. Poverty, once conceived of as an unfortunate but not dishonourable state in Christian doctrine had placed the moral responsibility for poverty on those who could provide assistance. As Coll points out ‘according to medieval poor law, the destitute had a right to assistance, those better off a duty to provide it. Performance of such a duty was an act of justice – not of charity or mercy’ (1969: 2). Now the ‘moral turn’ placed accountability on the individual for their condition and altered the poverty discourse from a shared duty to an individual responsibility. A document from the end of the 17th century defines the obligation of parishes towards the poor as ‘Work for those who will labour, punishment for those who will not, and bread for those who cannot’ (cited in Dean, 1991: 25) illustrating a more uncompromising approach between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ ‘poor’.

By the end of the 18th century ‘the poor’ was a disputed term and poor law reformers of the 1830s sought to make firm distinctions between ‘independent and dependent poor, labourers, indigents and paupers’ (Himmelfarb, 1984: 523). They argued that the designation ‘poor’ should only apply to those who couldn’t work, the infirm, orphans and aged; ‘pauperism’ was to be deliberately imbued with stigma. As Himmelfarb notes, however, the effect of the new poor law of 1834 had a different consequence in practice: ‘The ‘stigma’ of pauperism which was meant to differentiate the pauper from the poor, had the perverse effect of stigmatising the entire body of the poor...’ (Himmelfarb, 1984: 525). Although the Elizabethan poor laws had distinguished between categories of ‘dependants’, the effect of shaming ‘the poor’ in their entirety led to the notion of a moral turpitude applying not only to a section of the poor but to people in poverty generally. Thus, during this period ‘despite the effort to make fine distinctions, increasingly poverty itself became not the natural result of misfortune, but the wilful result of indolence and vice’ (Katz, 1989: 14).

Indeed, after the introduction of the 1834 Poor Law, Disraeli declared proudly that in England, ‘poverty is a crime’ (cited in Himmlefarb, 1984: 525). A further analysis of the New Poor Law (1834) and related reports reveal that poverty discourses of the time continued to clearly divide the poor into deserving and undeserving; the first group having access to assistance, the latter ‘duties and responsibilities’ (Carabine, 2000: 91). It appears
though, while such distinctions between categories of ‘the poor’ continued to be made, the
taint of pauperism now blemished even the ‘deserving poor’.

*Counting ‘the Poor’: Modern ‘Poverty’*

Economic stability after the middle of the 19th century meant the problem of poverty
temporarily disappeared from the political spotlight, to be rediscovered in the late 1880s
(Himmelfarb, 1984). Its re-emergence was in part a response to the violent demonstrations
of the time, a concern with national prosperity and increased awareness of ‘the poor’s’
abysmal living conditions. Such a context made the publication of The Bitter Cry of Outcast
London: An inquiry into the condition of the abject poor in 1881 a provocative read and one
that captured the attention of the media and the middle classes (Glennerster et al, 2004b;
Himmelfarb, 1991). Morality and respectability were key features of the late Victorian
zeitgeist (Himmelfarb, 1991) and consequently poverty was conceived of within this
framework. Helping ‘the poor’ thus meant ‘moral improvement’, a consensus that cut across
the political spectrum. As Himmelfarb (1991) notes ‘It was on this ground [moral
improvement] that laissez-fairests argued against state intervention, and on the same ground
that socialists argued for it’ (1991:7). Poverty, however, did not essentially worsen in late
Victorian England compared to previous decades, what altered was the moral impetus to do
something about it. As Himmelfarb argues, poverty went from being a ‘condition’ to being a
‘problem’ (1991:12). Charles Booth defined and explicated this social problem by
identifying and quantifying distinctions between classes of people in poverty in a manner
that was, at the time, considered objective and scientific. Under Booth there was a shift from
‘the poor’ as an outcast group, to the incidence of ‘poverty’, with the plight of the ‘labouring
poor’ in particular, rather than the ‘pauper’, becoming the focus of attention (Himmelfarb,

The extent of poverty, affecting around a third of the population, was revealed in Booth's
surveys of London (published in the late 1880’s and throughout the 1890s) and Seebohm
Rowntree's survey of York (1901). Both men attempted to provide an objective, statistical
account, transforming ‘poverty’ into a measurable scientific formulation. The approach used
firstly calculated the cost of ‘essentials’ and then surveyed a population to discover how
many had an income below which they could not afford these basic requirements – ‘a test of
destitution' (Glennester et al, 2004b: 21). As such, it is seen as a subsistence measure of poverty, further illustrated by Booth's description of being 'poor':

By the word poor I mean to describe those who have a fairly regular though bare income [...] by 'very poor' those who fall below this standard, whether from chronic irregularity of work, sickness, or a large number of young children (Booth's speech, Royal Statistical Society, 1887, cited in Glennerster, 2004: 19).

Rowntree's methodology was similar, although actual food budgets were used to define 'subsistence'. His key insight though was to identify the cyclical nature of poverty, identifying periods of high risk, such as childhood and old age. This approach arguably brought about a change in how people in poverty were perceived. As Glennerster argues:

In short, new social science evidence was posing an alternative to the traditional view of poverty that it was the result of personal failing and could be countered only by personal change which required the absence of easy state poor relief (2004a: 27).

The scientific calculation of poverty meant that 'the poor' could now be counted, the scale of the problem assessed and solutions developed; it was no longer perceived as insoluble. Consequently, this involved increased state intervention into private lives. Whereas the survival strategies of people in poverty had previously been managed within the family and community, unless total destitution led to the workhouse, 'within a few years of Rowntree's report, and partly as a consequence of it, the strategies of the poor and of the state and its agencies began to impinge upon each other in ever more complex ways' (Vincent, 1991: 5). Those in poverty became the objects of monitoring, of policy and of expectation.

After the Second World War, rising national prosperity and the proliferation of social insurance programmes were seen as eradicating the type of poverty highlighted by Booth and Rowntree. With the solutions to poverty in place the appearance of poverty publicly disappeared only to be 'rediscovered' by Townsend and Abel-Smith in the 1960s. The assertion that poverty had never gone away developed from Townsend's claim that the list of items deemed a 'necessary expenditure' on Rowntree's subsistence scales was too narrow.
What was needed was an assessment of 'necessaries' that took into account the social conventions and expectations of the milieu, measuring levels of social as well as material deprivation, based on new definitions of poverty (Alcock, 1997). This new relative definition not only highlighted the persistence of poverty but also altered what 'poverty' was perceived to be. The re-emergence of the public face of poverty, however, was once more to disappear during the Thatcher years; despite its rapid increase in incidence throughout the 1980s it was barred from the governments' formal political discourse. At the same time talk of an 'underclass' emerged, one whose 'poverty' was seen as deriving from their exclusion from mainstream values and attitudes as much, if not more than, their material deprivation. Although the concept of 'the underclass' is discredited as 'a recurrent political and social scientific myth' (Bagguley and Mann 1992, cited in MacDonald, 1997: 2) it was one that dominated public and political thinking about people in poverty during the late 1980s and early 1990s. ‘The poor’ had transformed into a discernible social element that threatened the moral fabric of society.

Another relevant change in the perception of poverty arrived with New Labour in the late 1990s. While initially poverty was not a prominent issue, the Prime Minister's pledge in 1999 to end child poverty brought it into the political realm as a central concern. Alongside poverty the notion of 'social exclusion' appeared (discussed in detail later), which produced the idea that people were missing out on opportunities that might allow them to escape poverty. At present a number of competing approaches of conceptualising poverty and social exclusion seem to exist within government. It appears that some groups, such as children and older people in poverty, fall firmly within the category of 'deserving poor', legitimately in need of state help, as opposed to those who fail to seek paid work, including lone parents.4 Despite these implicit 'deserving' and 'undeserving' categories, identifiable in anti-poverty, welfare and employment policies, such demarcations are usually avoided in political rhetoric whilst remaining embedded in the government terminology of 'hard-working families', the model New Labour citizens.

In summary, while it is problematic to encapsulate 'poverty' across the centuries some continuity can be noted. First, that of 'the poor' as set to one side or, more accurately and

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4 Although children are 'deserving' within the frame of poverty, concurrent New Labour policies and rhetoric identify children as legitimate targets for punishments, ones that may be seen to curb life opportunities and further social exclusion, most notably within the anti-social behaviour legislation.
consistently, set below the 'non-poor' population, not just in terms of economic lack but also on moral grounds. It is also clear that perceptions of 'poverty' are interrelated with the social and economic context of a particular epoch; 'poverty' therefore is not a stand-alone concept that can be explored in purely material terms but must be looked at through the discourses that construct it at any particular point in time.

A Poverty of Culture: Cultural and Moral Discourses of Poverty

In constituting the poor as outside the boundaries of society, the discourse of poverty serves to define those boundaries, and thus to constitute liberal society itself (Kingfisher, 1996: 34).

The previous section explored the historically changing notions and status of 'the poor'. What emerged was the habitual positioning of people in poverty as a distinct social group. However, this is not a 'group' in the sense that it is self-identified and chosen by people in poverty but one that is formulated by being labelled and differentiated by the 'non-poor', consequently positioning people in poverty as 'other'. Such a positioning is not necessarily an arbitrary one. As McNay (1994) argues 'The other is not always a marginal figure; rather its construction as such is always central, in a mundane way, to the maintenance of any hegemonic system of norms' (1994:6). Dean and Melrose (1999) also note that the disciplinary measures which emerge from classification and monitoring do not just impact upon 'the poor' but on the social world as a whole. In this way poverty is formulated as 'a symbolic presence' in which 'the spectre of poverty' serves as a reminder of the costs of social 'failure' and, as such, acts as a regulating measure (Dean with Melrose, 1999a: 27). In other words a discourse of poverty is never purely a description of a particular group but a means of organising society. The state of poverty thus becomes the bottom rung of the social hierarchy – a place of fear and punishment.

Consequently, it is not merely a case of being at the bottom but being a 'member' of a category imbued with negative connotations and representations. Poverty in the west is associated with social censure and although some criticism is aimed at the structural causes
of poverty most is directed at the perceived characteristics of people in poverty themselves. This section explores some of the discourses around the condition of poverty as a moral category rather than merely an economic one. It will be seen that such discourses are often interrelated in both theme and language use.

**Social Waste**

One enduring poverty discourse is that which associates people in poverty with waste. This is expressed in two ways: firstly, waste as that which is unwanted or useless and secondly, as identified in New Labour’s rhetoric (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004) as a costly waste of human and national resources (especially in economic terms) which can largely be remedied with intervention. The first type, that which links poverty and worthlessness, has connotations for people beyond their financial circumstances and it is for that reason that this aspect of social waste will be examined here.

Byrne (1999) notes that a concern for the condition of poverty in the 19th century came out of the idea of ‘the poor’ as a ‘useless’ surplus. Indeed, the Victorian word ‘residuum’ was used to denote both the sewage waste and the city poor, ‘the refuse of humanity’ (Golding, 1982; Himmelfarb, 1984: 358). In contemporary society Wacquant (1999) and Kaus (1992) have both identified associations between ‘waste’ and poverty, especially regarding geographic areas, such as the US ghettos and French banlieues. The ‘black ghetto’ is similarly identified by Bauman (2004) as having become a human ‘dumping ground’ (2004: 83). Bauman also expresses the social positioning of people in poverty more brusquely, ‘The poor are totally useless. No-one – no-one who truly counts, speaks up and is heard – needs them’ (1998: 91). Clearly, such a vision of people in poverty as ‘useless’ is in relation to mainstream values and achievements. From McNay (1996) and Dean’s (1999) perspective, noted earlier, poverty serves an important function in regulating ‘norms’. Such a ‘function’ however is not a position of choice by people in poverty but an outcome of ‘failing’ to make the grade by common cultural and economic standards.

The association between people in poverty and waste can be seen in modern colloquial terminology. ‘White trash’ and ‘trailer trash’ are pejorative terms found within the American popular media but ones increasingly being used by the British media, especially in relation to
confessional TV shows, such as Jeremy Kyle. The terminology focuses on behavioural characteristics, mannerisms, and lifestyle of those featured; the 'trash' stereotype being someone who is of a low socio-economic class, 'poor', uneducated, lazy, with little respect for authority or social norms (Ayto, 1998). During the 1980s and 1990s populist television sitcoms developed featuring 'white trash' families or characters such as King of the Hill in the US and Rab.C.Nesbitt in the UK. More recently comedy dramas such as Shameless have revelled in a focus on the dysfunctional 'poor'. It is also a theme identifiable in 'emo' music culture, as reflected in the lyrics of White Trash Anthem:

My world remains unseen by you.
Poverty and no family,
Broken homes and broken dreams,
I ain't your kind of white. I've never been your kind of white.
I ain't that kind of white 'cause I'm a lowlife outcast piece of
white trash.
(Taking Back Sunday, 2001)

The sentiment of the lyrics is one expressed by Skeggs (2004): 'white groups sharing the same skin colour are not equally white' (2004: 91). While a white ethnicity is largely 'invisible' due to its hegemonic status in Anglo-American culture, to be white is to be in a position of privilege and power. However, the privilege of 'whiteness' comes at the price of upholding norms of a 'white' culture. By using the terminology 'white trash' what is and isn't acceptable or 'normal' for whites is defined and brought to the fore (Wray and Newitz, 1997: 3). The 'white trash' designation is thus one of a 'failed' whiteness. The difference between the 'poor white', the 'trash', and the white 'norm' cannot actually be differentiated on 'race' terms but is nevertheless made identifiable in this way. However, while 'ethnicity' seems to be invoked it is actually 'culture' that is being spoken about. The 'white trash' are distinguished by their supposed pathological behavioural characteristics as well as low economic status; it is this 'pathological culture' that positions them as the detritus of whiteness. In terms of every-day life then, people in poverty are exposed to largely negative labels and representations that define them not merely as less valuable members of society because of their economic position but as surplus to social requirement.

7 'Emo', a contraction of 'emotional music', is a musical style and a youth subculture.
Poverty is rarely viewed in media and political discourses as a blameless state. As Byrne (1999) observes, notions of culpability in relation to poverty have become crystallised around the related concepts of 'the underclass' and 'dependency culture' (1999: 19). Such concepts are not new, having links to the 19th century idea of pauperism as 'social danger' (Procacci, 1997: 153), although both have been revived in a 20th and 21st century context. Haylett (2001) identifies the emergence of an 'underclass' discourse in the 1990s, the manufacture of which she argues 'can be located in the realms of press and broadcasting media, often in relation to other authoritative representations in political discourse and academia' (2001: 72). Writers such as Murray (1996; 2005) and Dalrymple (2001) increased the currency of negative 'underclass' descriptions by reifying them with 'real-life' accounts of people in poverty; versions which promoted a behavioural explanation of poverty.

Identification of an 'underclass' has a long history in relation to descriptions of a marginal or residual populace, those outside the norm. An early account of a perceived 'sub-class' can be identified in Mayhew's 1840s account of 'street-folk', distinguished by their 'peculiar' attitudes to work, family, sex, authority and values. As Himmelfarb notes, Mayhew's construction of the poverty of the street folk 'was not so much an economic condition as a pathological one' (Himmelfarb, 1984:361). John Macnicol (1987) illustrates the development of a discourse of a 'dangerous class' and notes that the essence of an 'underclass' concept appears regularly throughout history, despite its questionable existence. The late twentieth century 'underclass' is merely the most recent manifestation of this trend demarcating people in poverty as undesirable social elements (Manicol, 1987). Welshman (2002) similarly argues that the 'underclass' has been periodically re-invented in Britain over the past 120 years and persists because of the unresolved link between behavioural and structural factors in the causes of poverty.

Such a behavioural interpretation of poverty is now the essence of a discourse on the 'underclass', a term imbued with moral characteristics. It is a 'class' typically defined as disadvantaged relative to the lowest social class and as having a separate cultural outlook to the mainstream. However, different definitions of 'the underclass' exist: the term has been used to define labour market exclusion (Wilson, 1987), changing class structures as well as
the exclusion of particular ethnic groups (MacDonald, 1997). Its contemporary emergence as a concept was originally structural (primarily related to labour-market exclusion) rather than cultural and it was only later that its usage became inextricably bound with behavioural explanations of poverty. Such an interpretation was popularised by Charles Murray (1996), a leading proponent of the thesis, who identified ‘the underclass’ as a culturally distinct group characterised by illegitimacy, single parenthood, drugs, crime, long-term unemployment and detachment from the labour market and more recently declaring, ‘behaving self-destructively is the hallmark of the underclass’ (Murray, 2005). While his empirical evidence has been disputed (David, 1996), Murray’s popularising of an ‘underclass’ had a significant political and populist impact in the UK in the late 1980s and early 1990s, capturing the imagination of the right-wing media, who advanced representations of welfare dependency and benefit fraud above portrayals of need. As part of the ‘underclass’ debate, ‘dysfunctional’ familial arrangements were placed in the centre of the media spotlight. Female single parents and feckless fathers were identified as responsible for family and social breakdown by reproducing an ‘underclass’. Whereas women with children had formerly been ‘deserving’, their status began to shift into the realm of the ‘undeserving poor’, as unwilling workers and incapable mothers (Katz, 1989; Morris, 1996). The representations made through this moral discourse of the poor painted a picture of dysfunction, criminality and familial disorder and positioned the ‘underclass’ as different from the rest of ‘us’ (Haylett, 2000). ‘Underclass’, like many discrediting labels that have historically been synonymous with ‘the poor’, is one that positions people in poverty not just as different but also as a threat to mainstream social interests (such as paid work and the nuclear family) and as engaged in criminal and ‘immoral’ activities. Stitt (1994) uses empirical evidence to dispute the existence of a distinct ‘underclass’, noting that in fact there is little difference in the attitudes of the supposed ‘underclass’ and others in mainstream society and nothing to suggest a ‘culture of dependency’. He argues that what may be identified as ‘deviant cultures’ are actually ‘adaptive survival strategies’ (Stitt, 1994: 155).

An ‘underclass’ discourse, however, has had significant implications for how people in poverty might be seen and how they may see themselves. Bauman points out that the term implies people without a role, ‘making no useful contribution to the lives of the rest, and in principle beyond redemption’ (Bauman, 1998: 66). Further to this, as Lister et al note, ‘Non-

\[8\] From the Wall Street Journal online http://opinionjournal.com/extra/?id=110007348
recognition and disrespect are the typical experience of those in poverty, especially when labelled pejoratively as an ‘underclass’ or as inhabiting a ‘dependency culture’ (2000: 291). Schram and Soss (2002) remark that ‘troubling behaviours’ among people in poverty were once seen as a consequence of poverty and a reason for extending aid; within an underclass discourse, however, these same behaviours are reframed as products of an over-permissive welfare system and the breakdown of the family (2002: 64). Ironically, the financial assistance received by people in poverty has itself become identified as a cause of poverty, by producing ‘impoverishing behaviour’ and creating a dependency on benefits rather than on paid work (Bartholomew, 2004). Poverty then, within an ‘underclass’ framework, linked to unemployment, single-parenthood, delinquency and crime, became more about social threat than material disadvantage.

Levitas (1998) has identified a moral underclass discourse (MUD), emphasising the cultural pathology of the poor, within the early texts and rhetoric of the first New Labour government, one that perceived of both an ‘underclass’ and a ‘culture of dependency’. Direct reference to an ‘underclass’ subsequently became less common in New Labour’s political discourse but still appears periodically, as seen in the former cabinet minister, David Blunkett’s, recent pamphlet linking a stagnation in social mobility to the development of an ‘underclass’ (Blunkett, 2008) and is a term that continues to be used within Conservative party texts (Social Justice Policy Group, 2006).

While the ‘underclass’ may not be so frequently referred to within the formal political discourse of New Labour the current focus on the behaviour of those identified as socially excluded or in poverty means that the idea of a morally different ‘class’ or ‘culture’ still underlies current government discourses. Such a moral discourse, however, is ambiguous. Although many recent government texts concerning poverty and social exclusion identify poverty as ‘inter-generational’ or part of a ‘cycle of disadvantage’ (Cabinet Office, 2006; Department for Work and Pensions, 2003; Social Exclusion Unit, 2004), thus invoking the notion of a ‘culture of poverty’, Deacon (2003) and (Welshman, 2007) discern a number of different incarnations of the ‘cycle of disadvantage’ as used by government and conclude that New Labour recognises both structural and behavioural factors in the continuation of deprivation and social exclusion. As such it is not a straightforward cultural explanation, identifying individual behaviours and attitudes as responsible for poverty, but one that sees such behavioural factors as present but as a response to disadvantaged circumstances rather
than culturally inherent. However such nuances are not immediately apparent in government texts which repeatedly assert that, poverty is ‘inherited’ or passed down through the generations (Cabinet Office, 2006), thus appearing to locate the source and continuation of poverty firmly within the family. The government’s drive to reduce poverty therefore becomes a matter of disinheriting the children of people in poverty of this pernicious legacy. Policy focuses on breaking the ‘cycle of disadvantage’, the reality of which become fixed in the oft-repeated rhetoric of ‘inter-generational disadvantage’. Breaking the cycle of disadvantage in effect translates as getting people into paid work, revealing a centrally related notion of reproduced disadvantage and the ‘underclass’ — the idea of welfare dependency.

**Dependency**

Long-term dependency became a key concept during debates on welfare reform in the UK and US during the 1980s and early 1990s and an overarching discourse, closely connected to ‘the underclass’ and the ‘crisis’ in the provision of social security benefits. Indeed, Schram and Soss (2002) argue that ‘dependency is a synecdoche for underclass pathology’ (2002: 65). A perceived (over)reliance on benefits came to be seen by right-wing commentators, politicians and the popular media as a ‘culture of dependency’ for which an over-generous social security system was to blame. In its current form belief about dependency on social security is one shared by politicians on the left and right. For example, a dependency discourse is readily identifiable in the philosophy of the Centre For Social Justice (CSJ), the ‘poverty fighting’ think tank of the Conservative party (Social Justice Policy Group, 2006). A central plank of its purpose is ‘to develop policies that will help more people to live independently of the state’ (Centre For Social Justice, 2004). According to Bradshaw and Mayhew, ‘This preoccupation with dependency is also one echoed in the Third Way/ New Labour/ Blairite discourses’ (2004: 50). Although, as they acknowledge, it is less prevalent in the more recent government publications, it has been present in the then Prime Minister’s speeches (*ibid*), such as Blair’s comments in tackling the perceived problem of people ‘languishing on benefits’ (Tempest, 2004: 6). The ‘tough’ language sometimes used by New Labour also underlines the construction of welfare recipients as ‘other’ to ‘us’ the taxpayer and paints a negative picture of the ‘welfare dependant’(Lister, 2001b, 2001a). Indeed, as Dean (1999b) points out:
when applied to welfare, the central contention is that poor people have something more wrong with them than their poverty. Welfare dependency is hence a syndrome lurking behind the welfare state that can be related to biology, psychology, upbringing, culture or behaviour, or several, even all of these factors (1999: 62).

Again, as Levitas (1998) notes, like the discourse of the ‘underclass’, a culture of dependency shifts attention away from the structural causes of poverty and onto the moral and cultural character of the poor themselves (1998: 15). The idea of dependency as one equated with poverty is wholly negative and produces a discourse of those in poverty as a drain on social resources and as somehow morally different:

By implying that benefits encourage dependency, it figures not the optimising ‘subject of value’, but the value-less, passive, use-less subject. This is not the subject with potential to enterprise, but one that only constitutes a burden; its own culture is held responsible for the lack of value (Skeggs, 2004: 88).

In sum, what is constructed through this discourse and the discourse of ‘the underclass’ is not only a picture of difference but of cultural deficiency, which, if not prevented, is passed on from parents to children. As well as inferior economically, people in poverty are positioned as inadequate parents, workers and citizens. This contemporary discourse, imbued with cultural judgements, thus constructs poverty as not merely a lack of material resources but as a condition lacking the cultural, social and moral resources needed to get out of poverty (Dean, 1992).

Despite the prominence of ‘dependency culture’ rhetoric, empirical evidence does not suggest that such a ‘culture’, or that of the ‘underclass’, exists (Dean & Taylor-Gooby, 1992; Stitt, 1994). Firstly, most people move in and out of low income rather than maintaining an impoverished position for a substantial length of time (Smith and Middleton, 2007). Like Stitt (1994), Spicker (2002) also notes that there is little evidence to suggest that people in poverty do not share mainstream ethics about paid work and the family or are substantially alienated
from society. Such conclusions are similar to those previously found by Dean and Taylor-Gooby (1992), whose research also demonstrated that increasingly disciplinary strategies of social security did not serve to strengthen familial ties or attachment to paid employment but instead undermined the self-confidence of claimants. Furthermore, as Dean (1999b) notes, terms such as dependency ‘are integral components of government, of our organised systems of acting upon and directing human conduct [...] notions of dependency are primarily intelligible as components of various systems of governing or regimes of practices’ (1999: 64). From this perspective, dependency therefore is not a valid or even invalid ‘description’ but rather an organisational category that has implications for those positioned within and outside of the label. As such it has echoes of Foucault’s notion of governmentality, in which the management of population groups and their behaviour is conducted through institutions, knowledge, and the exercise of power.

Social Exclusion

As touched upon earlier, although ‘social exclusion’ does not necessarily have the moral undertones of ‘underclass’ and ‘dependency’ labels it has links to enduring notions of transmitted deprivation (Welshman, 2007). In addition, its contemporary linguistic reach goes beyond the structural and economic into the realms of private behaviour, for example parenting, and as such ‘social exclusion’ will be dealt with here as an element of the moral discourse of poverty. Furthermore, although aspects of the concept indicate the causes of poverty as external to individuals, a moral discourse is perceptible. Saraceno (2001) describes two discrete features of social exclusion: those of material deprivation (or poverty) and marginality. She argues that one can therefore be ‘poor’ without being social excluded. Others argue that marginalisation occurs through economic deprivation or the social fragmentation of social relations (Gore et al, 1997). Either way, those defined as socially excluded are outside the normative framework of social life. Despite its conceptual ambiguity social exclusion is a favoured phrase of New Labour governments. Ruth Levitas (1998) has outlined a model that identifies three discourses associated with New Labour’s concept of social exclusion. The first, redistributive discourse (RED) sees social exclusion as a consequence of poverty; increasing income is thus one solution to reducing poverty and

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9 Claimants are now referred to as ‘benefit customers’.
social exclusion. The second, social integration discourse (SID), identifies worklessness as key to social exclusion. Paid work therefore is viewed as the primary means of social integration and of preventing poverty. The last, moral underclass discourse (MUD), emphasises moral and cultural causes of social exclusion. Levitas notes that these discourses ‘often coexist, however uncomfortably, in individual documents’ of New Labour (1999:13). While all these discourses are recognisable in political rhetoric SID appears to be currently prominent in New Labour (and even more so in the Conservative party); while the MUD discourse is still present it is now more euphemistically alluded to than was the case when New Labour first came to power. The government defines social exclusion as:

A shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001: 10).

The problems described above are seen by government as indicative of social exclusion, problems which are ‘linked and mutually reinforcing’ (ibid). New Labour’s understanding of social exclusion is thus a multi-dimensional concept with both structural and cultural elements. However, Fairclough’s (2000) substantial analysis of New Labour texts and talk identifies that the state of exclusion is foregrounded over the process of being excluded. This means that the language of social exclusion focuses on ‘the excluded’ as a problem rather than the problem of exclusion – the hows and why’s. There is a danger then that a lack of material resources becomes redefined as a symptom of exclusion rather than its cause (Gillies, 2005: 81). As Øyen (1997) argues, social exclusion (and inclusion) are political concepts and ones through which poverty may become hidden (1997: 64). Fairclough also notes that the evolution of social exclusion as a problem in its own right, requiring ‘more than’ the re-distribution of wealth, may indicate a tendency to overlook the socio-economic disadvantage at the heart of social exclusion (Coll, 1969; Fairclough, 2000). An illustration of the excluded as socially problematic can be seen in a key Social Exclusion Unit document: while costs of social exclusion to the individual are first to be listed, a greater number of costs to the taxpayer and the economy are detailed (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004: 11). The implication from such a social audit is manifest; the ‘costs’ of social exclusion

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10 The Social Exclusion Unit is now the Social Exclusion Taskforce within the Cabinet Office.
are equally, if not more, problematic to those who aren’t excluded, to the taxpaying socially ‘included’ population. Indeed, such a position is clearly stated in the *Opportunity for All* report, ‘The economic arguments for tackling poverty are compelling. People living in poverty are more likely to impose costs on society than those who don’t’ […] we all pick up the bill for poverty’ (Department for Work and Pensions, 2002: 5). While such an argument may be offered in order to appeal to enlightened self-interest, it is still one that creates the socially excluded as failed citizens, not to be helped purely on grounds of social justice but because they are parasitical and as such a social burden.

Although the language of social exclusion, as an ‘active concept’ may call attention to people’s non-participation in society as ‘arising from constraint, rather than choice’ (Burchardt, 2000: 3), thus highlighting the structural nature of exclusion (Wolfe, 1995), it may equally discursively ‘other’ those who are excluded. For example, Gillies argues that the discourse of social exclusion in government works to sustain a moral agenda by ‘reframing issues of poverty and inequality in terms of a disconnection from mainstream values and aspirations’ (2005: 71). With this as its starting point the ‘solutions’ to social exclusion largely begin with ‘corrective’ measures aimed at the individual and their local environment (and from a very young age as seen in the Sure Start and pre-natal healthcare and parenting initiatives). Both social exclusion and poverty are centrally connected to lack of paid work within current political discourse; ‘worklessness’ steps forward into the discursive spotlight. This can be interpreted as moving away from structural origins towards individual responsibility. While unemployment may also be interpreted as ‘lack’ of paid employment, worklessness appears to convey something more at the level of the individual. This point is expressed by Haylett (2000) who argues that ‘interventions into problems of poverty are increasingly pitched at ‘worklessness’ as a cultural characteristic that is not the same as ‘unemployment’ as a political-economic condition’ (2000: 58).

The moral undercurrent present in current policies directed at disadvantaged and ‘excluded’ groups can be seen in the parenting discourse of New Labour.11 As Gough et al (2006) observe in their analysis of social exclusion in relation to current social policies, this is not a

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11 This moral agenda can also be identified in the anti-social behaviour legislation, policies and interventions, which serve to increase the surveillance and policing of the behaviour of particular social groups. An explicit link is made between public housing estates and anti-social behaviour in policy making and within the media.
new phenomenon. Rather it is a case that the moral discourse of old has re-emerged through the ‘Respect’ agenda and the emphasis on ‘rights and responsibilities’:

All these policies are intended radically to change the way of life and culture of the poor. It is not only attitudes to wage work which are to be ‘improved’ but also parenting practices, teenage parenthood, use of public space, exercise, diet, drinking, smoking and so on...[This] is in a tradition dating from the mid-nineteenth century of crusades and missions to improve the culture and ‘morality’ of the poor.

(Gough et al, 2006: 194)

Gillies (2005) also argues that this moral agenda seeks to control and regulate the behaviour of marginalised people. She proposes that New Labour’s policies around parenting are producing a concept of a ‘mainstream moral community’ (Gillies, 2005: 84). Those positioned as ‘outside’ threaten the community as a whole and thus their existence justifies intervention. Such a conclusion parallels Ryan’s (1971) notion of ‘blaming the victim’, the process of which is to first identify a social problem, study it and find how different ‘they’ are to the rest of ‘us’ and then define that difference as the cause of the problem itself (in Alcock, 1997: 32). Gillies describes the current social exclusion discourse as fundamentally flawed:

Founded on a further doublethink, the New Labour vision of an inclusive society treats the very poor as both victims and perpetrators of their own exclusion. The excluded poor are constructed as morally obliged to become part of the included poor for the sake of themselves, their children and the wider community (Gillies, 2005: 87).

She further argues that the socially excluded are not framed as the losers in an unequal system but ‘as failures in ethical self-governance’ (Gillies, 2005: 85). A similar point is made by Bauman (1998) who identifies the representation of social exclusion ‘as an outcome of social suicide, not social execution. It is the fault of the excluded that they did nothing, or not enough, to escape exclusion...’ (Bauman, 1998: 85).
Again, as with poverty, a ‘hereditary’ theme is implied in the government’s understanding of social exclusion, as illustrated in an SEU discussion document:

Social exclusion adversely affects those experiencing it, but it can also pass from generation to generation and affect life chances. Children’s futures are still affected by the circumstances of their parents. Limited opportunities are not just experienced by those suffering the most extreme disadvantage; people within relatively strong communities not traditionally seen as excluded can also experience disadvantage and poor opportunities that cascade down the generations.

(SEU, 2004: 4)

This ‘intergenerational cycle of disadvantage’ (Cabinet Office, 2006) maintaining and propagating social exclusion can be seen to share similar facets of a culturising discourse of poverty found in earlier formulations and as such is an extension of a moralising discourse. However, one differentiation between social exclusion and the discourse of the ‘underclass’ is the underlying premise that people may be reformed, ‘supported’ or offered opportunities out of their exclusion, rather than merely being punished for their culturally-innate moral flaws.

**Constructing Difference: ‘Othering’ People in Poverty**

While distinct aspects of mainstream discourses of poverty have been examined above, one interconnecting factor is the construction of people in poverty as ‘other’. This over-arching discourse has been historically consistent, with those in ancient and contemporary poverty discourses ‘othered’ visually, geographically and ‘culturally’, in terms of their supposed differences in behaviour and attitudes. To be ‘in poverty’ is not merely an economic description of an unenviable social position but a moral statement.

The process of othering is entwined with the process of stereotyping (Lister, 2004: 101). The stereotype of the ‘pauper’, the ‘street-folk’ and more recently ‘the underclass’ is perpetuated as fact within the public imagination and political rhetoric. The othering that
occurs through stereotyping exaggerates supposed group traits, demarcating those stereotyped as different to the rest and as such serves to act as a form of ‘symbolic expulsion’ (Pickering, 2001: 48). Coates and Silburn (1981) identify the irony of this position, in which ‘the poor’ are ‘framed in the very society from which they are to a greater or lesser extent excluded’ (1981 [1970]:69). Once ‘othered’ people in poverty are marked out as different and have less legitimisation to speak than their socio-economic position allowed in the first place. Othering therefore adds to the social oppression of people in poverty and their marginalisation.

One way in which people in poverty are ‘othered’ is through the perpetuation of negative representations (touched upon earlier in the discussion on social waste). The depiction of people in poverty within the popular media is often one based on crude stereotypes or sensationalist accounts. As Øyen remarks, this is overwhelmingly a damaging portrayal:

> The picture is fortified with irrelevant details when repeated and build into a tale-telling tradition of how poor people behave and think. As a group they are likely to be portrayed as lazy, dirty, criminal, sinful, producing too many children, greedy for social support... (Øyen, 2002: 2).

In a visual culture such as ours ‘poverty’ has also become a form of entertainment. Peel’s (2003) scrutiny of newspaper reports of disadvantaged areas in Australia found that ‘Sympathetic stories remained a minor stream next to the gritty grunge that aimed to entertain more than to enlighten’ (Peel, 2003: 20). Recent interest in reality TV has seen a number of programmes featuring high profile or affluent individuals ‘swapping’ lives to experience modern poverty, such as, *When Michael Portillo Became a Single Mum* (BBC, 2005), *Filthy Rich and Homeless* (Channel 4, 2007) and *The Secret Millionaire* (ITV, 2007). Factual television series such as *Wasted* (2002, channel 4) and even fictional programmes such as *Shameless* (2004, Channel 4) may offer some insight but eschew the mundanity of ‘everyday’ poverty in favour of sensationalist narratives or comical, romanticised representations of a ‘poverty culture’. Consequently, accounts of poverty tend to be voyeuristic rather than analytic, often serving to reinforce the ‘otherness’ of those portrayed. This has greater significance than merely misrepresentation. As Pickering notes, stereotyped
images and notions are ‘damaging to people’s actual social and personal identities’ (Pickering, 2001: 10).

A recent British stereotype, which has derogatory class and cultural implications, is the ‘chav’. The expression is said to describe a particular (sub)type of working class person, whose characteristics parallel those of the so-called ‘underclass’: ‘dole scrounging’ young men, often ‘feckless parents, who have little desire to gain paid work’ (Murray, 2005). A recent media anxiety with young people not in employment, education or training (NEET’s) described this ‘new underclass’ as ‘Über-chav’s’ (Sunday Times, 2005). Indeed, a provocative but popular website, chavscum.co.uk, equates ‘chavs’ more directly to a sub class, describing them as, ‘Britains peasant underclass that are taking over our towns and cities! (sic)’. The website encourages people to send in photos of ‘chavs’ and describe ‘chav’ areas; the contributions are vitriolic and demonstrate themes similar to those underlying the notions of a ‘dependency culture’ or ‘underclass’, as shown in the descriptions of neighbourhoods in Nottingham and Croydon:

A massive TKMax is handily situated close to these food outlets [McDonald’s and Burger King] so one can combine the eating and fake Burberry shopping without walking too far and therefore reducing the chances of being spotted by the DSS and getting their fraudulent disability claims pulled.

I have NEVER seen an area so densely populated with 14 year old chavettes with one scruffy, dirty looking child in pram & “one on the way” [...] These fuckwits need to be sterilised before they can spread their seed any further then nessisary.....Belive me they will!(sic).

WHY THE HELL DID THEY LINK CROYDON TO NEW ADDINGTON! They’ve given the criminals an outlet. It’s like forgetting to close the doors at Holloway prison. None of them work and they all live in Council houses with their 20 kids.

(From the Wall Street Journal online, www.opinionjournal.com/extra/?id/1100073.)
Hari (2004) accurately identifies ‘chav’ as among the ‘words and phrases that make it possible for privileged people to laugh at and hate the poor without admitting it to themselves that this is what they are doing’ (2004: 41). The portrayal of ‘chav’ as comic figure can be seen in popular sketch shows, such as the character Vicky in Little Britain (2006), supposedly an ironic depiction of a teenage single mother. As Skeggs recognises, however, the use of irony ‘enables the abdication of responsibility for the description while reproducing the historical stereotypes intact’ (2003: 17). The stereotype is somehow acceptable because it is not based on ethnic or racial characteristics. In essence though it propagates fallacious arguments about behaviour and lifestyle based on visual and class-based assumptions. In this way it is similar to the ‘white trash’ label examined previously.

People in poverty can also be ‘othered’ geographically. As Skeggs notes, ‘The highlighting, identifying and naming of ‘sink estates’ as the ‘worst housing estates’ produces evidence of an actual physical difference between the respectable and unrespectable, the deserving and undeserving’ (2004: 89). Hastings and Dean (2003) also point out the routine vilification in popular and media discourse of residents of ‘problem areas’; they are distinguished as ‘different’ or ‘deviant’ or as Haylett (2003) puts it as, ‘types of places’ where particular ‘types of people’ live (2003: 68). Such distancing has been further reinforced with television shows, such as a series featuring a prominent outspoken Conservative MP, Ann Widdecombe, travelling the country reprimanding ‘hoodies’ and telling unemployed people to get into work (Ann Widdecombe Versus, ITV1, 2007). Arguably this televised ‘poverty tourism’ does little to bridge the gap in understanding between those watching and those subjected to being watched. As Gough et al note, ‘policy and discourse have rested on contrasts between ‘poor’ and ‘normal’ places. Poverty is associated with particular deviant places, contrasted with normal, unproblematic places from which the gaze is directed’ (Gough et al, 2006:28). The poor become the exoticised and feared ‘other’ (see Lister, 2004).

A further factor that may serve to ‘other’ people in poverty is the link between crime and poverty. Edelman (1977) notes that ideas of criminality and poverty are associated linguistically (1977: 34); an association that can be found within government discourse in
relation to poverty (Blair, 2002; Byers, 2003)\textsuperscript{13} and within the discourse of the Conservative party (Duncan Smith, 2004) as well as policy documents, such as \textit{Opportunity for All},

There is a clear link between poverty and social exclusion, on the one hand, and crime, illegal drugs and anti-social behaviour, on the other. If left untackled, these problems have the potential to undermine neighbourhood renewal activity and attempts to create sustainable communities (Department for Work and Pensions, 2005: 52).

The link with criminal behaviour is one that produces the idea that those in poverty are somehow morally, as well as culturally, different to the social mainstream. In actuality people experiencing poverty and social exclusion are more likely to be the victims of crime than the perpetrators (Kemp et al, 2007). While the association between people in poverty and crime is long-standing it has been argued by Chunn and Gavigon (2004) that the restructuring of welfare has meant that even claiming entitled social security benefits has evolved into a form of crime, ‘welfare fraud became welfare as fraud. Thus poverty, welfare and crime were linked’ (2004: 221). This is even clearer in recent government campaigns against benefit ‘cheats’ in which benefit fraud has been re-branded as benefit theft.

However, the representation of people in poverty is not wholly negative and certain discourses dominate in other areas of influence. For example, the redistributive discourse (RED) (Levitas, 1998) is identifiable in some poverty lobby groups; such a discourse constructs people in poverty more sympathetically than in the moral underclass discourse (MUD). Nevertheless, as the general aim of any anti-poverty group is to gain public and political attention for their cause a particular frame may be adopted, often one that portrays people as agentless and in need of assistance, frequently using language which implies a passivity on the part of people in poverty. While limited or sensationalist portrayals may work in terms of the general aims of the organisations, it may inadvertently show a simplistic, one-dimensional portrayal of the experience of poverty or depict people in poverty as ‘victims’ and in effect as ‘different’ to ‘us’ the ‘non-poor’.

\textsuperscript{13} In a speech the former cabinet Minister, Stephen Byers, stated that the 5-10% of the population who are most disadvantaged are, ‘a burden on the health service, make demands on the benefit system, make no positive contribution to the economy, and ... are most likely to be involved in criminal activity’ \textit{The Guardian}, June 24, 2003.
Another area in which a more accurate representation of people in poverty may be expected is within academic research. However, as Schram and Soss comment, academic and policy research is, ‘No more autonomous than any other discipline, poverty research discourse is no pure unalloyed good, but instead is infiltrated by the prevailing discursive structures of the broader society, all the more so as poverty research strains to achieve policy relevance’ (2002: pxxvii). The point being made is that those working for change are delimited by the prevailing discourses of poverty, ones that habitually reify the idea of people in poverty as ‘different’ and by having to work within these, research knowledge may perpetuate and legitimate such notions. A further factor that may increase the objectification and therefore the ‘othering’ of ‘the poor’ is the preoccupation with the measurement of ‘poverty’ and ‘the poor’. People in poverty are, through social science research, placed into categories, which it is then seen as acceptable to measure and evaluate. Even apparently benign categories such as ‘people in poverty’ is not a neutral observation of an economic state within the context of a consumer society such as ours. As Hartigan argues,

> The terms that social scientists use to describe these classed forms of otherness are as intimately involved with confirming a perception of the poor as ‘different’, as is ‘white trash’. The charged, symbolic differences between the ‘poor’ and everybody else are reconstituted by the very studies that seek to render them neutrally (1997: 51).

Consequently, even though social scientists may be well intentioned and seek more benevolent descriptions than are popularly used, the act of categorisation itself is an act of differentiating. It is not merely openly derogatory language and treatment of people in poverty that serves to demean but also texts produced in the name of scholarship; ‘the poor’ are reduced to objects of knowledge, and ‘facts’ about them are verified and legitimated through scholarship and research (Richards, 1993).

A further feature of research that may unwittingly ‘other’ people in poverty is built into the dissemination of the research process (see Corden, 1996). Part of the rationale of academic research is to have findings widely published in order to effect change but because researchers cannot maintain control over poverty knowledge within public discourses original findings and understandings may be distorted and damage the self-identity of those
in poverty. Related to this is the point that othering may not always be explicit by way of derogatory labelling (either intentional or otherwise) but occur because of the indeterminate social location of an economic position of need – such as being a benefit claimant – brings with it:

The position of the assisted poor person is particularly ambiguous. In society, the pole where he is situated makes him a quasi foreigner. He is, at the same time, an outsider, as object of assistance from those who fully enjoy their citizenship and an insider because he remains, nevertheless, a citizen (Mbonda, 2004: 282).

Human Rights and Social Justice

Charting the moral and cultural discourses of poverty reveals the persistent ‘othering’ of people in poverty within mainstream discourses. While negative representations and narratives predominate, producing detrimental implications for the social position and self-identity of people in poverty, these are not totalising and some alternative discourses can be found. These can be seen as consisting of a more positive discourse for people in poverty compared with those previously explored. One such discourse is that of the poverty lobby in the UK, which focuses on structural conditions and solutions to poverty and is founded on a premise of social justice. A further constructive poverty discourse in the UK is one that frames poverty and social exclusion as a denial or violation of human rights. These will be looked at in turn.

Discourses of the Poverty Lobby

Numerous organisations and charities constitute the poverty lobby in the UK. Organisations such as the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and End Child Poverty (ECP), an amalgam of numerous charity and campaign groups, are examples of organisations primarily concerned with poverty. Traditionally the concern of the poverty lobby has been to highlight the issue of poverty and attempt to sway public and political thinking towards policy and legislative changes which are of direct benefit to people in poverty. For example, the CPAG and ECP demand legislative and policy changes, mainly in relation to improving social
security payments and public services accessed by people in poverty. As such, the basis of their approach can be seen to be founded on the notion of social justice, not only the idea of social justice in practice, through the mechanics of lobbying for change, but also by promoting the belief that people in poverty have equal social worth. In part, this is achieved implicitly by the focus on the structural nature of poverty rather than on cultural or individual factors but also by the promotion of people in poverty (in this case children) as similar to others, just like every child, except for their poverty. Thus, poverty becomes the identifier of ‘difference’, not the person in poverty.

A variety of other charities with specialist interests in relation to particular groups, such as lone parents (One Parent Families), older people (Age Concern), people with disabilities (Leonard Cheshire Foundation), homeless people (Shelter) and those with mental health problems (Mind) also call attention to the issues of poverty and social exclusion and generally share a structural interpretation of poverty and social exclusion. Such groups may also seek to portray the people they are concerned with in a more compassionate light than may occur in mainstream discourses and develop an approach that focuses on the agency of people within their situation rather than identifying ‘poverty’ as the overriding element in the personhood of those involved.

While the presentation of people in poverty, underpinned by the notion of equality, may therefore be a more humanising one than can be found within mainstream media representations, because of the nature of campaigning, people in poverty may nevertheless be depicted in simplistic terms or portrayed as objects of misery and assistance. Such a discourse may construct people more sympathetically but it may also reinforce stereotyped notions of poverty rather than highlighting people as resourceful agents in difficult circumstances. For example, many campaigns of the poverty lobby use images of children or older people to represent those in poverty, as population groups that attract greater public sympathy, but by using such representations a discourse around the notion of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor may unintentionally be perpetuated. To some extent groups such as ECP and CPAG avoid this by focusing on structural inadequacies rather than on people in poverty themselves but some charity groups, such as Barnardo’s, have used excessively
sensationalised imagery in some anti-poverty campaigns. One outcome of such an approach is that a social distance may be created between the poor and ‘the rest’. Equally, such representations might be rejected by those people experiencing poverty, who may not identify with such a depiction of their lives. In sum then, the discourse of the poverty lobby and associated charity groups may be a more positive one than that found in mainstream political and media discourses but may also be one that sustains particular beliefs about poverty and the characteristics of people in poverty.

Although the poverty lobby in the UK has traditionally maintained a platform of social justice there have been recent moves to include a more explicit human rights perspective, seeking the rectification of injustices under human rights legislation and through the European Court of Human Rights (CPAG, 2005). Clearly there is overlap between demands for social justice and for human rights but at present a discourse of human rights associated with poverty may be identified as a discrete one.

**Poverty as a Denial of Human Rights**

While a human rights perspective in relation to poverty is not new, emerging in the enlightenment period as a way of conceptualising and solving the problem of poverty (Steadman Jones, 2004), it has re-emerged with renewed impetus in recent decades in relation to concern over human rights in a global context. This contemporary demand for human rights is most frequently heard within an international development framework and represented in the philosophy of international organisations such as the United Nations. The centrality of human rights and freedoms embedded in this poverty discourse produces a distinct discourse from the representation of poverty within mainstream political and media spheres, one in which the individual in poverty is positioned as subject to poverty because of structural factors such as civil war, corrupt regimes or unfair trade rather than personal ‘failings’. In addition, the ‘capability approach’, developed by Sen (1985), has conceptualised freedom from poverty and the ‘capability to achieve knowledge, longevity and a decent standard of living’ (Vizard, 2005: 38) as a central aspect of fundamental human

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14 The ‘every child deserves to be born with a silver spoon’ campaign received complaints from the public about the graphic imagery involving babies. The ads were consequently banned.
rights. In a development context then ‘poverty’ and the need to address it by means of advancing human rights is seen as unequivocal.

By contrast, the relationship between human rights and poverty within affluent nations, although not absent, is muted in relation to the predominately negative discourses around poverty. Particular organisations, such as Oxfam, ATD Fourth World in the UK and the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC) in the US explicitly identify poverty as a violation of human rights and have a recognisably distinct discourse of poverty that revolves around a human rights agenda. This principle is identifiable in Oxfam’s programme in Great Britain, which endeavours ‘to change how poverty is understood and challenged throughout the country’ (Oxfam, 2005). Poverty is reframed, becoming an issue about the denial of social and economic human rights of people in poverty, expected by virtue of social citizenship, as opposed to individual or ‘cultural’ culpability. The relationship between human rights and poverty can also increasingly be found in the policies of the devolved administrations. For example, the Welsh Assembly has been guided by human rights, specifically the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in formulating policies for tackling child poverty (Welsh Assembly Government, 2005). However, the acceptance of human rights appears to be limited to child poverty within the Welsh Assembly, rather than applicable to everyone in poverty. This may well be connected to central government’s endorsement of tackling child poverty rather than poverty per se. A draft of the Northern Ireland Bill of Rights, however, goes further and argues that poverty and social exclusion represent a fundamental denial of human dignity, one that could be tackled with increased protection via the strengthening of social and economic human rights (Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 2004). The establishment of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission in 2007 in the UK appears to be making the issue of poverty in relation to capabilities and human rights part of its remit and signals the possibility of incorporating social and economic human rights in law in order to protect people in poverty and prohibit discrimination (Killeen, 2008).

A human rights approach to poverty generally has a multi-dimensional understanding of poverty, one that perceives that the consequences of poverty extend beyond material deprivation having social, psychological and emotional aspects:

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15 The Commission is currently deliberating on the nature and content of its advice to government.
Poverty also means being powerless – having no say in the decisions that affect your life. And it can also mean being treated as a second-class citizen by the rest of society. This is the same for most poor people, whether they live in a housing estate in Wales, or a village in Ghana [...] (Oxfam, 2005b, http://www.oxfamgb.org/ukpp/index.htm).

The powerlessness and lack of voice experienced by people in poverty is brought to the fore within this discourse, one that has been visually depicted, for example in Oxfam GB’s observance of the international day for the eradication of poverty in October 2004, pictured here. In addition to highlighting the negative consequences of poverty and social exclusion this discourse promotes the terminology of dignity, respect and self-esteem regarding people in poverty. As part of according dignity and respect, genuine partnership with people in poverty is sought; their knowledge and ‘expertise’ is viewed as valuable in gaining insight into the experience of poverty and as a means of giving them ‘voice’. Social inclusion, then, not only has a macro-understanding of inclusion into the wider social world but involves including people in poverty in the conceptualising and understanding of poverty itself: ‘asking their opinions and giving them a voice is essential if we are to come to any true understanding of poverty and what can be done to eradicate it’ (ATD Fourth World, 2002:1). In this way ‘A human rights approach thus acknowledges and promotes the agency of people in poverty’ (Lister, 2004: 162). Such a discourse, therefore, does not perceive of people in poverty as morally dissimilar but as social equals who experience the disadvantages of economic lack and the social marginalisation that comes with this. Hence, people in poverty are not necessarily seen as needing to be coaxed or coerced into some action to relieve poverty, as in some poverty discourses, but instead are encouraged to be empowered.16

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16 The notion of empowerment however is a problematic term (see Lister, 2004: 174). In the case of the organisations looked at here both Oxfam GB and ATD Fourth World attempt to empower people through encouraging direct participation of people in poverty in campaigns and activities. For the PFEHRC, empowerment takes the form of participation plus direct ‘educationals’ on previous civil rights and welfare movements and people’s social and economic rights.
Conclusion

This chapter has examined some historical and contemporary hegemonic discourses that position people in poverty in certain ways. Overwhelmingly, and throughout history, people in poverty have been marginalised by poverty discourses, ones that have linked poverty to crime, social waste and moral and cultural deficiency. Formulations of moral discourses of poverty examined were those which identify people in poverty as ‘other’, with reference to an ‘underclass’ and a culture of dependency. While some more positive poverty discourses have been outlined, specifically that which identifies poverty as a violation of human rights, go some way to belie the moral and individualised discourses of poverty this is not a common understanding of poverty in Britain. The discourses that are notably absent are those of people in poverty themselves. A current shift towards charting the voices of people in poverty will be examined in the next chapter.
Chapter 3: Researching Poverty – From Description to Participation

Introduction

The study of poverty has been an enduring issue for social science research, one principally concerned with measuring and predicting poverty, examining who may be vulnerable and why, durations of poverty, outcomes and risk factors. Complementing research into the ‘measurement’ of poverty is a large body of theoretical and qualitative work, some of which has attempted to understand the lived experience of poverty by talking with people deemed to be disadvantaged, excluded or in poverty (Chamberlayne et al., 2002; Cohen, 1992; Ridge, 2002). However, people in poverty rarely get to set the research agenda or to offer their analysis in the poverty debate. While much has been written on the conceptualisation of poverty and social exclusion there is a paucity of research focusing on the language of poverty, as used by those considered to be experiencing poverty. A fundamental problem with an approach that disregards people’s lived understandings of poverty is that we do not know when researchers speak of ‘poverty’ or ‘social exclusion’ whether they are talking about the same thing as those defined by such labels. Thus, even in inclusive research the voices of ‘the poor’ may get a chance to speak but what is said is interpreted through the hegemonic poverty discourses of politicians and academics. In order to achieve a more inclusive partnership between people with and without experience of poverty it is necessary to understand a vocabulary of poverty and exclusion rather than impose one; we must make sure we are talking about the same things. Clearly, an unmediated position within research is chimerical but by exploring the discursive formation of poverty and social exclusion by those people regarded as ‘poor’ or socially excluded insights may be gained and possibly the balance of communication could be altered.

This chapter will examine the changing position of the engagement of people living in poverty in research, one from a location as the subjects of description towards a more participative role in the research process. By reviewing previous studies it will be shown that there is a paucity of research regarding what people in poverty think about current poverty discourses and how ‘poverty’ and ‘social exclusion’ may be talked about among the
so-called ‘poor’ and excluded. It will be shown that, with a few exceptions, little research has been conducted into how people considered to be in poverty or socially excluded talk about their situation. Generally, research involving discussions with people identified as in poverty is concerned with ascertaining their lived experiences, asking people about the material reality, rather than listening to how this is spoken about. One arena in which the ‘voice’ of people in poverty has been more vocal and less mediated has been within some charity and campaign groups, ones which often have an underlying philosophy of working with, rather than for, people in poverty and some of this literature will be looked at briefly, alongside the findings of general poverty research.

**Changing Focus**

As Holman (1998) notes, much is written about ‘the poor’ but they are rarely allowed to contribute themselves. While he is referring to the absence of voices of people in poverty within the media, the same has been true of research until recently. Writing in the 1990s Schram argues that ‘contemporary welfare policy research is created by the government and has come to be written in a discourse that reinforces state interests about how to understand ‘the poor” (Schram, 1995: 4). People in poverty are constituted in research as knowledge subjects who are solicited for accounts of their experiences but have been offered little opportunity to conceptualise and define a vocabulary of ‘poverty’ and social exclusion themselves. People experiencing poverty may therefore be discursively excluded in two interconnected ways: firstly by the habitually negative construction of western poverty in discourse\(^7\) and secondly, as noted, by their exclusion from the conceptualisation of ‘poverty’ itself; not from what it means to be ‘poor’ but from what ‘poor’ means. Such an omission is identified by Daly (1992) who points out that poverty research has seldom included the participation of ‘poor’ people in order to elicit their definitions of poverty (1992: 6). More usually people in poverty are consulted for their life experiences rather than their thoughts and interpretation of the concepts themselves. This traditional research position regarding the exclusion of people in poverty is summed up by Beresford et al:

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\(^7\) I have used the term ‘western’ poverty here to mean the mainstream representations of poverty concerning the (poor) citizens of wealthier economies, such as the UK. This is to distinguish from the often more sympathetic portrayal of poverty in developing countries.
They [people in poverty] have rarely been included in discussions about the key focuses of dominant debates; the definition, language and imagery, causes and solutions of poverty. Little is known, therefore, about what they think about the definitions of poverty; who if anyone they would include as poor, their feelings about language and imagery, or their analysis of and policy proposals for poverty. Instead, people with experience of poverty have mostly been confined to talking about being poor (Beresford et al, 1999:24).

The case for changing the perception of people in poverty and their position in research is similarly called for by Lister, ‘As ‘people with views’ they do not simply want the space to tell their stories and describe what it is like to be poor but they are also asking for their analysis and prescriptions to be heard’ (Lister, 2004: 169).

A shift towards a more inclusive approach to poverty throughout the 1990s has been noted (Beresford et al, 1999: 25) although actual studies on the understandings of poverty and social exclusion by people living in poverty remain thin on the ground. There is, however, an increasing recognition that the participation of people in research and policy-making is not only morally appropriate but that the expertise of people with lived experience of poverty can be capitalised on and their inclusion can be a valuable contribution to the poverty debate (Beresford et al, 1999:25; Lister, 2004: 168; Bennett with Roberts, 2004). One example of the endeavour towards greater inclusivity in discussions around poverty can be seen in the creation of the independent Commission on Poverty Participation And Power and the subsequent report, which highlighted the desire by people in poverty to be engaged in respectful dialogue and to have their voices heard (UCAP/JRF, 2000). Such a position is now accepted in principle within mainstream policy at a European Union level and the acknowledgement, ‘that people with direct experience of poverty have much to offer a successful anti-poverty strategy’ is included in the UK’s National Action Plans on Inclusion (DWP, 2003: 3). Indeed, attempts have been made to include people in poverty in policy discussions, for example in the consultation on child poverty (DWP, 2003a) and more recently the UK-wide ‘Get Heard’ project (Church Action on Poverty, 2006).

A similar, and successful, move toward participation with people previously left out of debates about their interests has occurred with people with mental health problems and
people with disabilities (Barnes. M and P. Shardlow, 1997; Croft S. and P.Beresford, 1992). Both groups continue to suffer stigma and disadvantage but at the same time have become active in changing the terms (practically and linguistically) of how people with mental health problems and disability are perceived and included. Increased participation and consequent legislative and social changes, in addition to developments in policy and research, demonstrate that similar transformations are possible with people in poverty. However, a banner of ‘poverty’ or of ‘being poor’ may not offer the same sense of positive group ‘identity’ which has emanated from a change in the discourse of these other groups. As Lister (2004) points out, ‘a number of interrelated factors work against the development of a shared categorical identity among people in poverty’ (2004: 151). Nevertheless, despite the practical caveats of mobilising people in poverty under a banner of ‘poverty’, the acceptance of ‘user involvement’, and thus the ambition of participation with people living in poverty, is one that has gained credibility in political and policy circles.

A new ‘pro-poor’ agenda in many developing economies, deriving from criticism of the macro-development programmes of previous decades, has also led to a shift in focus from talking about people in poverty to talking to them. Certainly, influential institutions, such as the World Bank, have ostensibly altered their position from a top-down approach towards one with increased engagement in localised participation. This is demonstrated in their globally ambitious Voices of the Poor project and explicitly stated in World Bank literature: ‘There are 2.8 billion poverty experts, the poor themselves. Yet the development discourse about poverty has been dominated by the perspectives and expertise of those who are not poor – professionals, politicians and agency officials’ (Narayan et al, 2000: 2). The Voices of the Poor project culminated in a three-volume publication which reported on how people seen as ‘poor’ viewed poverty and their understandings of given terminology related to poverty, such as ‘well-being’ and ‘ill-being’ (Narayan et al, 2000: xv). While the project was not without criticism by those involved (Chambers, 2000) it does reflect a significant turnabout, at least in theory, in whose voices count in discussions of the problems of and solutions to poverty.

In summary what has been examined here is the turn toward the inclusion of the voices of people in poverty. However, within a Foucauldian logic of discourse and the ‘sayable’,

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18 More than 60,000 people in poverty from 60 countries were involved in the entire project.
while the turn to voice may bring people in poverty into the policy arena how far their discourses of poverty become recognised as valid remains contentious. Those that speak the ‘unsayable’, that which is outside of mainstream discourses, can only ever be deemed as ‘irrational’ and thus ignored as an irrelevant voice, at least at first. While participation of people in poverty can therefore bring forward alternative discourses of poverty it is debatable if it will produce a counter-hegemonic one.

From Description to Participation

The discussion above demonstrates a shift from talking about, or to, people in poverty, to talking with them; a revision reflected in some poverty research. However, while this is a fairly recent change of focus, one early, and exceptional, example of recording the lives of people in poverty, ‘in their own words’ was Mayhew’s extensive writings in the mid Nineteenth century. As Holstein and Gubrium note, the word ‘poverty’ at this time signalled ‘narrative incompetence’; people in poverty were thought to be ‘incapable of telling their own story’ (1995: 21). Mayhew’s aim – to find out from ‘the poor’ what they perceived as the causes and solutions to their poverty – was therefore a radical one for the period (Humphreys, 1971: x). Although journalism, rather than scientific research, Mayhew’s work set a precedent for social researchers by demonstrating that those in poverty were credible witnesses to their lived experience; in other words, they had a voice.

However, poverty research since Mayhew has only partially followed in his footsteps, principally investigating the experiences of people in poverty, rather than their analysis of poverty, and it is this research, which asks people about their lived experience of poverty, that has become customary. Interviewing in order to gain an understanding of the lives of people in poverty has thus become standard and has offered insights into ‘being poor’ in an affluent society (for example, Coates and Silburn, 1981 [1970]; Cohen et al, 1992; Newman, 2000; Burnett, 2006). Such work is undoubtedly valuable in providing knowledge about the daily realities and consequences of a life in poverty. However, this research is set within a mainstream discourse of the conceptualisations of poverty or exclusion by the researcher or the wider policy world in which they operate rather than the conceptualisations of people in poverty themselves.
One aspect of research looking at the experiences of living in poverty has attempted to extend the boundaries to be more inclusive of participants by allowing people in poverty to tell their own stories (Holman, 1998). This may consist of the writings or recordings of people in poverty in their own words. Alternative media forms have also been used, such as poetry and photography, offering insight into experience but, more importantly, indicating what is deemed significant to convey to ‘outsiders’ (i.e. the ‘non-poor’ audience) (ATD Fourth World, 2000; Barnardo’s, 2007; The Poverty Alliance, 2004). While offering a space in which to give voice is possibly empowering in itself for participants, such means of expression still remain an account of experience rather than an ‘insider’s’ analysis on the conceptualisations and ways of talking about poverty or social exclusion.

A further type of poverty literature can be classed as ‘biographical’ writings about ‘the poor’, including authors relating others’ experiences of poverty and deprivation (Kotlowitz, 1991; Davies, 1998) or the more populist publications exploring the author’s direct but temporary experience of living a ‘poor life’ (Ehrenreich, 2001; Adams, 2002; Toynbee, 2003). These latter forays into low wage work and poverty however have been subject to criticism. Bambra (2003), for example, rejects such work as having any use in poverty research, ‘This is poverty exposed as voyeuristic entertainment, and these books offer little more than that – a populist sensationalist scan of a far bigger and ongoing problem; they do not, and cannot, really enhance our knowledge of poverty or how it is lived and experienced in any meaningful way’ (2003: 549). Whilst it is true that such writings are mediated through the author’s position, often one of middle-class affluence, and as such a visitor to poverty, a position recognised by some authors (Ehrenreich, 2001; Toynbee, 2003), they can provide illustrative examples of the struggle of getting by on a low income and the compounding problems that often accompany poverty. Consequently, such inquiries can be useful taken with the caveat that the author has chosen to temporarily inhabit ‘poverty’, a choice lacking for many people experiencing poverty for real.

Despite a long history of poverty literature it is only relatively recently that people in poverty have been asked about their understandings about the terminology of poverty, rather than just their experience (Beresford et al, 1999; and to some extent, McKendrick et al, 2003). The following section will look at some of the research that has attempted to explore how
people vulnerable to, or with experience of being ‘poor’, talk about their meanings of poverty.

**Emerging Discourses of ‘The Poor’**

*Poverty First Hand* (Beresford et al, 1999) is a notable forerunner in studies that have attempted to explore the conceptualisations of poverty by people living in poverty and their thoughts on the language and imagery of poverty. The research was guided by the principle that, ‘So far, poor people have had few chances to contribute to discussions about poverty or to come together to develop their own’ and the study endeavoured to redress the balance (Beresford et al, 1999: 25). Galloway’s (2003) more recent research with people in poverty in Scotland also attempted to explore people’s understandings of ‘poverty’ and what it meant to them. Similarly, Hacourt et al’s study (2003) strove to give people a ‘voice’ on their perceptions of ‘being poor’ (2003: 8). Underlying much of this research is an attempt at creating a more inclusive and participatory process (Beresford *et al*, 1999; Galloway, 2003; Hacourt et al, 2003) rather than merely extracting data.

A general finding to come out of studies exploring people’s conceptualisations of poverty was that poverty was perceived as equating to ‘third world’ poverty (Beresford et al, 1999; Dundee Anti Poverty Forum, 2003; Yeandle et al, 2003). However when people spoke in relation to their experiences of life on a low-income, people’s understandings of poverty were also discussed in more nuanced, contextualised terms, demonstrating variable understandings of what ‘poverty’ is conceived to be. This indicates that people may acknowledge their own deprivations but do not necessarily want to formulate their circumstances in terms of ‘poverty’. Consequently, many people defined as living in poverty do not consider themselves to be ‘in poverty’ but merely ‘worse-off’ than others (Beresford et al, 1999: 63). A label of poverty may also be rejected because of its derogatory implications about self and social identity. As Spicker argues, ‘poverty’ is a wholly negative label ‘associated with a lack of social honour’, powerlessness and an implication of personal failure (Spicker, 1984: 82). Such an assertion appears to have validity – on being asked what the word poverty meant to them Galloway’s respondents mentioned: powerlessness, isolation, lack of control and hopelessness as well as a feeling of general dehumanisation (2003: 6).
Negative connotations associated with poverty have been identified as partly the fault of unconstructive representations of people in poverty in the media (Beresford et al, 1999:145; Galloway, 2003: 7). People in poverty recognised media imagery as stigmatising and as perpetuating stereotypes (Beresford et al, 1999: 178; Hacourt et al, 2003) but while acknowledging the damaging effects of such representations, it is also clear that people in poverty are influenced by dominant notions of the status of poverty and by historical divisions between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ ‘poor’. Even when people in poverty are included in research which aims to be inclusive and participatory their own terminology regarding poverty may be subjugated by the more hegemonic discourses, ones that already categorise them as being in poverty or ‘poor’ by some policy or academic definition. Consequently, the freedom of choice and manner in which to articulate their own definitions of poverty and self-identity are de-limited by hegemonic discourses and may not be recognised as being a description of poverty at all; namely, they may fall outside the discourse.

A commonality within research that attempts to gain insight into people’s understandings of ‘poverty’ is the difficulty for the researcher, as well as those identified as ‘poor’, in finding the appropriate expressions for talking about ‘poverty’. It appears that many people on a low income recognise their situation as less than satisfactory when compared to others but not as one they would label ‘poverty’, as commonly understood in researchers’ terms. This is illustrated in McKendrick et al’s (2003) analysis, which found that:

Both adults and children in low income family households drew a distinction between being on an even keel and experiencing poverty. Through this distinction, they tended to position themselves above poverty while acknowledging that the quality of life they experienced was still inadequate. (McKendrick et al, 2003: 44)

A further finding shared by UK poverty studies exploring the conceptualisations of people in poverty was the identification of particular ‘groups’ of people in poverty. The division between poverty in developing countries and the UK is habitually one that frames how poverty

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19 By virtue of their status as participants in ‘poverty research’.
is perceived but a further distinction is between how the respondents differentiated between themselves and ‘others’ in relation to poverty. These ‘others’ may be seen as different because rather paradoxically they either really are ‘poor’ (i.e. others who are worse off) or because they are not truly in poverty. Within this latter ‘undeserving’ group are those whose behaviour, such as not undertaking paid work or spending money inappropriately, such as on drink or drugs, is seen as causing their own restricted financial circumstances (Dean, 1992: 84; Dundee Anti Poverty Forum, 2003: 80; McKendrick et al, 2003: 46). Jodi Cohen’s (1997) US study, exploring soup kitchen patrons’ talk about poverty, also found such demarcations:

The patrons’ self-presentations are consistent, in most ways, with one another and institutional constructions of the culture of poverty. In talk, they separate themselves from the poor, and uphold socially accepted and historically established divisions between poor people who are essentially good and deserving and poor people who are essentially bad and undeserving (1997: 79).

It seems to be a consistent finding then that those deemed to be in poverty do not necessarily identify themselves as similar to other people in poverty, or indeed, identify themselves as ‘in poverty’ or ‘poor’ at all.

One Swedish study (Castro and Lindbladh, 2004) explored young residents’ talk about living in a ‘poor suburb’ (a general term for Swedish urban poverty zones) and how they conceptualised their area. Although not directly looking at ‘insider’ perspectives of poverty, it explored neighbourhood discourses used by people identified as disadvantaged (by virtue of their residence) and found both identification with, and rejection of, hegemonic discourses. The authors’ note that the notion of ‘the problematic area’ in relation to the poor suburb constitutes a hegemonic discourse in Sweden and is one that carries stigma:

In a certain sense, everyone – knowingly or unknowingly – is involved in the production of the discourse of the problematic area. However, it is evident that the hegemonic discourse, with its inherent mechanism of blaming the residents, has profound consequences for the people who are living in these neighbourhoods. The residents are impelled to
develop strategies to deal with the experience of residing in a stigmatised place (Castro and Lindbladh, 2004: 265).

The authors’ theorise that how people identified themselves in relation to their environment illustrated different ways of coping with the issue of living in a ‘poor’ and stigmatised area and was one bound up with the hegemonic discourses of ‘problematic’ areas. Four area-related discourses were identified in their analysis: identification, glorification, normalisation and detachment. In brief, the identification discourse emphasised a sense of identity with place and promoted positive social relations associated with the area as well as identifying particular residents as problematic ‘others’. The normalisation discourse saw the area as not dissimilar to other areas, any problems, such as drug-use, were identified as general social trends. Conversely, the glorification discourse emphasised the toughness of the area as positively self-affirming, ‘a central feature is the special bonding that is developed precisely due to the common experience of marginality’ (Castro and Lindbladh, 2004: 266). Lastly, residents utilised a discourse of detachment in order to separate personal identity from area identity; a problematic and stigmatising picture was accepted but was not viewed as part of one’s own sense of self. This study is of interest because it examined ‘poor’ residents’ own conceptualisations, and the descriptions they used, in order to explore available discourses about their neighbourhood, as well as illustrating that such discourses were inevitably entwined with available hegemonic discourses. By demonstrating that residents employ a variety of discursive strategies in their descriptions of place the study shows that conceptualisations around disadvantage, poverty and exclusion cannot be taken as ‘already known’ but must be explored if more than a superficial understanding of the issue is the objective.

What is indicated by the research examined above is that people in poverty can and do analyse their situation and offer conceptualisations of their circumstances outside the mainstream language of poverty. One problem with much of the research to date is that it has asked people about their understandings of poverty using dominant poverty terminology, such as what ‘poor’ or ‘poverty’ means to them. They are, as seen above, loaded terms and such enquiries although valuable, will only achieve a certain level of insight rather than necessarily exploring their own vocabulary of poverty. Beresford et al (1999) did go further than other studies by asking people if they had suggestions for alternative terminology regarding ‘poverty’ (1999:67). What seemed to come from this direct inquiry were
suggestions that had a rather ‘correct’ or socially acceptable tone, rather than terminology that might be used about themselves and others.

**The Rejection of ‘Poverty’**

As previously noted, the word ‘poverty’ is not an impartial term but one semantically connected to numerous social ills. Research has demonstrated that not only the overtly negative language of ‘dependency’ or ‘underclass’ might be disempowering and stigmatising to those experiencing poverty but also the terms ‘poor’ and ‘poverty’ (Beresford et al, 1999, Corden, 1996, Dean and Taylor-Gooby, in Dean, 2000). Within contemporary society systemic causations of poverty are rarely promoted, instead there is a turn towards cultural, community (neighbourhood) and individual explanations. While child and pensioner poverty may be beyond social criticism other groups defined as ‘poor’ are under suspicion for idleness or fraud. Thus to accept a label of ‘poverty’ within such a discourse is to accept more than a lack of finances.

Undoubtedly then it can be seen that ‘poor’ and ‘poverty’ are problematic terms; aside from their conceptual slipperiness they have ‘discursive baggage’, that is to say they carry negative connotations about behaviour, status and identity. As such, people subject to the label often reject the description of being ‘in poverty’ or of being ‘poor’ (Marsden in Spicker, 1984; Dean, 1992; Corden, 1996; Dundee Anti-poverty Forum, 2003; McKendrick et al, 2003). The validity of using the words ‘poverty’ and ‘poor’ have also been explicitly questioned by anti-poverty researchers (Corden 1996; Beresford et al, 1999; Lister, 2004); a position also taken up by those researching poverty in a development context and one summed up by Engberg-Pedersen and Webster:

> The concept of ‘the poor’ is problematic because it has become an outsider’s concept. In many societies no one would like to describe oneself or be designated as poor and thus having one’s own hardship made public. To be poor is often to be associated with low social status, laziness and irresponsibility [...] Furthermore, some would question whether the observer should herself or himself use the
terms ‘poverty’ or ‘the poor’ when these are not recognized by those categorized as such (2002b: 3).

Consequently, it can be concluded that current poverty discourse may further marginalise those whom it claims to speak about. It may also be the case that people identified as being in poverty do not ‘deny’ the categorisation but that they do not consciously see it as being significant, despite the negative impacts it may bring about. Other identifications and narratives may well take precedence over an ‘identity’ of being someone ‘in poverty’ (see Lister, 2004: 151). Thus, while one researcher interviewing people in poverty states, ‘Most amazing, in my opinion, is the fact that the interviewees scarcely make any spontaneous mention of financial or material difficulties, or speak of the role of welfare agencies in their lives’ (Murard, 2002: 53), it may not be that surprising that ‘poverty’ is not discussed as part of people’s life stories; it is because a life in poverty is in fact ‘normal’ life. Poverty is literally unremarkable to all but the poverty researcher.

**Beyond ‘Poverty’?**

The use of the term social exclusion in political and policy circles in recent decades has been discussed in Chapter 2 as part of a moral discourse. Here it will be looked at as an alternative to the description of poverty. To some extent the phrase has become synonymous with poverty in political rhetoric, although differences have been clearly delineated by academics (Walker and Walker, 1997 in Byrne, 1999: 2) and government. It has been argued that, ‘social exclusion has an advantage over a more individualised concept of poverty because it recognises disadvantage as a multidimensional social condition, and not merely one of material deprivation’ (Chamberlayne et al 2002: 8, emphasis added). Nonetheless, households with low incomes are more likely to endure multiple forms of exclusion and ‘social exclusion’ is commonly associated with income in political discourse. However, alternative definitions, for instance, those of the European Union (EU) Observatory, assert that social exclusion can be seen in terms of the denial - or non-realisation - of social rights, effecting employment, health and housing (EU Observatory, 1991). This rights-based analysis has identified particular groups, for example, women in low-income households and migrants, as especially vulnerable to experiencing social exclusion.
It can be seen then that a good deal of debate surrounds ‘social exclusion’ at a conceptual (Levitas, 1998), as well as a practical level (in terms of who the label is describing). As Labonte points out the practical applications of the concept appear illogical and asks ‘how can one ‘include’ people and groups into structured systems that have systematically ‘excluded’ them in the first place?’ (Labonte, 2004: 117). Additionally, while the language of social exclusion may to some extent avoid pejorative terminology it may still contain negative nuances about person and place. Again Labonte (2004) remarks:

Social exclusion ... defines disadvantage as an outcome of social processes, rather than as a group trait. But in attempting to take us away from a narrow focus on material or income inequality, the concept can falter on an even more subtle form of victim blaming. People are no longer at fault for their disadvantage. But their disadvantage is seen to lie in their exclusion, rather than in excluding structures; for which the solution is targeted efforts at remedial inclusion rather than more systemic reform of economic practices predicated on inequality (Labonte, 2004:117).

While the discourse of social exclusion has undergone academic scrutiny and semantic changes throughout New Labour’s terms in government (as documented by Fairclough, 2000) it remains uncharted conceptually regarding its understanding by people defined as socially excluded. Indeed the deployment of the term ‘social exclusion’ in contemporary research might well be questioned more than the use of ‘poverty’ or ‘the poor’, as it is almost exclusively used about Others, with no evidence that the terminology has any resonance for people defined as such or for the public at large. Although in-depth research of the experiences and outcomes of social exclusion (Chamberlayne et al, 2002; Webster et al, 2004) offer insight into the processes and experiences of exclusion a limitation of existing research is that conceptualisations of social exclusion are relatively unexplored, despite the commonality of the term in academic and political discourses. One study that has attempted to look at this was conducted by Richardson and Le Grand (2002), who compared the academic definition of social exclusion to the definitions of those with experience of social exclusion. The study was designed to identify deficiencies in the academic definition as well as increase the legitimacy, or the ‘insider’s view’, of the category. Although the research
revealed aspects of social exclusion that would have remained outside the researchers’ understanding, the respondents in the study were not asked for their thoughts on the term itself or on alternative conceptualisations to those offered by the researchers. Another study, while not looking directly at the terminology of social exclusion found that people in some groups participating in the research ‘felt undermined by discussions on ‘social exclusion’ which linked their particular experience with other indicators and placed them in the a ‘social dustbin’’ (Williams, 2004: 68). Such a response may indicate that this terminology, which has popular currency in political and policy circles, is not well regarded by those it claims to describe.20

**Conclusion**

This chapter has charted the turn to ‘voice’ and participation in policy and practice and the effect of this on poverty research. The review of empirical work has illustrated a long-standing focus on the experiences of people in poverty rather than on their conceptualisations and the language used to convey these. Thus, a lacuna remains in our understandings about what ‘poverty’ and ‘social exclusion’ mean from the perspectives of people in poverty. How this research project attempts to explore such discourses will be the focus of the next chapter.

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20 The Williams study was a mixture of research projects, rather than just involving people in poverty.
Section II: The Research Study
Chapter 4: The Research Journey: Rationale, Methods and Reflections

Introduction

This chapter details the methodological aspects of the research. I will firstly look at the theoretical assumptions and rationale behind the design and analysis before moving on to describing the study from the point of access to the field, the process of research and the methodological tools used to collate and analyse the data. Throughout the chapter the reasons why particular approaches were chosen and how effective these were will be explored. I will end the chapter with some general reflections on my research journey, of what has been learnt and on what future research might improve upon.

Rationale and Theoretical Approach

Much of the discussion of social exclusion has been ‘top-down’ in nature, with the poor and the excluded remaining relatively voiceless. There is, accordingly, a need for studies that present the views of ordinary people, articulated in their own words.

(Manicol, 2005: ix)

This study was carried out in order to explore the undocumented perceptions of people in ‘poverty’ regarding the language of poverty and social exclusion as well as examining their discursive constructions on the conditions of their lives. The research focus developed in part because of my personal experiences of poverty at different points in my life. Being raised in a male lone parent family in receipt of benefits, married as a teenager, being a young mother and then a lone parent myself also meant that I had some similarities with people who took part in the research. Personal experience not only motivated me to examine this area but also gave me cause to believe that I could achieve this in a way that avoided merely looking at the ‘exotic’, in this case people in poverty, out of ‘researcher curiosity’. Because, akin to Skeggs’ claim, because ‘...I once had been very similar to the women of the
study I felt less like a class tourist who voyeuristically explores the differences of the other’ (1997: 35).

Although this is true to some extent it may also be self-delusional; my situation is now different – I was the researcher, they the researched. Gaining social and cultural capital (via higher education and qualifications) means that I no longer regard myself as lacking choices, as I once did. Because of this I do not feel as confidently as Skeggs that I am not just briefly visiting people’s lives and scurrying away with their words. While I may share many of the experiences of the people who took part in the study one is, in some measure, always a tourist if one has left. Moreover, it is almost an inevitable part of a research study that ‘othering’ research respondents will occur, whatever similarities of experiences and background are shared or not.\(^{21}\) As Clough and Nutbrown (2002) point out, research subjects are chosen as a particular population, essentially identified as categorically dissimilar from the researcher’s world: ‘they are primarily interesting, therefore, because of a perceived difference – however benignly understood, and however politically motivated the study…’ (2002:71). We largely choose them because they are ‘other’ to what is known. In this way, I was aware of my position as outsider-researcher rather than ‘member’ but, even so, I felt that similarities of life events allowed me to achieve greater understanding, and certainly greater rapport with respondents, than had we not had parallels in experience.

The research focus was on ‘mundane’ poverty rather than a more obvious poverty of homeless populations or people in extreme poverty. As previously noted, looking at how people in poverty talk about the conceptualisations of poverty, via the language of ‘poverty’ and social exclusion, is an un-elucidated area in social policy research. This study was therefore a first step in charting the discourses of ‘poverty’ by people who might be defined as such. How the discourses of ‘poverty’ were discussed, ignored or re-negotiated in respondents’ talk, and the production of alternative ways of speaking about situations and conditions conventionally defined as ‘poverty’, was the overall research focus.\(^{22}\) It was logical then to utilise the methods and approach of discourse analysis.

\(^{21}\) This assessment perhaps does not apply in genuinely participative research, such as that outlined by Bennett and Roberts (2004), although the question of how to choose a research population, unless it spontaneously chooses itself, still poses questions of power relations and categorisation.

\(^{22}\) By conventionally, I mean in social policy and practice and in academic literature.
It is discourse and conversation which should be the focus of study, because that is where meanings are created and negotiated (Willig, 2003: 161)

In beginning an exploration of the language of poverty a number of discourse analytical approaches were considered. Conversational analysis (CA) and discursive psychology (DP) (Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1996) pay close attention to talk at the micro level. Both are primarily concerned with the technicalities of language use based on a premise that language constructs social reality. Within this approach language does not reflect people's inner thoughts and behaviour; it is in itself social action (Edwards, 1997). Naturally-occurring data are the preference in DP and CA, although data from interviews and focus groups can be used as long as they are analysed within the context of their occurrence, that is to say, as an 'interview'. Within these approaches, the context of wider social systems, categories and practices are dismissed as 'going beyond the data' and as unimportant for analysis. Social categories, such as 'class' or 'gender', are only dealt with if mentioned by the participants in the conversation under study and, it is claimed by DP analysts, have no bearing on the analysis if these are not present in talk. Such an analytical denial of the social world makes it a difficult approach to adopt if one is interested in social issues, such as poverty. As Erica Burman (2004) point outs, contextual details do not vanish just because they are left out of an analysis. A further criticism is that an exclusive focus on language use is narrow, 'if we constrain our research in this way, important (and admittedly difficult) questions are left unanswered [...] Many crucial issues simply disappear'. Similarly, Parker notes that an analysis that separates itself from culture may be trivialising the social phenomenon under study (2002: 125). As a methodological approach that separates itself from social context it was an inappropriate one for this study.

A form of discourse analysis that takes into account contextual detail is critical discourse analysis (CDA). Unlike DP, attention is not solely given to the surface linguistic features but also to what is not said but hinted at or presupposed as apparent from the text and from other culturally available resources (Cameron, 2001: 128). CDA is chiefly interested in the connections between what is happening in the details of interaction, social structure and
power relations and in how ideology is encoded in discourse. In CDA social structures and practices are perceived to favour dominant minorities or elites. Another form of discourse analysis, Foucauldian analysis, is also concerned with power and discourse but, unlike CDA, a Foucauldian perspective does not perceive power as necessarily ‘top-down’ or discourses as inevitably invested with the interests of particular elite groups. This position is illustrated by Foucault’s description of discourses and their relationship to power:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.

(Foucault, 1978:100, cited in Young, 1981)

So, while discourse is intertwined with power, it is not inevitably caught up with the transference of ideological power or meaning. Indeed, unlike critical discourse analysts, Foucault rejected the concept of ‘ideology’ (Kendall and Wickham, 1999: 118). As outlined in Chapter 1, Foucauldian discourse analysis is concerned with the manifestation of discourse in language, structures, systems and representations in the production of the social. The particular meaning of ‘discourse’ in Foucauldian terms is defined as ‘practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972 cited in Cameron, 2001:15). Discourses facilitate and limit, enable and constrain what can be said, by whom, where and when (Parker 1992: 244). By examining discourses and their implications for action (or inaction) the limits of discourses as well as the possibilities of new discursive structures can be explored and that is why this theoretical approach was an appropriate choice for this research study. Choosing a type of discourse analysis that looks at language in use in addition to the material and social context adds to our understanding of what ‘poverty’ is perceived to be and the consequences of its construction in different ways. On the other hand, one criticism often levelled at a Foucauldian approach is that it disallows human agency; the emphasis is placed on discourse to construct its objects and the subject positions which come from these. This assessment, however, misrepresents the role of human agency, it is not that agency is totally absent but that what can be said and done is limited by particular discourses.
Starting Out: Contacting and Access

The difficulties in choosing people to take part in the study were both ethical and practical. One of the central problems was how to engage people in a study exploring poverty discourses who don’t see ‘poverty’ as a relevant description of their life-experiences. As Beresford and Hoban note:

[...] there is a strong body of evidence to suggest that many people do not want to associate themselves with the identity of being ‘poor’ (regardless of whether they are included within conventional definitions). Thus poverty and disadvantage often provide a less than helpful basis for identity for involving people (2005: 2).

I was mindful that attempting to engage people in ‘poverty’ who may not see themselves as such was a situation that could lead to an imposed categorisation by me, as someone with greater discursive power. However, if I merely engaged with those who professed to be in ‘poverty’ an incomplete perspective would be gained. With such considerations in mind people were therefore not brought into the research process with the individualising descriptions of being in ‘poverty’ or being ‘poor’ but because they lived within an area viewed as being ‘hard-up’ or labelled as ‘deprived’. As such, the labels used were applied geographically rather than individually and were ones utilised by official bodies (such as government or local councils) rather than defined by me. I therefore began looking at recruiting respondents through local community centres and Sure Start groups based within areas identified as ‘deprived’. The features of the chosen research areas indicated ones with significant levels of poverty ‘risk-factors’ and, as such, were ‘strategically selected’ for the purposes of this study (De Vaus, 2002: 239). This method meant that I was not using the conventional poverty measure, of household income below 60 per cent of median income level, because it seemed too invasive to obtain such data on people’s household incomes. However, some people self disclosed low earnings and all respondents were in receipt of benefits or tax credits, implying a low income relative to the population.

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23 All areas were in the top 10% or 20% most deprived super output areas (SOAs) in England. The overall Index of Multiple Deprivation 2004 combines information from seven domains: income deprivation, employment deprivation, health deprivation and disability, education skills and training deprivation, barriers to housing and services, living environment deprivation and crime when assessing deprivation (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2004b).
In addition, it is evident that not everyone living in ‘deprived’ areas is living in poverty but, as will be seen in chapter 5, respondents’ accounts of their lives indicated considerable economic and material hardships, ones that would be regarded as experiences of ‘poverty’.

I began by contacting local community organisations and Sure Start groups across the East Midlands. I wrote personalised letters to more than forty individuals responsible for local community groups within these areas (appendix 1), which elicited a very poor response with only one person responding. I followed up letters with emails and also telephoned the groups contacted. While this achieved a better response, with more people saying they were interested and even arranging several focus groups (one of which was successful) many people were non-committal or agreed to take part only to cancel at a later date. I also wrote a short article for inclusion in a local newsletter whose readership was based in a Partnership estate asking for people to take part, which received no response. Permission to put up posters requesting participation was refused at a furniture re-cycling project and at one Sure Start group. It was not clear whether difficulties in recruiting people were part of the research process itself or this topic in particular. On reflection I think it was a combination of workers in ‘gatekeeper’ roles not wanting to become involved in commitments outside their (often already overburdened) remit as well as the sensitivity of the research issue. In addition, the element of the study that asked people to record their visual perceptions of ‘poverty’ also slowed down recruitment (as discussed below). Another factor was a wariness of researchers; one group leader was rather cynical about researchers’ interest in communities merely for the length of their research. It was a view that I had sympathy with and I offered to do voluntary work at the centre in exchange for holding a focus group as some form of involvement, albeit temporary, but this offer was declined.

After a slow start I thought a direct approach might achieve better results and therefore visited some groups, including three Sure Start groups and an unemployed workers centre in an ex-mining area in Nottinghamshire. This proved to be the most effective means of engaging people and the remaining focus groups and most of the individuals who took part in one-to-one interviews were recruited through these groups. It was not straightforward from here however. A change of staff at the Sure Start group I had been attending for over a month meant acquainting myself with the new key worker and re-seeking permission for my continued attendance at the group and carrying out a focus group. A further problem was conducting interviews in less than ideal conditions; two of the focus groups took part in
rooms with pre-school children present, as did some of the individual interviews, which meant that noise and distractions were common. Individual interviews took place in rooms within Sure Start centres and within people’s homes. In order to protect respondents’ anonymity all names have been changed.

In total four focus groups and twelve individual interviews took place between summer 2006 and spring 2007. Three of the four focus groups took place in social housing estates (two in community centres and one in a Children’s Centre) in which the population is primarily white working class. The fourth focus group was an inner city location, among a primarily immigrant population from Asia and Africa. All of the focus groups, except the inner-city group, were conducted within different parts of one borough. Thirty-four people took part in the four focus groups, thirty-two women and two men and all were parents. Seven women and five men took part in in-depth individual interviews; only one man and one woman were not parents. The general age-range of participants was early 20’s to mid 60’s and one teenager took part (more details of respondents can be found in appendix 3). Focus groups lasted between 50 minutes to an hour and a half and individual interviews lasted on average 40 minutes, the shortest being 35 minutes and the longest an hour and a half. The individual interviews were conducted across several counties within the East Midlands region.

Regarding the ethical dimension of participation all potential respondents were informed that the interview would be recorded, that their involvement was voluntary and that they were free to leave the research process at any time. I also made it clear that names and identifying details would be made anonymous. Consent forms were given out to all respondents, but people would often sign these without reading them, especially within the focus groups. I therefore read through the consent form in order to make sure people were fully aware of what they were committing themselves to.

Methods

As the focus of the research was an exploration of peoples’ discourses of poverty a qualitative approach was the most appropriate: as Gubrium and Holstein argue, ‘a world comprised of meanings, interpretations, feelings, talk and interaction must be scrutinised on
its own terms. Qualitative inquiry has always maintained this commitment...'(1997:13). A number of methods within this approach were used, not all of which were successful. The primary methodological tools utilised were individual interviews and focus groups. Both were employed in order to see how ‘poverty language’ was talked about in different situations. Some participant observation with two of the groups involved, consisting of a year attending the weekly RestART group and several months of weekly attendance at one Sure Start group meant that I could observe naturalistic conversation, which increased my understanding of the context of respondents’ lives. This showed that people in the groups talked openly about their everyday problems, ones that might be seen (from a policy perspective) as consequences of poverty and social exclusion but would not be framed in economic terms by the group members. I also learnt that lack of money would be discussed in a very matter of fact way and in one that was not relational, in terms of individual comparisons to others who might be better off. A visual dimension to the research was attempted but proved to be more of an obstacle to participation than a fruitful avenue, for reasons that will be examined below.

**Visual Methods**

There were two visual components within the original research plan. The first was to provide cameras in order that respondents could visually capture their perceptions of ‘poverty’ and exclusion. The second was introducing anti-poverty campaign posters and photographs into the focus group sessions (see appendix 4).

Asking respondents to take photos had a number of purposes. Firstly, it was hoped that it would provide a relaxed opening gambit into the interview process, that talk around ‘poverty’ and related words and concepts would arise within the course of asking about the photos they had taken and why. The emphasis was to be not just the final images produced but on photo production – why they took that particular image and why it mattered. In point of fact, however, this photo-element actually prevented people from taking part and was one of the reasons for the slow participation rate at the outset of research. This was demonstrated quite clearly when this element was dropped and participation increased dramatically. Reluctance to take part in the photography aspect of the study seemed to stem, not just from the commitment required, but also from people’s lack of confidence in what they were
supposed to be doing, in other words the request of asking for photographs of what they saw as ‘poverty’ or ‘exclusion’ was too un-directive and vague. However, I had been deliberately ambiguous in the hope that I would avoid imposing my notions of poverty but clearly this was an impediment to participation. Interestingly, as considered in Chapter 6, of those people who did take photos (three of the individual interview respondents) two travelled elsewhere to take them. This, in itself was insightful as they felt ‘poverty’ was depicted in the images of derelict houses and rubbish filled gardens they had photographed, rather than closer to home (see appendix 4, image 4). Another respondent told me that they hadn’t wanted to take pictures of homeless people (their idea of what ‘poverty’ looked like) in case they got attacked. What also became apparent during the research is that people had been confused by the idea of portraying ‘poverty’ when for them it was often represented by ‘Africa’ and as such beyond the realms of possibility to capture. On reflection, it may have been more productive to have asked people to take pictures of their own experience of being ‘hard up’ or ‘skint’ but at the time I felt that such a request was invasive and it only became apparent during the process of research that people did not mind talking about the experiences that came from economic hardship, they just didn’t want this to be called ‘poverty’.

The second visual element of the study was the method of photo-elicitation – using images from anti-poverty campaigns to invoke comment and discussion within focus groups. The rationale was that the pictures would evoke talk of being in ‘poverty’ but people generally engaged with the images at a very literal or emotional level, prompting stories of child abuse (the posters featured babies – see appendix 4, image 1) and drug abuse. With the exception of the conventional image of material neglect, featuring an elderly man in impoverished surroundings (appendix 4, image 2) – one that conformed to their notions of poverty – the images were rejected as not ‘poverty’. Despite misreading of the campaign material ensuing discussions generated ‘poverty talk’ and the method was therefore more productive than it might have first appeared. This method was also insightful in revealing that much anti-poverty publicity material merely produced non-recognition for those who were the subjects of the representations.
Interviews and Focus Groups

In-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups were the primary methods of data collection. They offered the opportunity to see how the concept of poverty was deployed in talk in addition to how ‘poverty’ might be articulated in other ways. The methods adopted and questions asked were designed to generate talk around poverty and social exclusion rather than ‘excavating facts’ (Mason, 2002:65). It was not essentially the answers to the questions that I was interested in but how poverty words were managed in discussions in addition to how people talked about their economic, material and social circumstances.

The focus groups took place prior to individual interviews and consequently gave some idea of what the general understandings of ‘poverty’ might be. The value of this was that some of the topics raised in focus groups could be followed up in individual interviews, such as discovering that ‘social exclusion’ was an unknown phrase for most people. Interviews and focus groups were recorded using a small digital recording instrument. The recorded data were later transferred onto computer and transcribed in detail. The method used for transcription was a simplified version of the conversational analysis system (Psathas, 1995), one that attempts to convey the patterns of speech, such as pauses and emphasis, as well as what is actually said, in order to illustrate significance and meaning-construction in talk. A guide to transcription symbols can be found in appendix 2.

Interviews

Talking with people using interviews is a legitimate and meaningful way to generate data in order ‘to listen to them, to gain access to their accounts and articulations or to analyse their use of language and construction of discourse’ (Mason, 2002: 64). In practical terms a semi-structured interview is one of the few methods that allow focused attention on the issue of concern (to me the researcher) as well as providing opportunity for respondents to raise issues that concern them.

A small number of broad questions were constructed as part of the semi-structured interview guide (appendix 5). This allowed for flexibility, enabling me to follow alternative lines of enquiry while maintaining a focus on the research questions (as suggested by Bryman,
2001). The intention was to have more of an informal discussion than a question/answer type session. The guide included questions that were focused on terminology relating to poverty, low-income and social exclusion, in addition to those enquiring about personal experiences, opinions and perceptions about others’ circumstances. As Mason (2002) notes, the method is dependent ‘on people’s capacity to verbalize, interact’ and ‘conceptualise’ and this varied in interviews, with some people being very forthcoming and others requiring much more encouragement and prompting. Whilst Bryman (2001) cautions researchers to bear in mind that ‘rambling’ in interviews is not necessarily irrelevant and in fact may illustrate what is significant to respondents – advice that I heeded – it was also a case of sometimes guiding people away from particular subjects after a time, such as the local school, ‘men’ or other local groups and on occasion I had to be more directive than I had originally foreseen.

One difficulty that occurred throughout the research process, but more markedly in relation to constructing interview schedules, was related to the use of the word poverty. As mentioned, I felt uncomfortable using a word about people that they might not use about themselves. However, I was investigating how peoples’ own discourses of poverty fitted in with mainstream discourses and as such its use could not be avoided altogether. For that reason I introduced the term poverty as the interview progressed in order to gain insight into how it was handled in the discussion; in this way I was looking at its management in conversation, rather than applying a definition.

**Focus Groups**

In some ways focus groups were easier to manage than the individual interviews. I did not feel discourteous cutting people off or prompting dialogue (the two extremes encountered in the interviews). Respondents would often interrupt someone if they felt they were talking for too long and, while I still managed the group interaction, this ‘self-policing’ aspect of the focus group made my role seem more informal. However, I was aware that while a focus group may have the appearance of a casual group discussion it remains a contrivance of myself, the researcher, on the subjects I determined. Such a criticism, though, does not distract from the importance of the focus group method for obtaining rich amounts of data through a shared interactive process that allows for assessment and re-evaluation by the
respondents rather than one solely directed by the researcher. The dynamics of interaction within the group setting meant that opinions were challenged by other respondents, leading to counter arguments and justifications and as such produced interactional data that could not occur in a one-to-one interview situation. For example, people argued with one another or added to previous speakers’ comments or offered a particular perspective, which then gained endorsement from the group, thus showing the depth of feeling about particular subjects, such as doubting the existence of British poverty. The method was also useful for examining respondents’ shared understandings of everyday life and, ‘the everyday use of language and culture of particular groups’ (Litosseliti, 2003:17, italics original) in the respondents’ own words. In addition, the group situation showed how particular subjectivities might be talked about, accepted or resisted. Addressees as well as speakers have a role to play in the construction (or co-construction) of identity (Cameron, 2001: 176) and a focus group was thought to be a useful situation to explore how a ‘poor’ identity was managed or rejected. It was hoped that the use of both focus groups and individual interviews would reveal how poverty is spoken about in different contexts and what is it is allowable to say within a group situation compared to one with the researcher alone. Interviews and focus groups involve asking people about experiences and opinions and as such are potentially a ‘face-threatening act’ (Cameron, 2001:118). While ‘face-saving’ may have occurred in both situations I felt it was enlightening rather than restrictive to find out what can and cannot be said to an ‘outsider’ in a group of one’s friends and neighbours.

**Analysis**

The aim of the analysis was to understand the ways in which respondents constructed ‘poverty’ and ‘social exclusion’. This was achieved by examining the discursive meanings attached to poverty and exclusion and identifying the discourses which informed their accounts of ‘poverty’. As stated at the beginning of this chapter the analysis chosen is not simply an application of Foucauldian discourse analysis but instead uses his analytical insights on how discourses operate and form subjectivities and positions for people.

Several models have been developed for the type of discourse analysis I felt was most appropriate. Parker (1992) outlines a number of steps in the analysis of discourse, which has
been adapted into a six-stage model by Willig (2003). Willig’s model (2001; 2003) moves from identifying discourses at work through to the consequences of taking up subject positions based on these discourses. The first stage examines in what ways the discursive object is constructed; in this case charting the construction of ‘poverty’ in mainstream discourses. Thus, the analysis began by looking at ‘poverty’ and how it is deployed in the social world (historically and today) in section one. The first step of Willig’s model was also used to analyse how the discursive object ‘poverty’ was constructed in respondents’ talk. This meant careful and repeated examination of the typed transcripts to identify recurrent linguistic constructions. All references linked to poverty, exclusion and related concepts including explicit and implicit references were looked at. Because this type of analysis is not just word-spotting I felt that using a computer package was not appropriate as information might be lost if it was embedded in narratives that did not appear to be about ‘poverty’ or ‘exclusion’. What was required was identifying the discursive meanings that constructed poverty, deprivation and social exclusion by paying close attention to the transcripts and recordings. Patterns and themes began to appear, identified not just in the words and phrases used but also by their similarity or dissimilarity of construction. Stage two aims to set the discursive object within wider discourses, thus ‘poverty’ may be located in wider discourses of the family or paid work. The third stage involves looking at differing constructions of the object and what is gained from constructing it in particular ways, ‘the action orientation of talk and text’, (Willig, 2003:174). This involved examining the constructions of ‘poverty’ found in people’s talk and what was gained for respondents from constructing it in particular ways. Stage four involves identifying the points where they overlap, where they constitute what looks like the same object in different ways. Stage five looks at the relationship between discourse and practice and involves systematic exploration of the ways discursive construction (and the subject positions offered within them) opens up or closes down opportunities for action (ibid). In other words what can be (legitimately) said and done within a particular discourse. From this, and following stage five in Willig’s model, is a concern with looking at available subject positions offered by particular formulations of ‘poverty’. It is important to look at the potential subject positions offered by the discourse as ‘they offer discursive locations from which to speak and act [...]’ (Willig, 2003: 175). This last stage also involves examining the consequences for taking up various subject positions for the participant’s subjective experience (Parker, 1992). In other words what can be felt, thought and experienced within particular subject positions. Thus, what it means to be called ‘poor’ within a particular discourse of poverty.
This step-by-step analytical procedure led to the identification of particular ways of understanding ‘poverty’ and ‘exclusion’. In reality many of the stages overlap and are not the linear process they appear. People’s talk also appeared contradictory on occasion, such as claiming there was no ‘poverty’ in Britain, whilst later giving an account of their own poverty in the past, sometimes the recent past. Cameron (2001) argues that such contradictions in discourse demonstrate that a number of ‘social voices’ or discourses available and that, ‘by speaking in more than one voice, social actors are providing evidence about their multiple ways of understanding the world.’ (2001:157). Such apparent ‘contradictions’ do not therefore undermine research findings, indeed, they illustrate the nuances found within an understanding of ‘poverty’ and the context in which it occurs. Because of the nature of the research and the method adopted my analysis and findings were somewhat intertwined, principally because it did not seem appropriate to present people’s speech as completely separate from the analysis of that speech.

**Reflections**

I have reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of research strategy, design and methods throughout this chapter. In this section I will further examine some of the limitations of the study and the potential ways of doing things differently.

One potential shortcoming of the study was the lack of diversity among respondents. Due to the nature of recruitment, via Sure Start and community groups, respondents were predominantly parents of children of school age (only one woman and the younger, teenage participant, were not parents). Additionally, the majority of respondents were also female. As many participants attended Sure Start groups this may also mean that they may hold different understandings of poverty than other residents, living in poverty, who do not attend. While this does not invalidate the findings it does reduce their generalisability to non-parents in similar circumstances. However, the notion of generalisability in a study such as this may not be possible or necessarily desirable. As Widdicombe (1995) argues, the best way of avoiding imposing categories of meaning upon others is to stick to contextualised
analysis and not generalise from research findings. This allows respondents to redefine themselves and their experiences each time they might participate in research and as a consequence may be more empowering than policy suggestions from generalised findings. That said, although the findings are not generalisable they may provide a foundation for further research. Such research could examine the understandings of poverty and social exclusion by people and groups not represented in this study.

While a notion of reliability is disputed regarding qualitative methods Mason nonetheless outlines how the concept can be made more meaningful to this type of research. She advises 'ensuring – and demonstrating to others – that your data generation and analysis have been not only appropriate to the research questions, but also thorough, careful, honest and accurate' (1996: 146). I hope I have achieved this and that, despite the difficulties encountered, the approach chosen was suitable for exploring discourses of poverty. Of course alternatives are always available and whereas this study focused on data from focus groups and interviews, on-going participant observation would be another worthwhile method of exploring the more unformulated aspects of discursively managing material and economic lack, whilst refusing labels of 'poverty'. An ethnographic study, observing and recording talk and action in people's daily lives and their reflections on the mediated representations of poverty would illuminate new areas in the discourses of poverty. Such a study, however, would take considerable resources and bring about its own ethical dilemmas in terms of participation and consent.

Although some ethical questions have been explored here the over-arching question as to the acceptability of researching relatively powerless groups has not been addressed. As Silverman argues it is relatively easy to gain access to 'underdog' groups, indeed, 'it suggests their vulnerability' (2001: 56). Is it justifiable as researchers to exploit such vulnerability? Possibly, as Orton and Rowlingson (2007) debate, a new research agenda is needed, one that examines inequality and poverty by rigorous scrutiny of asset-rich groups rather than the traditional focus of poverty research – the 'poor' themselves. Although the call for research into the wealthy is well founded their access not just to financial capital but also to social and cultural capital ensures their voices are already well heard while the voices of people in poverty remain relatively silent. This does not mean that research into such socially powerless groups is justifiable on such grounds but that raising awareness in addition to
demonstrating the significance of people’s accounts, most importantly to themselves, may in itself be a way of reducing their vulnerability rather than exploiting it.

**Conclusion**

The study aimed to explore the discursive resources and rhetorical arguments used by respondents when managing the terminology of ‘poverty’ and ‘social exclusion’ in individual and group situations. Consequently, the methods of focus groups and individual interviews and the analytical tools adopted were the most appropriate for this type of exploratory research into poverty discourses. The research approach cannot be seen as trying to get to a more ‘authentic’ underlying discourse about ‘poverty’ but rather as examining how the language of ‘poverty’ is managed in the cases explored. Problems encountered along the research journey have also been outlined in this chapter.
Chapter 5: Being Hard Up: Indications of 'Poverty'

**Introduction**

‘If had extra money I would pay my bills’

[Amy, individual interview]

While Spicker (Dundee Anti Poverty Forum with Spicker, 2003: 11) argues that ‘...the most accurate description of poverty will come from peoples’ own experiences’ it is often the case that situations described are not identified as experiences or consequences of ‘poverty’. Instead, people describe family arrangements, care of children, employment, past or present difficulties and future hopes. In other words, they talk about what is important to them in their everyday lives rather than from within a socio-economic position labelled ‘poverty’. It is not a case that financial hardship is absent or does not have material and psychological effects but that this is not the primary position from where someone speaks.

The researcher dilemma then becomes how to define and describe ‘poverty’, to label ‘people in poverty’, when this is often an alien concept to the way they think about themselves and their lives. Commenting on his study involving life-history interviews (Peel, 2003) notes the ‘difficulty of finding the correct descriptive term’ when talking with people defined as ‘disadvantaged’ but who mostly describe themselves as ‘ordinary’ (2003, xii). Similarly, recent participatory research with children in both wealthy and low income households found that the ‘estate children’, many of whom had experience of relative income poverty, did not define or talk about themselves as ‘poor’. Indeed, much like Peel’s (2003) interviewees, all of the children were keen to identify as ‘average’ along a continuum of poverty through to affluence’ (Sutton et al, 2007: 18). Furthermore, while many of the parents of the ‘estate children’ engaged in the research talked in terms of ‘getting by’ ‘just managing’, and ‘struggling’, they did not refer to themselves as being in poverty or ‘poor’. 

As discussed in section one, the dilemma of talking about the experience of poverty to people that deny that experience as poverty, indeed, the validity of using the words ‘poverty’ and ‘poor’ at all has been explicitly raised by anti-poverty researchers (Corden 1996;
Poverty may be experienced as a stigmatising description, having negative consequences for self-identity (Beresford et al., 1999: 64; Yeandle et al., 2003: 26) and as such is one that is rejected if the negative moral implications associated with being in poverty are to be avoided. Webster and Engberg-Pederson sum up the predicament for the poverty researcher:

The diversity in experiences of poverty suggests that generalizations about it or about the interests of the poor will always be prone to being a reflection of the ideas of the observer more than the realities of the observed. In this sense, the concept of 'the poor' is problematic because it has become an outsider's concept. In many societies no one would like to describe oneself or be designated as poor and thus having one's hardship made public. To be poor is often to be associated with low social status, laziness and irresponsibility. The fact of poverty must therefore always be weighed against the experience and perception of poverty in a specific context (Webster & Enberg-Pederson, 2002: 3).

As with previous research, people involved in this study rarely identified themselves as being in poverty. However, while a denial of poverty was often resolutely stated, the narratives that accompanied this denial were routinely full of hardship and distress caused by economic marginalisation, situations characterised and defined as 'surviving' in other recent research (Orr et al., 2006). What will be examined here are some of the details of people's lives that, from an outsider perspective, would be seen as a consequence of material and financial hardship. In addition, the areas in which the focus groups and interviews took place, chosen because they were identified at ward level to be areas of multiple deprivation, will also be delineated. The description of neighbourhoods and individual circumstances is not an attempt to put fact over experience, as cautioned by Webster and Engberg-Pederson (2002), or intended to undermine the respondents' insistence that they are not in poverty but rather it is presented to show that from an 'outsider' and policy perspective what is commonly known as 'poverty' would appear to be present. The contrast between the realities of the statistics and the realities of the lives of people who make up those statistics on the one hand and their rejection of descriptions of poverty and deprivation on the other is therefore significant.
Areas

As many of the focus groups and individual interviews were arranged through organisations, such as local community centres and Sure Start, the research inevitably had an area-based dimension. However, while a statistical examination of the areas reveals significant deprivations, residency alone cannot be taken as an indicator of individual or family poverty; not everyone living in ‘poor areas’ experiences income poverty. While this may be the case, the way in which respondents talked about their lives suggests experience of being in ‘poverty’, as conventionally measured, if not by their own standards.

Two focus groups and five individual interviews took place in the neighbourhood of Hathley, one in the newly built Children’s Centre, built as part of the Sure Start initiative, indicating a government designation of disadvantage, and another at the local community centre24. A recent ward-level analysis places Hathley in the top 10 per cent most deprived super output areas (SOAs) in England, with over half (52%) of children living in ‘income deprived households’ (Leicestershire County Council, 2005: 33; Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2004a). One third (33 per cent) of Hathley residents have no qualifications and, while local unemployment is near the borough average, long-term unemployment is high, 33 per cent for men and 42 per cent for women. Hathley also has the highest concentration of lone parents in the borough, 12 per cent, compared to a borough average of 2 per cent. Truancy rates are also high and Hathley is described in a recent Ofsted report as ‘an area of social and economic deprivation [...] in which child poverty is recognised as the worst in the county’ (2004: 1). Twenty seven per cent of the ward population are council tenants, resident on a large and long established housing estate with its own school and community centre. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals in 2004 was more than a third, a high number compared to the English national average of 17 per cent (Flaherty et al, 2004: 235).

An Ofsted inspection in 2004 found the school to be below the expected standard and recent...
national tests (SATS) place the school in the bottom five per cent of schools nationally in English and mathematics (Office for Standards in Education, 2004).

A community centre sited on a large social housing estate in the same borough as Hathley was the location for a third focus group. Ashton ward is in the top 20% most deprived SOAs in England and is identified as having ‘pockets of extreme deprivation’, income deprivation for children and older people is high and the local authority has identified Ashton ward as one of its regions’ ‘urban priority areas’. Both Hathley and Ashton are ranked within the top five most deprived SOAs in Leicestershire (Leicestershire County Council, 2005b).

Six individual interviews took place with respondents who were residents in Cravendale ward in Nottinghamshire. Cravendale is one of the 20% most deprived SOAs in the country and is one of the most deprived within this (ranked 3rd), with the highest unemployment in the region. Nearly half (47.2%) of children in Cravendale were living in families with out of work benefits; this compares to a national average of 21%. Not unsurprisingly then 37% children claimed free school meals in 2005, more than double the national average of 16.9% for the same year. Cravendale has additional social problems, being rated the highest ward in the district for violence and treatment for drug abuse.26 Despite the level of deprivation indicated by these statistics most of the respondents felt the area had improved significantly in recent years, citing Sure Start, based in the newly built Children’s Centre, as a significant factor in this.

One focus group took place in a city centre ward, which has a high ethnic minority population (75%). The ward is in the worst 10% nationally in terms of deprivation. Economic inactivity is high and 44.2% of children were living in families with out of work benefits in 2004, again, twice the national average. The percentage of people with no qualifications at 45% is very high, although the schools in the area achieve a higher standard than others locally (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2004b).27

From the outline above it can be seen that the research areas had multiple deprivations, including income deprivation, according to statistical analysis. That said, the caveat that not

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27 Statistics from Local Area Health Reports (2005), Leicestershire Community Profile (2005) and Neighbourhood statistics (ODPM).
all residents of ‘poor’ areas experience poverty must be reiterated. In addition, while a statistical review of neighbourhoods offers insight into potential problems it is also the case that many residents of ‘deprived’ areas appreciate their home environment for the intangible aspects that statistics miss, such as support networks and a sense of belonging (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2004).

Signs of ‘Poverty’

All respondents were in receipt of social security benefits and, to a lesser extent, tax credits (as recipients themselves or through a partner) and all but two respondents (out of 36) lived in social housing. Despite a rejection of a description of poverty the material circumstances respondents recounted often indicated considerable hardship. It is significant that when respondents discussed how they could not be in poverty, because of what they had, it was the basics that were given as evidence for their non-poor status: food, clothes and a roof over their head. Although the idea of missing out was also generally rejected by those respondents who denied a label of poverty, it become apparent that people were going without, relative to contemporary expectations, because of lack of money. In addition to material hardship a low income also had psychological and existential implications. These will be explored below.

Material Hardship

You walk past the chippy and think well it’s not an option, one fifty for chips when I can get potatoes and that.

[Matt, individual interview]

During the focus group at Hathley Sure Start one respondent related her current living situation to another mother attending the group. The narrative was told as a practical account

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28 Receipt of benefits has sometimes been used as a proxy for poverty although the 60% of median income is the customary measure.  
29 For example, not buying shoes when needed or new items of clothing and going without heating to save money.
of family sleeping arrangements, originating from a discussion of babies sleeping through
the night, and not as an anecdote of poverty, which she later denies as existing in Britain:

My oldest little boy he stops at my mum and dads, comes for his tea and goes to my mum and dad’s for the night so I don’t see him all night [...] Matthew, my other little boy goes to my brother’s, his girlfriend and his little lad so I’ve only Shaun [aged three] and him [newborn baby] and he sleeps in his pram and Shaun, he sleeps at the bottom of the bed.

[Vicky, Sure Start focus group]

Vicky’s story displays a skilful management of family resources, organising children to stay at various family members’ homes because of lack of space in what is clearly a complicated arrangement. While this is not recognised by her as a consequence of poverty it would clearly be identified by social services as an inadequate housing situation and a family ‘in need’. Such apparently casual accounts of very real hardship often punctuated interviews. Whether respondents wanted to display adversity or whether respondents had become inured to their circumstances and did not see them as adversity at all is unclear, what was apparent was that accounts of material hardships were not viewed as ‘poverty’. Material deprivations were daily occurrences that had to be dealt with practically:

Me, I run out of money all the time. It’s a case of managing. The girls don’t go hungry. The bills get paid first, the gas, the electric, the water, it’s just a matter of cutting back on your budget to meet your income and your outgoings.

[Nathan, individual interview]

In this way strategies for coping on a low income were not seen as ‘strategies’ at all but as standard practice. Julie, for example, described how all the children were taken to the hairdressers when her husband got paid extra money for some casual work. Such aspects of personal care were carried out when money was available rather than when required. This demonstrates the lack of choice that often accompanies a restricted budget; decisions are made on a needs basis rather than through the more prevalent assumption of consumer desire. This lack of choice is clearly acknowledged by Lorraine:
I'd have some new furniture [if had more money] because I only rely on second hand furniture you see, which is, you don't get a lot of choice either if your ( ), you see a second hand sofa or if you get a sofa given you haven't got any choice what style or colour it is, you just take it. I mean I was working with an agency not long ago and er I actually bought my first new bed and that's the first bed I've ever had. I've always had second-hand, even as kids.

[Lorraine, individual interview]

Another respondent, Nicky, described herself as hard up at the moment because of ongoing problems with Working Tax Credit. She recounted how her husband had to walk to town that day because they only had 46p left and, with no money for gas, how she sat in a cold house all day, only putting the bar fire on when everyone was in the living room in the evening. Matt, one of the few respondents who did identify himself as experiencing poverty, narrated a recent situation that not only illustrates his material hardship but also his sense of exclusion:

Somerfield the other day I calculated I had 36p and I erm, I only had that because I'm changing my claims over at the minute and I have a credit card but they have stopped me using it and I have like no money at the moment, I'd had to put five pound in the electric card

( ) meter and owed someone five pound and that was it. I thought for the two weeks I'm without money I could rely on the card but I didn't make the last payment on it, didn't have enough to make it on it, it was sixty quid, I couldn't actually use it, I tried to use it but ... so erm I er anyway I went in to the reduced section but there was nothing there and I went to the bread and all the value bread was gone as well, 29p, so I thought I'll get cheap rolls and the finger rolls they had were 37p and I thought shall I do that thing of going up and pretending I don't have enough and see if they let me off but then with people behind you, it's embarrassing isn't it and also everybody is using plastic, it's such a weird thing to be
counting your money to calculate these day to see if you can get something... ( ) so I ended up getting pitta bread coz that’s all they had I could get..

[Matt, individual interview]

Respondents also revealed, without being asked, that even with paid work their household income was low:

my husband earns £10,500 a year, he’s 38 years old and he earns £10,500 pounds a year ( ) and that’s it-

[Jenny, Ashton focus group]

[...] we’ve been based on fifteen and a half thousand [for WTC assessment] whereas now we’re only getting thirteen so we should be having more but of course they say well you’ve had that much already paid to you from your old work that’s all you got left so you can go change in April. Hopefully by April he’ll have had his pay rise.

[Sue, Hathley Sure Start focus group]

do they [the government] write shopping lists, you can live on this much a week ( ) it’s like they’re doing this thing like if your income is less than twelve thousand pound a year mine’s, mine’s loads lower than that!

[Julie, individual interview]

Another way in which respondents in the study revealed that every penny mattered was their acute awareness of the price of things and their knowledge of how and where the cheapest goods could be found, from 20p toilet rolls to cheap clothes for children. One example that demonstrates such close attention to marginal differences in cost was during a discussion of baby milk:
coz we worked it out, he's on the Farley's First milk, that's 5 pound ninety nine, erm my sister's on the Farley's second one for older babies and it's a it's a penny cheaper† ( ) it is...

[Vicky, Sure Start focus group]

While people in the study largely rejected any inference of 'poverty', as they saw it, they nonetheless demonstrated awareness of charity organisations and institutions, including grants offered to people on a low income, in addition to the location and quality of second-hand shops; in other words, resources that make life on a tight budget achievable. Such careful attention to the cost of living and the micro management of what would generally be considered small amounts of cash out of necessity seems to indicate 'poverty' relative to the standards of the day. In addition, respondents may have shielded themselves from the more acute consequences of a very low income (and possibly therefore a subjective experience of 'poverty') by receiving resources, money and practical help from friends and family:

I found out it's easier for me because my family and my ex-boyfriends' family they go out ( ) and buy Sean's school uniform. I don't have to buy it, they all buy it for him, for me, and it's like his auntie ( ) she's a bit like these people she don't like Sean wearing nothing unless it's top and that. His school shoes she paid forty five pound for, from Clarke's ( ) [quality shoe shop] and he goes and scratches em.[...]

[Vicky, Sure Start focus group]

Getting expensive household items, such as white goods and furniture, from friends and family was common, especially at times of significant life events, like the arrival of a new baby or moving house. Other strategies mentioned by respondents for stretching a limited budget included: borrowing from family, using doorstep lenders, juggling credit cards, getting incoming calls only or using PAYG mobiles (because of arrears or inability to pay for a landline), going to relatives' houses for dinner and strategically not paying the (social) rent or other debts when money was needed elsewhere. Such accounts, seemingly clear indications of material deprivation, were recounted by respondents, not as examples of 'poverty', but just as the 'way things are'.
I was stressed over it all [lack of money] a few weeks ago about it all but you just get on with i::t.. and you don’t com†plain [...] [Kelly, Hathley Sure Start focus group]

As discussed in Chapter 1, the term poverty covers a wide and diverse range of experiences and processes of marginalisation. Economic disadvantage then cannot be measured purely in material forms; it is also a state that has recognisable emotional consequences (Dolan, 2007; Wilkinson, 1996). Adopting this broad conceptualisation of poverty means looking at it not simply as a material condition but also at the social and psychological implications. As Bauman notes ‘...as the propriety of human existence is measured by the standard of decent life as practised by any given society, inability to abide by such standards is itself a cause of distress, agony and self-mortification. Poverty means being excluded from whatever passes for a ‘normal life’’ (1998: 37). While such a statement may fail to see that life on a low income may well be a ‘normal life’ for many, and as such not induce the humiliation he describes, it was clear from the respondents’ accounts that lack of money was a source of anxiety for many and the source of a deeper emotional distress for some. Such a finding reflects other research which recognises financial hardship, ‘as a contributory factor in the onset and severity of mental illness’ (Gould, 2004: 4, also Rimmer, 1997) and as source of considerable stress (Hooper et al, 2007).

It became clear listening to people that the experience of insecure work, inadequate income and a limited local environment had psychological and emotional costs, often directly linked to lack of money. This was all the more significant in that no interview questions related to how people felt about their situation. Clearly, therefore, this was a highly relevant feature that people felt it was important to raise. The broaching of emotional problems however, especially with a stranger as I was, is a difficult process and most people revealed emotional difficulties or depression by placing these within a story. For example, Amy, a lone parent in Cravendale, described a recent experience in which the building attached to her house was

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30 Although the link between mental health problems and poverty is apparent, the causal relationship is contentious. People with mental health problems are susceptible to poverty for numerous reasons, including being unable to find or sustain paid employment, rather than poverty necessarily causing mental health problems. However, it is clear that poverty does have a direct impact upon an individual’s mental health (Gould, 2004: 5).
deliberately set on fire. Amy and her daughter escaped the fire but many of her belongings were destroyed:

I did actually tell the council about it [the adjoining building] coz it had been left derelict for years and then, one day, like I smelt smoke and I call my dad, coz like I don’t like going round the back of the houses you see, coz of the druggies and anyway I smelt something and it was quite strong and I phoned the fire brigade...it really shook me up and I got depressed after that.

[Amy, individual interview]

Another Cravendale resident, John, described how he had to get rid of his dogs when he lost his full time job. He was clearly upset about the loss of something that had been meaningful to him and was an aspect of his self-identity and became visibly distressed when describing them:

I used to have dogs, big dogs, American Staffordshires, basically pitbulls, they used to weigh like ten stone each and they were massive ( ). I had to sell them, I couldn’t afford to keep em. Each dog was havin’ you know those big sacks of dogfood, each dog was havin one of them a week, each [...] and they weren’t dogs to me they were like my family. Course they were the first to go...

[John, individual interview]

John knew that even though his dogs were important to him they were the initial casualties of a reduced income; they were expendable when money had to be spent on a ‘needs’ basis. His story illustrates the lack of choice that often accompanies living on a low income; the power one may have had to exercise over decisions on what to spend is gone. This loss of power and choice may also produce a sense of despair:

[...] I’m on JSA at the moment, it’s horrible ...I mean () you can’t buy clothes, you can’t really go out much, you can’t buy nice things that you fancy to eat, you have to stick to a budget, I get really down sometimes [Lorraine, individual interview].
[... very depressing, very depressing, I don’t know whether it’s harder for me because I used to be ( ) better off ( ) If I wanted something I could go out and get it, with out a seconds thought, I could just go out. get it. [...] I go without a lot now just so my children can have it, I sp’ose that’s the same with most.

[Fred, individual interview]

it’s just a case of having to get your essentials, you can’t ( ) you can’t get, you aint got no money to do things with the kids coz you got to pay like, like with a rent and that, got to get up to date with that, you can’t take the kids swimming and stuff like that coz you can’t afford it and stuff like that and so it ( ) it does get you down a lot.

[Danielle, individual interview]

One of the more mundane real-world implications of lack of money was the inability to take part in leisure pursuits requiring payment. This was often compounded by the lack of nearby facilities that could provide entertainment or relaxation. Many people complained of ‘not having anything to do’ in the area leading to boredom and, from many of the adults’ perspective, trouble, in the case of young people. Lorraine described having little to do prompting her to undertake voluntary work in order to avoid ‘staring at four walls’. For others despondency was clear:

I’ve been alive fifty-one years, they say the best things in life are free. I want to know what. You tell me what? I’ve been alive fifty-one years and I don’t know [shakes head].

[Fred, individual interview]

a thing about smoking, I mean I don’t anymore, I gave up, but it was like a way of breaking up the day you know, the boredom, something to look forward to, to have another fag sort of thing and the day would be timed out in terms of ( ) cigarettes, in a sense you know ( ) tea and a fag. [Matt, individual interview].
Some of the negative psychological consequences of life on a low income were generated by the methods and practices of the organisations designed to provide support. For example, Matt felt very angry at his treatment at the local job centre and felt that the process of signing on was degrading:

I want to complain, to them [job centre], about the way they treat you, of what it’s like being there it’s so ( ) wrong ( ) it’s just so humiliating, you’re standing there with fifty people, all waiting to have their name called and there’s not even a clock in there so you don’t know what time, you don’t know how long, standing, waiting and there’s like four seats so everyone just has to stand ( ) it’s so soul-destroying.

[Matt, individual interview]

The experience of humiliation was also felt by an older couple, an experience that put them off accessing benefits in the future:

Stephen: This year I stuck in a claim for council tax benefit because our ( ) youngest ( ) son lost his job and he wasn’t ( ) I thought oh, I’ll stick it in and see what happens and I got it (but I will never, ever, claim again ( ) because I have never felt so degraded [in all my life

Barbara: [humiliated]

Barbara: hhh..and do you know, know wh- the other humiliating thing is. >The envelope ( ) it’s so distinctive

[Ashton focus group]

The public declaration of benefit recipient status, in the form of the envelope, added to Barbara’s sense of shame. This illustrates the awareness of stigma that was felt by some
respondents in relation to their social or economic positions, discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

The consequences of a low income impacted upon people’s quality of life and happiness. The psychological implications arose out of lack of choice, and therefore control, over decision-making and from the reality of being excluded from a social world largely based around consumption. It was also evident that for some respondents the administrative system of benefits compounded, rather than alleviated, some of the consequences of financial hardship.

Social Exclusion

The phrase, ‘social exclusion’ had little resonance for respondents in the study, most of whom had not heard of it (this will be discussed in Chapter 6). However, while respondents did not see themselves as excluded they were all too aware of the problems they faced and many of the issues they discussed are those identified as experiences of social exclusion (as defined in ODPM/SEU, 2004: 21).

Many respondents spoke of the (financial) barriers they faced in trying to re-train or gain qualifications. For example, Amy, a lone parent, currently in the second year of a college course, described the difficulties faced by the recent removal of childcare payments for part-time attendees:

> I’ve said, I’m gonna say to them at the college, the last ten sessions I’ll have to bring her [daughter] in with me ( ) because I just can’t afford it [childcare] and that’s ( ) I, I felt like a second class citizen...I mean I’m gonna do it...
> [Amy, individual interview]

Another respondent had a strategy for getting around the cost of higher education but this was a distant hope rather than a plan:
well I mean I’m not looking to go to university coz it’s so costly I’m gonna wait till an employer gonna send me to university haha I’m gonna look for a job where they’ll send you hah I am yeah [sniff].

[Martha, individual interview]

Others, such as John, pointed to the structure of the benefit system as preventing him from getting work because he was not allowed to undertake a full-time course without loss of benefits, on which he was reliant. Another respondent, Fred, felt that his age (51) was a barrier to employment and that re-training was not an option:

[... you go on all these government schemes and right, you go to Learn Direct and they want you to go back to school again! They ask you do English and maths and ( ) I’m not doing that, I’ve been to school!]

[Fred, individual interview]

One focus group, in response to a question on who the socially excluded might be, felt that lack of work experience (largely an outcome of early motherhood) and the lack of affordable childcare were a double whammy that kept them out of the labour market:

Rita: th- you can get socially excluded on anything, whether you’re on benefits or I, I’ve tended to found at the moment that is I’m looking for, I want to eventually look for work but you get excluded to the fact that you’ve not had enough experience, you’ve got all the qualifications but no experience, right you know your just back to square one in the end you can’t get no where no ones prepared to give you a chance!

Wendy: yeah

Michelle: you do, and when you’ve got kids and you’re on a job, that, that gets you stuck, coz of childcare I mean they’ve got all these big incentives at the moment ‘oh, we pay your childcare’, it’s not as easy as that, you might have a friend that says ‘well I’ll have em’, do you know if their not registered they don’t get the childcare money, you don’t get paid! [RestArt focus group]
The experience of exclusion not only appeared in relation to paid employment but also to social activities. Many activities were dictated by the availability of ‘spare’ money, when necessities and other pressing responsibilities had been dealt with, rather than based on choice. This meant that such occasions were infrequent:

> Basically, we we don’t go out anywhere, enjoyment wise because I mean I haven’t got any money to do †it coz the government says ‘you got to live on this bare minimum’ right and that’s it, you can’t afford to go on holiday, you can’t afford to do [cough] even, even if you’re not working you still deserve a break.
> [Fred, individual interview]

If I want to go out when I need to, like when I’ve saved up two months so I can go out for a couple of hours on a Friday night ( ) first of all I got to save up ten pound for a babysitter, then there’s the going into town, having a couple of drinks and coming back ( ) well there’s some people out there who will try and rub your nose in it but at the end of the day I know that like my girls have got everything that they need, that’s all that matters to me.
> [Nathan, individual interview]

Danielle saw social exclusion as specifically related to a social life. Something she did not feel she really had:

> er I don’t ( ) I reckon when the government talk about social exclusion they are talking about people like †myself and other people around this area that ( ) don’t , don’t, hardly have got a social life ( ) the only social life I’ve got is coming down Sure Start and meeting other parents and stuff like that [...] 
> [Danielle, individual interview]
Such exclusion from many mainstream activities may have led to a lowering of expectations; certainly respondents’ aspirations were often very modest desires, relative to the omnipresent consumer dreams in the media:

I’d like to go, doesn’t have to be a week but I’d like to go to seaside, or day trips, holiday. I go round and see nice clothes, can’t have ‘em...

[Lorraine, individual interview]

If I had more money I’d take ‘em [his children] to places like Alton Towers and the zoo and things like that but my girls are good and they’re quite happy with us going down swimming or going up to the park play on different things, it’s just as cheap and easy to put a little picnic in a bag and take them down to Priestly Park and play.

[Nathan, individual interview]

Although recognising difficulties, as seen in their narratives, people did not for the most part identify with a description of ‘social exclusion’. Experiences described were looked upon as daily difficulties and frustrations rather than signs or consequences of an over-arching exclusion. Reflecting on the above comments it is possible to see parallels with the concept of ‘adaptive preference’, the notion that people living in unfavourable conditions often adjust desires to fit their situations (Naussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1985). This was also apparent when respondents were asked to consider the amount of money they believed to be an adequate income. In general, relatively modest sums were offered as enough to live on, with an emphasis on easing routine burdens rather than an eye on luxury.

What is Enough? – The Idea of an Adequate Income

Although not identifying their circumstances as one of poverty the respondents’ narratives of challenging situations demonstrated lives that were restricted because of lack of money. At the end of interviews and focus groups people were asked what they would define as an ‘adequate income’. Answers, some humorous, some practical, were interesting because they
showed that in fact people’s expectations about what was adequate were generally low (compared to average incomes). It also revealed that many people currently existed on what would be classified as a ‘poverty income’:

Well I think the thing, over the years I’ve learnt to live on very little I mean I’ve lived on ten pound a week food, like kwiksave’s own beans and bread, no frills sausages and some eggs and five quid to put in the electric so that’s fifteen quid altogether so that’s, that’s, that shows it can be done so I don’t feel like I need ( ) even, I think ( ) well, twelve grand a year would be enough, I mean I’ve got a kid so that’s something else to think about >coz he’s 3 now< but erm ( ) so I see about 12 grand a year as being comfortable.

[Matt, individual interview]

having enough for me would be to go-to get paid in a week erm ( ) >to know that you’re going to get to the end of the week without having to borrow< borrow money off someone or stuff like that, having enough to do your shopping, I’m not saying go to extremes about shopping but just get a few treats in for the kids [...] 

[Danielle, individual interview]

There was a general consensus in focus groups that an ‘adequate’ income should be calculated on an individual or family basis and that the current benefit system was ineffective in this regard. Many people felt that a general one-size fits all model of benefits payments did not take into account individual circumstances, for example, boys eating more than girls or young children wearing out their clothes more quickly. Overwhelmingly people said they needed more. Responses, however, were often gendered, with men referring to earnings and the minimum wage whereas women would refer to general amounts, in response to the question of adequacy:

The national minimum wage would be it and family tax for the amount of children. More than the income support that’s made available to me.

[Nathan, individual interview]
Others felt the minimum wage was not enough:

A minimum wage is nothing, I reckon a minimum wage should be at least eight pound an hour coz cost of living goes up but wages don’t go up.  

[Fred, individual interview]

Minimum wage work is useless. Once rent and transport are taken into account you’re working for dole money and £20 worse off because have to pay for bus fare!  

[Stephen, Ashton focus group]

Often female respondents would run through what they needed money for and would therefore give a detailed account of different pressures on the household budget, as illustrated in Julie’s response to the question of adequacy:

M: some researchers talk about like an adequate income. What do you see as an adequate income?  
Julie: about six hundred quid a week.. ha ha [ha ha
M: [hahahah
Julie: yeah, definitely, the income has got to be higher than what it is, what they expect you to live on, it’s stupid, it’s impossible you can’t do it, no way and it makes me laugh like when they say to yah, like coz like he [husband] works for his-self and he gets so much and we’re lucky if he comes home with ( ) hundred and twenty quid for the week↑ and then I’m expected, I mean I get two hundred and twenty pound...that’s what we have to live on. It’s fifty one pound for me rent...and three kids and shop:::ping and everything else and now all the other bills have started again which is like council tax and erm gas, electricity water, how the hell can you do it, impossible, just can’t do it yeah ‘bout six hundred quid a week that would do hah ha
[Julie, individual interview]
Fundamentally, what people saw as ‘adequate’ was enough to live on without the pressures of an income that allowed them to just get by:

erm, I think just not having to struggle () I wouldn’t wouldn’t want to say a number on it mm, I mean, you know, I mean I wouldn’t but you live to your means don’t you?
[Marta, individual interview]

well, for me to care for me family ( ) adequately I would need about £200 a week ( ) with everything that they need ( ) not being wealthy, not you know, not going to extremes, just being able to cope, with food ( ) bills, school uniforms, >things like that <.
[John, individual interview]

Nicky: we spend ( ) about ( ) we spend about one hundred a week on food a week in our house , which is a lot isn’t it?
M: mm, well there are five of you, like grown men
Nicky: so that’s what I need, just for food, without electricity and gas and ...when you have to pay for water and everything else ( ) bet you’d need about ( ) three hundred quid a week, bet we’d need about three hundred quid a week ( ) and that’s without, you know, that’s not going mad on anything it’s not like we have nights out or ...nothing like that
[Nicky, individual interview]

Respondents were anxious to demonstrate that ‘adequate’ did not mean spending excessively. This may be accounted for by virtue of being a socially acceptable attitude and not being seen to be ‘greedy’ or it may have been their keeness to show their responsibility in money matters. Either way, what they did demonstrate in their answers was that relatively low levels of income were seen as making a significant change in the way they could live their lives.
Conclusion

This chapter has examined some of the hardships faced by the respondents in the study, ones that ranged across the material, emotional and social aspects of everyday life. Many respondents experienced a substantial lack of material necessities, found difficulty paying bills and were excluded from social activities because of lack of money. The circumstances in respondents' accounts would indicate 'poverty' and 'social exclusion' but were rarely formulated as such by respondents.

Not identifying circumstances as 'poverty', however, does not mean that people did not want more to improve the quality of life for themselves and their families. The question of adequacy reveals that a 'bit more' was desired in order to improve circumstances and meet needs and therefore may be taken as an admission that, for many respondents, current income was inadequate.
Chapter 6: The Construction of 'Poverty'

Introduction

This chapter examines the constructions of ‘poverty’, social exclusion and deprivation deployed by the respondents. It will consider what ‘poverty’ is conceived to be, where it is located and who may be considered to be in ‘poverty’. Within the research people disidentified with ‘poverty’, both by means of direct denial and also by their definitions of what ‘poverty’ was seen to be. Thus, the strategies for resisting a label of ‘poverty’ or deprivation were part of the process of formulating what ‘poverty’ means as a phenomenon. This chapter will focus on how this was achieved.

Within the focus groups, descriptions of personal circumstances in individuals’ pasts were sometimes referred to as an experience of poverty or ‘being poor’ while at the same time poverty was rejected as ‘really’ existing in Britain (with some exceptions regarding homelessness). Whilst many respondents within individual interviews also rejected the existence of British poverty it was acknowledged by some, although not unconditionally, often being accompanied by narratives involving other people’s incompetence (in money or debt management) or failings in personal behaviour, such as drink or drug abuse or laziness. Alternatively, if they offered a description of their own circumstances as ‘poverty’, an account was given involving incompetence of work and welfare agencies, or the lack of available paid work. As a result, the emerging discourses – on what ‘poverty’ was, its causes and who ‘the poor’ were – changed depending on whether people were talking about their own circumstances or those of others.

Discourses of ‘Poverty’: What is ‘Poverty’ and who are ‘The Poor’?

The absence of ‘real’ poverty in Britain is a prevailing public discourse (Oxfam GB, 2006; Castell and Thompson, 2007; The Fabian Society, 2005). To a large extent it is one based on the widespread perception of poverty as absolute, the archetype being ‘third world’ destitution. Such an understanding of poverty was ubiquitous in the study and was often the
benchmark for respondents when discussing their experiences of being ‘hard up’. Where there was a recognition that people in richer nations, such as Britain or America, could experience poverty it remained very much within this absolute notion, such as street homelessness. However, the condition of homelessness as ‘poverty’ was also regarded with scepticism since it was viewed as either the fault or choice of the individual to be homeless, thus negating their status as genuinely in ‘poverty’. This ambiguous status of ‘poverty’ in a British context was recurrent throughout the study.

**Poverty as Having Nothing**

Whilst many poverty researchers have an elaborate conception of what it means to be ‘poor’ those who experience economic and material hardship repeatedly express an uncompromising, ‘absolute’ understanding of poverty. Although this study is looking at mundane poverty (the everyday type that rarely makes the TV), respondents in the study did not perceive of a mundane poverty at all. They offered a description of either ‘extreme’ poverty or of ‘managing’, and for them managing meant the absence of poverty. When discussing the issue of poverty or being ‘hard up’ respondents frequently compared their situation to one in which people barely had the necessities for life:

Nicky: not having enough money for food and clothes innit it. I suppose, that’s poverty.

M: is that what you think?

Nicky: I think yeah! It’s not having ( ) like I say it’s basic needs innit it, food and warmth and clothes, basically

[Individual interview]

well, at the moment I get a £180 but I mean I wouldn’t class myself as being in poverty, I wouldn’t...there’s a lot out there worse off than me in life...I’m not wealthy, I don’t know I ( ) I’d say people that are really in poverty that are like homeless ( ) who’ve got  no::thing. I’ve at least got somewhere over me head, somewhere to sleep, I’ve got ( ) me game systems, a telly to watch... there’s times when we
haven't got food, well you know *enough* food but I wouldn't class myself as in poverty

[John, individual interview]

Amy: I wouldn't say I was really hard up, we've always got *food* and (pause)

M: Right

Amy: anything I want I'll save up for, could do with a bit more, an extra tenner a week would be *fine!* Poverty's like not enough money to eat, homeless, dependent on drugs ( ) loads and loads of kids and can't support 'em

[Amy, individual interview]

Vicky: Nah. >I think the only ones you can say are poor are the ones on, the ones that are< actually on the *streets* when they've got nothing

Kelly: yeah

Vicky: you can say that they're *poor* ( ) coz they've got nothing. They've got no house or nothing ( ) where hhh. people that don't get a lot of money aren't that poor ↑they're in a house! They got warmth, they got [food! they got clothes=  

Dawn: [they got a roof, they got running water, electricity

Vicky: = they got everything

[Sure Start focus group]

I think it's having nothing. I think that's true poverty when you've got nothing.

[Terri, individual interview]

Talk of poverty as 'having nothing' was often articulated with reference to starvation and the absence of even basic necessities, discussed in more detail in the next section. Such scenarios as a definition of 'poverty' were an assessment that often closed down discussions on alternative constructions of 'poverty' existing in richer western countries at all:
June: yeah but really, I’m, I’m getting my soapbox out here
I’m sorry, but. I th::ink that people in this country
>don’t really know what poverty is<
Sharon: no
[mmmm general agreement]
June: especially when you go to places like Africa an’ that
when they’re livin’ out, they’ve got no water, no food,
they’re literally starving to death, that’s poverty, you
know what I mean [...] [RestART focus group]

Barbara: My idea of poverty is a child not having enough to eat
Lynda: same [here
Jenny: [ yeah
Clare: if they’re not properly dressed ( ) with an adequate
roof over their head and not getting at least one decent
meal a day that’s poverty so I [don’t think in that
respect I -
Barbara: [and that’s not as
hard these days
Clare: I don’t think in that respect anyone round here’s in
poverty.
[Maxwell focus group]

On only one occasion was a more relative construction of poverty mentioned, but this was
dismissed as going against common sense and experience:

Jenny: I think there is a lot of people on low incomes and like I
say on family credit and stuff but I don’t thi::nk ( )
they’re ( ) I mean my idea of poverty I suppose is ( ) I
suppose is not having enough to eat in a day and er =
Barbara: yeah
Karen: mmm

Jenny: = things like that you know

Barbara: there are[ ways i-

Jenny: [I mean, I mean I read in a magazine that a child is described as living in poverty if, if a family doesn’t have a video recorder. I mean how stupid’s that?

[Maxwell focus group]

Expressions of absolute poverty as poverty were embedded in how people perceived themselves and their lives to the extent that their own experiences and conditions seemed inconsistent with a description of ‘poverty’ when compared to this absolute understanding. Even respondents who described their current situation as one of poverty did so using a very harsh absolutist notion, for example, of not having enough money to buy food:

I would call running out of money poverty, we, we, we’ve been going- we’ve had days where I’ve had to go and ask my mum to give us some food coz I’ve not any been able to buy any, we’ve had live off, >going back a couple of weeks ago< the cupboards were literally bare and all the kids were eating were toast so I had to keep going to my mum’s and saying look and ( ) that, that was getting me down coz I thought I got these kids and I can’t even provide for them at the minute but, I’d say that is most of the time that is poverty.

Danielle, individual interview

Even within the context of poverty as having nothing, ‘not having enough money to live on’ is a stringent yardstick. It is germane that when respondents talked about their own lives in comparison to those who were ‘really’ in poverty, it was largely with reference to their having the basic needs of shelter, food and water rather than to signifiers of a customary version of 21st century living standards in Britain. The excerpts below illustrate a number of these points:

All the kids [on the estate] are pretty well dressed and they’ve all obviously got a roof over their heads and they eat well enough.
Karen, Maxwell focus group

I suppose there is some poverty in Britain – like homeless with trench foot and stuff coz they’re walking round and round and taking drugs and that. I’d say that was poverty like that but not if you look at other countries because their poverty is a lot more extreme than ours like and ha they’d think my life was a life of luxury hah!

Martha, individual interview

By recognising variations of ‘poverty’ Martha can still claim an absolute notion of poverty as ‘real’ poverty, while recognising gradations of hardship. Her identification of street homelessness as ‘poverty’ in Britain was also acknowledged by some other respondents but its position remained problematic in terms of its status as ‘poverty’, both because of its comparison to the ‘third world’ situation, examined later, and because, as previously noted, a shadow of suspicion was cast over the homeless as genuinely in poverty. For example, some respondents deployed the populist narrative of people pretending to be poor, begging without being homeless or because of drink and drug abuse:

Terri: ohh, I, don’t know think the ones on the street, the homeless coz a lot of them they reckon that they’re not actually homeless don’t they?

M: right

Terri: you know when they’re out and they’re begging and they’ve really got a big house and a Mercedes () so you don’t know who you can trust really do you?

Nicky, individual interview

some people pretend they got no money and everything and then they die and there’s like $1000000s of pounds underneath the mattress
The standard benchmark of ‘poverty’ was generally extreme and unambiguous. People saw the absence of necessities as both the definition, and the point of reference, for assessing the condition of their own lives and concluding that it was not ‘poverty’. The perception of ‘having nothing’ as a central feature of (‘real’) poverty constructed what ‘poverty’ could be interpreted as being in a British context. Such a construal effaced the very real hardships that people endured as outside a definition of ‘poverty’ (as outlined in Chapter 5).

**Poverty as ‘Elsewhere’: Another Place, Another Time**

I think it’s wrong that they say poverty’s here

[RestART focus group]

One strategy for dealing with the dilemma of a ‘marked’ identity, such as poverty, received by virtue of being a claimant, residency (living in a ‘deprived’ neighbourhood), or as the subject of research, is to deflect attention by pointing to more appropriate examples. What emerged from discussions is that poverty was often somewhere else. Three ‘elsewheres’ emerged: the third world, other localities – often nearby estates – and a historical elsewhere, experiences of poverty in the past.

**The Third World**

The prevalence of a discourse referring to ‘real’ poverty as third world poverty demonstrates the pervasiveness of this construction in public discourse. Such a position has emerged in other research with people in poverty (Beresford et al, 1999) and was therefore not unanticipated, although the government focus on poverty and social exclusion in the past decade might have been expected to bring about more nuanced understandings of ‘poverty’ in the British context. It appeared that this was not the case. The deployment of poverty as a ‘third world’ phenomenon was not only used by respondents to define poverty but also, and partly as an outcome of this definition, as a strategy for their denial of a ‘poverty’ label. The comparison of personal experiences to the third world situation, meant that ‘poverty’ was rejected as an appropriate description:

Wendy: yeah we were sayin’ poverty’s like poor countries, you
know what I mean?

Michelle: yeah yeah

Wendy: kids who’ve got no food and have to walk twenty miles a day to get a bucket of water THAT’S poverty

Michelle: mmmm

Wendy: not like, this int- you know round here, it’s not poverty!

[RestArt focus group]

... Running out of money, I wouldn’t call that poverty though, poverty is a word that you use for third world countries, like Ethiopia so like where they are really desperate. Poverty is a word that you’d use with erm third world countries I wouldn’t class it [running out of

some people see poverty you know as not working really, not having enough money [...] not enough, not enough work, not enough places to go or not enough houses being built. [...] er, can’t say Britain is not that bad as other countries. Most people have got places to live>and they can get jobs easily< places like Africa, they’re all going without medic-, medicine, food, treatment, there’s a lot of diseases going about.

[Tim, individual interview]

A construction of ‘poverty’ as directly contrasting to respondents’ circumstances can also be seen in Nathan’s explanation:

... Running out of money, I wouldn’t call that poverty though, poverty is a word that you use for third world countries, like Ethiopia so like where they are really desperate. Poverty is a word that you’d use with erm third world countries I wouldn’t class it [running out of

An assessment was made of the difference between the archetype of the starving child in Africa and the children on the estate in order to demonstrate that the latter could not be considered as experiencing ‘poverty’:

I think it’s wrong. Because when somebody says poverty to you, you think well () third world countries and all the stuff that you see on the telly with the ()little kids and stuff like that you can’t compare that to over here () you can’t at all coz it’s totally different.

[Kelly, Sure Start focus group]
money] as poverty I'd class it as erm ( ) as ( ) erm just scrimping for the sake of doing things.

[Nathan, individual interview]

Nathan, a lone parent of two pre-school children, described his situation as one of being ‘hard up’ and of running out of money ‘all the time’ but by utilising the absolute yardstick of the ‘third world’ he disassociates his circumstances from one of ‘poverty’. An interpretation of a ‘third world’ situation as poverty – in other words anything but this was not poverty – enabled respondents to redirect attention away from themselves and their area towards other groups they perceived accurately as being ‘poor’. What this revealed was that an understanding of poverty in relation to one’s immediate social context and expectations was absent when thinking about ‘poverty’ and ‘the poor’; they did not perceive themselves and did not want others to perceive them as in ‘poverty’ as they understood it.

It might be expected that the few respondents who did refer to themselves as currently in poverty would adopt a different understanding to the harsh yardstick generally constructed but in fact they also acknowledged this ‘absolute’ frame of reference in which to contextualise their situation. Although Matt gives a more relative account of poverty than generally encountered in the research, he still prefaces this with an acknowledgement of the African experience:

I would say I was in poverty but also I do realise I’m not starving or anything, like kids in Africa or anything...I, I’m not gonna die, but it’s all about ( ) how you compare yourself to others and that’s like what I was saying in the public, the public domain or whatever, in town that’s when it hits home to you.

[Matt, individual interview]

Fred, another respondent who described his circumstances as one of poverty also evaluates his own, and the national situation, against an African context:

we’ll say we’re poor we’ve got this we’ve got that, yeah, we are poor, people unemployed, people out o- yeah we’re not as poor as ( ) Africa but it could be, it it’s just that there’s no social security over there,
there's no dole money over there but if you took that away then we would be in the same situation.

[Fred, individual interview]

This demonstrates that even when respondents self identified as experiencing poverty it was not without qualification, they wanted to distinguish between their own situation and that of absolute poverty thus demonstrating their belief, or awareness, of absolute poverty as 'poverty'.

The definition of poverty using a global comparison of an 'African' or 'third world' experience was interesting because many other assessments made by respondents, such as the condition of houses and neighbourhoods, were locally based. So, estates would be compared to other local estates, schools to similar nearby schools and so forth. Possibly it was because the 'Third World' represented 'poverty' in the most obvious and visual way. In addition, locating poverty in a country rather than an individual re-sites poverty as place, in a 'poor' country, rather than as a 'poor' person, and in this way transcends the individualised conceptualising of poverty that often exists in public and political discourses of poverty in Britain, which demarcates between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' 'poor'. The belief that real 'poverty' was somewhere else prevented both the adoption of the label being chosen as a self-description of circumstances and it being 'accurately' applied by others.

Other Local Places

The notion of 'deprivation' arose because the areas in which the study took place were chosen because national and local information identified them as 'deprived' or disadvantaged. Mainstream 'poverty' discourses often link the term 'deprived areas' and poverty, and targeting particular neighbourhoods identified as such has been part of government's anti-poverty strategy. It was therefore apposite to look at peoples' understanding of 'deprivation'.

What became apparent was that, unlike poverty, 'deprivation' itself was recognised as existing in Britain but it was always located elsewhere. Residents rejected the suggestion
that it was their neighbourhood that was ‘deprived’. Such a view was often a shared construction within focus group situations, in which respondents would jointly create a narrative of their area in relation to other areas (often neighbouring estates) as worse than their own and thereby denied their own was the ‘poorest’ and therefore ‘deprived’:

That’s a really bad area, Hadwell, a really deprived area. Worse than this area... it’s the estate’s just like a rabbit hutch, really horrible place to live.
[John, individual interview]

NO, no we’re not the richest [area] but we’re not the poorest [area]
no, no we’re not, not poor innit?
[Maxwell focus group]

best bits about Hasleigh er, are things are not vandalised as much as what other estates are!
[Rita, RestART focus group]

I would say that there is poverty in this country but, I wouldn’t say this area particularly, I’d probably say Nottingham or London and, places like that. I, I can’t say I’ve seen any homeless people round Mainston.
[Amy, individual interview]

What may be seen as ‘bleak cultural locations’ (Blackman, 1997: 126) to outsiders are often a source of security and pride to residents. It is not that respondents were unaware of their area as ‘deprived’; it is that they do not agree with the definition itself:

Rita: we’re not disadvantaged we just need more resources!
Sharon: we need to be listened to an all=
Rita: yeah!
Sharon: -No point talking to your bloody self
Rita: =compared to some estates this is quite friendl:y!
June: Yeah () especially in Leicester [local city]
Sharon: Yeah!
You go round some of the estates in Leicester and you think god ( ) how they think say Hathley's deprived when you know ( ) when, you know [...]

[RestART focus group]

A denial of 'deprivation' is similar to the rhetorical strategies involved in a rejection of poverty as 'really' existing anywhere but the 'Third World'. It may be that the respondents genuinely see the other areas (another local estate or larger cities) as deprived but it could also be seen as rejecting the identity of deprivation and the negative consequences of such a description. If a label, such as 'deprived', is connected to place and the people who live there, the means of forging alternative, positive, formulations become limited. One choice open to respondents is to deny the labels either by rejecting them outright as erroneous or pointing out that others, elsewhere, are truly deprived. By passing on a label of deprivation the existence of deprivation is not denied, it is just 'not here'.

Poverty in the Past

A further way of displacing poverty as 'not here' is to put it in the past. By stating that some, but not all, areas are bad, and not as bad as they used to be, John can acknowledge how his neighbourhood may have had a damaging reputation but that it is no longer accurate:

Some of it is deprived but I don’t think it’s fair coz only some areas are bad. ( ) other bits aren’t really that bad off. It used to be really rough...there were three drug dealers just in this street ...we got rid of them...fed up of walking the streets in syringes.

[John, individual interview]

He offers a further example to illustrate the change in the estate over time:

[...] this place [Children’s Centre] wouldn’t have been here when I was younger, building materials would have been nicked and then ( ) when it got built it would have been smashed up.

[John, individual interview]
Not only areas but also certain points in people’s lives were situated as being ‘poor’ in the past. Although most respondents denied currently being in poverty people often self-identified as ‘poor’ or of having experienced poverty in former times:

Back in the late 70s that was, that was, we were stationed at Hampton [English town] that’s the poorest I were, I actually felt ( ) That’s the first time I ever claimed things like milk tokens and there was a charity in [nearby city] and we actually claimed shoes and trousers for the kids and that, ’77, ’78, ’79. During that time Callahan I felt very poor I thought I’m serving the country yet I’ve got to go and claim milk tokens and beg for money you know? [Stephen, Maxwell focus group]

I mean I have fed my kids on next to nothing and stolen to feed them coz I’d not got money to feed them coz Jim [ex-partner] was using it all for gambling† so to me that’s poverty, I had no money to feed my kids. That is poverty. So I had to steal to feed me kids ( ) any good parent would I suppose, you know what I mean? [Nicky, individual interview]

Sue: we got a load of our stuff from there [second-hand shop] when we first moved in together ermmm nine years ago now, yeah and we needed everything† ( )
Dawn: yeah start from-
Sue: erm ( ) we were, we were >we were poor
Dawn: Very poor
Kelly: very, very poor
Sue: at that* time* ha we were
Dawn: yeahhh, we were
[Sure Start focus group]

Such past experiences of poverty tended to be described using quite extreme examples. This may well be due to the predominant notion (always formulated in focus groups) of ‘poverty’ as having ‘nothing’ and therefore only cases of extreme hardship could be counted, and
consequently admitted to, as ‘poverty’. An admission of personal poverty in the past also reveals one’s triumph over it and a demonstration that one is better off now and thus clearly not ‘poor’. Interestingly, respondents appeared to see no contradiction in admitting to poverty in their own pasts while denying its existence in Britain. This may be in view of the fact that ‘real’ poverty was perceived as a permanent position, something they did not foresee for their own lives and therefore they could talk about a period of ‘poverty’ (although not unproblematically) but this was not the same as being ‘poor’. In this way poverty could be admitted as a historical event but rarely a current one:

I dunno coz (long pause) we used to think that we didn’t have it too bad because we’d got bread and stuff but it turns out that we were quite low down in poverty but we didn’t see that when we were kids but apparently we were quite low down I mean like go to jumble sales to get your clothes and that and erm ( ) I dunno ( ) I mean we’d always have a Sunday dinner but the rest of the week we’d just be bittin and bobbin.

[Julie, individual interview]

Illustrations of ‘poverty’ in the past conformed to the absolute conceptualisation of poverty, people talked of poverty when they had no money, no food or no adequate housing. In this way an admittance of past poverty was one of a state of complete lack. Yet it was also the case that even severe cases of personal hardship would sometimes not be viewed as ‘poverty’:

I’ve been homeless, slept in shop doorways, lived off food parcels so yeah ( ) that was hard but it wasn’t poverty, it was homelessness. ( ) round here you got hostels and food parcels and pretty good social state so ( ) if you look at America they get tokens and they’re in poverty.

[Martha, individual interview]

Unusually (and uniquely in the study) Martha uses America as an example of poverty. She notes the support structures in place in this country, which she identifies as ameliorating dire circumstances and therefore guarding against poverty. Such an austere view of poverty was
also reflected in another respondent's account of her early years as a lone parent. Jenny, now married and currently reliant on her husband's low wages (under £11,000), told the group how she had 'really struggled' for years, describing how, due to problems with the child support agency, she was reliant on family members to buy baby-milk and nappies and had only £19 to last the week on one occasion. Nonetheless, she concluded her narrative by asserting, 'but I still considered there were people worse off than me'. Such a claim of others as 'worse off' is not unusual in poverty research (Beresford et al, 1999) and whilst this may serve to demonstrate altruism it may also be deployed, like other 'elsewheres', to distance the speaker from the label of poverty.

Looking Poor

One part of the focus groups was the introduction of pictographic anti-poverty campaign material in an attempt to elicit respondents' understandings of public representations of poverty (discussed in Chapter 4 and see appendix 4 for campaign material). However, people spontaneously talked about 'poverty' in visual terms even before being presented with the images. For them 'poverty' could be seen. This formulation of 'poverty', as a visual phenomenon, may have been a further reason for the rejection of a label of poverty. For respondents poverty and the signifiers of poverty were clearly identifiable – embodied in neighbourhoods, houses and people. A rejection of the description of 'poverty' was a rejection of the application of a social label of poverty to themselves and their neighbourhoods, one that marked difference.

From individual and group discussions it became clear that people's visual notions of 'poverty' were largely unambiguous. Looking 'poor' was often associated with and represented by dirt:

Vicky: I think the the only ones you can say are poverty is when you see the kids walking round ( ) where they've like () got frumpy clothes on >and they got no [ to:::ys< erm ( ) and-
Sue: [No shoes]
Dawn: yep, no shoes and er
Sue?: dirty
Vicky: -er they’re dirty all the ti::me

[Sure Start focus group]

The representation of dirt, or rather, its absence, was therefore an indicator of non-poverty, noted in a discussion of the campaign material (appendix 4, image 3):

M: what do you think? er-
Lynda: I’d say help old people more.
Jenny: I’d say that’s more (.) to do, to do is this ( ) I mean is this to do with poverty? [picture of young children, Barnardo’s] see they don’t look like they’re in poverty I mean if he’s in poverty th-
Karen: what’s he smoking for!
Jenny: I was gonna say he might be stealing em ( )
Karen: but then again they’re not-
Jenny: they’re not dirty looking are they? they got decent clothes on, they’re dressed.

[Maxwell focus group]

The construction of poverty as visual enabled respondents to argue that it could be seen that they were not ‘poor’, they did not look ‘poor’ and by way of such reasoning were therefore clearly not ‘poor’. The signifier of ‘dirt’ to demonstrate lack of respectability seemed a powerful one. Those who were seen to be ‘dirty’ were not merely ‘poor’, they were also in some way ‘undeserving’ and the subject of moral censure:

[Preceded by an anecdote about having no furniture or appliances when she first moved in with partner]

Sue: I wouldn’t have even considered us (I) that poor
Kelly: [no, coz even if you haven’t got much money you can still be cle\an can’t y::aaa

Dawn: Yeah that’s it, some make an effort an’ some don’t.

[Sure Start focus group]
[...] you go round to some and they’re both on the dole and their house is shit and they’re on the play stations! ‘Why don’t you get a cleaning brush and clean the house!’

[Nathan, individual interview]

Erm, well my friend, she’s on a low income, she struggles financially and struggles for new things as well and erm I know that some people that’s got money but you think ( ) er, they must be poor because it’s dirty, even though they have new sofas it’s dirty six months later coz they don’t appreciate it. Me and my friend even though we struggle, we all keep our homes clean as well because detergent you can get a bottle of bleach for 50p instead of paying £1.50 for a bottle of Domestos [leading brand] or whatever.

[Lorraine, individual interview]

The few people who self-identified as being in poverty also expressed some form of visual element in their descriptions. While such accounts did not include obvious identifiers of ‘dirt’, a visual poverty discourse was used in discernment of their own appearance and in discussion about protecting their children from being conspicuous:

my laces, look, my laces broke and I found these in the house so I got odd laces on like and they just look completely crap ( ) it’s that kind of mismatching crap and how big do you let the holes in your jeans go before they become really not fashionably holed jeans, ha ha hah

[Matt, individual interview]

I mean I’m not dressed spectacular but like I said you have to do what you have to do for your kids I mean, I’ve got a pair of shoes

---

31 Parents were aware that their children could be bullied for standing out if they did not have the peer-approved clothing (see Chapter 8). Research has shown that children in poverty are also acutely aware of the potential for bullying if they do not ‘fit in’ (Ridge, 2002).
A visual criterion was also used in the assessment of ‘deprivation’, a description of ‘deprived’ often being based on how an area looked. Within focus groups, discussions usually began with what people thought of the description ‘deprived’ in relation to their neighbourhood. It was made clear that this description was not my own but one used by government agencies, the county council or within the local media. The label of deprivation was consistently seen to be an inaccurate one and often rejected on the grounds that ‘deprivation’ could be seen, the corollary being that it could be seen that their area did not match such a description:

I see deprived as homeless people on the streets. Messy streets... I mean we’ve got the drugs and things but I wouldn’t say it was deprived....not really messy

[Amy, individual interview]

and I think when people say like it’s a deprived area it’s looking mainly at the state of the roads more than anything and the state of the houses down the roads that’s what I think ( ) coz I think it’s nothing to do with the people inside it it’s just how the houses are kept and things like that I don’t think the council really want to, to help with the housing and stuff so.

[Sue, Sure Start focus group]

Appearance was key in assessing ‘deprivation’. The condition of houses and gardens was an indicator for the respondents of where poverty or deprivation was. In one focus group a nearby estate was dismissed as being ‘deprived’ (despite being officially categorised as such) because of its presentable appearance:
up Haddon [nearby council estate] it looks very much like this but

neater, cleaner, tidier ( ) all the houses have been doubled glazed, all

the -you know the problem we had with th:::e erm ( ) grass verges

with the parking well yet they’ve been replaced by little infills of

little bricks and paving and it looks really nice, it looks so nice so

how they can keep saying Haddon’s deprived!

[Maxwell focus group]

One component of the initial research was to offer cameras to respondents to take photos of

what they saw as ‘poverty’. This proved to be problematic however and was therefore

abandoned as a research tool (discussed in Chapter 4). One interesting feature of the photos

taken by the three respondents who did take pictures was that they went outside of their

home environment to do so. Although they lived in areas labelled as relatively ‘deprived’
two of the respondents travelled some distance outside the borough to an area they identified

as ‘rough’. The photos taken show boarded up derelict houses, broken glass, litter and

waste (see appendix 4, image 4 for photos), emblematic representations of deprivation and,

for them, poverty. In many ways the photos conform to conventional representations of

poverty and, indeed, such images are still used in some contemporary reports about poverty

(see TUC report, 2007: 3). For that reason the images are not unexpected but the fact that

respondents travelled to obtain them demonstrated the depth of their distancing from, or non-

recognition, of poverty as near them, as well as the pervasive impact of such images of

poverty. It was clear then that the respondent-photographers felt that ‘poverty’ was not close
to home, in part because home did not have the signifiers of ‘poverty’ for them:

M: How did you decide what photos to take?

Julie: I did-s ( ) just what you see. I mean the poverty, I don’t

know, there is people living here where the houses are

all boarded and it’s unbelievable

M: why did you go there?

Julie: because it’s a rough area, it’s very rough and the

gardens, see [points to photo of garden with rubbish in]
dunno, Weston is a very rough area there’s nothing for

people to do. It’s like it stopped in time ( )
Nicky: People live in this house, here, †squatters, go round the back
M: do they?
Nicky: mmm, ye::ah, but this you know, you got all these people that are homeless and then they got all these houses standing empty, look at ‘em () it’s really bad
M: mmm
Nicky: and these, these are meant to be people’s back †gardens are here coz when I took these, this is like a house someone lives in here and here [picture] and these are like the back gardens and these are like all where people take cars and set fire to ‘em like ( ) You don’t see nothing like this round here [home town] not really, not these houses like that are just boarded up and people are living in.

[Nicky, individual interview]

For Nicky and Julie the ‘roughness’ and ‘poverty’ were self-evident in the condition of the surroundings. This was an area that in their eyes contrasted to their ‘non-poor’ home environment, despite its own label of ‘deprivation’.

As referred to previously, one aspect of the focus group format involved passing around posters and pictures from poverty charities. To a large extent the campaign material did not resonate with respondents’ understandings of ‘poverty’ and a mis-reading of the message was common. On the whole respondents did not position themselves or their children as being the subjects of the anti-poverty campaigns. In only one instance did a respondent indicate that she had made a comparison, which was denied with her assertion, ‘if you look at any of our kids, none of ours look like that’ [Sure Start focus group] (with reference to appendix 4, image 3). The city centre focus group commented that the same image only showed white children but this concern about the absence of non-white children in the poster was not so that it represented them (none of whom said they were in poverty) but that ‘black people’ were also represented. People engaged with some of the other images, such as the Barnardo’s posters and the photograph of an elderly man in substandard accommodation (appendix 4, image 1 and 2) at an emotional level and often took a very literal interpretation,
producing strong reactions and opinions. However, confusion remained about the Barnardo’s campaign’s meaning as regards poverty:

Michelle: that one’s horrible, horrible, [Barnardo’s]
June: Methylated spirits, that’s sick
Chris: that one’s alright
M: I wanted to know what you think they might say about poverty?
Michelle: this one is on about druggies isn’t it? That’s what it’s on about, this one
Sharon: what’s that got to do with flaming thingy? ( ) Poverty
Wendy: cockroaches on it, bit of a worry innit it?
Michelle: that one’s on about on about winos and stuff and that’s what you can do to a baby if you drink innit it?

[ResART focus group]

Jenna: There’s no black images there is there ha ha
What’s it sayin? Black people don’t live in poverty? hehehhe
Kelia: no longer impoverished
Ahmed: I was just going to say that as well hah hah
Jenna: well when I look at these it’s like poverty does exist
M: mmm
Jenna: lookin’ at these pictures I mean just for me it says like, if these people are in poverty they all look very sad so probably these images say everyone in poverty look, looks, sad, know what I mean? but I don’t think that, that’s the case!
Ahmed: I don’t understand the image [Barnardo’s poster]. Is it because the child has no food?

[Braddon focus group]

Barbara: uh, oh, Stephen will you move it [poster] please
Karen: that's gross, it makes you look at it
Barbara: It really is isn't it?
M: mm, yeah
Barbara: it makes you look at it, like that Bennetton one
M: mmm, what do you think it says about child poverty
    and that?
Karen: Cockroaches an' that ( )
Stephen: I don't think it's getting the message across
Karen: it's not!
Stephen: Because I don't think that would happen
Jenny: I think people are looking at, probably are going to look at
    that [picture] and they probably won't read that [text on
    poster]
Lynda: they probably won't believe it
Karen: no, they'll just turn their heads and walk away
[Maxwell focus group]

Respondents were uncertain about the appropriateness of many of the images in relation to
highlighting poverty. The use of babies in the Barnardo's posters evoked other charity
campaigns concerning child abuse (such as the NSPCC television adverts) and it is this, and
the shocking imagery itself, rather than the anti-poverty message that the respondents
reacted to. In general, the images were viewed as not really about 'poverty' as they
perceived it. One exception was the portrayal of poverty in old age, which depicted an older
frail-looking man in a room with mouldy walls and peeling paint (appendix 4, image 2).
Such a bleak image conformed more closely to respondents' absolute notions of poverty and
they therefore tended to perceive it as representing poverty more than the other
representations:

That's more poverty coz of the the state of that [older man] >I
wouldn't let my granddad live like that<! ( ) he's be outta that place
( ) if you saw someone in a place like that you'd wanna take em out
of it wouldn't you, You wouldn't leave im in it [child screams so
can't hear] if they said they wanted to live like that, let im live like
that. [Vicky, Sure Start focus group]
Can I just say something, I mean we’ve been talkin’ and that but for a moment until you gave me the pictures I forgot older people living in poverty, living off pensions, I suppose we sometimes forget don’t we, so you see particular groups, but let’s face it a lot of older people would describe themselves as living in poverty and so...

[Jenna, Braddon focus group]

To summarise, an enduring discourse around squalor was clearly germane in judgements about what and who could be considered ‘poor’. For people in the study ‘poverty’ was very much a physical manifestation – it could be seen. While this might seem obvious, the formulation of poverty as a visual phenomenon is not one that is prevalent in political or policy representations, even within international portrayals of poverty. The unseen side of poverty, such as lack of opportunity and social exclusion are more likely to be central tenets of political and policy understandings of poverty, manifest in consequences of economic and material deprivation, rather than in the observable, as it was for the respondents. Theirs was a visual consciousness around poverty. Accusations of deprivation and poverty could be redirected to other places that looked ‘poor’. Through dis-identification and consumption practices (discussed in Chapter 8) it was a label that could be avoided.

Other Labels of ‘Poverty’: Social Exclusion and Deprivation

Social Exclusion

As discussed in earlier chapters the terminology of social exclusion is one found largely in political and academic discourses. While it may appear in public discourses – employed by the anti-poverty lobby and used in the press – it often does so in relation to these former discourses. There is a paucity of research into everyday understandings of social exclusion but it does not appear to be one widely used in everyday talk relating to deprivation and poverty. Indeed, most people involved in this study claimed not to have heard of social exclusion or the associated terminology of inclusion (as touched upon in Chapter 5). They were therefore unsure about what the phrase might mean or to whom it might apply (even
those few who said they had heard of it). In the main respondents did not see themselves as ‘outside’ or marginalised in the comprehensive way implied by the term, if at all. Consequently, there was puzzlement about perceiving themselves as being framed as somehow outside of the society of which they subjectively felt within, as Amy’s question to me indicates:

You know when you say excluded, what are we excluded from?

[Amy, individual interview]

Amy had not heard of ‘social exclusion’ yet her account of obstacles faced when attending a college course, housing difficulties and of stereotyping by others (detailed in Chapters 5 and 8) reveals experiences that would come under the definition of social exclusion.

While respondents noted the effects of ‘social exclusion’ — age discrimination, lack of affordable transport, limitations of the benefit system and lack of childcare were all mentioned — social exclusion was not a lived concept. People talked of local support networks or were proud of getting by on their own and seemed confused by the idea that they might be excluded from anything. They did not perceive the inability to do something, such as take the children swimming, as ‘exclusion’.

M: another phrase that the government use quite often is social exclusion or socially excluded erm have you heard of that?

Dawn: I think so, mm

Sue: I’ve heard of it but I don’t get what ( ) the hell they’re going on about, does it mean those that are on low incomes can’t get into certain things? or those on high incomes can’t get into certain things that the lower incomes can get?

Vicky: no [not heard of it].

Kelly: what does that mean?

M: well, I’m interested in what[ you think it means

Kelly: [ do they point to things like asylum seekers? Because they come in and people aren’t
I don’t really know these days, I know like, years ago, to me, social exclusion would be like you know when years ago when er ( ) blacks weren’t allowed to be in the same place as whites-

M: right

Nicky: -and that sort of thing, to me that is excluded or like they’d like, the blacks had to sit at the back of the bus and the whites sat at the front, you know to me that is people being ( ) pushed out of things ( ) er that ( ) for reasons that are not really their fault, d’ya get me?

Articulating understandings of ‘social exclusion’ was problematic as it was relatively unheard of. Some people speculated as to the nature of social exclusion and who the excluded might be. While Martha (below) recognised that others might apply the phrase to herself and fellow attendees of the Sure Start facilities, most people perceived social exclusion as not related to their personal experience. Examples of ‘social exclusion’ given, such as Nicky’s (above) and Kelia’s comments (below) use quite extreme instances to demonstrate understanding:

I’ve heard of something come to think that it’s about people, excluded socially from things like, erm things they can’t access, coz they’re like trying to get us *people attending the children’s centre* to access more erm you know the gym, and dietician, and I think they think we’re excluded from things like that from what I’ve seen round here and the government talking I should imagine that’s what it’s about. [Martha, individual interview]
M: Another phrase that the government uses recently is the term social exclusion, have you heard of this term?

Kelia: Heard it but not a *lot*, he ha

M: mm, right, ( ) what does it mean to you?

Kelia: ( ) groups that are erm, further down erm, I suppose prostitutes, drug dealers that kind of erm, yeah, excluded from society?

M: ok

Ahmed: even people like live on unemployed, low income they are just excluded because of ( ) certain att, er drunkards poor people, unemployed people, maybe because of their background, that’s like social exclusion.

[Braddon focus group]

erm [long pause]) it’s er just being erm, you know ( ) outside, er you realise that most things involve money, even going for a piss but everything’s like ( ) there isn’t stuff going on without paying for membership or that. The way I see it most things are centred around membership and money.

[Matt, individual interview]

Karen: It’s a totally new word to me you know

M: right

Karen: I’ve never heard of it

Barbara: mmm, social, I mean social, it sounds very erm, erm

Jenny: the basic thing is that you are excluded from things pres(h)uma(h)bly

Barbara: your, your ignored your sort of?

[Maxwell focus group]

Even though people were not familiar with the terminology of social exclusion, the central feature — that one is outside the mainstream in some way — was construed. However, some
people actively disliked it as, rather ironically, they perceived it as excluding. The feeling was that it was a ‘big word’ (a colloquial phrase to describe an ‘educated’ vocabulary), one that ordinary people could not understand, seen as a deliberate ploy by one respondent:

M: One word used by the government is social exclusion-
Michelle: that’s a big word innit?
June: mmm
M: they use it quite a lot these days-
Rita: well they like using big words so it makes us look a bit thick coz we don’t understand we just say ‘yeah’.
[...]
M: do you think it’s a helpful term, socially excluded?
Rita: NO!
Michelle: quite a quite a putting down term isn’t it, well I’d say-
Rita: Coz, they’re categorising people, well ( ) they, they’re categorizing either, they’re the, they’re the better ones, which was the ones which are not categorised are they, those that are further up the ladder...
M: does anyone think any differently to that?
Wendy: I dunno about social exclusion, I don’t have an opinion on it, don’t hear it
Jean: yeah, I haven’t
Michelle: no it’s the first time I’ve ever heard it
M: right
Rita: big words so people on the street don’t understand them

[RestART focus group]

yeah, all these terms that they use it is difficult for people to understand. They should make it simple some kind, it is good to make it simple, if you watch the news or read newspapers they er, they’ll use these words but then some people they won’t really understand.

[Kelia, focus group]
‘Social exclusion’ was therefore rather an ‘unknown quantity’ for the respondents and as such had little discursive baggage. When people guessed at its meaning they talked of others, often referring to very marginalised groups, such as the homeless, prostitutes and drug addicts. As noted, one of the principal reasons people were confused by a concept of exclusion in relation to themselves is that many people had strong social networks in their local community, providing material and emotional support. Throughout the research people did not talk about feeling excluded from ‘society’ but about feeling that they, as individuals, came up against obstacles at certain points, in certain situations. In sum then, like poverty, it was not that the characteristics of ‘social exclusion’ were absent but that they were largely not recognised as such by those who they were said to define.

A Sense of Place – Rejecting ‘Deprivation’

In government reports social exclusion often goes hand-in-hand with the idea of a deprived or ‘poor’ neighbourhood. As touched upon previously, unlike an official assessment of deprivation, an area was often seen by respondents as ‘deprived’ if it conformed to their visual picture of deprivation – boarded up houses, disorder and disarray – and was rarely identified as a suitable description of their neighbourhood, although was one used about others. Other research has shown that self-perceptions of deprivation relative to other people seem to be significant in assessments of disadvantage (Dolan, 2007: 718). Rose (2006) states that ‘it has been suggested that most individuals are much more interested and aware of how other proximate individuals are faring compared to them than they are with those in different social situations (2006:2). Such an assertion seemed to be borne out in the study. Respondents consistently compared their neighbourhood estates to other estates, rather than to nearby middle-class houses or private housing estates. Dolan (2007) remarks that respondents may choose to make downward or sideways comparisons, rather than comparisons with people who are better off, as a means of maintaining or augmenting their self-esteem (2007: 720).

A disavowal of area deprivation to retain self-worth may be an explanation of why the label of deprivation was rejected; it seemed that neighbourhood was closely bound with self-identity for respondents. Consequently, respondents often became defensive about their area being described as ‘deprived’ while at the same time articulated problems with the
neighbourhood or estate that could be identified as indicators of deprivation (by official standards):

Barbara: it’s, it’s overlooked [the estate]
Lynda: yeah
Barbara: it’s neglected-
M: Right
Barbara: -It’s not, it’s not the fact that we’re poor, we’ve just, we’ve just been neglected it’s like a garden if you don’t put any effort into it ( ) it goes isn’t it?

[Maxwell focus group]

This is similar to the ‘detachment’ discourse used by young residents living in a ‘poor suburb’, who utilised it in order to separate personal identity from area identity in which a problematic picture is accepted but is not viewed as part of one’s own sense of self (Castro and Lindbladh, 2004). However, the respondents in this study seemed to be saying more than this, in fact they were aware of what they conceived of as ‘deprived’ neighbourhoods and theirs was not one of them. In common with Lupton’s (2003) study of declining neighbourhoods, respondents were aware of the reputation their estates but downplayed this and instead focused on their own as being better than other estates. As another study, with council tenants on a London estate found, when discussing their neighbourhood in comparison to others residents used ‘what can be called a ‘geography of roughness’ involving place images from various parts of the city’ (Watt, 2006: 788). They drew on these ‘geographies’ and most viewed their immediate area more favourably than others. Such findings were reflected in this study: in some cases areas of deprivation or ‘roughness’ were broken down to street level or a point past a local landmark, such as the children’s playground or a certain road, but it was never where respondents lived now:

Sharon: it does seem from the reccy, down, I mean, I know you live up there [nodding to one respondent] but it’s like them and us int it?

Wendy: I think this end of the estate is better than that end of the estate. I’ve lived both ends and I think this end of
the estate is better than that end [RestART, focus group].

The label of deprivation was also rejected if people felt there was a sense of community, which was seen to act as a buffer against material or area hardships. A subjective sense of community, in addition to the sharing of resources mitigated, and thus, in the eyes of the respondents, protected residents against accusations of ‘deprivation’ and indeed, the actual effects of ‘poverty’. This was most explicitly stated in the focus group that took place in the migrant community:

even if, right, where I come from, I come from Africa, I come from Tanzania, there’s poverty ( ) but it’s very difficult to find someone who’ll sleep without food because ( ) you know you go to a neighbour and get anything you want, even if it’s salt, if it’s sugar even if you don’t have food you go there and you eat that, that that’s the kind of, that’s the kind of community we live in there and most people who have come from abroad here, Asian erm, that’s how they live as well they don’t have money they give you a loan, they don’t ask interest from you like give you £100 you get £100 back [...] [Mbakara, Braddon focus group]

...our communities are stronger, the black sort of culture if you haven’t got anything or your sister hasn’t got anything you will cook for your sister, you will lend your sister money or she’ll come to her parents or whatever and you will help each other it’s like, I don’t know what his name is ( ) was saying, but I can’t but you know nobody goes hungry because everybody helps each other, you know people get older and everyone chip in and looks after the parents† whatever because that is part of black culture [Jenna, Braddon focus group]
Deprivation, as with poverty, was rejected or accepted on the basis of distance from such a label. Unlike a conceptualisation of 'poverty' it was recognised as applicable to Britain and as such was assessed relationally within a local framework. The context of community and social networks, in addition to the appearance of a place, seemed to form part of an evaluation of 'deprived'.

**Conclusion**

Thompson and Castell (2005) note that the stereotypes of 'real poverty' are accepted by people who may be defined as experiencing poverty as much as by people who are unlikely to have direct experience and this was borne out in people's talk. A central understanding of 'poverty' was that of having *nothing*. Formulated in this way British poverty was perceived as not 'real' poverty at all. Although street homelessness may be seen as one exception it was integrated into this absolute poverty definition and in this way the absence of 'poverty' outside of the absolute formulation could be maintained. The starving African child embodies the blameless position of 'real' unambiguous poverty as well as being an iconic image of having nothing. Respondents saw the absence of necessities and the prevalence of squalor as identifiers of poverty, signifiers that appear more applicable to nineteenth century, rather than twenty-first century, markers of disadvantage. Such a construction, so far from the respondents' reflection of themselves, meant it could be seen that they were not 'the poor'.

Further ways in which 'poverty' was placed elsewhere was by rejecting its applicability to the here and now, either by placing it in the past or by identifying it as a description belonging to another place, often a local estate or area. A further distancing from a 'poverty' label was through its construction as a physical manifestation; it could be seen. The importance of the visual was key to understanding how poverty was located as 'not here'. Even those few respondents who self-identified as currently experiencing poverty also conformed to stringent definitions of being 'hard up', including an inability at times to purchase basic necessities, such as food. They also distinguished between their own circumstances and the prevailing discourse of 'third world' poverty.
The extent to which some mainstream discourses are reproduced because they are thought to have veracity by the respondents and how much they are employed as a distancing mechanism from a label of poverty, which is seen as stigmatising, is probably an insoluble question. What was clear, however, was that most people did not self-identify as experiencing 'poverty', as they understood it, even though their accounts of daily life indicated considerable hardship. Of significance is that the discursive strategies drawn upon to circumvent a label of poverty were inherent within the respondents’ definitions of what ‘poverty’ was.

This chapter has examined the construction of ‘poverty’, what it is and what it is not and explored the idea that people’s formulation of poverty and the ‘poor’ places themselves some distance away from such labels. The next chapter will examine dis-identifications with poverty by means of utilising the discourse of responsibility.
Chapter 7: Utilising Discourses of Responsibility to Contest Labels of ‘Poverty’

Introduction

Responsibility has become a key term within the past decade. The connection between ‘rights and responsibility’, largely in relation to the right to social welfare, was an early mantra of New Labour and is now established across the political spectrum and endemic in a range of social policies. Obviously, responsibility is not a new term and the notion of the ‘breadwinner’ and ‘housewife’ roles were dependent on a gendered understanding of personal and social responsibility, ones that have changed dramatically in recent decades. With the social, cultural and political changes occurring since the late 1970s the numbers of unemployed, lone parents and those in poverty increased and the social security system slowly altered. By the 1980s the idea that the benefit system took away people’s responsibility, displacing it with dependency, was firmly entrenched in the public and political imagination. Currently, the notion of responsibility in regard to poverty found in public and political discourses is often one that locates the responsibility for poverty, and getting out of poverty (through paid work), with the individual.

The discursive strategies for managing a label of ‘poverty’, especially dis-identifications with poverty utilising a discourse of responsibility, will be examined in this chapter. Managing ‘poverty’ discursively, by refusing to acknowledge its application to self, whilst also accounting for circumstances that are less than satisfactory meant respondents re-positioning themselves in discourses of responsibility. ‘Poverty’ was interpreted through two discursive constructions of responsibility, ones that accounted for individuals’ own circumstances and behaviour, as well as those of others. These two formulations are those of ‘personal responsibility’ and of ‘relocating blame’. Traces of both discourses were found in respondents’ talk, although many people positioned themselves primarily within one discourse from which to speak. What may sometimes seem like contradictory statements in exchanges are different positionings within the talk and their implications for self; people defined and redefined themselves and their experiences as they articulated their ideas. Such
variations illustrate the multiple meanings attached to ‘poverty’ and responsibility and its management in talk. The apparent inconsistencies may serve to retain the dignity of the speaker, by distancing themselves from the harmful associations attached to ‘poverty’ and exclusion and dependency, while also maintaining pride in managing limited resources.

The Discourse of Personal Responsibility

Respondents rejecting the relevance of a label of poverty to their lives often did so within a discourse of personal responsibility, one that identified gaining paid work and improving material conditions as attributable to individual decisions, reflecting a belief in the solutions offered within this prevailing discourse. While the majority of respondents drew upon the discourse of personal responsibility in relation to poverty at some point, a number of respondents positioned themselves almost exclusively within this construction and for them the idea of ‘poverty’ was both ‘failure’ and ‘choice’ (in that one was responsible for getting out of it); it was therefore a description vociferously denied as appropriate to them. In addition, these respondents not only rejected a label of poverty but also criticised those individuals whom they perceived as indicative of a British ‘poverty’. However, although denying a label of ‘poverty’, respondents who espoused a discourse of personal responsibility would often say they were ‘hard up’. Being ‘hard up’ was perceived as a regrettable normality in their current circumstances, in which ‘managing’ and ‘struggling’ were an expected part of everyday life.

By pointing to the importance of individual behaviour in causing or sustaining ‘poverty’ in a British context, such respondents were not merely reproducing stereotypes about dependency but were also asserting the power of individual agency over structural constraints; constraints they often felt they had overcome or had not had to confront because of their ‘good’ management and behaviour:

I think some people they just, they just can’t manage it, they want all the nice things like the, the NTL and the, the phone, they can’t go without it ( ) whereas I think ( ) I can because there’s more
important things like feeding your kids, and you know, clothing
yourself and your children. I’ll make do.
[Amy, individual interview]

You have to control yourself because if you, if you ( ) are putting
yourself in debt you are making yourself poorer now, right, making
yourself poorer and poorer, making yourself worse and then you
gonna, sometimes they blame the government or whoever it is but
its up to themselves as well you have to know how to budget
yourself, live within your ability, you can’t, you can’t be buying
shoes for one hundred and eighty and you don’t have a job, you are
unemployed, its difficult, you can’t live up to that standard so you
have to know how to ( ) you have to be made aware, some people,
that you know that you have to live in a certain standard otherwise
you are making yourself poorer and poorer and stop blaming it on
the state.
[Ahmed, Braddon focus group]

Implicit in a discourse of personal responsibility as used by respondents is a characterisation
of themselves defined oppositionally to the social representations of ‘poor people’ that
associates them with crime, drink, drugs and unwillingness to work, especially a distancing
from the stereotype of the ‘welfare dependant’. Such an endeavour is not a mistaken one;
recent research on public attitudes showed that ‘poverty is seen as something that largely
happens to those who don’t want to help themselves’ (Fabian Society, 2005: 3). It is
important, therefore, to demonstrate personal responsibility in order to create distance from a
label of ‘poverty’. While Nathan described himself as currently living on benefits and ‘hard
up all the time’ he was anxious to present himself and his situation as different to a
stereotypical perception of the dependent lone parent:

What I can’t stand is people in the community who don’t do
anything. I am a single parent doing something, there’s some that
just sit around, get their easy money and sit around watching TV,
you need to do more than watching Jeremy Kyle [morning talk
show] [...] I think they should have to go on a college course or
something. People in our situation who try their best and they’re defrauding the system and getting away with it. I could sit at home all day with a play station but I’ve gone out there, got myself a part-time job.

[Nathan, individual interview]

The fragility of respondents’ position, as one that might be described by others (such as myself) as ‘poverty’, is transformed through the discursive manoeuvring of ‘going without’ (necessities) into just ‘good sense’. This was often framed as what any reasonable person would do in the circumstances:

I, I know this sounds daft but I’m like wearing these shoes that are like worn out and I think ‘I’m not buying any more yet’, because I can’t afford them and I’ll just do that >and that won’t bother me < and I don’t see that as being poor I just see that as, you know, just as just ( ) economic isn’t it?

[Amy, individual interview]

Jenny: I dun::no. I, find that I’ve got a seven year old son and this one whose nearly three if, I mean, well boys tend to wear their clothes more than girls anyway with kn:::ees gone=

M: mmmm

Jenny: =and things and if there’s anything worth saving I will save it for him...not because we’re impoverished but because it makes sense, you’ve got money for other things

[Maxwell focus group]

By utilising the language of self-reliance people were able discursively to distance themselves from others who may be seen by outsiders to share the same characteristics via a label of ‘disadvantage’ or ‘poverty’ being applied. It was therefore important for these respondents to use a discourse that created distinctions between themselves and others, who
may be sharing their physical space in terms of neighbourhood, but who were not seen as ‘like them’ in terms of aspirations and attitudes:

Kelia: -some people do () choose to like () live in those circumstances coz I live in St. Stephen’s at the moment, it’s quite a deprived area but even when I was on benefits I, I didn’t feel I was or poor or living in poverty but I could see it all around me, I understood what that meant but my, for myself, personally didn’t feel like that.

M: can you say why?

Kelia: probably because of my expectations of wanting to come off benefits and and kind of be focused on the future whereas I’m not saying other people didn’t have that but that’s that’s how I felt so...

[Braddon Focus group]

I’ve not heard of social exclusion but they’re probably talking about people like us. I see it like if we were excluded from something, I dunno, () work whatever, it would be people like us- I say us but I don’t see me as ‘us’ I mean coz I thin- there’s some people who genuinely don’t want to work, if they take drugs and that. I don’t think they do.

[Amy, individual interview]

yeah, well I’ve always had that kind of attitude to my children and, like I’ve said they’ve never gone without, they’ve, they’ve worn designer clothes and they wear like mainstream clothes it makes no difference to me but when I say no, it’s no, and like I say, I don’t care what Joe Bloggs down the road is wearing.

[Jenna, Braddon Focus group]
The above extracts illustrate that these respondents felt a sense of righteous superiority relative to others within their networks. For them self-determination, demonstrated in their actions or their expressed intentions, distinguished between themselves and the supposed ‘other’. Within a discourse of personal responsibility the charge of ‘inadequacy’ is avoided as long as one is in control. There is, however, a dilemma between autonomy and dependency as respondents are often in a position of being reliant on social security benefits, if only for a while. The distinction constructed between themselves and people that are not like them is not only displayed in apparently dissimilar attitudes but also in what they are seen to be doing, such as Martha’s account of increasing her work-focused skills, despite being disadvantaged by becoming a young mother and missing out on work experience:

I mean I got qualifications but not much work experience so, I like me first one, my first son at seventeen so erm I like, I'm building up my like the work experience [through voluntary work] so I can go out and get a job you know, I don't think I'm too bad to or hard off or anything like that, I'm quite optimistic so, you know.

[Martha, individual interview]

Amy offers a similar account that justifies her position as someone who does not fit into the stereotype of the dependent claimant:

I've never got enough money, but I've always worked you see it's on-I'm twenty eight now, I've worked up until twenty five, and then I had my daughter but I go to college, I don't just sit around [...] I've got friends who say ‘Oh, we haven't got enough money’ but personally if I want something I'll save for it and then I think I'm not in poverty coz I organise my money and I can save >I could always do with more< but I can save so I think it's different attitudes.

[Amy, individual interview]

By pointing to her full-time employment prior to having a child, her current education and her thriftiness, she displays socially acceptable ‘attitudes’ that counter the accusation of abrogating personal responsibility and being welfare ‘dependent’. A further way in which
respondents made a distinction between themselves and others in their position but ‘not like them’ was to redefine disadvantaged circumstances by utilising ‘active’ words, ones that implied their agency in the face of adversity, offered self-esteem and espoused responsibility. One of the key means of achieving this was employing the language of ‘managing’ and its opposite ‘mismanaging’.

Managing and Struggling

Although respondents encountered considerable hardships (see chapter 5) they largely perceived of their situation as one of managing. Such a statement of coping is identifiable in other research with low-income populations. For example, Dolan’s (2007) interviews with men in non-affluent households found that although they stated that they were managing financially quite well in actuality all the men experienced some degree of difficulty in meeting their needs (2007: 716). Such findings are similar to respondents’ accounts in this study:

Jenny: I mean I don’t think we’re amongst the highest paid band in the world but I think a lot of people these days-

Karen: [Surviving aren’t we

Jenny: -are on family credit, I think family credit accounts for a lot of the income in this area, erm,

M: Mmm

Jenny: as regards being deprived I don’t class myself as° deprivi·ved° to be honest there’s times we could all do with a bit more money but we manage.

[Maxwell focus group]

People in the study were aware that they went without whilst still claiming to ‘manage’. Thus, the concept of managing and its meaning for respondents was clearly more than one of straightforwardly meeting needs, it was a subjective position which signified they were not ‘failing’.
Respondents were often keen to display their self-sufficiency and, for many, this translated into competency in financial organisation and budgeting:

It’s what any parent should do, make sure the children are sorted and the bills are paid first before they decide to do something but I can’t stand people who will turn round and say ‘oh, I just gone out and bought 200 fags’, buy dvd’s, ‘oh, I went out clubbing the other night and now I got no money for my electric and I’ve only got 36p’, you shouldn’t have bought the fags! You shouldn’t have bought the dvd’s and you shouldn’t have gone out clubbing! So… it’s priorities […]

[Nathan, individual interview]

Julie: I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know. ( ) mmm I sometimes wonder, coz I’ve been on the social and I sometimes don’t quite get, to be honest, why people, when they’re on the social and they got to pay no rent or council tax right, have to go and sell things at places like Cash Converters, what do they need the money for?! We can live on social money so why can’t they?

M: Well can you though? Can you live on the social money

Julie: [yeah!] [yeah!]

It’s getting by but you manage, don’t you, so why do people have to go and sell things...i don’t want to have to sell me stuff to ( ) mind you it might be to buy drugs or beer or something

[Individual interview]

The frequently employed term of ‘managing’ often accompanied a denial of ‘poverty’:
Nicky: I mean where I can't even afford to buy Scott a pair of shoes because he's a size 13.

M: yeah, yeah, ( ) umm, you don't see that as poverty?

Nicky: ↑I don't see it as poverty, no ( )

M: why?

Nicky: because we have got enough to manage on but not ( ) for anything ( ), anything ↑else ( ) so I wouldn't call it poverty, I'd just call it a bit skint.

[Individual interview]

Sue: my husband's just changed jobs so he's gone on less pay but we're still managing to ( ) =

Dawn (?): [live↑]

Sue: = to [ ge- live. we're still managing to pay the mortgage↓, feed the kids, keep them clothed ( ) ok yeah, we haven't got disposable income f::: or treating ourselves right now but that'll come back again in the future once we get a little bit more but I wouldn't say we're in poverty.

[Sure Start focus group]

Managing was about being in control and juggling resources to avoid going under. The fact that people were relying on family and friends for money and for material goods, including essentials such as accommodation and food, was not seen as relevant, indeed, it meant that they were managing. The use of such terminology may also serve to distance them from a label of poverty while also acknowledging that things can be difficult. People who couldn't manage were always other people:

they really need to get down to the grassroots of poverty [...] Like going out and about meeting people who are on the poverty line, who can't manage

[Rita, RestART focus group]

When discussing how those in poverty could be represented Rita states that officials should talk to those 'who can't manage'. Such a statement indicates that poverty is when you fail to
cope. Hardship — going without clothes, shoes and even food — was not necessarily acceptable but it was ‘managing’ and managing was not poverty. ‘Poverty’ then was not getting by or many of the euphemisms found in previous research but falling short, socially as well as economically. It awaited those who were unable to manage their scarce resources.

The use of ‘struggle’ as a description of daily life and events was also common in the study. Both ‘managing’ and ‘struggle’ implied that people were coping on their low income but not easily:

I still struggle [long pause] things are all sort of like always - ↑I never seem to get to a ( ) a stage where everything’s like nice and calm and just going along nicely, >d’ya know what I mean?< it’s still ( ) always struggling
[Nicky, individual interview]

Lorraine described her life on job seeker’s allowance (JSA) and her search and hope for paid employment, to enable her to buy the things she wanted. Although her account was clearly one of going without, she did not want to frame it as ‘poverty’; ‘extremely struggling’ was her phrase of choice:

M: erm, how you are living on the income you have, would you call that poverty?
Lorraine: ( ) erm, ( ) Id say I was er, I don’t know if I’d go into poverty, but I would say that I were extremely struggling erm and I d, like with bills and stuff and er in the winter I only allow 4 hours a day for my heating on because I can’t afford it on anymore than four hours a day so I have to do that and my friends always take the mick out of me for doing that hah, ha
M: oh, they think you’re being tight ha ha,
Lorraine: because they’ll turn round and say, ‘I won’t take my coat off’ or ‘there’s snow in your living room, it’s warmer ↑outs::ide’, but I will, like if they’re cold, I will put the heating on for them but sort of thing but yeah,
they understand that it’s hard for me to have the gas on a lot so... [Individual interview]

Unlike ‘poverty’ – the description of a state – the language of struggle and managing are active concepts: they are not what you are; they are what you do about what you have got. In this way the use of such concepts allowed for the recognition that things were difficult and could be better but that control was not lost. In essence managing allowed respondents to feel in control of their resources, however modest and by extension maintain control over their choices and their lives. Not managing equated with failure and thus with ‘poverty’.

**Mismanaging**

Mismanaging was a popular conviction about others shared by respondents which was seen as leading to a ‘poverty’ situation (see also Walker, 1993: 82). A general disbelief in the reality of ‘poverty’ in Britain was based on the presumption that people had enough money to live on but that it was mismanaged. Consequently, people who claimed to be ‘in poverty’ were seen as financially out of control because of misspending, overspending, accumulating debts or through ignorance. Citing some of the causes of ‘poverty’ as people’s mismanagement of money allowed individuals to feel proud of their own achievements in stretching meagre resources, thus creating a position of mastery over their lives as well as displaying their distance from ‘poverty’:

> I think poverty’s sometimes what you make it yourself you know
> [Barbara, Maxwell focus group]

> There are courses on money management, courses are available. People don’t take the opportunities they’d rather go to debt management! [Julie, individual interview].

> [...] and like you say budgeting skills, if you did want something really expensive, put aside a bit each week or something.
> [Jenna, Braddon focus group]
If you need stuff [furniture] the Salvation Army have a thing, it’s just people are uneducated about stuff and don’t go there.

[Mary, Braddon focus group]

In addition to a perception of a general mismanagement of money, the stereotype of people in poverty ‘squandering’ the money they do have is an enduring one in the public imagination (Golding and Middleton, 1982; The Fabian Society, 2006). Talk of people spending money on alcohol, drugs and cigarettes (and even on chocolate in the case of one respondent) in other words, luxuries that people in poverty should not be having if they really are ‘poor’, was therefore not unexpected:

Rita: Sometimes people get theirselves into poverty
Karen/Kris/Sharon: mmmmm [general agreement]
Wendy: spending their money on beer and drugs and everything else and the kids have to go without
Rita: I think some of it’s just basically down to how some people budget their money, basically
Sharon: ye::ah
Wendy: well we don’t go to Bargain Booze [off licence] every day
[RestART Focus group]

And I think to myself like, to me, it’s like if somebody says they’re poor and they’re crying and they haven’t got no money this, that and the other and yet they’re smoking 40, 50, 60 fags a week to me I couldn’t afford to spend that money on fags, I mean alright everyone has their bad habits or their little things but to me I would rather spend that money on food than on cigarettes!

[Jenna, Braddon focus group]

Dawn: it’s a lot to do with the parents and I think a lot a er, I mean you do see people and it’s hard to tell whether they’re
they're in poverty or whether that's how the parents choose to bring them up because you know

Kelly: or they put their money on something else

Dawn: yeah exactly! They might say 'oh, gotta a bit of money we'll buy shoes' or 'we'll buy a packet of fags and a bottle of whiskey' you don't know do you whether they're, what they're choosing to spend the money on?

[Sure Start focus group]

Nicky: then why is it that they give money to old people but not with people with kids ...years ago when me and my kids were on the social and the temperature fell below zero for three nights, consecutive nights you got a heating allowance which were something like ten quid, right, weren't much but they don't do that no more but old people get it and it's quite a lot, it's about three hundred quid! That's what my mum got last year

M: mmm, the cold payments allowance?

Nicky: yeah, what spent it on was Christmas presents though she didn't go out and buy three hundred pound of electric and gas!

M: mmm, no

Nicky: no, this is what I mean, you know when the old things have had their cold weather payments, you see 'em all round the market with shopping trolleys full of food and stuff, chocolate ( I don't think that's right, if they're giving you money for cold weather payment that's what, you know if it's heating allowance then it should be used for heating! not to go an buy chocolate ( ) It really pisses me off, honest.

[Individual interview]
Stephen: I feel since I've retired we look at every penny we spend ( ) and we make every pound ( ) try to be two pounds and work for its keep. I'm better off-

Barbara: yeah, you could have a lot of money and still have poverty because you've not spent it right

Karen: I got a neighbour who's pleading poverty ( ) because she borrows ten off me ( ) two days later pays me back and then borrows it again!

Stephen: Is that ten pound to buy two packs of fags or something?

[Maxwell focus group]

The accusation of misspending served a number of functions within people's talk. It gave an explanation in support of why some forms of British poverty, such as homelessness, often mentioned by respondents, might exist. At the same time respondents articulated their suspicion that another cause, rather than simply lack of money, was at the heart of it, such as drink or drug abuse, which somehow negated the validity of a label of 'poverty' and therefore the contention that 'real' poverty did not exist could be upheld. Similarly, the account of people getting money for particular hardships but spending it on other things acted as a means of showing that people were not really in need. In a general sense narratives, in this case about other people's behaviour, can be understood as a form of accounting (Gergen, 1994: 186) in which people make claims about themselves and others. Personal stories can 'attend to motive and accountability, to alternative readings, alternative identities' (Edwards, 1997: 282). Thus the story form, such as Nicky's description of her own circumstances and those of the 'old people', offers a way of presenting privations without acknowledging them as 'poverty', whilst simultaneously displaying and distancing oneself from the 'wrong' actions of others. By utilising such narratives the respondents were demonstrating their knowledge of 'scrounger' discourses around poverty and their distance from such a marker. As well as acting as a distancing mechanism from the stereotypes associated with 'scrouging' and welfare dependency the corollary of such a position also meant that genuine 'poverty' must be a blameless condition.
Relocating Blame: Others' Responsibility

Respondents who espoused a discourse of personal responsibility were not the only ones to present their aspirations, qualifications or experience in order to illustrate their distance from ‘poverty’ and its negative associations. The same construction of personal self-worth (in terms of recognised social worth through success in education, training and paid work) was used to contrary effect, not to demonstrate personal responsibility but to show (the interviewer) that current hardships were a result of the failure of others. This relocation of ‘blame’ meant they were not accountable for the ‘hardship’ of their situation; that responsibility lay with others. For the minority of individuals in the study who self-identified as being in poverty the emphasis of blame was always on external causes, rather than their own ‘mismanagement’ demonstrating their awareness of the accusations that could be levelled at them by accepting the marker of poverty.

Some respondents expressed an ideal of self-reliance but considered the responsibility for getting things done or, conversely for things going wrong, was beyond their control. Instead the power for change lay with external agencies such as social services, the council or government. For instance, the area may look ‘deprived’ because the council hasn’t carried out required maintenance:

But I’ve always said, I’ve always said that if the council upgraded the windo::ws so the council properties all looked the same i.e, the flats, the houses hhh (in-breath) then you wouldn’t know we’ve got a †problem ( )

[Karen, Maxwell Focus group]

Factual narratives were often employed by respondents to demonstrate that they were not accountable for difficult circumstances; blame lay elsewhere. A demonstration of personal responsibility was therefore redundant because external factors had undermined individual agency. Despite this, respondents regularly employed a discourse of personal responsibility to demonstrate that they had made an individual effort in altering circumstances but had been thwarted by other agencies with more power. In this way they retained a ‘moral adequacy’ (Seale, 1996) in their behaviour and circumstances. For example, Danielle explains her low income as caused by a benefits error and therefore not her fault:
I would say I’ve been hard up, *a lot* hah hah ( ). Yeah, well like, for instance erm recently, I got a new partner, who started claiming ( ) benefits, we was, they was deducting forty two pound a week out the benefits which was like eighty pound a fortnight, less than what we were getting, we were getting ninety six and we should have been getting a hundred and eighty pound![...] and we’ve only just got it backdated today and that’s been about eight weeks now so we’ve had to survive on they were getting ( ) ninety six pound every fortnight and then seventy eight pound a week and that’s for family of four so really it’s well, it’s hard...

Danielle, individual interview

Looking to external sources for problems encountered took into consideration more structural causes, such as the nature of the labour market or bureaucracy and inefficiencies (as they were seen as) of the benefits and tax credits systems. This meant that personal stories of ‘poverty’ or ‘hardship’ could be talked about without a loss of face or dignity. Not unexpectedly then, respondents who identified as being in poverty (Matt, Fred and Danielle) drew predominantly upon this discourse.

There were some observable gender differences in what and who was held accountable for difficulties. Male respondents were more likely to identify a number of structural barriers, including the benefits system itself, which precluded them from gaining paid employment and thus causing their current low income:

You’ve got a government body that’ll say, ‘yeah, all right, we’ll give you a bit of help but you gotta help yourself’, >how do you help yourself?< you know, go for a job interview, you got to pay bus fare [...] The genuine cases where people do want to go back into work, there’s nothing there. I mean the government say they’re putting all this money back into getting over 50 year olds into work, so many millions of pounds, where is this money? I mean I’m 51, nobody’s helped me get a job

Fred, individual interview
I mean I just tried to get on a course because I wanted, I wanted to become like a mechanic, because there’s not many that do motorbike mechanics but because I’m unemployed >I can’t do it< because it’s a full time course they’ll take away my benefits so there’s no way of me getting better qualifications so I can actually get a job! But they’re at me to get a job all the time [...] The government is making more people poor and unemployed, from my own experience coz they make it that hard to get the qualifications you need ( you can’t get back to work and they just look at you ‘oh well you don’t want a job’, I hate being sat around but saying that I’ve got qualifications in other things...I did gardening and I quite enjoyed it and I got a level 2, which is high.

[John, individual interview]

People have no idea what the daily experience is like. Not having the right tools to get up the ladder when you’re long-term unemployed, you go so long it’s hard on a personal level, you lose confidence and all the jobs have changed...the reality is if you’re out of it for so long it’s really hard getting back.

[Matt, individual interview]

Many of the female respondents, such as Danielle (above, p153), also located financial problems as arising from problems in the benefits and tax credits systems, not in relation to gaining paid work but more as a cause of financial hardship. In this way, tax credits, created to increase the household revenue of low-income families, were often seen as the cause of money difficulties, impacting upon managing limited resources:

Weren’t too bad before that [tax credit stopped]. I could manage better ( ) at the minute you see I’m robbing Peter to pay Paul ( ), I’m on incoming calls only I mean I’ve had four letters from NTL [telephone service] today [...] I mean all the problems at the minute as well [reference to own health problems and child in family] I
mean if, if I’d be needing an ambulance or anything I have to go into Barbara’s [neighbour] because I can’t ring out so...

[Terri, individual interview]

I have to manage the money **VERY** carefully, really carefully, coz I’m a hundred quid down a week **now**, (sigh) fuming...family credit, they’ve done it to thousands, it’s the second year [...] they’ve got their heads up their arses most of the time [tax credit office] and it’s a lot of them that are- a causing the poverty because you can’t all of a sudden, I mean to pay bills I was- people go to the bank to get it >you get no letter, nothing< you go the bank to get your money for your week’s shopping you think ( ) where’s my money gone?! They don’t tell you, til you ring em ‘excuse me, why hasn’t my money gone in?’

[Julie, individual interview]

Sue:  luckily, luckily I real-I knew that they’d overpaid us so I kept that so what they’re not paying me **now** ( ), from now until April I’ve just split that overpayment, between those weeks

Kelly: see that’s, I, I don’t agree with that family tax credit thing. It is **SO** bad because it gets you in debt

[Sue Start focus group]

By distancing from blame for difficult economic circumstances respondents were able to acknowledge those difficulties, while removing themselves from culpability. They had a
strong sense that their position was unjust but that it was not their fault. The sense of injustice, however, rarely took the form of criticising social systems at a macro level; rather it focused on the errors of specific services and organisations.

Conclusion

People in the study denied ‘poverty’ by utilising different formulations of responsibility. They did not want to see themselves or be identified as the ‘irresponsible welfare dependant’, a characterisation that has become virtually synonymous with legitimately claiming benefits. Respondents therefore had to negotiate around their position as claimants, and in hardship, in a manner that distanced themselves from this, either by accepting a mainstream discourse of responsibility and demonstrating how they fitted into this or by displacing blame onto inadequate systems that caused their economic difficulties. In doing so they did not challenge mainstream discourses that promote notions of dependency, indeed some aspects were reified in their narratives, but it was clear that it was always unspecified, irresponsible, ‘others’ who fitted this stereotype.

The rejection of a stigmatised classification was not the only reason for the negation of ‘poverty’ in people’s lives. While it may be argued that non-recognition of a poverty situation by respondents could be applicable it was also the case that respondents genuinely believed, in line with prevailing public attitudes, that poverty wasn’t really ‘here’. However, while for many of the ‘non-poor’ public such a stance is relatively straightforward, for those people faced with economic and material hardship there is a contradiction at stake, how to acknowledge obvious hardship but deny ‘poverty’? There was often not much of a dilemma – ‘poverty’ was elsewhere, they were struggling but managing and managing was synonymous with not being in poverty. Managing was a key concept in accepting or re-locating responsibility. By placing themselves oppositionally to those who ‘mismanage’, respondents distanced themselves further from the negative connotations of a ‘poverty’ label. The language of struggle and ‘managing’ demonstrated an acute awareness of available resources and the precariousness of ‘getting by’. However a denial of ‘poverty’ was not a denial of difficulties. It was the word, not the situation, that was contested.
Chapter 8: Subjectivity

...power is not simply based on the distribution and access to material resources but also on self identity and the marginalisation of particular identities (Dominelli, 2005: 16)

Introduction

'Discourses provide us with conceptual repertoires with which we can represent ourselves and others' (Burr, 1995: 141) and in this way they have implications for identity. As Burr (1995) argues, we are an 'end-product' of the combinations of various discourses available to us, although assorted configurations of the 'self' are offered across different discourses. From a Foucauldian perspective, the subject is both produced within discourse and also subjected to discourse. Although subject positions are proscribed by and within particular discourses, numerous discourses are culturally available to us at any one time, for example, gender, ethnicity, age and social status. These locations have consequences for subjective experience: what can be felt, thought and experienced from within particular subject positions (Parker, 1992), for example, what it means to be called 'poor' within a particular discourse of poverty. Even though one may be positioned by available discourses it is not that agency is totally absent. As noted in Chapter 1, it is not merely a case of respondents being passively positioned by discourses but also how people position themselves; people can be agentic in choosing constructs as well as being positioned by discourses (Willig, 1999: 68). Subject positions therefore offer 'discursive locations from which to speak and act rather than prescribing a particular part to be acted out' (Willig, 2003: 175).

This chapter will explore the ways in which subjectivities might be constituted within, framed by and regulated through discursive constructions of 'poverty'. It will explore respondents' knowledge of representations and subjectivities of the 'poor' person and how they position themselves in relation to these, or indeed construct and prioritise subject positions which have little relation to 'poverty'.

People presented a number of subjectivities within talk, some of which will be focused on here, primarily those in relation to 'poverty', and those which occurred frequently, indicating
their significance to respondents: that of being a (good) parent and that of paid worker.\textsuperscript{23} Both these subject positions were influenced by gender discourses and cultural norms as well as their importance to respondents. The chapter will also touch upon some aspects of how subjectivities, in relation to a notion of ‘poverty’, were achieved in talk.

One caveat of this research is that it is only a snapshot of how people perceived and represented themselves within the conditions of an interview. Although participant observation added richness to respondents’ narratives and presentations of self it is still a partial account of people’s multiple and fluid subjectivities.

\textbf{What Does it Mean to be ‘Poor’?}

‘People may resist the way they are positioned by others, as subordinates or as members of a group they do not wish to be identified with’ (Cameron, 2001: 178).

While various research studies may lead us to believe that for ‘people in poverty’, their poverty is their defining characteristic this is often an outcome of the research rather than the reality of research subjects. While economic and social disadvantage undoubtedly impacts upon life chances ‘poverty’ is not an ‘identity’ for most people outside of the research report. Many theorists from varying positions along the political spectrum have attempted to outline characteristics of ‘the poor’ but this has always been an imposed taxonomy, an outsider’s perspective and description of what a ‘poor person’ is. This quest to define and characterise the ‘poor’ in a large part stems from the problem of seeing the ‘poor’ as a homogenous group, defined by their poverty. However, the people in this research did not talk from an identification of being ‘poor’ or being ‘in poverty’ or of living in a ‘deprived’ area except when asked to perceive themselves from that position. When they are situated as such (as in this study to some extent) it is often a positioning that is rejected, despite the apparent evidence to the contrary (see chapter 5). People instead choose to present themselves as being a (good) parent, as someone seeking paid work, as a resident of a particular place or, more often, ‘just like everybody else’. It is when looking in, as a researcher talking to people

\textsuperscript{23} Subjectivities arising in relation to ‘poverty’ are invoked as an outcome of the research itself. However, this does not mean that their significance is necessarily absent from people’s daily lives.
defined by the research as living in ‘poverty’, rather than attempting to gain the perspective of those looking out, that the researcher sees ‘poverty’.

While discursive constructions of poverty have implications for practice by offering a (limited) number of subject positions (Willig, 2003) many people in the study avoided this by refusing the label itself. While their capacity to live satisfactorily may well be restricted by disadvantaged income, their subjectivities were not; many simply circumvented the language of poverty by denying its applicability to themselves: they were ‘hard-up’ or managing but not ‘poor’. However, although they may have discursively sidestepped a label of ‘poverty’, they were nevertheless often subject to it in terms of how they were seen by others, by virtue of their residency (on an estate or ‘deprived area’) or as benefit claimants, as well as subject to the judgement of others, often premised on stereotypes based on appearance. In this way subject positions were imposed on them and respondents had to contend with being the objects of discourses of otherness.

**The Poor Subject**

‘If one is the [O]ther, one will inevitably be perceived

uni-dimensionally; will be seen stereotypically; will be defined


**Stereotypes**

Stereotypes serve to reify a set of characteristics about a particular person or group of people and in doing so produce categories of ‘them’ and ‘us’. The exaggerated traits of the group stereotyped are the ones that feature, inherent in which are ideological assumptions that justify the subordination or derision of a particular group (Pickering, 2001: 48). As such, stereotyped representations are often ‘damaging to people’s actual social and personal identities (Pickering, 2001: 10). Lister argues that in relation to people in poverty, ‘stereotyping functions to create cultural difference and thereby the Other’ (2004: 101). People in poverty are within the mainstream and subject to the expected norms – those of an affluent majority – but at the same time placed outside of it. Bullock et al (2001) note that, ‘classist stereotypes about the characteristics and behaviour of poor people are pervasive within the media’ (2001: 230). Associations with crime, ignorance, wastefulness, drink,
feckless parenting and ‘sponging’ are the stock poverty stereotypes. Negative media representations and political rhetoric often reinforce such representations and in this way they come to be seen as true, not only in relation to where poverty is located but also to the supposed causes of poverty and the characteristics of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ ‘poor’, the margins of which are subject to change. Respondents in the study are clearly aware of stereotypes of poverty and indeed re-circulate the very same stereotypes they are themselves often exposed to. As Riggins (1997) notes, the self identity of subordinate minorities, in this case economically marginalised people, are rarely able to exclude traces of the majority’s discourses of otherness. ‘Discourses of otherness are articulated by both dominant majorities and subordinate minorities’ (Riggins, 1997: 6). The extract below illustrates a shared awareness and reproduction of a number of poverty stereotypes:

Chris: I’m on a low income anyway so hahah
Rita: but would you say it’s coz it’s [poverty] down to people, how they budget their money?
Chris: Yeah because I mean I get ( ) so short of money I mean coz I don’t go out. I only smoke, that’s all, I don’t I’m not on drugs or anything I jus-
Sharon: But you’d like to be wouldn’t you love?
Chris: I need it sometimes ha ha
Sharon: You’d like to be drunk if you could afford it,
*so would I*
Chris: But erm if there’s a bill comes in I pay it an’ so I just tryin keep up my end (,) but I think if I went out and everything I couldn’t do that and that’s where the problems start isn’t it?

[RestART focus group]

Mismanaging money and misusing drugs or alcohol are indicated as causes of poverty, ones that Chris distances herself from by demonstrating her ‘good’ management in prioritising household bills above socialising. Such beliefs in the nature of British poverty were mentioned by many of the respondents in addition to older notions of ‘the poor’ as dirty and lazy (see Chapter 6). Within such a context it is unsurprising that the word poverty was seen as an inappropriate label for current self-narratives.
Bourdieu identifies not only an older moral justification for the dismissive treatment of people in poverty but also a newer intellectual justification, 'The poor are not just immoral, alcoholic and degenerate, they are stupid, they lack intelligence' (Bourdieu, 1998: 43). One outcome of a society that perceives itself as meritocratic is a pervasive belief that the 'best' people get to the top. The working class generally and people in poverty in particular are 'failures' within such a system and their socio-economic status denotes this. Many people in the study seemed aware that they might be perceived of as intellectually inferior, mentioning being or feeling 'looked down on':

They think coz I come from a poverty areas [sic] that I'm not very clever, yeah maybe if I hadn't had me kids young I'd be doing other things I might have a job but you know I've got here on my own and worked quite hard so ( ) you know.

[Martha, individual interview]

Martha demonstrated her awareness of others' pre-conceptions of her (as a resident on a 'rough' estate), but empowered herself by subverting these stereotypes, thus undermining their influence and safeguarding her sense of self worth:

I don't get angry about stereotypes anymore coz they're always gonna be about and I will like show off a bit sometimes * like* come out with a long word you know * to surprise* them. My best friend thinks I'm the cleverest person she's ever met*! But I don't, I don't *think that's* true () I'm not that *clever* haha!

[Martha, individual interview]

People in poverty have overwhelmingly been subject to a history of negative representational practices. Although a different perception to the non-poor mainstream may be expected, people with experience of poverty are not invulnerable to the mediated images and representations of poverty and social exclusion in the public, policy and political arenas, even if these do not match up to their subjective experience. The knowledge of and belief in the veracity of poverty stereotypes was apparent in the study (as explored in Chapter 6). If subjects can only exist meaningfully within discourse as Hall (1997) argues, people in
poverty may choose to escape positioning (by others) by rejecting the description of ‘poverty’ itself – we are not poor and therefore those stereotypes apply to others – indeed we can even apply those stereotypes to others as a way of demonstrating that we are not poor, like them. Broughton’s (2003) research, examining self-perceptions of welfare recipients, maintains that members of a stigmatised group will reject stigmatising labels and may do so by ‘othering’ and distancing themselves from others that may be seen as ‘like them’. The women in Broughton’s study could thus rationalise the contradiction between their self-identification as deserving and a derogatory discourse that labelled them as undeserving.

In order to become the subject of a particular discourse (and as such the bearers of its power/knowledge) we must locate ourselves in the position from which the discourse makes most sense (Burr, 1995). An awareness of existing stereotypes, ones used in respondents’ own formulations of poverty necessitates that they must disengage from the label of ‘poverty’ if they are not to be tainted by its connotations. People in the study, who may be defined as experiencing poverty by objective conventional measures, could not perceive of themselves within the hegemonic, negative portrayal of British poverty or with the notion of traditional or third world ‘absolute’ poverty. Thus a dis-identification with ‘poverty’ occurred. For many, this was a refusal to be positioned as a ‘person in poverty’; admitting being hard-up, coping or ‘managing’ were alternative locations, ones that did not deny economic hardship but transformed the situation into one that allowed for positions of control and respect.

**Doing ‘Not Being Poor’**

Public image may become self-image. Our own sense of humanity is a hostage to the categorising judgements of others.

(Jenkins, 1996: 57).

Davies & Harre (1990) argue that people take up discursive positions, as subject or object, in relation to other people, events and activities. People ‘in poverty’ in Britain live within a consumer society which places great value on the accrual of goods and status for self-worth;

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33 Despite me potentially positioning them as such by making them subjects of research around ‘poverty’.
being workless is to be worthless; being ‘poor’ is to be excluded from these consumer dreams. People in the study consequently included themselves by buying into the mainstream. Clothes and consumer goods are systems of signification and, as social animals that constitute ourselves semiotically, it was here that people rejected a position of both ‘poverty’ and exclusion. This seemed essential for individuals’ self-esteem as well as how others perceived them; as Jenkins notes above the two are closely intertwined. The use of name brands that signify ‘quality’ was one means of belonging and demonstrating this fact to others:

> We don’t go without I mean I’ll get some of my children’s clothes from Next. I’ll shop in Asda, we don’t go without, I’d say we live to our means.
> [Martha, individual interview]

> I wear labels but I get them from charity shops. I mean why pay forty pounds when you can pay two pound and I look alright, I mean you wouldn’t know.
> [Nathan individual interview]

> as a parent I know I tell my children, No, I’m not paying this much for such and such and don’t get me wrong it’s not like my children walk around .hh ( ) in the cheapest clothes they don’t, my daughter, my daughter wears Prada or what have you but I do, do a balance and I say no, if I can’t afford it they just don’t have it, if I can afford it they can have it.
> [Jenna, Bardon focus group]

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argue that the (stigmatising) hegemonic discourse concerning the poor, disseminated through different authorities: ‘scientific forums, the media, and through the dynamics of rumour and reputation’ (1985: 109), is partly reproduced by the poor themselves. The discursive practice, however, always involves an act of reorganisation of the hegemonic view and may include elements of symbolic resistance. For many

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34 It should be noted that this did not always mean getting name-branded goods from original sources, but from second-hand shops, car boots, markets and people selling items around the estate/s.
respondents it could be argued that ‘resistance’ took two forms: firstly, dis-identifying with a label of poverty at all and secondly wearing the symbols of status that conformed to commonly shared mores within a local and class framework; in other words, ones that could be read as being ‘ordinary’. Such an argument also stands for the few respondents in the study who used the word ‘poverty’ to describe their circumstances, as all mentioned their appearance in relation to clothes (Chapter 6, page 120) demonstrating a strong consciousness of others’ views about them based on how they looked.

The following focus group discussion involved an exchange of information among the women on where bargains could be found. Vicky, the mother of a newborn, her third child, overspends on an ‘unnecessary’ item for her baby, receiving gentle mocking for her admission. Although she and the group see the expensive acquisition as excessive it was clearly important to Vicky to own something unique within her local community:

Sue: T-shirts are what, one fifty, two pound, jumpers ( ) three pound!
Dawn: there’s a place in Nottingham and it’s every item a pound
Vicky: it’s like I didn’t want ( ) when I had ‘im [3 week old] I wanted, I needed more blankets I did so the woman down the road knitted me a load and I went on holiday to Cornwall and I paid twenty seven pound for a Winnie the pooh blanket
Dawn: you plonker!
General: hahahahah
Dawn: just coz it’s Winnie the po::oh
Vicky: the best thing about it nobody in Hathley’s got one. I’m the only one so I was like, yes

[Sure Start focus group]

As Gillies points out, spending is a significant act that communicates the extent to which children are valued: ‘for working class mothers acquiring a high status or much desired item for a child can convey a range of symbolic meanings, heightened by the scarcity of the financial resources required to buy it’ (Gillies, 2007: 129). While expensive purchases may
initially seem counter-intuitive for someone with a low income, Vicky has publicly demonstrated her ‘good’ motherhood and signified that her child is special. Therefore, while money was often a central factor in decision-making around purchases the symbolic played a crucial part, in addition to practical incentives. Jenna offered an account of why she buys expensive shoes for her son:

I say to my son you can have Kickers for school and I set between £80 to £100 for school shoes and the only reason I spend that is because I know they are going to last him the year and if I bought cheaper ones one, he’s not going to wear them and two they’re not going to last him so I might as well spend a hundred pounds and it last him for the whole year. I think I’m good at budgeting, like the Nike ones they will last longer than cheap ones.

[Jenna, Bardon focus group]

Jenna justifies her decision on the grounds of sensible budgeting, as well as the practical acknowledgment that her child would not wear cheaper (non-branded) versions. In various ways then respondents bought their way into the mainstream and by doing so contradicted the labels of ‘poverty’ and exclusion.

Choice

While people experiencing poverty may choose to purchase beyond their resources at times they remain positioned by economic conditions and the limitations that come with this. As Stitt (1994) notes, poverty is bound up with a lack of power and characterised by a gross restriction on access to decision-making that affects one’s life. People in poverty are more likely than the non-poor to become objects of social policy, social security and other regulatory bodies. Individuals and families reliant on benefits are also more likely to be the focus of compulsory training, work and health schemes but while choice is curbed it is not eliminated. Choice may be exerted and demonstrated through purchasing material goods, as discussed above, but also through life choices or by reframing conditions to be sources of personal self worth rather than simply adversity. For example, many respondents demonstrated pride in their ability to budget and juggle their (low) income, and at the same time showed disapproval of those who did not (see Chapter 5). A recent report showed
similarly that 85% of parents felt proud of how they made ends meet (Save the Children, 2006: 3), illustrating that a sense of self-respect in balancing the budget is a familiar outcome for many low income families.

In some cases a deliberate choice was made to prioritise personal satisfaction over economic gains. Martha’s partner’s choice of employment was one example:

Martha: [...] if you look at this area the jobs aren’t going to be as well paid as other areas like ( ) like my partner he works very hard but he’s on the minimum wage↓

M: Right

Martha: but he’s been on other jobs where he’s been better paid than that but he likes this job so he stays there coz he wants to work in an office I mean he’s dyslexic and it’s took him ( ) a lot work to be able to get an office job so he’s happy he works in an office, even though he just gets minimum wage.

[Martha, individual interview]

Although a decision to follow desire rather than budget had its consequences this was nevertheless one that was sometimes made, instant gratification being chosen above longer term planning:

you get your giro and you get excited you know and you blow it and you do get chips and you do have a few beers and stuff and then you know it’s erm you got to pay for that by having a week and a half of nothing, and you knowing that you’re not gonna be going out and looking for money down and under the ( ) settee and you know [...] [Matt, individual interview]

Nicky: [...] coz some people have like all these callers that come to the door coz it’s dead easy to get into debt -

M: yeah

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Nicky: -and people will get into debt won’t they when they’ve not got much, like if it gets to near Christmas or something coz adverts saying oooh you can have these vouchers and you know, I’ve done it and pay ‘em off and you think ‘oh yeah, that’s good’ but then a lot of the places put loads of interest on it and you end up paying a lot, a lot more back than you’ve had so people get into debt so when it comes to buying everyday things they ain’t got enough money [...] 

[Nicky, individual interview]

However, people were also aware that they might be seen as making the ‘wrong’ choices, possibly shown in Nicky’s story of others getting into problems with debt and slipping her own experience into the middle of the narrative. A further example is offered in Lorraine’s account. She had already stated the difficulties she had getting by on JSA and therefore her claim that she knows it’s for everyday costs but that ‘everybody’ uses benefit money to go out is designed to normalise the situation and consequently refute criticism:

[...] I mean I do go out socialising, about once a month, once every six weeks I mean I know that’s not what JSA’s for but I mean everybody does it. 

[Lorraine, individual interview]

The use of ‘choice’ over spending decisions, however, must be used with care as a limited income leads to limited choices. What may appear a ‘choice’ is actually an outcome of straitened circumstances, getting into debt or using money from a minimal budget for occasional socialising is more Hobson’s choice than genuine choice. This is illustrated in the example below:

again it’s that calculating thing, waiting at the bus-stop and then thinking hang on I’ll walk to the next stop and then no bus so you think I’ll walk on and then if I walk to town I’ll save the bus fare you know so I ended up walking everywhere and when I was on the employment training and in the end after the first few weeks you’d go
on the Thursday (.) coz that’s when you got your travelling expenses and that would be six quid hah but I’d walk you see and then I’d make the six quid.

[Matt, individual interview]

The decision by Matt to walk was made on the basis of money in both cases. A claim of ‘choice’ can only be sustained if there is a genuine alternative rather than a calculation based on lack of funds.

Opposing Stigma: Subjective Spaces of Self Worth

Apart from being residents of a particular place respondents did not express perceptions of themselves as a wider ‘group’. An assumption of similarity, however, was often assigned to them by others based on stereotypes which identified them as belonging to a ‘type’: because of where they lived, how they spoke, what they looked like or because of claiming benefits. Many people in the study mentioned occasions when they felt they had been treated with disdain:

You do what you have to do. You have to go and sign on, you have to go and sign on but you shouldn’t have to erm ( ) have people look down their nose just because you are asking ( ) for help and that’s what I think poverty is ( ) and they feel like they’re down there, they are the scum of the earth.

[Fred, individual interview]

It is interesting to note that Fred changes the pronoun from a description of his own experience into one of a general other (claimant), which places him in a different position to ‘them’. It appears hard for him to perceive himself as someone who might be viewed as ‘scum’, even within his own analysis. Fred’s experience of being placed or seeing others placed in a derogatory category was not isolated:
the everyday experience of it [having no work or money], the feelings ...the feeling of going to sign on for instance and having to be ( )
judged and scrutinised in some way just to get your little bit of money
....going in feeling ohh...[...] If they make one little mistake with your
claim you have to spend hours and hours and hours on the phone trying
to get through and then being talked to like shit.

[Matt, individual interview]

The experience of claimant, frequently analogous to the notion of ‘sponger’, has been an
enduring and well-documented discourse within the public realm (Golding and Middleton,
1982). Indeed people appear to be less likely to demonstrate tolerance toward benefit
claimants than in previous decades. The latest British Social Attitudes (Taylor-Gooby and
Martin, 2008) reveals that more than half (54%) of people surveyed thought that
unemployment benefits were too high and so discourage people from finding work, up from
a third of people twenty years ago. A Public Attitudes Survey (2003) also found that 4 in 5
people agreed with the statement that ‘many people falsely claim benefits’(cited in Hall and
Pettigrew, 2007: 22). Within this social context a difficulty exists of retaining ones dignity
in the face of being a claimant. Walker (1993) argues that stigma comes from the social
security system itself, fraud being an ever-present accusation for those claiming benefits:

The frequent sniping at the easy claimant target inevitably has an
impact on how claimants perceive themselves and how they are
perceived by others. It leads to a sense of inferiority among claimants
and a sense of suspicion both by staff who administer the scheme and
by the general public (Walker, 1993: 151).

Recent research also concluded that it was ‘the actions and attitudes within external agencies
which had knocked people’s confidence and discouraged them from progressing rather than
encouraging them’ (Orr et al, 2006: 29). However, people in the study, although clearly
aware of the populist idea of the claimant as ‘benefit fraudster’, sidestepped the ‘sponger’
label as applicable to them. It seemed that everyone knew of someone who knew someone
who had deceived the social and even though respondents appeared to believe these stories,
and indeed added to them with examples of their own (especially within focus groups), no
one identified themselves as ‘cheating’ in anyway and instead rationalised their own actions
as necessary to get by. The description below is indicative of the exchanges within focus groups that involved discussions about social security benefits; stories which often displayed their right to social security benefits, and justifications for undertaking informal work, compared to other people’s cheating and greed:

Wendy: I know people that, I know people that get money like er invalid care and all this thing for nothin’ an’ you know they dupe the social-

Sharon: That’s it. But they’re not the ones that get caught but if you’re tryin’ to help out your family by I don’t know, doin’ a couple of hours a week cleanin’ you can guarantee that you’re the one that’s nailed for it, get these that are gettin’ 400-500 pound a week for this that n’ there’s nothing else wrong with ‘em

[RestART focus group]

But a lot, a lot of the young kids er like teenage kids they just see how easy to get a place and to get money off the social so they just think it’s, they just think it’s whopeedo, I’ve heard some of them when I’ve gone to take my slips in, they’ve been standin’ outside going, ‘oh at least I don’t have to drag myself to work’ and I just sit there and I think [makes a face] but then you’ve got some who really want to get up and go and work and that...

[Michelle, RestART focus group]

Such a construction of others as ‘benefit cheats’ not only displays respondents’ awareness of stereotypes but also confirms their status in opposition to such stereotypes, as rightful claimants, a position that allows for moral and self worth.

Nonetheless, while a sense of entitlement avoided potential feelings of inadequacy that might come from being a claimant, perceptions and treatment of them in the public sphere were less easy to remedy and respondents encountered humiliation because of other people’s perceived behaviour towards them:
I think people see me pushing a pushchair and think ‘oh she looks young, she’s got a baby, no husband, lives on her own, if they’d met me they’d you know but it’s a stereotype, she wants more kids, wants more money but I just want to be me.

[Amy, individual interview]

I haven’t heard of social exclusion but I think they are talking about people like me, a single dad. People constantly look at you funny.

[Nathan, individual interview]

Although people in the study were largely critical of other areas in relation to their own there was also a consciousness that by living on an estate, especially one viewed as a ‘problem’ estate by non-residents, marked them out. Residency, as a publicly stigmatised identity, consequently had implications for self due to stereotypes encountered:

Round ‘ere, it’s stupid but I got friends from Hampton [another estate in the town] and they won’t come here after dark. Won’t come ‘ere in the day some of ‘em hahah.

[Tim, individual interview]

Some people look right down at us [residents] and think we we’re like scum.

[Amy, individual interview]

mmm, social exclusion, I think probably they’re are talking about they’re trying to put, ( ) do up this area, I mean we’ve been approached [at Sure Start] by people who want to do crafts and she came and she thought we knew nothing right and I hounded her so much, not in a nasty way because she assumed that I’m nothing , she assumed I didn’t know what I was doing […] And she, she assumed because we lived in Cravendale....we knew nothing and she said ‘oh, you know a lot more than when I first walked in r::oom’ and I thought and that’s that’s why I handed her those questions and and >I was really impressed with myself< because people do assume I’m
not very clever because of where I live and I, you know I got, I had children young.

[Martha, individual interview]

Jenkins acknowledges that ‘Identification by others has consequences; it is often the capacity to generate those consequences which matters’ (1996: 23). People found themselves subject to the judgemental gaze of others, not evaluated on their own merits but on stereotypes based on area and class. Such an awareness of stigma may lead people to ‘manage information about potentially stigmatising circumstances within their social interactions’ (Hooper et al, 2007: 32). This point seemed to be demonstrated by Martha, who was clearly anxious not to be regarded as stupid (as seen earlier), an association she relates to her (and others’) residency on a particular estate. As Hanley’s recent analysis notes, the reputation of social housing in the public imagination serves to instil stereotypes and fear:

In newspapers and on television, every reference to a council house is prefaced with the word ‘tough’ [...] it does its stigmatizing work, as intended. Estates are dangerous, they imply: don’t visit them, and whatever you do, work as hard as you can so you don’t have to live on them. All the people who live on estates are failures, and failure is not only contagious but morally repugnant. Any connection between the physical, economic and social isolation of council estates and the sometimes desperate behaviour of their tenants is ignored, or dismissed or laughed at, because that’s what they’re for: to contain the undeserving, un-useful poor (Hanley, 2006: 15).

Just as residency was cited as a source of support and friendship for many people its identification as a liability and a source of stigma was also acknowledged:

I don’t actually put Cravendale on my address [when applying for jobs], I just put, 301, Leafield Avenue, Craddon, Notts. I never put Cravendale on my address because, because I know what it used to be like down here. See, this place used to be what was the worst part of this area. Especially this bit behind the shops but the council’s actually come in and done all these up. [John, individual interview]
During one focus group a participant suggested the word disadvantaged, instead of deprived, as a term that might be less stigmatising but this was questioned by another participant:

Jenny:   mmm, I think the word disadvantaged doesn't help either
        I think in the education system either. If you're classed
        as a child from a disadvantaged area, home or
        background ( ) people probably have low expectations of
        you...I sometimes wonder as well if in the terms of
        disadvantage as you grow up and apply for jobs and
th[ings-

Barbara:   [You feel it!

[Ashton focus group]

One way of refusing a stigmatised identity was about becoming the namer rather than the named. This was achieved by verbal criticism and abuse of organisations and authority figures. The job centre and the tax credits were frequently said to be ‘not knowing what they were doing’ or ‘messing things up’ and more abusive language was used to describe significant people in daily life in positions of power:

Sharon:   Because you see he [ex-head teacher] screwed it up and
        then >she [current headteacher] stepped in and
        she’s screwin’ it up as well<
[general]  hahahaha
M:       right
Sharon:  she’s an arsehole
June:    in yer face
[ResART focus group]

The gaffer, he’s a fuckin’ idiot! I got let go and he don’t know his
arse from his elbow!
[Fred, individual interview]
Being critical of others was a means of forging spaces of authority for respondents over people that represented authority over them and as such was a fundamental part of maintaining self-esteem.

There was clearly a familiarity with stereotypes and stigma for respondents, both perpetuating them and of being on the receiving end, even if speakers attempted to distance themselves from the consequences by talking in terms of ‘other people’. A further way of bringing about a more positive sense of identity and self worth was to promote alternative, available subjectivities. As Dominelli and Gollins (2005) (cited in Dominelli, 2005) note, ‘marginalized individuals draw on a whole range of strategies and knowledge in everyday interactions to empower themselves and highlight subject agency in negotiating social inclusion and exclusion’ (2005: 15). One such strategy was to focus on elements that were shared across socio-economic boundaries and were a source of social and personal worth, that of being a ‘good’ parent and worker as well as identifying and criticising those who were not.

**The Good Parent**

Parenting is primarily the business of parents and the Government does not want to interfere with that principle. But where parents are unwilling, or unable to meet their responsibilities we must ensure that they are challenged and supported to do so (Respect Task Force, 2006: 17).

Children are increasingly the focus of ‘help’ through social policy as well as the subject of disciplinary measures, using the educational and criminal justice systems to place restrictions on their public and private behaviour. The responsibility for ‘failure’ (educational and behavioural) has moved away from institutions, placing greater emphasis on individuals’ (ir)responsibilities, such as ‘deficient’ parenting practices and a failure of parents to meet their responsibilities. This context is significant for respondents; focus groups were predominantly mothers and the majority of respondents in the study were parents, many of whom were the focus of Sure Start initiatives, the premise of which is to improve parenting practices within ‘disadvantaged’ areas.
Inevitably then notions of being a ‘good’ parent, especially in the face of accusations of ‘inadequacy’ (poverty), came up in discussions. It was clear that parenting was an important role for people and often a subjectivity that they advanced in their narratives. Research has shown that motherhood especially has been seen as inextricably linked to self worth for working class women in difficult financial circumstances. As Gillies (2007) study found, ‘Caring for children was prioritised and highly valued in the context of hardship, struggle and disrespect’ (2007: 142). Recent research takes this one stage further and argues that defensive investments in identity as a parent reflect lack of alternatives as a result of poverty (Hooper et al, 2007: 102). The reasons behind respondents’ privileging of the parental role are multifaceted and it was clear that it was significant for them to be considered ‘good parents’.

One way in which they exhibited that they were ‘good’ was by demonstrating that their children’s interests were paramount. David Smith notes the impact of consumer capitalism, imbuing children with increasingly materialistic attitudes in which, ‘participation in fads and fashions becomes a crucial marker of inclusion in to peer groups’ (Smith, 2005: 126). His research found a frequent theme among parents was a sense of inadequacy and guilt if they couldn’t deliver their children’s requests. Clearly, within a limited income, parents in this study could not always supply many of the heavily promoted and culturally expected ‘must-have’ items and entertainments available and although they generally stated that their children did not go without, their accounts often contradicted this. Part of adopting a position as a ‘good’ parent but not having the ability to provide economically then was to shield their children from the consequences of a low income by going without items they needed themselves in order to provide for their children, a familiar strategy for parents on a low income (Middleton, 1997). Danielle’s words epitomise this situation:

I mean like at the minute I’m pregnant and so I’m growing out a lot of my clothes, sixteen week pregnant, some of me clothes aren’t fitting me and I’d sooner my kids have new stuff than me personally buy meself new things and stuff like that but it’s not a choice of like ( ) it’s like when the kids they rip their clothes up and I’ve got two

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3 The ethnographic research was conducted with people on a low income living on a south London estate.
boys and they’re really boisterous and I think clothes do rip quite
easily, erm so I think that they need them more than me coz mine
aint ripped they’re just a bit ( ) hah a bit tight so...

[ Danielle, individual interview]

There was a clear strain in the position of being a parent on a low income. Parents’ accounts
demonstrated the seemingly contradictory position of protecting their children from the
consequences of a lack of resources whilst also declaring that their children did not miss out:

I’m always strapped ( ) always the bills, the money you get on
income support and things like that, it’s not enough to pay the
bills...So I have to save up a bit each week for school uniforms.
Me> I’m not bothered, I go to second-hand shops for my clothes<
but, but the girls, they need it...they don’t go without, I’d rather go
without than have the girls go without.

[Nathan, individual interview]

However, despite their best efforts there was a realisation that inevitably their children were
affected by a low income, although this was often framed as a temporary situation and there
was always an expectation that the future would bring better prospects or that their children
still had a better childhood than their own:

I’d take the kids out more [if had more money], that worries me, the
kids, I feel sorry for the kids. See they used to have their family
allowance [Child Benefit] go into the bank, course they can’t any
more, the money’s not there now. I feel awful but when I catch up with
the bills I can start it up again.

[ Terri, individual interview]

Sue: I don’t w- I can see that my kids miss out ( ) money to
take them places ( ) or like to do ( ) dancing, or
horse riding
( ) things like that see I missed out on that as we::ll
Dawn: yeah, I did

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Sue: so I, I mean I look back and I think my children have got a better life than probably what I had ( ) I, I buy them things because I didn’t have anything I mean, I had one pair of jeans when I was younger coz we we I don’t know maybe, maybe we were in poverty coz ..I dunno but there weren’t the cheap shops then the Primarks you always had to search between the expensive ones.

[Sure Start focus group]

The mention of horse riding and dancing can be seen as aspiring to activities undertaken by many middle class children. However, such activities are a costly on-going financial obligation. Whilst one-off purchases for children might be possible when the money was available, such a commitment was often beyond the respondents in the study. However, although Sue acknowledges her children may miss out she still sees their childhood as favourable when compared to her own childhood experience. On the other hand Danielle feels that her children have missed out more than her and recent difficult experiences (including homelessness) have influenced what she desires for her children:

I, I do feel like I miss out on a lot but er I think what it is is erm that that my kids miss out on a lot more than I do coz I feel like I’ve experienced my childhood, I’ve, my childhood’s over and done with so I want to look at theirs now, making it as happy and as peaceful as possible.

[Danielle, individual interview]

The expense of schools trips and school uniforms came up spontaneously in discussions in three of the focus groups. Other activities, such as going to the leisure centre or extra-curricula lessons and days out were all mentioned as (economically) out of reach. One question in the individual interviews expressly asked what people would do if they had more money. A number of activities relating to their children were mentioned: going swimming, going on holiday, to the zoo, Alton towers (theme park) or Disneyland Paris were cited as examples. Such prospects for their children, potentially seen as ‘expected’ within a middle-class framework of parenting, were not about a poverty of aspiration but a poverty of
possibilities. Parents wanted the best for their children and it was often the material, financial or emotional support that was lacking, not the motivation to provide and aspire.

Part of being a ‘good’ parent for many respondents was consciously separating out money for their children’s needs and wants, now and in the future. Putting aside money each week for treats, such as sweets or toys, or more long-term financial arrangements, such as trust funds (using the government’s child trust fund and money from relatives) were important to parents. However, it should be noted that the amounts of money saved were often modest sums.\(^{36}\)

but he’s, he’s [her eldest child] had his [bank account] for over a year and a half, his money, and he’s got over a hundred pounds.

[Nicky, individual interview]

Sue: I’ve got a normal bank account which was set up, set up just after they were born and I get like five pound each from out my account and goes straight in their account and now, they got more money than I have! It’s like ( ) but at least it will be something for them [when they-

Vicky: [when they want to go to college↑ or owt]

Sue: -I mean I’m not gonna let them have that-

Dawn: [for them to get on the property ladder you know in the, in the ye-

Sue: [-it might be a couple of thousand by the time they are eighte::en, nineteen.

[Sure Start focus group]

Inevitably when money is short shielding children from financial hardship is not enough and in reality sometimes it is children’s money that goes into the family spending pot:

\(^{36}\) According to figures from the Children’s Mutual, a children’s savings organisation, around 50 per cent of families make regular additional contributions to their children’s savings plans, compared with around 18 per cent before the Children’s Tax Fund scheme was launched in April 2005. The average monthly contribution into children’s savings plans is £24 a month (Daley, 12 May, 2008).
I took this one [photo of child's money box on bed] to show that, and we don’t do this a lot, hardly ever but like when we have been really tight then we have had to take money out of his [child's] money box. We will try to put it back and he’s only little so it’s not like he knows or anything, you know but () like we needed it and that was the only money we had.

[Matt, individual interview]

Despite seeing themselves as good parents, respondents, especially the mothers in the study, were aware of surveillance from authorities that may perceive them in other ways. One example was Nicky, who was fined £100 for her son’s non-attendance at school. Nicky felt that she had been a good mother, getting her son to the bus stop and attending school meetings about his truancy. She was humiliated by the process of having to go to court and then be subject to voluntary parenting classes, of which she commented, ‘they are not really voluntary are they? I have to go and sit there and smile and listen to all the bullshit’. She was upset and angry that accepting the judgment and paying the fine meant accepting she was a ‘bad mother’ but that she had no recourse in the law as she had been told that if she challenged it in court the fine might increase to £1000, a sum beyond her reach. A further example was the fear that everyday childhood accidents might be interpreted as abuse:

Vicky: and you feel bad takin’ them to walk in

Sue: yeah yeah It was really weird ()I had to take my eldest, we had to take her over to the () L***** Royal† because she was being sick and she wasn’t fully with it and you sort of sat there thinking what are they going to think of us -

[...]

Sue: what, what are they going to think you’ve done to your kid ...they got the bruise on them

Kelly: my kids fall over, here, there and everywhere, [they’re covered in bruises-

Dawn: [and somebody probably thinks-
Vicky: and then you have to explain if they go swimming or owt, the teachers see bruises on cm you've got to explain to that teacher where they come from!

[Sure Start focus group]

She [her daughter] hurt her hand the other week, well it looked really bad and I thought 'shall I just run it under the tap' because you knew they might think, well ( ) >but I phoned my dad in the end and took her to the A and E <

[Amy, individual interview]

One of the key objectives of Sure Start is to support 'early bonding between parents and their children, helping families to function and enabling the early identification and support of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties' (Sure Start, 2002: 19). It has been argued that Sure Start pathologises parents within the Sure Start areas, 'characterizing risk as residing, at least proximally, in parents and parental behaviour' (Clarke, 2006: 717). While this may be an underlying tenet of the Sure Start programme it was not one apparent to parents in this study who, without exception, saw it as a valuable resource for themselves and their children, one that reinforced their perception of themselves as good parents.

One aspect of being a good parent was about protecting their children from harm and bullying. Parents were well aware of the aggression or isolation that their children might experience if they were made to feel different by looking different, some experiencing the harsh realities of standing out themselves. Vicky's experience was not an isolated example, but a recurring narrative or at least an expressed fear for respondents:

when I went to school I used to like, coz I ( ) they always say ( ) hhh coz we didn't wear top-name clothes when we was at school coz my mother said what's the point, it's not worth it, so we used to go to school in normal clothes and we got, we got beat up like mad we did, I got beaten up (.) three times after school coz I didn't have new clothes on they said I was a tramp [...] 

[Vicky, Sure Start focus group]
A concern with appearance was not merely a case of avoiding peer exclusion by ‘fitting in’ (as outlined in Ridge, 2002) but of protection from emotional and physical harm. Parents went to great lengths to make sure their children were well clothed, often with designer wear, in order to keep their children safe.

Another way in which parents in the study situated themselves as ‘good’ parents, thus generating positive self-worth, was by invoking a discourse of ‘bad’ parents, who neglected their children both physically and in terms of responsibility toward them. Respondents described such parents and then positioned themselves oppositionally. Throughout the study children that they knew, who might be considered as in ‘poverty’ (wearing scruffy clothes and so forth), were suspected of neglect by their parents who spent money on drink and drugs (see Chapter 7). They therefore distanced themselves from negative parallels, for example Kelly’s response to one of the child poverty campaign pictures (appendix 4, image 3):

the lads looking all mean and moody with the ( ) fags hanging out their mouth and so on that’s the way they’re brought up because if you look at any of our kids, none of ours look like that!

[Kelly, Sure Start focus group]

Wendy demonstrates how she is a responsible parent by describing the actions of ‘bad’ parenting:

I mean people say a lot of time when kids go off the line, you know off the rails blame the parents, it’s not always the parent’s fault d’you know what I mean. I was saying to Harry last night, my husband, erm the fact that I’m quite, er this word that I can’t remember, er protective, over my kids and even tho John’s 14 I have to know where he is and what he’s doing and what time he’ll be in, and we was on about erm, we was comin’ back from Tesco’s one day last week and it was a school night, and it was half past ten! And there was kids of John age and younger knocking about round the shops. I says to Harry you know, ‘what are the parents doing and why are they in their houses’ you know what I mean, coz I think my
kids are in the house and I know where they are and a lot of time that’s the parents fault they’re not sayin to the kids you should be in and they should be telling them this right from beginning not just when they get to fifteen.

[Wendy, RestART focus group]

Listening to people it became clear that avoiding the snakes rather than necessarily going up the ladders was significant in how they saw themselves in terms of their accomplishment as parents. As one respondent noted, her son had not been permanently excluded from school, had not got a criminal record, a drug habit, knocked anyone up and was not ‘robbing’. Thus, he had got through the trickiness of late teenagehood ‘successfully’. She considered avoiding the potential pitfalls as an accomplishment in itself. To some extent parents appeared to adjust their ambitions towards their children to what might be achievable. In this way they cannot be said to have ‘failed’ as a parent (very often for mothers in the study this was their full-time role). The aspirations may be considered ‘low’ by middle-class (that is to say ‘mainstream’) standards but the ability to achieve them realistic. For many better off parents’ material and local environmental factors are unproblematic and therefore not an issue of concern. For many parents in the study keeping their children protected from harm, or from standing out, was a priority and this was an achievement and a sign of good parenting.

The Worker

The subjectivity of ‘paid worker’ as a desirable one was apparent in the research. However, because the majority of respondents were female and mothers of young children this gender dimension was reflected in the research, with more talk based around parenting (as the primary role of women in the study) and as a traditionally positive role for working class women (Gillies, 2007; Skeggs, 1997).

The government have consistently promoted work as the best route out of poverty. Paid work is seen as delivering not only income but also a sense of social and self worth and is currently bound up with the notion of good citizenship; ‘hard-working families’ have become the legitimate subjects and objects of government policy. Respondents, especially
male interviewees, were often anxious to promote themselves as workers and providers, even if they were unemployed, demonstrating that promoting a subjectivity of ‘worker’ does not necessarily mean entering paid employment. Assertions of an identity of ‘worker’ is one that fits into a longer history of the breadwinner ideology and public discourses of masculinity:

it were a blow when it went [made redundant] it was the one job I ever had – after the forces... You knew where you stood then, came out of that, got a really good job and now ( ) now I can’t get a job.
[John, individual interview]

Once you got your housing benefit and your JSA and you look at these jobs, and it’s not like you’d want to do most of them anyway but I wanna get a job but you look at them and the pay is so low, it’s such a gamble to take a job [...] coz your gonna end up no better off and if you leave it voluntarily lose your benefits.
[Matt, individual interview]

I mean a lot of people are unemployed through their own fault or their own doing, not through genuine cases like me, go to work and then all of a sudden gov’ner say’s ‘you’re finished’, not gave you no reason, didn’t like your face and then your out and then that puts the mockers on or puts a barrier up for anybody else who wants to employ you because ‘well why?’ ‘dunno, didn’t give me a reason’.
[Fred, individual interview]

Some people clearly had a feeling of being accused of not trying hard enough and thus many people wanted to prove their worth:

they think if your poor it’s your own bloody fault, it’s like, pull your socks up and get on with it. Stop moaning. I think that’s what people think.
[Matt, individual interview]
The only male interviewee who talked about himself more in terms of a parent and carer than a worker was a lone father of two pre-school children, although paid work was clearly important to him too. In fact he felt proud that he was coping as a single parent but was also about to undertake part-time employment and was quite disparaging about those he saw as sitting around ‘doing nothing’. Work, both voluntary and paid, was also important to some of the female respondents, but many of the women had young, pre-school children and were focused on caring for them rather than seeking full-time paid work. Martha, though, clearly felt strongly about proving her social and self worth as a ‘worker’:

People say to me you’ll go to university and you still won’t get a job well, I think that’s a working class attitude for some people anyway. I think some people think it doesn’t matter how hard you work but I think you gotta work hard because what’s the point? ( ) I like to work hard and do something and get somewhere and that’s why I like volunteering coz I’m more thought of like and it makes me feel you know, like I’m important and things like that.

[Martha, individual interview]

Some of the mothers expressed a desire to undertake paid work but identified the cost of childcare and the consequent remuneration from paid work as a significant barrier:

Michelle: and if I was to take a permanent job >it wouldn’t be worth me working there coz I just wouldn’t earn enough to pay me work and everything else<.

Chris: and then there’s childcare

Michelle: yeah, then there’s childcare after school coz the school don’t finish ‘till half past 3 ( ) so your sort of stuck aren’t you, like that, in a circle all the time.

[ResART focus group]

In doing so they place themselves in the position of potential workers but their ability to earn enough income and juggle caring responsibilities, which they identify as theirs, means that to do so would often put them in a worse financial position than if they chose not to work or undertook casual jobs to top up the household income.
Paid work for many was not guaranteed or regular. Agency work and paper rounds (a job for adults) were identified as sources of income, albeit precarious. However, such work did not allow social networks to be developed in the same way as permanent employment and did not offer opportunities for better prospects. Nevertheless, such work was often crucial in terms of family revenue.

**Positioning Poverty: The How of Doing Poverty**

This section will outline how people positioned themselves within the study by exploring aspects of the manner in how accounts are constructed in talk. Langenhove and Harre (1999) argue that ‘deliberate self-positioning’ can be done by stressing one’s agency. Thus, by referring to one’s point of view or to events in one’s biography one retains authorship over those events. How people said what they said and the implications for subjectivity and claims about the self and others will be considered below. This, however, is more of an indicative look at how language use is employed in positioning, specifically how ‘not being poor’ was managed in talk, rather than being a comprehensive analysis.

**Reported Speech**

One frequent occurrence in respondents’ talk was a phenomenon known as ‘reported speech’. This involves drawing on others’ words, quoting what they may think (or supposed words and thoughts) and their points of view. Reported speech is often connected to assessments and may be used by speakers for their own purpose, such as endorsing a particular point or counteracting criticism. Reported speech may also be used to discredit the original source (or imagined ‘source’) by making disreputable statements sound like objective accounts. As Basso, ([1979] in Buttny, 2004) proposes, ‘Using the utterances of others seems to offer rich material for understanding how members construct a ‘portrait’ of the other’ (2004: 96). It appears that this was often the case when respondents wanted to distance themselves from others who may have been identified as in ‘poverty’:

Dawn: it’s a lot to do with the parents and I think a lot a er I mean
you do see people and it's hard to tell whether they're
do they're in poverty or whether that's how the parents
choose to bring them up† because [ you know
Kelly: [or they put they’re money on something else
Dawn: yeah exactly! They might say ‘oh gotta a bit of money
we’ll buy shoes or we’ll buy a packet of fags and a
bottle of whiskey’ you don’t know do you whether
they’re, what they’re choosing to spend the money on

[Sure Start focus group, reported speech in bold]

It's what any parent should do, make sure the children are sorted and
the bills are paid first before they decide to do something but I can't
stand people who will turn round and say ‘oh, I just gone out and
bought 200 fags, buy dvds, oh, I went out clubbing the other
night and now I got no money for my electric and I've only got
36p’, you shouldn’t have bought the fags! You shouldn’t have
bought the DVDs and you shouldn’t have gone out clubbing!
[Nathan, individual interview]

Buttny (2004) notes that most reported speech is, at least implicitly, not merely commenting
but evaluating. Such assessments serve to discursively position oneself and others (2004: 98). Portraits of ‘out-member’ groups are often ridiculous or critical and the above examples
contain both elements. The aspect of exaggeration in the accounts provide an ‘extreme case
formulation’ of the situation and thereby dramatise the point, possibly accentuating the
distance between ‘them’ (the undeserving) and ‘us’ (the good parent/claimant) as well as
being an element of effective story-telling.

**Laughter**

Whilst many respondents spoke about having financial problems, the admittance of being
‘hard up’ and, more especially, of being ‘poor’ or in ‘poverty’ was often a ‘troubled telling’
(Jefferson, 1984) and one often managed in the conversation by laughter or other strategies
involving humour. The use of laughter may have been employed to mitigate the admission
of what was, for many respondents, an embarrassing or even stigmatising set of
circumstances. This can be seen in Danielle’s response to being asked about ever being ‘hard up’:

I would say I’ve been hard up, ha ha *a lot* hah hah ( ) Yeah, well like, for instance erm recently, I got a new partner, who started claiming ( ) benefits, we was, they was deducting forty two pound a week out the benefits which was like eighty pound a fortnight, less than what we were getting, we were getting ninety six and we should have been getting a hundred and eighty pound! [...] it’s hard... and now I’ve just got an house as well so ( ) coz erm I was living in a hostel and I had to pay rent on the hostel so I got in arrears with that and erm just, nearly all the time I’m hard up ( ) so...

[Danielle, individual interview]

While Danielle acknowledges money problems she does so by softening the self-exposure of such an admission with laughter. However, it is only in the first instance of ‘admittance’ that laughter is used to soften the troubled telling, Danielle then goes into detailed account and a further declaration of being hard up all the time. A further example of using humour to counteract the seriousness of admitting poverty can be seen in Julie’s talk. She had just related a story from her childhood in which she describes conditions of poverty although she didn’t think so at the time:

M: what about now, is it different now?
Julie: No, still poor hah ha ha, I am poor ha ha erm ( ) erm in what way do you mean now?
M: in terms of like erm ( ) money being tight...

[Julie, individual interview]

The possibility of social criticism or humiliation was also headed off with laughter:

I think the lowest moment I had was when I bought four cans of better-buy larger for 98p which I paid for with 2p’s ha ha ha, and the person behind me was you kno...[pulls face]

[Matt, individual interview]
I didn’t plan to have a child at seventeen you know, how can I make my life ten million times harder hahaha

[Martha, individual interview]

Within focus groups disclosing ‘poverty’ was often embedded in a humorous story:

Sue: [...] we’d bought ourselves while we were still living at home but things like sofa-bed, fridge, freezer, cooker, we had a little dinky two ring belling cooker

Vicky: that’s what my sister’s got now

Sue: heeheh I loved it! And then I came to do () Christmas dinner () put me chicken out-

Kelly/Dawn: hahahah haha

Sue: -I put me chicken in, two hours later

Vicky: not cooked!

Sue: it’s like G:::od [comedy voice]

Such stories were sometimes joint tellings, in which participants in the conversation share experience through shared humour:

Sue: we got a load of our stuff from there when we first moved in together ermmm 9 years ago now, yeah and >we needed everything↑ ( )

Dawn: yeah start from-

Sue: erm ( ) we were, we were >we were *poor

Dawn: Very poor

Kelly: very, *very *poor [comedy voice]

Sue: *at *that *ti:me ha we were

Dawn: yeahhhh, we were*

Sue: We *were*

[Sure Start focus group]
Discursive psychologists argue that in making claims about the self, speakers will often tell stories. In a general sense storytelling can be understood as a form of accounting (Gergen, 1994: 186). The claims within narrative stories are not to be understood solely in terms of their content but in terms of the ways that they are being used to justify, blame, criticise, account and thus to position oneself and others in the course of interaction. Personal stories can ‘attend to motive and accountability, to alternative readings, alternative identities’ (Edwards, 1997: 282). The uses of narrative stories, such as the jointly constructed one about being ‘poor’ above, are another means used for making argumentative points. Sue was displaying that they were aware of poverty but were not poor now. This confirmed her claim that poverty was having ‘nothing’ (a consensus that had appeared in the focus group) and also that she had endured hardship and had overcome it and therefore by implication so could others. Also, by offering a past experience of being ‘poor’, respondents demonstrated they were suitable candidates to talk about the issue with authority and also to deny that they were actually in poverty now and hence avoid the negative connotations that such a description would engender. Edwards (1997) argues that where to start a story is ‘a major, and rhetorically potent, way of managing causality and accountability’ (1997: 277). By starting from the admittance, ‘we were poor’ indicates an extreme position, which was then overcome with help of relatives and by their own actions.

Stories about poverty were not used merely to prioritise the agency of the storyteller, in terms of overcoming hardships, but also to place blame. Mini-biographical accounts of others’ supposed lives and life-styles were used as illustrations of misdoings by those seen as ‘poor’, a position which sustained the speaker’s beliefs in the non-existence of poverty in Britain:

you know when they’re out and they’re begging and they’ve really
got a big house and a Mercedes ( ) so you don’t know who you can
trust really do you?
[Terri, individual interview]
Reports offered also positioned the speaker in a good light, as a genuine claimant, compared to defiant benefit fraudsters, a staple pariah of the populist British press (see p170). In addition, stories possibly also served an allegorical function. People were aware of stereotyped versions of poverty; a hyperbolic representation of what poverty and who the poor were created a greater distance between themselves and the notion of ‘poverty’ they had created.

**Conclusion**

Available subjectivities within mainstream discourses of poverty are often passive or stigmatised ones. Removing oneself from alignment with a ‘poor identity’, as most respondents did, and seeking more positive subjectivities, such as ‘good’ parent or worker, has implications for self-worth and social identity. It is within the matter-of-fact accounts of daily life that hardships were revealed by people, not with an identification of themselves as someone in ‘poverty’; people did not feel defined by their ‘poverty’, nor did they want to be. However, while respondents often side-stepped subjectivities arising out of a discourse of poverty it was a position that was sometimes imposed by others and therefore had repercussions for their sense of self. Nonetheless, respondents also used stereotypes about and against others, possibly the use of which reinforced social and identity boundaries with people that might be seen as like them; a separation of ‘us’ from ‘them’ is all the more important if ‘us’ is seen as ‘them’ by outsiders. This chapter has also briefly looked at some of the strategies used by participants to discursively manage a label of ‘poverty’ and to (re)position themselves favourably, accomplished through utilising laughter, storytelling and reported speech.
Section III: Reflections
Chapter 9: Negotiating Labels of Poverty, Deprivation and Social Exclusion

Introduction

Mainstream discourses of poverty have been explored in section one and respondents’ discourses have been examined throughout section two. This chapter will compare and contrast these discourses, beginning by examining overlapping discourses, namely, the mainstream discourses found in respondents’ talk and how far the use of such discourses involved acceptance or renegotiation by respondents. ‘Missing’ discourses, those that may have been expected to appear, will then be examined and discussed. The final section will conclude by exploring the implications of differences in discursive understandings and the dilemmas around ‘poverty’ talk.

Overlapping Discourses

As discussed in Chapter 1, while the potential exists for a variety of meanings in discourse there is in fact a constraint on what can be thought and said within a particular social milieu and within particular discursive structures (Young, 1981). It was predictable therefore that respondents would reproduce some mainstream poverty discourses, although it was also expected that subjective experiences of financial hardship may alter the interpretation of these discourses. There was, however, no strong oppositional discourse or ‘anti-language’ (Halliday in Fairclough, 2001: 75) in respondents’ talk around ‘poverty’ except, arguably, in the denial of its existence in Britain or its relevance to themselves. The frequency of distancing oneself from a label of poverty could be seen as demonstrating the reification of the negative mainstream discourses around it, producing an unwillingness by respondents to interpret their circumstances of being ‘hard up’ or managing’ as being ‘poverty’.

This section will focus on four mainstream poverty discourses utilised by respondents and the extent to which these were straightforwardly reproduced or re-negotiated in talk around poverty:
The division between the deserving and undeserving poor
- Othering the ‘poor’
- Responsibility
- Africa and ‘third world’ poverty

The ‘Deserving’ and ‘Undeserving’ ‘Poor’

As Willig notes, some dominant discourses become naturalised as ‘common-sense’ (2003: 171), a practice that can be seen in respondents’ talk throughout section two. Self-ascribed descriptions involved accommodation of the negative public discourses of poverty in so far as people often accepted these as true and then described themselves oppositionally, in ways that did not frame them as ‘the poor’. Even if there was recognition that stereotypes might be applied to them or their neighbourhoods incorrectly they were willing to use the same stereotypes about others. In general, positions were actively constructed in opposition to a label of ‘poverty’ rather than attempting to challenge the negative poverty discourses by producing subjective experiences to show them to be false. This was because poverty talk was about others. Once they had established that they were not the subjects in a ‘poor’ discourse there was nothing at stake and nothing to defend or redefine about ‘poverty’. It was not their battle. Their particular triumphs lay in managing a restricted income so that bills were paid and children did not go without.

It seems therefore, that while direct experience of economic and social marginalisation might have been expected to produce more empathetic understandings of British poverty, this study shows that views expressed were often analogous to the largely negative public discourses, media representations and political rhetoric. Indeed, recent research by The Fabian Society (2005), undertaken with middle-class non-poor respondents, found very similar views expressed to those in this research, with a denial of income poverty in Britain and a considerable lack of compassion for people living in ‘poverty’. Many of the Fabian research respondents used reality programmes such as Wife Swap to validate their beliefs that people on benefits were ‘scrounging’ or had a luxury lifestyle or that parents in poverty wasted their
money on gambling and drink. Similar to respondents in this study, behavioural causes of poverty were not merely prioritised over structural causes, they were seen as the cause.

As identified in earlier chapters the respondents' position as claimants made them vulnerable to accusations of 'sponging' and 'dependency', descriptions that abound in the popular press and within political rhetoric. People in the study could not avoid all of the consequences of claiming benefits, the practicalities of form filling, queuing, delays and mistakes, but they could resist negative valuing by others. This was achieved by dis-identifying with the undeserving 'bad' claimant. As seen in chapter 6 and 7 the dichotomy between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' claimants, those who sat around watching TV, 'doing nothing' or explicitly 'conning the social', was therefore believed to be fact and actively contrasted to the respondents' own situations. They were willing and looking for work or were only doing in-hand work as well as claiming social money because they had to; it was others who were 'defrauding the system and getting away with it'. Despite claiming benefits it was others and not them, who were the illegitimate claimants lambasted in the popular press. As Walker argues, the perpetuation of the 'bad' claimant not only has an impact on entitlement but on how people perceive themselves in relation to such a representation:

> Not only does the stigma associated with claiming deter people from taking up their rights but it subtly discourages potential claimants from thinking that they might be entitled; after all they do not wish to think of themselves as having anything in common with the kind of social security recipients they read about in the newspapers (1993:152).

The enduring mainstream categories of the 'deserving/undeserving poor' and the parallels of deserving/undeserving claimant were reproduced by people in the study, thus maintaining the dualism and the connotations that come from such positionings. Such a distinction was made, however, without placing themselves into a 'poverty' camp. Demarcations were

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37 Wife Swap is a reality TV programme that largely features working class respondents. One couple gained notoriety when they were seen to be living on benefits with their eight children but were later convicted of benefit fraud. The popular press took up the story.

38 The categories of 'deserving' and undeserving' claimants is one reified by the DWP, who recently employed Ipsos MORI research (Hall and Pettigrew, 2007) that used such a distinction in a study exploring public attitudes to social security benefits to endorse forthcoming changes toward an 'active' benefits system.
accomplished through establishing divisions between the ‘genuine’ claimant (themselves) and the ‘sponger’ (others) or between those people who ‘manage’ and those who don’t.

People recognised their material and financial situation as wanting but largely painted themselves in a positive light within this position, one that demonstrated their agency and pro-activeness, even in the face of structural barriers and bureaucratic inefficiencies. ‘Poverty’ however, was not recognised as an accurate description either in relation to conditions or a supposed ‘poor identity’. Other identities, or subjectivities, were more pertinent to people’s lives than a description of their economic position. As explored in Chapter 8, subjectivities promoted were ones that conformed to the culturally dominant norms and hegemonic discourses of ‘good parent’ and ‘good worker’. By emphasising their own self-sufficiency in getting by and their competency as ‘worker’ and ‘parent’ people fought off accusations of the enduring public discourse of dependency, one that they often expressed themselves in relation to the idea of British ‘poverty’. Adopting a discursive location of personal responsibility or externalising blame ensured that one was not at fault for difficult circumstances. In addition, the reformulation of a ‘poverty’ situation (using a conventional definition) into ‘scrimping and scraping’ ‘managing’ and ‘getting by’ served a number of purposes to further disassociate themselves from potential accusations of blame and passive ‘dependency’. Indeed the subjectivities of the good worker and good parent run counter to the supposed characteristics imbued within a dependency discourse. ‘Managing’ was a particularly important concept to respondents (examined in Chapter 7) and served to transform a description of materially bad circumstances into a positive accomplishment. The everyday phraseology of ‘managing’ is one that is culturally recognisable and, to some extent, socially worthy, it indicates stoicism and of being proactive within a situation. People’s discursive power therefore resided in their ability to renegotiate the label of ‘poverty’ as one that was inapplicable and to redefine their position in terms of ‘managing’.

In sum, when respondents described themselves as ‘hard up’ it was without personal blame, no-one in the study stated that their straitened circumstances were in any way due to their own actions or inactions but such a rationale did not apply to others, others who might be seen or claim to be in ‘poverty’; as noted earlier, it was often perceived as their fault for spending unwisely: drinking, smoking, taking drugs or poor budgeting and there was little sympathy with their plight, however similar it may look to the ‘outsider’ to the respondents’ own. In this way categories of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ were reproduced, despite not
being labelled as 'poverty'. The production of such a division also othered those people who were positioned in the category of people ‘not like them’.

**Othered Subjects**

As detailed in Chapter 2 the othering of people in poverty has an extensive history. Such othering does not only occur through the ‘non-poor’s’ attitude towards the ‘poor’ but also through divisions made between types of ‘poverty’ and types of ‘poor’. Respondents formulated people in poverty as ‘other’ in a number of ways, ones that demonstrated their distance from the label. People in poverty were positioned as the exotic other, (examined later), through the classic representation, spectacle even, of the starving African in the ‘third world’. This undoubtedly distanced the meaning and location of poverty to this other place and people whose lives were seen as incomparable to respondents’ own. Another way was to identify people that might be seen as in ‘poverty’ as socially or morally deficient, in terms of not maintaining the social norms of paid employment and standards of ‘decent’ behaviour. The notion that to be ‘poor’ is to be connected to greater social ills than lack of money is common in public discourses, including political rhetoric and the media. A government report on child poverty introduced one section of the document as examining:

> Key public services, both area-based and universal, that contribute to improving poor children’s life chances and breaking cycles of deprivation: early years services, education, parenting support, health services, transport, services to prevent child crime and anti-social behaviour and services to support families experiencing parental offending, domestic violence and parental substance misuse. Many of these involve a focus on poor children living in deprived areas.  
> (H.M.Treasury, 2004: 12)

In one paragraph crime, deviant behaviour stemming from the parental home and the immediate environment, domestic abuse and the misuse of drugs and alcohol are linked to poverty. Although structural aspects of being a resident in a disadvantaged area, such as

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39 Respondents disputed the term poverty if people were seen to be culpable for their situation.
transport, education and health, are included the overwhelming emphasis is on behavioural, even moral, aspects of deprivation. As examined in detail in Chapter 2 many public discourses of ‘poverty’ offer a negative picture, not because of the condition but because of the moral and social implications that a label of poverty brings. Respondents accepted this moral dimension of ‘poverty’ and indeed propagated the mainstream narratives of bad parenting, anti-social behaviour (such as drug and alcohol misuse) and welfare dependency.

An additional aspect in othering those in ‘poverty’ was its association with squalor. This visual yardstick for defining ‘poverty’ was not merely used as a literal description but also as a metaphor for difference. While some poverty researchers in the past, such as Mayhew and Townsend, identified visual features of poverty this is not found in contemporary political or academic discourses. Indeed, pointing to visual differences as an identifier of poverty would be seen as neither scientifically accurate nor appropriate (although it is often implied in the images accompanying government and charity reports). For the respondents ‘poverty’ was on display. Through the visual identification of ‘poverty’ it could be argued that a renegotiation of the othering discourse had taken place. The sheer visibility of ‘poverty’ meant that poverty was obvious and it was obvious it wasn’t them. This display of ‘poverty’ was not only seen as accurate by respondents but also had a symbolic purpose, in terms of construing people’s attitudes by their appearance and manner. Despite the usual denial of the existence of ‘real’ poverty in Britain there was a recognition by respondents that people who might be identified as living in poverty existed, although they were not referred to as ‘poor’ but rather as ‘people that didn’t bother’ or who mismanaged their resources and lives. In this way, respondents, especially those firmly positioned within a discourse of personal responsibility, often presented themselves as superior (in terms of attitudes, aspirations and decision-making) to others within their locality who were seen as not managing.

By making explicit judgements about individuals who were failing to manage, respondents would invoke the ideas underlying the labels of the ‘underclass’ or dependency culture – that people did not want to work, spent money unwisely, had children to acquire housing and were bad parents – without employing the phrases themselves. It appeared that for the respondents such behaviour rested not upon an innate culture or rational response to the benefit system, as proponents of the ‘underclass’ thesis might argue, but rather individuals’ choices based on their own (wrong) value systems. Such an individualising of the ‘underclass’ and ‘dependency’ discourses – that it was a few individuals who behaved
‘wrongly’ rather than ‘them’ (the good claimant/worker/parent) as a whole – may have served to challenge the idea of a homogenous group identity, one to which outsiders might perceive them as belonging to.

Africa and ‘Third World’ Poverty

As discussed in Chapter 6, the study demonstrates that the stereotype of the starving African, without the basic necessities for sustaining life, was perceived to be poverty for many respondents in the study. Such a conceptualisation of poverty, fuelled by media representations and many anti-poverty campaigns that tend to focus on overseas poverty, is ubiquitous within the public imagination. Recent research established that even children identified poverty as, ‘always represented as beggars living on the streets and desperate for food and money’ or people in ‘poorer’ countries, such as Africa (Sutton et al, 2007: 19). Such dominant images of ‘third world’ poverty appear to influence respondents, leading them to make direct comparisons with their own lives. For example, Nicky is obese and refers to the discrepancy between what she considers a conventional image of what poverty looks like and herself:

Nicky: I don’t look very poverty stricken though do I? Not really
[gesticulating to her body].

As she states at another point in the interview, in her view Africa is where real poverty is, a discourse imbued with images of starvation and survival living. To be overweight then is a visual sign of being ‘well-fed’ and as such, the antithesis of ‘poverty’. Such a perception of poverty was one widely accepted by respondents in the study. As noted previously, the representation of the starving African child as a synonym for poverty was frequently the definitive version of what poverty really was. This corresponds with the findings of a number of research studies conducted in Britain (Beresford et al, 1999; Dundee Anti Poverty Forum, 2003; Castell and Thompson, 2007) (outlined in Chapter 3).

40 A divergent position on the link between poverty and obesity exists within medical discourse [see Chapter 8]. However, it is an irony that the visual representation of starvation held by many respondents as the epitome of ‘poverty’ is opposite to the one evoked in the middle class news media and images paraded on daytime TV and sketch shows.
While perceptions of poverty as absolute ‘want’ have links in traditional images of poverty in Britain’s past, they appeared to be largely informed by depictions of famine in African countries, highlighted by popular campaigning since the 1980s and more recently through the Make Poverty History movement in 2004, which pushed for the eradication of absolute poverty and for trade, debt and aid justice in ‘poor countries’. The dominance of the word ‘poverty’ as equating to extreme poverty undoubtedly impacts on how ‘poverty’ is seen in contemporary Britain and, despite respondents’ accounts of material hardship and economic struggle, such a stringent yardstick meant that ‘poverty’ as a description for their own circumstances, was dismissed as inaccurate. In this way, the idea of British poverty, not just relating to them, but as applicable to Britain in its entirety, was seen as a dubious claim. Consequently, the high-profile status given to (child) poverty by government and the recent interest of other major political parties in Britain had not filtered into the poverty talk of people in the study; social policies in this country were not perceived as relating to poverty, despite the use of the word itself.

Responsibility

Responsibility is central in current political discourse in which ‘rights and responsibilities’ are rhetorically connected. Within the current discourse such a notion of rights privileges the status of paid worker. Current political discourse emphasises the behaviour of individuals in terms of their responsibility to the social body, recently framed as the Respect agenda, ‘putting the responsible majority back in charge of their communities’ (Respect Task Force, 2006:1). Implicit, and increasingly explicit, moral judgements about responsibility are being made through social policies, notably in the parenting discourse of New Labour, ones often created on the grounds of addressing child poverty.

Many of the respondents also expressed a belief that (other) people in Britain were responsible for their own financial misfortunes. For those people in the study who said they were in ‘poverty’ (in addition to those who noted hardships) it was always caused by extenuating circumstances, such as unemployment (compounded by age or lack of work.

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41 The Band Aid campaign and Live Aid concert in 1984/85 brought widespread attention to the Ethiopian famine. This focus on African poverty was repeated in 2004 with the Live 8 concerts, closely connected to the Make Poverty History Campaign, conducted before and during the G8 economic summit held in Scotland.
experience) or mistakes with benefit payments. Denying and admitting one’s ‘poverty’ was therefore closely tied up with responsibility (or not) for one’s circumstances. As discussed in chapter 7, a discourse of personal responsibility was one favoured by the respondents, with many people seeing themselves as the source of agency and change in their personal circumstances. Few identified their situations to have arisen from their relationships with structures that discriminate against or marginalise them, although an awareness of problems of access to the labour market in addition to stereotyping and stigma were clear. In this way, the mainstream mantra of rights and responsibility was fairly unequivocally accepted. The re-negotiations that took place accounted for ‘poor’ situations in which people found themselves because of the fault of others, often the ‘helping’ agencies themselves.

While it can be seen that responsibility was a key feature in respondents’ discourse it may be related more to the times we live in than a product of conscious government policy, although the two are interrelated. Some theorists of modernity identify the burden of personal responsibility as a characteristic of living a ‘life of one’s own’ in modern times, as Beck and Beck-Gersheim (2002) argue:

 [...] failure becomes personal failure, no longer perceived as class experience in a ‘culture of poverty’. It goes hand in hand with forms of self-responsibility. Whereas illness, addiction, unemployment and other deviations from the norm used to count as blows of fate, the emphasis today is on individual blame and responsibility. Living your own life therefore entails taking responsibility for personal misfortunes and unanticipated events. Typically, this is not only an individual perception, but a culturally binding mode of attribution (Beck and Beck-Gersheim, 2002: 24).

Currently, groups that hitherto have been traditionally seen as requiring state support, such as people with disabilities and lone parents, are expected to demonstrate their responsibility via paid work. Acknowledging responsibility for one’s life, and for one’s failure, is a contemporary discourse that privileges the individual and their ability for choice and control. Such an individualising discourse is reflected and circulated in government policy and public ‘common-sense’. People in ‘poverty’ are thus positioned as failing in their individual and social obligations to take responsibility, with the notion of disadvantage perceived as an
excuse rather than a reality, one reflected in the respondents’ own talk of others’ behaviour. Such a discourse, perpetuated by people who have the least resources and opportunities to consistently achieve autonomy has worrying implications. Firstly, it may serve to increase the sense of failure, guilt and stigma that people in ‘poverty’ experience and secondly, it offers little opportunity for alternative constructions around responsibility beyond the individual. An emphasis on the individual as responsible for circumstances and for changing circumstances diverts culpability away from wider systems and institutions. As McRobbie argues, ‘self-blame where social structures are increasingly illegible or opaque, serves the interests of the new capitalism well, ensuring the absence of social critique’ (McRobbie, 2002: 521).

**What was Missing?: Gaps in Respondents’ Discourses**

*Introduction*

While it may appear paradoxical to look at what was not said, the gaps in respondents’ talk about poverty adds to our understanding of the limits of current discourses. Some missing elements in talk around poverty, such as the phrase ‘social exclusion’ as a technical and contested expression, may be expected, although its frequent use in highly publicised media campaigns by government would be expected to have made it into at least a heard term, if not understood in detail. Other ‘absences’ in respondents’ discourses, notably the lack of reference to social justice or injustice and connected to this the mention of structural inequality and the omission of a ‘rights-based’ discourse will also be examined below.

**The Absence of Exclusion**

For respondents social exclusion was an unknown and even confusing term, one they rarely connected, and never applied, to themselves. On one occasion, when a personal association with social exclusion was noted, it was as an outsider’s perspective, as seen in Martha’s comment below, which was not an admission of social exclusion but a reflection on what authorities might think of residents:
I’ve heard of something come to think that it’s about people, excluded socially from things like, erm things they can’t access, coz they’re like trying to get us [people attending the children’s centre] to access more erm you know the gym, and dietician, and I think they think we’re excluded from things like that [...] 

[Martha, individual interview, emphasis added]

It may be the case that although people were economically marginalised they did not feel socially marginalised; they felt that they belonged. In part, as seen in chapter 8, this was because people bought their way out of the threat of, or feeling of, exclusion by purchasing mainstream goods that had cachet within their local community. In this way they could be seen to part of the mainstream. Nevertheless, despite feeling subjectively included, respondents did encounter ‘linked and mutually reinforcing’ (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001) problems, characteristic of the government’s definition of social exclusion. Accordingly, the expression is not redundant in charting problematic situations and consequences but it is one that has no conceptual resonance for the people it purports to describe. As identified previously, respondents in the study generally felt part of their local community, many of their friends and family lived locally and were in similar situations and as such ‘exclusion’ did not ring true. Indeed, a feeling of inclusion came from the interdependency between people within neighbourhoods. This importance of cohesiveness between friends and family is noted by Atkinson and Kintrea as a factor that led to a ‘pride in the area that challenged external impressions of the supposed deviance of residents and the sub-normality of everyday life’ (2004: 450). In fact people felt safe and empowered by their local knowledge. People in the study knew who the drug dealers and other ‘undesirable’ characters were and where they lived and as such felt a sense of control over their social environment. However, while some of this sense of power was acted upon, for example, in John’s account of moving on drug dealers, people were more likely to be subject to decisions about their local environment rather than agents. Nonetheless, it was at the level of local knowledge,

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42 This possibly was a reflection of those taking part in the focus groups, many of whom were already involved in their local community through the community centres and Sure Start.
43 For example local people in Hasleigh were consulted over whether their social housing should remain in the care of the local council. Despite results of a survey revealing that the vast majority wanted rents to remain with the local council the county council permitted a housing association to take over responsibility. Similarly, residents were not consulted on whether they wanted Children’s Centres in their areas. Although these were popular with respondents they were imposed rather than proposed.
especially that of social connections, that people's sense of security, identity and power rested rather than in actions themselves:

> It's like when you're out you, you know, you see somebody and the kids are like at loggerheads and you say they say I'm gonna get my dad to see you an you say yeah yeah bring im down and you went to school with them and you're like mates at school and like how you doing and the kids are like you know her and your like yeah come in for a cuppa tea.

[Sharon, RestArt focus group]

This local knowledge not only acted at a psychological level but also a stratagem for survival, offering a site for the mutual exchange of resources (Smith, 2005). One example of this was revealed at the time of the Harvest Festival in Hasleigh in which the older residents who received food from the local schoolchildren sold it on cheaply to others residents. More mundane examples included mutual childcare arrangements and sharing lifts to the local supermarket. However, theorists such as Putnam, (2000) argue that a situation of local integration may lead to a distinct form of social capital where the resources available to people from their relationships may often be used to help them 'get by' in difficult material circumstances rather than to 'get on' or get out.

On the other hand, non-recognition of social exclusion, like a rejection of 'deprivation', could be seen as being inured to a state of affairs in which social exclusion or deprivation are merely identified as 'the way things are'. As noted by Wacquant, 'when marginalization becomes part of the order of things, it deprives one of the consciousness of exclusion' (1999: 157). However, Atkinson and Kintrea offer an alternative reading to that of Wacquant:

> There can be an element of reading 'false consciousness' into debates about area effects: the view being that residents of deprived areas do not know that they are deprived and disenfranchised because they are not aware of the opportunities they would have if they lived elsewhere. A recurrent theme was that there were problems in the deprived areas, but they were 'just like anywhere else really'. However, an alternative interpretation is that many residents in the deprived areas are content
with the familiarity and support found in their locality and it would be unwise to suggest that their social relations are impaired or deficient (2004: 452).

Du Toit (2004) questions the premise of ‘social exclusion’, that mainstream society is conceived to be normal and exclusion from it constructed as the problem. He notes a further difficulty with the concept and use of the term, namely that certain groups (such as the ‘workless’) and certain processes are focused upon as excluded or excluding and as such ‘distract attention from the overall and systemic dynamics of inequality, impoverishment, and conflict within those larger formations themselves’ (2004: 1004). In the mouths of politicians social exclusion is a term used by those who feel included and set the limits of what that ‘inclusion’ should look like. For people in the study it had little meaning or relevance.

**Structure, Social Inequality and Wealth**

An interesting feature of the focus groups and interviews was the absence of a discourse of structural unfairness. Although structural aspects were mentioned – nowhere to go, lack of transport, jobs or inability to get to jobs – and anger was directed at ‘the government’, local councils, the benefits agency or the lack of help or work available, a critique of the system overall in terms of inequality was rarely articulated. This does not appear to be a new phenomenon however, as Townsend pointed out three decades ago:

> Some of the poor have come to conclude that poverty does not exist. Many of those who recognise that it exists have come to conclude that it is individually caused, attributed to a mixture of ill-luck, indolence and mismanagement and is not a collective condition determined principally by institutionalised forces, particular governments and industry (1979: 429).

Although today poverty is firmly on the political agenda of the two major political parties in Great Britain, an unprecedented position, the hegemonic conception of poverty is primarily
an individualised version rather than a structural one. The language of intergenerational deprivation and the ‘cycle of disadvantage’ is common in New Labour policy texts and increasingly so. An emphasis on ‘opportunity for all’ implies equality without really offering it. While structural factors such as lack of educational qualifications and training for the jobs available are acknowledged by government as potentially causing poverty and exclusion it is placed firmly in the hands of the individual to change their situation with little acknowledgement that structural features and material conditions of peoples’ lives often limit what might be achieved. This neo-liberal version of responsibility places emphasis on the individual to get out of ‘poverty’; the effacement of structure, wealth and vested interests with a thin veil of meritocracy naturalises inequality in relation to class and poverty. As Peel (2003) notes those ‘on the lowest rung of an unequal society’ constantly hear that ‘inequality measures skill and talent rather than power and advantage’ (2003: 85). An American dream rhetoric, anglicised as ‘hard-working families’ and aspiration, perpetuates the idea that if only those in poverty tried a bit harder they would not be there.

However, as outlined in Chapter 7, institutions, structures and systems were blamed for both causing and maintaining hardships. Narratives of benefit and tax credit payment mistakes were frequent, as was the experience of being excluded from paid work through lack of qualifications, age, experience and residency. While such structural factors were acknowledged, however, respondents did not express the idea that they were disadvantaged by structures overall. It was more a case that there were problems with the systems rather than the system was the problem. In this way difficulties encountered were seen as affecting them rather than the balance was tipped against them in a comprehensive sense. To my knowledge none of the participants were engaged in collective action and this may have a bearing on their analysis, as it is well established that there is a greater likelihood of people developing a structural understanding when involved in such action.

As identified in an understanding of exclusion it was a case of facing isolated obstacles, which had to be overcome. Interestingly, two of the three respondents who called their current circumstances ‘poverty’, Matt and Fred, were among the few people in the study to express anger at inequalities:

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44 Such an effacement of structural inequalities has also been identified as a characteristic of early New Labour government (Lister, 2001a).
[... ] being hard up is like pleading to get help from somebody who’s got more than you! which I-the way I look at it people shouldn’t have more than you, should be equal [...] and the government pays like John Prescott to go two minutes up the road in his jag!

[Fred, individual interview]

You know a lot of people say you’re not in poverty ‘coz you live in an ok place or whatever but there’s a lot of things they don’t see like I’ve went 11 years without a holiday and it’s, it’s not right that some people have three or four and others like me don’t have any ( ) it’s just not right.

[Matt, individual interview]

Rather than a sense of injustice directed at the social and political systems, indignation was more often directed at others in a similar position but who were thought to be receiving more. Hence, nearby estates that were seen as getting play areas, double-glazing or more resources evoked strong exclamations of unfairness. Similarly, ‘immigrants’ or ‘asylum seekers’ were often viewed (in the white working class groups) as taking resources and getting things for ‘free’. Although respondents identified some people as ‘looking down’ on them or making them ‘look thick’ there was not an expressed recognition of socio-economic inequality as problematic per se. Similarly, while authority figures were sometimes mocked (see Chapter 8) they were not brought into play as examples of social injustice; in other words, class and economic positions and the relationship between them were not challenged.

Within New Labour, Blair and Brown have maintained a policy position that focuses on increasing the income of the poorest rather than on the differences between the incomes of the wealthy and ‘the poor’ and reducing this income gap by focusing attention on the very wealthy. Poverty has therefore maintained its traditionally problematised status, regardless of the ‘problem of riches’ (Orton and Rowlingson, 2007). Similarly, respondents rarely mentioned wealth in the context of inequality. One exception was the youngest respondent, Tim:
And the rich people who don’t have to pay rent or nothing so they just spend money how they want and are not bothered about it but people like us we got, when we get paid we have to pay all sorts of stuff like rent and the ones with money don’t have to worry about that, one bit.

[Tim, individual interview]

If wealth was mentioned people used it to contextualise their current circumstances by saying they weren’t ‘fantastically rich’ or ‘well-off’ but neither were they poor. Like Peel’s (2003) and Sutton et al’s (2007) respondents people saw themselves as ‘average’.

**Social Rights**

The lack of a system-focused critique is disempowering to those people defined (by their economic position) as at the bottom of the social ladder. There is limited ability to act inside an over-arching discourse of opposition, just anger at particular services or individuals. The United Kingdom is party to a number of international and European human rights covenants and declarations, which offer guidelines on social and economic rights; however, their absence in domestic law means that little protection exists against their violation of rights. There is greater recognition of the need for socio-economic human rights in relation to (child) poverty in the Welsh assembly (Welsh Assembly Government, 2005) and also in the proposed Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland (2001) (Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 2004). As discussed in Chapter 2 some anti-poverty charities and movements have adopted a human rights agenda from which to fight poverty.

All the respondents in the study perceived themselves as ‘genuine’ claimants and in these terms had an awareness of some social rights around benefits and housing but the language used was not that of ‘rights’. One reason, outlined above, is that economic and social rights are not found within the discursive mainstream. Secondly, as with the working class respondents in Skeggs’ study, the respondents’ socio-economic positioning ‘[...] did not enable them to think that they were entitled to many things. They rarely saw themselves as individuals with rights and had not been in a position historically to do so’ (Skeggs, 1997: 144). It is not only rights enshrined in law that are relevant but also discursive rights.
Respondents in the study (as benefit claimants and council tenants) have unequal discursive rights to those in the affluent mainstream, and even less so regarding access to discursive spaces of authority. What they say and the spaces in which they are able to articulate ideas, desires and needs are not considered as worthy. There were often comments by respondents of ‘not being listened to’, being ‘ignored’ or ‘overlooked’ and many people in the study did not feel that complaints, especially those in relation to the school and the council, were taken seriously. The third reason that a rights-aware discourse may not have been utilised is that, as already explained, people did not see themselves as in poverty in the first place and therefore their ‘right’ to something better was not founded from within a recognition of ‘poverty’. People were not going to demand rights if they did not conceive of themselves as not having any violation of economic human rights – in other words being ‘poor’ – in the first place.

‘Poor’ in Other Words?: The Dilemma of ‘Poverty’

...[W]e cannot simply speak against discourse, or attempt to liberate a network of repressed discourse lying beneath it. To attempt to ‘give voice’ to a great unspoken risks simply reproducing the criticized discourse in another way (Walker, 1993: 535).

Non-recognition of a ‘poverty’ situation by those described as such presents difficulties for tackling the condition of poverty. Firstly, the obvious problem is achieving some of the aspirations of discourses concerned with poverty alleviation, such as including people with experience of poverty in poverty debates, policy development and respecting their rights and citizenship as part of an inclusive approach (Beresford et al., 1999; Lister, 2002; Bennett & Roberts, 2004). How to engage with people who may be identified, but not self-identify, as experiencing poverty? At its worst, this leads to an imposed categorisation by people with greater discursive power, thus undermining the ideals and practice of inclusion. At its best, and in keeping with respecting the rights of all citizens, regardless of their social, economic or discursive power it fails to engage with all but those people who declare ‘poverty’, a minority group who may offer a very incomplete perspective. A dilemma appears in using a
word to describe *conditions* that are recognised by people but within a categorisation, ‘poverty’, that is rejected.

People in the study were not trying to put a brave face on their situation, they were candid about the financial difficulties and barriers that were in their way to improving their quality of life (Chapter 5). In view of this 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: not only the stereotypes invoked by a ‘poverty’ label (including those held by the respondents) but also the extreme images that people could not relate to their own lives and experiences. The meaning of ‘poverty’ has become altered within a global context of poverties, in which a British poverty looks mild by comparison. There seems to be little advantage in keeping hold of an outdated word that has relevance neither to the general population nor to those it is said to be describing. But what is the alternative?

The dilemma of using the word ‘poverty’ is not new. The questioning of its usage has not only been thought about on the grounds of political expediency, as in the 1980s, but also by those whose sympathies lie with respecting the agency and voice of people in poverty has also been raised. That is to say, part of respecting the dignity of people in ‘poverty’ is to not define them by a description that is largely disliked by them (see Lister, 2004). A recent research project (Castell and Thompson, 2007) looking at public attitudes to poverty in the UK has also questioned the helpfulness of using the word ‘poverty’, commenting that no respondents:

[N]ear to or below the poverty line described themselves as ‘poor’ or ‘living in poverty’. In fact they seemed to want to avoid the tag – an important communications implication (2007: 11).

While Castell and Thompson (2007) advocate avoiding the word poverty if an effective anti-poverty message is going to be communicated to the public, their alternative suggestion of LOLI (low opportunity, low income) appears a contrived and somewhat offensive term that is unlikely to resonate with people in ‘poverty’. The obvious connotations are not only of being ‘lowly’ but being low down the social scale in value and status. Although Castell and Thompson see the use of LOLI as ‘adopting a head-turning, lighter approach’ while avoiding
victimising those it describes (2007: 24) it is a sound-bite acronym that fails to look at how people in poverty describe their own lives and instead slaps a media-friendly label on them. As such it would suffer from the same non-recognition by those it purports to describe, as does ‘poverty’ now.

Other words are needed and, in reality, other words are used. Studies conducted with people experiencing poverty found that the descriptions of being ‘hard up’ (Marsden in Spicker, 1984; Beresford et al, 1999), ‘not well off’ (Beresford et al, 1999) ‘hard-pressed’ (Coats and Silburn, 1981) or ‘less well off’ (McKendrick et al, 2003), were used by people to describe their circumstances. In this study ‘struggling’ and ‘managing’ were key descriptions as well as being ‘a bit skint’, ‘scrimping and saving’, bittin’ and bobbin’, ‘scraping here, there and everywhere’ and ‘just surviving’. These were the phrases used by respondents – they had lived resonance for individuals and for others in the community. Unlike the word ‘poverty’ these descriptions were not seen as essentially ‘wrong’ or ‘embarrassing’ even though they were describing the same economic, material and life chance scenarios that would be labelled ‘poverty’ in academic, policy and political discourses. Neither did the choice of language underestimate the implications of socio-economic marginalisation. What was conveyed was the full reality of their economic situation as one that is not the expected or desired way to live in our society:

> Because, if you’re on a low income you just get through don’t you? Each week you just, *just* scrape through and if you’re poverty [*sic*] then you don’t get through to the end of the week, you, you just ( ) scraping here, there and everywhere aren’t you?  
> [Michelle, RestART focus group]

The phrases used by people in the study had individual and local social meaning for people’s lives. They were apt, significant and maintained self-esteem (in that they were not stigmatised). However, while such words may be preferable to a refuted label of ‘poverty’, many people who say they are ‘managing’ are going without essential items (as outlined in Chapter 5). The problem in replacing ‘poverty’ with words around ‘managing’ is that people might be left to manage alone, on inadequate incomes and resources or that the existence of very real hardship, currently called poverty, is seen as a thing of the past. A dilemma
remains then of talking about inadequate conditions and resources without alienating the public or producing anything but non-recognition among the subjects of the description.

Alternatives to the word ‘poverty’, ones that do not make the economic and social consequences of poverty disappear but which allow people to define their rights and needs without stigmatisation are needed. There are no easy solutions. Even if the self-descriptions by people in ‘poverty’ are used it is possible that as soon as a phrase became adopted in political, policy or public discourse, it would produce non-recognition by them upon its very institutionalisation. Another alternative is to promote the re-framing of ‘poverty’ as a denial of human rights. Basic economic and social rights in a rich economy, such as the right to a minimum standard of living could be demanded, ones that no one is expected to live below. The proposal of a minimum living standard, ‘a standard defining the income that will maintain good health, provide essential needs and participation in the community at different stages of one’s life’, with a minimum income as a crucial element, may offer a solution (Howarth et al, 2001: 3). Such a standard would offer a guideline to an expected quality of life relating to a social norm, one that no one would be expected to live below. The line would indicate not ‘poverty’ therefore but social *unacceptability* and in this way may have greater currency for people across a range of incomes. By re-considering poverty in this way, as found within organisations such as ATD Fourth World and Oxfam GB, people can point out economic injustice and demand their rights, rather than fear the negative implications that currently accompany a label of poverty.

One must be cognisant, however, that words cannot transform the world in isolation; changes in the material conditions of people’s lives by tackling social inequality require political and cultural change at the most elementary level. As Schram notes:

> The deconstruction of prevailing discursive structures helps politicise the institutional practices that inhabit alternative ways of constructing social relations. Isolated acts of renaming, however, are unlikely to help promote political change if they are not tied to interrogations of the structures that serve as the interpretive context for making sense of new terms (Schram, 1995: 21).
Discourses in themselves do not merely reflect social reality but are in themselves social practice. Therefore, altering the discourse of poverty is not merely playing with words but is part of an altering of the conceptualisation of ‘poverty’. Alternative descriptions may offer scope for a valid identification of needs and inequalities in which genuine progress in tackling poverty can be made.

Conclusion

It became clear in peoples’ talk, and also by some unwillingness to take part in the research itself (as examined in Chapter 4), that ‘poverty’ as a self-description was to be avoided. This chapter has looked at some of the hegemonic discourses of poverty and their interpretations by respondents. Respondents often naturalised many of the mainstream discourses of ‘poverty’ and then distanced themselves from these; the mainstream discourses that demarcated between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ were brought into play, as were discourses which othered people in poverty. Such use of mainstream discourses, which positioned people in poverty negatively, meant that a dis-identification with ‘poverty’ was unavoidable. However, just because ‘poverty’ was denied by respondents in the study does not mean their current situation was a satisfactory one; people wanted, and needed, more resources in order to live decently but the contested nature of the word ‘poverty’ meant that an improvement in circumstances would not come by aligning themselves with such a description.

Perhaps ‘poverty’ in Britain needs to be rethought, not in a way that effaces hardships that accompany economic marginalisation but so that people currently defined as experiencing such marginalisation and its consequences can relate those experiences to the description. It is important that respondents’ views are not just put away; they have answered questions, joined in conversations, opened up their lives and experiences. They have talked about ‘poverty’ in other words, and they have rejected the word. Should we not take it seriously and look at this too?
Chapter 10: Conclusion

But though it is easy enough to predict only the negative outcomes from poverty, when we examine actual lives, what we find is a far more complex pattern of positive coping, strengths, dreams, ambitions, creative solutions to problems of living...

(Lott and Bullock, 2001: 202)

Introduction

This thesis has explored the discursive formations of ‘poverty’ and ‘social exclusion’ by people deemed to be experiencing poverty, as conventionally defined. While seemingly commonsensical to ask people in poverty what they think of the language of poverty it has been an issue that has been neglected, with many people taking part in poverty research on the basis of their presumed poverty status. To some extent this study is still subject to such criticism of past research – that respondents were chosen because of their likelihood, rather than their declaration, of poverty. Such an assessment is accurate in terms of choosing respondents but not in its desire to impose categorisation. It could not escape categorisation completely, without falling into a meaningless relativism in regard to living standards, but it has attempted to give voice to people’s own discourses of ‘poverty’ as well as the narrations of their situations in relation to ‘poverty’, whilst also attempting to look behind why the term itself might be denied.

This study has raised several original contributions to existing research knowledge and has raised some important implications for practice. In particular, the research has contributed original insights in terms of what ‘poverty’ is perceived to be by people whose candid accounts of hardship would indicate the description but who deny its appropriateness. It has also shown that social exclusion is more or less an unknown quantity to those people it is used to describe. This concluding chapter will draw on the key themes to have emerged from the study, summarise the research outcomes and examine how these relate to the research objectives, previous research and the possibilities opened up for future research.
The outcomes of the study in relation to the original research questions and previous work examined in the literature review chapters in section one will be reviewed here. This will be divided into three parts. The first two address the three research questions relating to poverty, examining: whether, and to what extent, self-definitions of poverty might deviate from mainstream perceptions of poverty, whether people accept or reject the label of poverty and what alternative descriptions may be used instead, and if, and in what ways, mainstream discourses of poverty might act as agents of inclusion or exclusion. The third part will focus on the specific questions around social exclusion: respondents' understandings of the meanings of social exclusion, its resonance for them, whether they felt excluded and, if so, how this was described. In addition, why this aspect of the research was more limited than hoped will also be discussed.

**The Said: Understanding 'Poverty'**

While it might have been expected that people with experience of economic and material hardships would have differing discourses of poverty to the ('non-poor') mainstream, in reality, as shown in Chapter 9, there was much overlap in views about 'poverty' and the 'poor'. This largely emanated from the fact that talking about people in poverty was talk about others – the majority of respondents were not talking from a perspective as a person in 'poverty', as they defined it, but as someone with views about it and as such drawing on the mainstream discourses of poverty. In this way the question exploring self-definitions of poverty found that respondents definitions of 'poverty' were largely similar to mainstream perceptions of poverty.

Where they differed, as discussed in Chapters 6 and 9, was in terms of the visual identification of a British 'poverty' and its association with squalor. Although contemporary representations of poverty, such as that found in anti-poverty reports (TUC, 2007) at times use images that reinforce an association between visual appearance and poverty (and in this way it could be argued that it is therefore a discourse found in the mainstream), respondents
both identified and othered people and areas through a visual identification as a defining factor of 'poverty'. This explicit and obvious marker was also associated with the general formulation of unambiguous ('real') poverty being absolute poverty.

In examining self-definitions of 'poverty' it could be argued that the research found that these did not exist, not in terms of 'poverty'. Instead, it became clear that 'managing' was the key description through which respondents articulated their inadequate resources whilst maintaining that they were coping. Indeed, for the respondents, managing was an indicator of resourcefulness, self-sufficiency and achievement. It not only marked them as doing well within constrained circumstances, it also positioned them oppositionally to those who were not. Whilst 'managing' is common parlance in relation to juggling limited resources, it was one that had particular resonance for respondents. It was the yardstick by which they judged themselves and others; others who were failing to manage. A dis-identification with 'poverty' was often made in conjunction with a declaration of managing. Managing, therefore, had implications for status, identity and 'failure'.

In exploring the question of whether people accept or reject the label of poverty and what alternative descriptions may be used instead, this research has uncovered some of the complexities behind the denial of a label of poverty. It is not the case that respondents denied 'poverty' because of the shame of the conditions implied by such a label – people were candid in their descriptions of hardships and a lack of resources were acknowledged – but because poverty was defined as something very different to what they saw around them. While possibly bound up with the fear of stigma or 'failure' that a label of poverty may convey, it is also the case that 'poverty' was understood as having nothing and even though people's situations were sometimes desperate they had the basics for sustaining life. As with McKendrick et al's (2003: 44) study, respondents positioned themselves outside of poverty whilst recognising that their quality of life was inadequate. Whereas the 'real' poverty of the third world was seen as unequivocally appalling, the 'poverty' of people in Britain had associations with bad choices and negative social behaviours. This othering of people in poverty by respondents allied their discourses of poverty to the mainstream media and political messages about people in poverty as culpable for the circumstances of their lives. At the same time, however, respondents also identified institutional failures, within the labour market and social security systems, for example, that meant that they themselves experienced unwarranted hardship. The locating of blame to systems and structures served
to place responsibility for their circumstances, but not necessarily others', as outside of their personal responsibility and in this way contradicted the mainstream discourse of individual blame for poverty.

The Unsaid: Non-recognition and Dis-identification

Aside from the obvious reason that people did not feel subjectively ‘poor’ there are two central factors as to why poverty was generally rejected as a description for people’s lives: non-recognition and dis-identification. Firstly, respondents did not see their own circumstances as relating to the absolute poverty that they generally defined poverty as being. As documented within the thesis, for many people lacking money or resources was ‘managing’ or ‘getting by’, it was not identified as ‘poverty’. It is difficult to know if this reflects other research because, as already noted, many studies tend to presume respondents are in ‘poverty’ by judging their circumstances rather than asking if this is an accurate description for them. Descriptions given of conditions of lives are taken as evidence of poverty rather than evidence of unacceptable conditions that people want to improve but not within a label of ‘poverty’. For respondents in the study talk about ‘poverty’ was to discuss a phenomenon that was seen as having more to do with Comic Relief and famine news-reports than with their day-to-day lives. Discussion of ‘poverty’ in Britain ranged from a denial of its existence to blaming those who might be said to be in ‘poverty’. The few respondents who stated that they were in poverty did so within a stringent definition of necessities and barely acceptable quality of life.

Dis-identification with a label of poverty was related more to an awareness of the conditions that might be called ‘poverty’ in Britain but that many respondents in the study saw as the result of personal failings, such as alcohol misuse, poor budgeting and reluctance to find paid work. In other words, respondents did not want to be associated with the social criticism that they themselves perpetuated about the ‘poor’ and therefore dis-identified with a description that would place them in ‘poverty’. As noted previously, the discursive strategies drawn on to disavow a label of poverty were inherent within the respondents’ very definitions of what ‘poverty’ was seen to be. Further strategies were to position poverty as ‘elsewhere’. Three central ‘elsewhere’s’ emerged: the ‘third world’, ‘other local places’ and ‘the past’. Although, in some ways, the assertion that poverty could be found in the (often recent) past
and in other areas (often other estates) may seem to contradict respondents' other general assertion that there was no poverty in Britain, this national poverty was largely framed as behavioural if it was talk about others or unfortunate, but a fleeting state of affairs, if in talk about themselves. In this way 'poverty' was rarely admitted to by respondents as relating to themselves in the present.

The barrage of negative connotations that attend a label of poverty have implications for social and self-worth that would leave few people to claim it. As examined in Chapter 2 many contemporary mainstream discourses about poverty and the 'poor' within richer nations are detrimental to the individuals involved, their neighbourhoods and the institutions they interact with. The continuation of the Victorian discourse of the 'residuum', of people in poverty as qualitatively, culturally, different can be found in the modern discourses of 'dependency', the 'underclass' and the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage. Such discourses often place responsibility for poverty and for getting out of poverty with the individual and in doing so disregard that the playing field is far from level. By dis-identifying with 'poverty' respondents were not subject to the social criticism that accompanies the label.

Although, as outlined in Section one, it was argued that people in poverty are located within poverty discourses that marginalise them, this study has illustrated that people did not feel themselves to be discursively positioned negatively and passively within dominant discourses. This, however, does not detract from the dominance of mainstream poverty discourses to position people but instead indicates that peoples' power within such discourses lies only in placing themselves beyond them. To some extent this is because such discourses are marginalising and as such have limited scope for manoeuvre. One way to widen possibilities is to remove oneself from being the subject of poverty discourses and away from an identifier of 'poverty'. Therefore, while it might have been expected that discursive reformulations of poverty would be found in the study, respondents sidestepped this by not placing themselves within a description of 'poverty'; it was rare, therefore, that mainstream notions of 'poverty' or the poor were 'challenged'. They excluded themselves from the debate by denying the state of poverty as applicable to them. Discursive exclusion is maintained because people infrequently stand up and say 'I am in poverty'.
The study was limited in achieving its objective of examining how self-definitions of social exclusion might deviate from mainstream perceptions and its relevance for people due to respondents’ unawareness of such terminology. As noted in the thesis, when asked what social exclusion was and who the excluded might be responses conformed to a broad conventional definition, although extreme examples were offered, but the majority of respondents stated that they had never heard the term before. This meant that ‘social exclusion’ was of little significance to people at a conceptual level and certainly at an experiential level, in that respondents did not recognise or feel themselves to be ‘socially excluded’. As seen in earlier chapters, respondents largely felt engaged in their locality as well as in wider society and, to a limited extent, people bought their way out of identifiable exclusion by purchasing mainstream goods, often status symbols within their community. Such a strategy maintained a feeling of social belonging. On the other hand, difficulties in accessing training, childcare, work opportunities and social activities that might be described as social exclusion were part of everyday life for many respondents. It was also the case that whilst one-off purchases for children’s toys or branded goods could be acquired, on-going leisure expenses were not feasible. However, problems encountered were not seen as examples of social exclusion but as individual troubles. Consequently, the research question examining how people described their exclusion and its relevance for them was based upon an erroneous presumption that people might use a language of ‘exclusion’ rather than there being an absence of feeling excluded in any comprehensive sense. Nevertheless, respondents’ unfamiliarity with the terminology of social exclusion in addition to their subjective feelings of inclusion are themselves interesting outcomes of the research. Further implications for practice and future research to have come out of the study are discussed below.

Implications for Practice

Respondents maintained and perpetuated moral discourses of poverty. This has practical implications for anti-poverty policies and campaigns. If people who are classified as in
poverty using conventional standards do not identify with the category then much campaigning will fail to include the majority of people in poverty. If participation is seen as laudable then this is a concern. If a label of poverty is rejected because of its perceived inappropriateness or stigmatised status then something else is needed. Either, as argued in Chapter 9, the meanings around poverty can be transformed so that poverty becomes relevant for people and a word without stigma or the word itself needs to undergo transformation.

To reframe poverty, by placing it within a human rights framework, has been adopted by some charity organisations and, significantly, the potential to do so has been noted within the remit of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (Killeen, 2008), as outlined in Chapter 3. In such a context poverty becomes a denial of human rights. This may have particular significance for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, not only in terms of improved material circumstances but how people in poverty are viewed in society – as people whose rights are violated rather than as ‘failures’ or ‘victims’. However, while cultivating an economic and social rights culture might alter people’s perception of poverty it is unlikely to erase the harmful and enduring discourses of poverty to the extent that people in ‘poverty’ would reclaim it as a description of their circumstances. A pro-‘poor’ movement, as seen in development work, may not therefore be the way to proceed.

It has been argued within the thesis that an introduction of a minimum living and income standard may offer a different way forward, one that recognises socially unacceptable living conditions without the stigma of ‘poverty’. Such an expectation of an ‘adequate standard of living’ is a morally undisputed one, already enshrined in numerous international human rights treaties but one that has failed to find a cultural or political foothold in British society. At the present time the construction of ‘poverty’ in Britain is so imbued with moral discourses and individual blame, as reflected in the study, that a cultural change will have to occur in which individualistic values are replaced by of an ethic of commonality in order for a minimum standards ethos to flourish. A cultural change towards greater equality of living standards and genuine opportunities for all as a desirable social and political goal is required in which ‘poverty’ in richer economies would become an unacceptable standard of living by definition, rather than a subject of censure. To succeed it would also have to be set within a human rights framework, but one that promotes the welfare of the social whole, not privileges the individual.
Changing the Discourse: Research as Reality

Reality does not seem to be enough to change people's perceptions of poverty. For many years people have been informed about poverty in wealthier countries without significant transformations of negative stereotypes. Even at the present time in Britain, where it could be argued that a more sympathetic approach towards poverty has been adopted at government level, the stereotypes of benefit cheating, dependency and 'chosen' worklessness are left to flourish. This is largely because for the majority - those without experience of poverty - information about poverty is always mediated. Extending studies and moving to alternative ways of exploring the consequences of economic and material hardship, but without becoming voyeuristic poverty tourism, might allow for greater insight and understanding about poverty. For example, a US anti-poverty organisation The Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU) undertook 'reality tours' in New York in 2004 to show (wealthier) people places they would never see or go to, such as free health-care centres, project housing and homeless shelters. Clearly, caution is needed to avoid othering and creating a further distance between people in 'poverty' and people who are not, but humanising 'poverty' can be one way in which discourses are challenged and altered. It is also a way in which people in 'poverty' can be involved in campaigns and allow themselves to be heard in an unmediated way. However, this presents a problem, when, as shown in this study, people do not identify their circumstances as one of 'poverty' and therefore do not engage with such campaigns. How such reality tours could succeed with the inclusion of people experiencing 'poverty' might be to reframe them in the terms of acceptable and unacceptable standards of living.

A further way to illustrate the reality of poverty and to challenge the dominant discourses is to offer statistics on poverty in a more balanced manner. For example, showing that most children in poverty are in a household with one adult in paid work and a re-focussing on the amounts of unclaimed social security benefits rather than on benefit fraud. Although the statistics exist to paint any picture it is the darker picture of poverty that is normally chosen in political and media discourse. While it may be considered naive to expect a re-emphasis away from the individual and towards the structural in contemporary Britain it is not unachievable and at a time when the next potential government is looking toward an American model of workfare it is more imperative than ever.
Implications for Future Research

While this research is limited in terms of generalisation, given that the study is based on a small sample in the East Midlands, the majority of whom were parents and female, it nevertheless offers new insights for poverty research and points to where further research could be undertaken. It may be worthwhile, for example, to undertake comparable research with other population groups and areas in order to assess the extent to which the research outcomes of this study are also evident. Possibly, different discourses of ‘poverty’, or different interpretations of mainstream poverty discourses, may be found among younger people, among adults without children or with particular ethnic minority groups.

As argued in Chapter 4, exploring the discourses of poverty by people identified as such would benefit from an ethnographic study. While focus groups and interviews are worthwhile, and have revealed insights into the understandings of respondents, everyday talk and action would show not just what people say but what they do.

Further research would also be beneficial in examining the concepts of ‘getting by’ and ‘managing’ for people, how they do this and what it means to do so. While at the outset of this research I was aware of the sensitive nature of questions it became clear, as seen in Chapter 5, that respondents were very open about their circumstances. This willingness to describe being ‘hard up’ might allow for the possibility to pursue a photographic element in future research, which failed largely in this study because of its use of the phrase ‘poverty’. If people were asked to take images of ‘getting by’ or being ‘hard up’ it is possible they would capture their own lives rather than looking elsewhere for ‘poverty’.

Although coming from a different standpoint than this study, research undertaken from a social psychology perspective may be a productive means of exploring people’s reluctance to identify with the labels and language of ‘poverty’ and ‘social exclusion’. Some psychological research relating to poverty and discourse has been carried out but it has concentrated more on views about poverty and attribution (Harper, 2003) rather than on people classified as in poverty themselves. Other research has looked at the psychological implications of living in poverty (Wrapson et al, 2008). Consequently, there is no research
on strategies of dis-identification by people in ‘poverty’ but it is at the psychological level that this issue could be explored more fully.

A further research issue to be explored is looking at discourses of wealth. The wealthy (even the averagely wealthy) are an under-researched group who have the ability to exclude themselves from scrutiny. Little social science, especially social policy, research has been conducted around wealth because it has not been problematised in the same way as poverty but if inequality, opportunity for all and the failure of meritocracy are a concern, then it is an area of considerable significance. As Orton and Rowlingson (2007) argue, the research focus has concentrated for too long on the easy to access ‘poor’ when the ‘problem of riches’ demands attention, if we are to gain understanding (and possibly bring about change) of the relationship between wealth and poverty. Although wealth was not a topic in this study people did refer to ‘luck’ in relation to people doing well. This belief in or use of the notion of ‘luck’ rather than social structures would be an interesting avenue to research, exploring both economic and social positioning.

**The Research Framework**

The denial of ‘poverty’ and of ‘being poor’ should be seen as a rejection of a negative *positioning*, rather than necessarily as a denial of the condition of ‘poverty’ itself. Practitioners and researchers must therefore be wary of situating people into a category of the ‘poor’ or ‘excluded’ person, as this in itself constitutes an exclusionary act. A central implication of this study then is to adjust power dynamics at the discursive level by allowing respondents to define the terms (literally) of their participation. Such calls for greater consideration have been made (APPG on Poverty, 1999; Bennett, 2004; Beresford and Hoban, 2005; Lister, 2004) but the difficulties remain in attempting to discuss something such as ‘poverty’ without effacing the causes and consequences if the word is not used or effacing the dignity and self-respect of respondents if it is. This study has not answered this dilemma but it does offer some possibilities for talking about the condition in terms of being ‘hard up’ or ‘managing’ or alternative phrases that people may use to describe their situations.

Maybe this research will go some way to illuminating discourses of ‘poverty’ with the potential that alternative, less stigmatising formulations of what we currently call ‘poverty’
can be created. Indeed not only the outcomes of the study but also a wider application of the method, discourse analysis, to other areas of poverty research may assist in changing the discourses of poverty. Discourse analysis can be used as a tool to challenge social practices that perpetuate and legitimate oppression, for example within media and policy (Fairclough, 2000, 2004; Willig, 1999). Discourse analysis may also be used to inform interventions which facilitate empowerment through repositioning the subject (See Gillies, 1999). However, as Willig acknowledges, attempts made ‘in order to reshape other people’s subjectivities through discourse constitutes a form of manipulation’ (Willig, 1999: 148). She argues that even when the objective may be in the interests of those taking part it is still an intervention in which one group instructs another on how ‘to be’ (ibid). While change at the discursive level is possible then it is not desirable if conducted on behalf of, rather than by, participants of a discourse. What needs to be challenged and altered then is not individuals’ subjectivities but the largely negative mainstream discourses of poverty. Credible accounts and representations are needed that neither pity, valorise nor condemn people but instead attempt to understand and change unacceptable conditions of living. Yet this study has found that looking to people with experience of ‘poverty’ is not necessarily the solution to confront the currently insidious mainstream poverty discourses. Respondents’ understandings of ‘poverty’ meant that they generally placed themselves beyond being the subject of the discourse and as such in the position of one who judges ‘poverty’ and ‘the poor’, often using the condemnations found within mainstream discourses by which they themselves are judged by others.

Concluding Reflections

Understanding talk about ‘poverty’ and ‘social exclusion’ cannot be separated from the social milieu in which it is articulated, set within the context of both local and global awareness of the condition of other lives. Such a context influences what ‘poverty’ means in Britain and what it means to be identified as living ‘in poverty’. Recognising ‘poverty’ also involves examining the complexity of a situation that goes beyond the material into the realm of the psychological and the social, in terms of self-identity, status and social justification about individual choice.
One choice generally exercised by people in this study was to reject ‘poverty’ as a valid description of their circumstances, without denying the unacceptability of those circumstances. Although ‘managing’ created a discursive space in which people maintained self and social worth there was a realisation that resources were inadequate and that life could be better.

Clearly, ‘scraping by’ and ‘managing’ are not acceptable in an affluent society, even if those who use these terms to describe their lives perceive such ways of living as not constituting ‘poverty’. If the constructions of identity under the present mainstream discourses of poverty result in feelings of shame, ‘othering’ and thus dis-identifications of poverty then they are inadequate in enabling people in poverty to have a voice; their voice has already been muted by the very discourse that defines them as ‘poor’ and ‘excluded’. Poverty, as a symbol of personal failure, as something denied or perceived by many as ‘elsewhere’ is thus inadequate in its current form as a viable description for people to use about themselves or to be seen as such by others.

Although ‘poverty’ and ‘social exclusion’ are being addressed as issues of concern by all political parties, bringing poverty out of the darkness is not leading to greater enlightenment but to an attack on the ‘poor’ rather than just an attack on poverty. A moral discourse that points the finger and blames individuals can only serve to distance social groups from one another and reinforce the notion that ‘poverty’ is indeed a dirty word.
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Appendices
Appendix 1: Example of letter to potential focus groups

Dear .....  
Hello, my name is Jan Flaherty and I am based at Loughborough University carrying out research looking at how people perceive themselves and their neighbourhood in places often identified by government statistics as being vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. I am contacting you as I wondered if any groups at the community centre would be interested in taking part in some research

The initial stage of the research will be a focus group, which will involve about 6-10 people discussing a number of questions. At a later stage (in about six months) I plan to begin the second part of the research, which will involve giving out disposable cameras, the pictures from which will form the basis of an informal one-to one interview. I plan to carry out about 15 individual interviews, which would last about one hour (I will contact people on an individual basis if they are interested in taking part). However, if people wish to take part in a one-off focus group and not be involved any further that is fine. Complete confidentiality is assured and all respondents identifying details (such as names of people, places etc, such as the Centre itself) would be made anonymous. From past experience I have found that people do enjoy talking about their opinions.

I have a modest budget to pay for the hire of premises and expenses such as drinks and snacks. If you have any questions my email is ********** and my office number is ****** and my home number is *****  

Warm Regards,

Jan Flaherty
Appendix 2: Transcription Symbols

- word or part word underlined indicates emphasis
- words in upper case indicates especially loud talk
- colons indicate a prolongation of the immediately prior sound
- a dash indicates an abrupt cut-off of sound in progress
- empty parenthesis indicates transcriber’s inability to hear/dubious hearings

[Intalics] indicates interviewer’s descriptions, not transcriptions

! an animated tone is used
hahahh indicates laughter as it sounds

? indicates rising intonation
>< utterances bracketed indicate speech speeding up

.full-stop indicates a stopping fall in tone

° indicates speech that is relatively quieter than the surrounding talk

↑↑ indicate marked shift into a higher or lower pitch

hhhh indicates out breath

.hhhh indicates in breath

* indicates ‘laughter ’in voice* (used instead of the customary (h))

[ A single left bracket indicates point of overlap onset
] A single right bracket indicates point of overlap terminates

= used to show that there is no ‘gap’ between the two lines of speech and to show
continuity of speakers utterance when a speakers utterance is broken up for purposes of
presentation

( ) indicates a pause

‘ bracketing an utterance - used to indicate reported speech (that which someone else has or may
have said)

Transcription symbols based on a modified version of those developed by Gail Jefferson cited in G. Psathas
Appendix 3: Respondent and Area Profiles

Introduction

This appendix provides a brief outline of the groups and individual respondents involved in the research study. As noted in Chapter 4, four focus groups and twelve individual interviews took place. Further statistical details of the areas in which respondents are resident appear in Chapter 5.

Focus Groups

RestArt Group
The RestArt focus group was held at a community centre located in the local school grounds with a group who meet weekly for creative activities and basic skills training, organised by the estate community worker. The community centre is currently used by a number of local resident groups, provides a crèche facility and a community room for daytime activities, such as 'mums and tots'. The group is exclusively attended by residents on the Hathley estate, all mothers of children who are, or have been, pupils at the school. While the group sometimes enjoys the activities a lot of pleasure seems to be gained from just meeting together to talk, often involving sharing derisive comments about the activity or tutor provided. The weekly groups' primary function from the women's perspective is to reflect on recent problems in families (often on-going ones) and to reflect and comment on recent events. The meeting is also a place to share ideas on daily activities like what to prepare for tea.

Sure Start Group
This focus group took place in a Children's Centre during a Sure Start session involving seven women, all of whom were mothers of pre-school children, although two women also had teenage children. The Hathley Sure Start, based in the local primary school grounds was popular with parents as a place to meet and chat but parents who attended were not always enthusiastic about becoming involved in the activities set up by the Sure Start workers. This may have been because Sure Start was seen as replacing the mums and tots group, which had existed in the school prior to Sure Start. Mums and tots groups in England are traditionally an informal meeting place for the mothers of children to talk whilst pre-school children engage in unstructured play, a different ethos to Sure Start, which aims to engage parents and children sharing time and activities together. Typical activities involved some craft-based
project in which parents could help their children. In reality this would be a small part of the session, which would mostly be taken up with the parents sitting around the table sharing tea and stories of recent events and discussions about the children. The women attending are aged between early twenties to late forties, although the average was mid twenties, and have been attending the Sure Start group regularly although numbers attending did vary from week to week.

**Maxwell Community Centre**
The focus group took place in the community centre building, involving five respondents aged between 35 and 67, again one male and the others female. Maxwell community centre is based on a large housing estate whose population is largely white working class. A weekly youth club and various community meetings take place in the centre although some people in the group felt the centre was underused and underfunded, requiring financial backing to fulfil its potential in the community. People taking part in the focus group were all resident on the estate, two for twenty years. One of the respondents was the 'lolly-pop lady' for the local primary school.

**Braddon Parent and Child Community Group – City Centre**
This focus group took place in a community centre for child and family activities and consisted of seven respondents from ethnic minority communities, aged between 20 and 46, one respondent was male and the rest female, all were parents. The Parent and Child Centre existed to support parents with advice on parenting and training for paid work, in addition to offering parent and child groups. The respondents attending this focus group were all from Asian and African ethnic minority groups, two respondents had been born in Britain and other members had immigrated to Britain. This group were the least comfortable in an interview situation, possibly because they were not an already pre-formed group but had gathered at the centre specifically for the focus group. It became clear that they did not see 'poverty' as existing in Britain, especially within 'their' community as people shared resources.

**Individual Interviews**

Although this research was looking at people's discourses of 'mundane poverty' – the everydayness of living on a low income – three of the interviewee respondents had
experienced more acute forms, including street homelessness and living in hostels. Interestingly only one of these people, recently homeless, saw themselves as ‘in poverty’.

Danielle – is in her early twenties. She has three children and is expecting her fourth child with her new partner with whom she has recently moved in with. Until recently Danielle had been living in a hostel due to her status as homeless. She is one of the few respondents to say that she was in poverty, although she distinguishes between her circumstances and those that she described as ‘severe’ poverty.

Matt – is in his mid-thirties and has a 3-year-old child. At the interview he lived with his partner but was in the process of separating and moving out of the family home into a rented room. Matt is currently unemployed and had experienced long-term unemployment and low-wage work in the past as well as a period living in a hostel. He was very angry about his financial situation and the way he felt he and other claimants were treated in the job centre. Matt identified himself as in poverty and also as excluded from many of the activities that he perceived that many people took for granted.

Fred – is a 51-year-old married father of an eight year old by his second wife and stepfather to his wife’s two teenage boys. He also has two adult children, one of whom is in permanent institutional care because of disabilities. Fred was unemployed at the time of the interview and has had a series of jobs as a labourer, often lasting a week or less on a variety of building sites since his redundancy from a local firm three years ago. Fred did see himself as living in poverty.

Terri – is in her early thirties. She identifies as a lone parent of her two children (who are both in secondary school) but her boyfriend lives with her most of the time. She is a full-time parent and does not intend to enter full-time paid work although she has undertaken some casual work as a school dinner-lady. One of her children has an unidentifiable illness, which has meant missing considerable amounts of school and Terri has recently suffered mental health problems.

Nicky – is 36 and the mother of three boys, aged 9, 12 and 16. She has been married for three years. Her husband is not in full time work but picks up casual employment, often agency work. Nicky has not been in paid employment since the birth of her first child at 17.
Nicky encountered domestic violence while with her first partner, the father of her boys, who left her with considerable debts that he had run up through gambling. Her first husband still lives on the estate but the boys only see him occasionally and he refuses to contribute financially. While Nicky considered herself to be made ‘poor’ at one time because of him she no longer thinks of herself or her family as in poverty.

Amy – is 28 and a lone parent of one pre-school aged child. She is currently at college, attending a course, which she hopes will lead to good paid employment although a recent withdrawal of funding for childcare has made her situation difficult. Despite experiencing shortages with money and ‘going without’ Amy did not consider herself in poverty or that poverty existed in Britain except though peoples’ own bad money management.

Tim – is just 18 and was excluded from school and later from college, which he left without any qualifications. He has recently begun an E2E course (which offers preparation for entry to an apprenticeship, employment, or further vocational learning opportunities). He lives with his parents who are currently both unemployed. He has recently volunteered at a youth club and hopes to have a career in youth and community work.

John – is in his late thirties and currently lives with his partner and her children. He has been married twice before and has children from both relationships. John was employed in the armed forces. After leaving the services he subsequently had a secure job for twelve years with a family company until he was made redundant several years ago, since which time he has had several agency jobs. John is hoping to attend a course on motorcycle maintenance and retrain in order to find paid work. While John acknowledges the estate where he lives has problems, especially drugs, he does not see himself or his area as ‘in poverty’.

Martha – lives with her partner and three children. She has experience of street homelessness and hostel living but does not consider her current situation as one of poverty. Martha is a volunteer at Sure Start and says her partner works in a minimum wage job (low wages are one aspect of the area where she lives that she identifies as a potential cause of economic hardship). Martha does not feel herself or her family to be in poverty.
Nathan – is a lone parent of two young daughters, one just starting primary school and the other at nursery school. He is in his early thirties and is proud of bringing his children up alone although he notes that it is a struggle financially, especially without any money from the childrens’ mother. Nathan was soon to start part time employment at the local Children’s Centre, a role that he had been undertaking for a number of months in a voluntary capacity. Although Nathan acknowledged that he struggled financially he did not regard this as poverty.

Lorraine – is in her mid thirties, is single and lives alone. She lives in a rural location near a large city centre. She currently volunteers at a housing project in order to occupy her time and to gain experience, which she hopes will be useful for obtaining paid employment.

Julie – is a 34-year-old mother of three girls, between the ages of 16 and 10. She has been married for two years to the father of her youngest child. Julie’s husband, who is in his fifties, has a delivery round which is the family’s only income, apart from tax credits. Julie and her girls have health problems, the eldest has epilepsy and all have asthma.
THERE ARE NO SILVER SPOONS FOR CHILDREN BORN INTO POVERTY

Barnardo’s Image 1: Posters from Barnardo’s ‘silver spoon’ anti-poverty campaign (2003).
Image 2: campaign image used to highlight poverty in old age.
Image 3: promotional image from child poverty campaign.
Image 4: photographs taken by respondents.
Appendix 5: Individual Interview Questions

Casual introduction: ...this is an informal chat really and what I am interested in your ideas so...
There are no wrong or right answers as such...

- If you had to do a tv programme on being hard up in Britain what would you focus on?
  [Prompts if clarification needed: Areas, groups of people, situations]

Moving onto your own experiences

- Has there been a time when you weren’t very well off? (if no, how about in your parents lifetime? How do you compare things now....? Why would you say you were hard-up then and not now?)

- Do you sometimes run out of money now or can’t do what you’d like because of not having enough money?

- Would you call this poverty?

- Are there activities you would you do if you had more money (what?)?

- Can you describe the life of someone you see as living in poverty?

- (I’ve found that some people haven’t come across the word social exclusion) but it is a term the government uses quite a lot.* Have you heard of it? What do you think it means?

- What do you think they imagine people are excluded from? [Do you find that you or people in your family are ‘excluded’ from anything?]

- Some researchers talk about an ‘adequate income (having enough). What do you see as an adequate income? What’s adequate?

- Have you got any questions?

Prompts

Could you say more about that?
What do you mean by that?
In what way? Why?

* In initial interviews this question asked about social exclusion without the prefix (in brackets) but as it appeared that people seemed embarrassed not to have heard of social exclusion the part about other people not having heard of it was added.
Appendix 6: Informed Consent Form

Date: 21/07/05

I would be very grateful if you would take part in this research. All personal information will be made anonymous and all data will be kept confidential and only used for the purposes that you agree to below. The focus group will be recorded, but the data is strictly confidential. Excerpts (in the form of quotes) from the recording may be included in the research report/future written material, but under no circumstances will your name or any identifying characteristics will be included (in report/journal article etc).

I would like to emphasise that you are free to refuse to answer any question and free to withdraw your consent at any time.

All data collected will be destroyed by 2010 or upon your request.

Please tick the following boxes according to what you consent to:

I give my consent to take part in this discussion, which will be recorded. 

I give my consent for the recorded information and transcribed data from the recording to be used within a written report/thesis.

All information from the tape-recording and the transcribed data will be made anonymous and remain confidential.

Signature of participant ..............................................

Signature of researcher ......................................................

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION