

Children and Poverty

Why their experience of their lives matter for policy

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Abstract

Children's poverty has long been a central concern for policy makers and policy researchers. The body of extant research conducted and the range of programmatic interventions undertaken by successive governments in this and other countries is extraordinary. Nevertheless, children remain in poverty. Clearly there are many reasons for this, not least of which is the maintenance and intensification of market capitalism with its attendant blatant inequalities. Even so, the moral, political, social and economic imperatives for developing workable responses to children's poverty remain. This paper argues that we, in Australia, should adopt an approach increasingly taken in the UK. Drawing on, among other things, the new sociology of childhood, this approach begins not with the expertise of adult researchers and policy makers, but with that of children. In doing so, the case is made for why children's perceptions and experiences of poverty are key concerns for policy. The paper outlines in theoretical terms why children's voices matter. Invoking the new sociology of childhood and the sociology of identity, a conceptual framework for understanding why policy scholars and makers should carefully attend to the voices of their subjects is sketched – in this case, the subjects are children. Finally, some methodological implications of this for undertaking policy research informed by this approach are outlined.

Key Words: social policy, children, identity

Introduction

The existence and persistence of poverty is, arguably, one of the most important issues to confront contemporary policy. Children's poverty in particular has an enduring capacity to disturb us, and has long been a central concern for policy researchers and policy makers nationally and internationally. The enormous corpus of extant research about children's poverty and the range of programmatic interventions undertaken by successive governments in this country, in other countries, and internationally at for example, the level of the United Nations and other transnational institutional bodies and forums, is extraordinary. Nevertheless, children remain in poverty. Clearly there are many complex and intersecting reasons for this, not least of which is the maintenance and intensification of market capitalism with its attendant inequalities, coupled with policy regimes internationally, nationally and sub-nationally which prioritise individualism and economic growth over collectivism and redistribution. Despite, or should we say in spite of capitalist triumphalism, the moral, political, social and economic imperatives for developing workable and effective responses to children's poverty remain intact. And they demand our urgent attention. Irrespective of the efforts of post World War Two Keynesian welfare states and their more recent (transformed) workfare-informed versions, the persistence of children's poverty in the face of sustained economic growth in the advanced post-industrial economies disfigures contemporary human society at what ever level one chooses to view it. From a macro sociological and economic point of view, such a state is not particularly surprising. Authors such Wintersberger (1994) and Sgritta (1994) argue, for example: that state-promoted distribution of resources between generations is distorted in that the older generation benefit far more from welfare than do children (Wintersberger, 1994: 239); and that the real politics of managing the political impact of the baby boomers exacerbates these tendencies (Sgritta, 1994: 352). These comments reflect a growing awareness that 'childhood is a variable' – specifically, a dependent variable – with consistent and persistent outcomes related to it (Qvortrup, 2000: 79).

This paper argues that we, in Australian policy research and policy development, should adopt an approach to understanding children's poverty that has fairly recently been developed by policy researchers in the United Kingdom. Drawing on, among other things, the new sociology of childhood, this approach (unlike most other policy responses to social problems) begins not with the honed and sophisticated expertise of highly educated and well read adult researchers and policy makers, but with the seemingly naive knowledge of children. It is an approach which suggests that children's perceptions and experiences of poverty are (or should be) key knowledge for policy, accepted as having an epistemological significance at least equal to the most robust quantitative data generated via complex positivist research methods. It is a position which proposes that, in Fraser's words (2004: 16), 'children are expert in their own lives'. While taking a starting point from this mostly British work, this paper goes one step further than our international policy research colleagues by attempting to do what they, for the most part, partially undertake. That is,

the paper outlines in theoretical terms why children's voices matter. Invoking the new sociology of childhood and complementing that with sociology of identity, the paper begins to sketch a conceptual framework for understanding why policy scholars and policy makers should carefully attend to the voices of their subjects – in this case, those of children. Put simply, failure to attend to children's experiences, perceptions and responses to poverty could, in policy terms, lead to policy responses which miss the mark. Because this is work that is as yet largely undone in Australian policy research, the paper outlines some of the methodological implications for work informed by this approach.

As well as taking up the challenge of arguing why children's voices matter in policy, the paper also – coincidentally – addresses another issue which plagues social policy research and analysis in Australia; the role of social theory. While there are key exceptions in the social policy tradition more broadly (see for example O'Brien and Penna, 1998; Leonard, 1997), social policy and social theory has, according to Jordan (2005) and arguing from a British perspective, long enjoyed an ambivalent relationship. This ambivalence also occurs in the Australian context and this paper represents a modest attempt to overcome it. It does so by sketching the background to a case study which illustrates the utility of social theory for social policy research in that it allows nuance, depth and an orientation to useful criticality to emerge. It allows us, for example, to move – albeit tentatively – towards explanations of why, despite our strenuous and persistent efforts, children's poverty persists. Hopefully, this then allows us to move beyond a position that mostly accepts that our anti-poverty policies, programmes and models of intervention are necessarily appropriately constituted and/or targeted. Theory is a practical instrument for any endeavour which purports to understand children. It allows us to describe and analyse the institutional settings which 'contain' and constitute children, and in which their personal capacities are formed (such as programs aimed at children and the impact of such ubiquitous settings such as families, schools, and communities).

To undertake these two tasks the paper proceeds as follows. Part one of the paper discusses the 'problem' – both of children's poverty and of our approaches to it. Part two introduces and draws on theory – in this case the new sociology of childhood and the sociology of identity which – logically – emerges out of any serious engagement with the first body of theory invoked. In doing so, the paper demonstrates the implications of this body of theory for our understanding of children's poverty. Part three, outlines some of the methodological implications of undertaking research into children's poverty from this perspective and illustrate how such research has a contribution to make to the overall genre of social policy research in Australia.

Children's poverty

We all know and we all agree that children's poverty is an issue which has such moral salience in contemporary society that it cannot and will not be ignored, whatever perspective one adopts or position one occupies. Politicians, parents, and the public all care about children's poverty. This is born out in

the investment, over time, of a great deal of money and energy into learning about the dimensions of, and perhaps more importantly, the implications of children's poverty – both for themselves and for society more broadly. Perhaps the principal reason we are concerned about children's poverty (other than our emotional and/or philosophical repugnance about the suffering of 'innocents') is articulated in terms of children as a social investment, or put another way, our collective interests in children as future adults (Harper, Marcus and Moore, 2003; Lundberg, 1993). Although contested (see Bradbury, 2003 for an overview of the debates) the general view is that childhood poverty is associated with significant problems in adult life which impact on the employment, health and overall wellbeing of individuals and their families, as well as resulting in unacceptable collective costs of such phenomena as crime, high morbidity and early mortality patterns associated with lower socio-economic status (understood as a consequence of childhood poverty) in adulthood.

We know, for example, that poverty affects children's health, development, achievement and behaviour (Aber, Bennet and Conley, 1997; McLoyd, 1998; Spencer, 2000; Draper, Turrell and Oldenburg, 2005; Zwi and Henry, 2005). Currently, we know that children's ability to participate in community activities, school activities and peer group activities can be greatly restricted if children are poor (Attree, 2004; Ridge, 2002). We know that poor economic circumstances have the potential to impact on children's lives in a number of ways, for example on their family relationships and circumstances, schooling and educational achievements, access to developmental, and recreational opportunities, and on their health (Finch and Saunders, 2001; Duncan and Brooks-Gunn, 1997). We also know that the timing, depth and duration of poverty are significant in the effect of poverty on children's lives (Bradshaw, 2003, 2001; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). We know that childhood poverty has physical, cognitive, behavioural and emotional outcomes: on mortality, morbidity, accidents, child abuse, teenage pregnancy, homelessness, educational attainment, school exclusion, youth crime, smoking, alcohol and drug use, suicide, self-image, happiness and subjective well being (Bradshaw, 2002; 2001; Morrell, Page and Taylor, 2001). In other words, as Attree (2006: 59) so aptly comments, 'the costs of poverty are not only material, but also profoundly social'.

The persistence of children's poverty in the face of our knowledge about its impact is puzzling. While estimates of child poverty vary according to the way it is defined and measured, commonly used snap-shot measures of child poverty suggest that at the turn of the 21st century, between 12 and 15 percent of Australian children were living in income-poverty (Whiteford & Adema, 2007; UNICEF, 2007; Wooden & Headey, 2005). Australia is placed in the middle to bottom end of league tables of child poverty for member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (estimates range from 3% in Denmark to 22% in the United States) (UNICEF, 2007; Whiteford & Adema, 2007; UNICEF, 2005).

Seminal contributors to the corpus of work known as the ‘new sociology of childhood’ suggest some reasons for this persistence. Arguing from the perspective of economics Wintersberger (1994), for example claims that we commonly think of children in terms of the costs they impose on society. Alternatively, he suggests we should (among other things) think about children as one population cohort among several – which may (or as he demonstrates, may not) be treated favourably in terms of redistributive income security and other social policies.

In all, the literature on children and poverty is both extensive and disturbing. It is the latter because, particularly in the Australian context, we have had as yet limited success in making significant inroads into the problem. What is striking however, when scanning the extant work done in charting the dimensions, extent and outcomes of children’s poverty is the extremely limited extent to which we understand the experience of poverty from the perspectives of the children themselves. As we know, much research on poverty – including children’s poverty – adopts a narrow definition, usually operationalised in the form of income measures, and this is an approach which leaves out quality of life issues. It also neglects another dimension which is particularly important for policy: how people (in this case children) respond to and manage their lives (McKendrick, Cunningham-Burley and Backett-Milburn, 2003).

Policy research and development in relation to children often focuses on adults – particularly the adults closely involved in shaping children’s lives. In doing so, such work assumes that adults speak as proxies, uniquely capable of articulating issues that children, perhaps, cannot. Relying on the insights of the new sociology of childhood (James, 1993; James and Prout, 1990; Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998), if we assume on the other hand that children are competent, then social policies grounded in assumptions of non-competence or diminished competence would not be grounded in reality and would (in fact probably do) misjudge the subjects to which they speak. Increasingly, this is the focus of a growing but as yet very small body of qualitative research¹ undertaken, predominantly in the United Kingdom and Ireland² (Backett-Milburn, Cunningham-Burley and Davis, 2003; Daly and Leonard, 2002; Davis and Ridge, 1994; Dowling and Dolan, 2001; Ridge, 2002; Roker, 1998; Willow, 2002)³. All of these studies reinforce our key assumption – that the experience of childhood matters. Backett-Milburn et al (2003: 614) state in relation to health outcomes, for example, that ‘if childhood experience is indeed creating

1 Qualitative approaches to poverty are increasing in number, but for the most part (as with most research undertaken on children’s poverty) they are undertaken and presented from the point of view of families, particularly parents (mothers). See, for example, Hays, 2000.

2 The author notes the extensive contribution also made by scholars in the Nordic countries such as Qvortrup (2005, 2000, 1994), Wintersberger (1994), Sgritta (1994).

3 The author notes that there are some others such as Van der Hoek (2005) from the Netherlands; Weigner (2000) and Percy (2003) from the USA; and Taylor and Fraser (2003) from Australia.

and recreating inequalities which affect health in adult life, clearly understanding children's own perspectives and how they exercise agency in/and make sense of the health cultures in which they grow up are missing links'.

Among these studies, perhaps the most significant is the work undertaken by Ridge (2002). In this seminal work, Ridge explicitly nominates the dominance of adult-centric approaches to poverty in terms of economic mal-distribution and poor access to material resources. Taking up the insights of the new sociology of childhood, she also explicitly argues that by adopting a 'children as future adult' perspective, much policy research on children's poverty inevitably obscures their contemporary subjective experience and also eclipses the complexities of their experiences along with the current implications of those experiences for their day-to-day lives. In other words, Ridge's approach helps us to appreciate that paying attention to children's experiences of poverty helps us overcome the abstracting tendencies of much poverty research, which constitutes its subjects as collective categories in disembodied and de-humanised ways. Further, her approach stands in contrast to the 'futurity' approach of much research (and associated social policy which draws on the corpus) which positions children in the public sphere as a form of future human capital.

It also overcomes the tendency in most research into children's poverty to sequester them within the private sphere of the family where we know little about the impact of unequal distribution of resources. This, not surprisingly, feeds into the development of policy instruments which, by targeting the family as the unit of intervention, also obscures the potential mal-distribution of intra-familial resources in some families. Finally, and in her own words: 'to truly understand the complex dynamics of poverty on children's lives and their capacity for self-realisation, we need to develop a greater understanding of children's discourse and agency, and the meanings and interpretation they give to their lives and experiences in the context of restricted social, material and structural environments' (Ridge, 2002: 9). Important though Ridge's work is to the developing genre of qualitative research into children's experience of poverty and to social policy which is (potentially) informed by it, Ridge's work (along with most other work in the – albeit small – genre) identifies and asserts but does not articulate the role or importance of the specific forms of personhood (identity) which children develop and acquire in their passage through social institutions. For example: 'Any understanding of childhood poverty must encompass the discourse, agency *and identity* of the child' (Ridge, 2002: 141 – italics added). But she does not enumerate/explain/discuss why, for example, identity is important.

This 'why' question needs to be addressed, both theoretically and empirically, and this is where this paper hopefully contributes. Children living in poverty know they are different, and know this from a fairly early age (Middleton, Ashworth and Walker, 1994). This knowledge and experience of 'difference' impacts on their social relations: for example in terms of causing embarrassment, exposure to bullying and through fear of social exclusion (Bakett-Milburn et al, 2003; Daly and Leonard, 2002; Ridge, 2002). Further,

the qualitative studies referred to earlier have indicated that children become resigned to living in poverty (Middleton et al, 1994; Roker, 1998), and actively develop a range of strategies to cope (Ridge, 2002). Children are, accordingly, resourceful in their attempts to moderate and/or influence how they project themselves to others and how they are seen. All of these insights suggest that children's agency matters and that the identities they construct and propel are central to their experience of poverty.

Theorising Children's Poverty

The contribution of the 'new' sociology of childhood

At the risk of oversimplifying what is a rich, robust and complex body of interdisciplinary work (see, for example, Jenks, 2005; Prout, 2005; Corsaro, 2003; Mayall, 2002; James, 1993; James and Prout, 1990), there are two key themes raised by the 'new' sociology of childhood relevant to our purposes here. First, it can be understood as a corrective to what were, in studies of childhood, the dominant biologically-informed theoretical approaches, for example those promoted by the broad corpus of development psychology (Prout, 2005). In this respect, it is a reaction to tendencies in developmental perspectives to objectify children, rendering them as immature adults in the making, captured and propelled by an inevitable telos of cognitive, physical, emotional and social development towards some idealised and imagined end. The 'new' approach, while not rejecting the notion that children develop and mature biologically and cognitively, suggests instead that any approach which conceptualises childhood as a universal biologically-determined condition misses the nuance and difference arising from temporal, historical and social variance in the lives of children. As Qvortrup (1994, p. 3) suggests, developmental approaches position children as ontologically different from adults, a 'difference' which, ultimately, justifies a lowered regard for their status vis a vis adults and the exertion of adult power over children.

It is an approach which is also critical of the adult-centric tendencies embedded in traditional accounts which suggest that childhood is merely a period of socialisation, wherein children are drawn along a trajectory leading them to the (preferred and dominant status) of adult. The 'future-ism' or 'futuraity' inherent in such perspectives under-appreciates, or more accurately, obscures the importance of the ongoing present. Childhood, this body of work suggests, is a social and cultural institution. So children themselves must, logically, be understood as social actors in their own right and that their agency is important.

Second, it is an approach which argues that generation and the generational order is key to understanding childhood. Here, 'generation' is conceptualised as social structure. Children, it is argued, constitute a social group, an institution, a permanent feature of society, a part of the social order. Children's daily lives are structured by adults and by adult views of how their lives should be lived (Mayall, 2000), social reproductive processes which are very much taken-for-granted and rendered invisible in much the same way as women's subjection was/is rendered invisible by the gender order of patriarchy.

The 'new' sociology of childhood has much to offer us in our quest to understand children's poverty and to evaluate and develop policy which attempts to respond to children's poverty. While acknowledging that there are many implications, here three are drawn out, reflecting several dimensions of interest –in terms of our understanding of the rights of children (or the ethics of our understandings of children); in terms of the potential efficacy and/or impact of policy; and in terms of methodological issues when undertaking research designed to inform policy related to children:

1. In drawing our attention to the futurity in traditional conceptions of childhood, the new sociology highlights the connections between traditional accounts and modernist policy assumptions promoting the 'promise' of childhood, for example, in the manner in which policy responses to poverty are predicated upon assumptions about the impact on individual and collective futures, and on children as a form of human capital investment. Such assumptions are, suggests Prout (2000: 306) 'unbalanced', and need to be accompanied by a 'concern for the present well-being of children'. In other words, children have rights to human self-realisation as children, not as embryonic adults. Such futurity has the capacity to render us deaf and blind to issues experienced in the present and their impact in the present (much less the future). The present is, in effect, a hostage to the future – a future imagined by adults and imposed on the present of the daily lives of children. Put at its most stark, a futuristic orientation is not about children qua children at all. By contrast, the new sociology of childhood renders children as people today, and (if the human race does not become extinct) in an infinite series of consecutive 'todays'.
2. The new sociology of childhood not only allows us to appreciate the logic (and ethics) of attending to the present, it also allows us to do so in that it emphasises the competence of children as social actors and as informants about their lives. Children are 'keen, constructive and thoughtful commentators on their everyday lives at home, at school and in the wider community' and as such, have a richness of knowledge to offer that would be senseless to neglect (Prout, 2002: 71). Further, by encouraging an approach to children as competent, groups of children normally excluded from giving authentic lived accounts of the impact of particular policy domains are given voice. The experiences, for example, of the very young of childcare move beyond the (no doubt well meaning but nevertheless adult-centric) accounts of parents, and may well render our understanding of childcare as a domain of intervention poorly, or at least, inadequately understood. Such an assertion is supported by empirical work undertaken in such domains by Clark (2003), Strandall (2000), and Corsao (1997). Alternatively, policy research informed by the new sociology of childhood encourages an approach in which the experience of disabled children, for example, of segregated versus mainstream schooling are brought into debates which also tend to be adult-centric in their orientation.

3. Taking seriously, the insights of the new sociology of childhood imposes particular ontological, epistemological (and hence) methodological imperatives on the undertaking of policy research, encapsulated perhaps in the notion that such research is with children not about children. As will be discussed in more depth in part three of this paper and drawing out the three types of imperatives identified above, this suggests that:
 - a) children are competent social actors enmeshed in power relations emanating out and through generation as social structure, b) that children's knowledge is (at a minimum) as valuable, authentic and significant as any other form of social scientific knowledge, and c) that to attend to both a) and b) above, qualitative participatory approaches are most appropriate in that they attend centrally to issues of both power and representation in research.

In summary, the contribution of the new sociology of childhood is one which suggests a particular ethic in that children are rights bearing and are so in the present; that our location of children and childhood in a generationally-engendered matrix of social relations produces and reproduces unacceptable sets of social relations; and provides ontological and epistemological validation for the use of qualitative research methods in policy research related to children. Finally, it is also a theoretical approach which suggests that children's identity, especially as constituted in the present, is central to our appreciation of their experiences – in this case – of poverty.

The contribution of the sociology of identity

The new sociology of childhood is predicated on an appreciation that children actively construct their own identities and that identity constitution '*works* for children as much as it does for adults' (Jenkins, 2004: 58, italics in original). The sociology of identity is a subset of a broader intellectual project of understanding identity that incorporates such diverse intellectual trends as structural linguistics, Althusserian Marxism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction and discourse theory. Here, we focus on that part of identity theory which focuses on the social relations, practices and techniques through which human beings acquire the characteristics and attributes of a particular type of person. It is a body of theory which draws upon such classical authors as Norbert Elias (1978), and particularly for our purposes here, the work of Erving Goffman (1969; 1968). It also relies on contemporary theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu (1987) and Nikolas Rose (1996; 1989).

What does the sociology of identity contribute? It provides us with a capacity to develop an understanding of the specific forms of personhood that individuals acquire in their passage through social institutions. It is a sociology which asks: what are the practices within which human beings are located within particular regimes of the person – for example, the regime of 'the child' (Rose, 1989)? The sociology of identity encourages us to locate the "inner" in space' (Elias, 1978), or, in other words, identity as a social artefact. If we accept the instruction provided by the new sociology of childhood, that childhood itself is a social institution with attendant identities, then addressing how those identities are

constituted is, as Jenkins (2004: 57-59) suggests, logically consistent. This means that understanding how identities are constituted cannot (or rather should not) be separated from appreciation of the specific institutional, social and cultural milieu – in this case, the lived experiences of children in poverty – in which they are formed.

In this section I will illustrate, albeit partially, some of what the sociology of identity suggests, particularly in terms of the individual processes of self-identification in the context of social relations and social institutions. In doing so, I initially identify one facet of children's agency. Further to that, I discuss how the sociology of identity captures another form of, for want of a better term, more 'active' agency on the part of children. Finally, I will discuss some (theorised) potential outcomes of identity categorisation, particularly for poor children, and finally, I end this section with some concluding, but by no means comprehensive comments on the significance of attending to children's identity.

So what does the sociology of identity tell us about children, and more specifically, about the impact of children's poverty? First, it suggests that identity construction occurs from quite early ages, for example, from two to four years (Poole, 1994), in that from that time children are able to illustrate self-identification through, for example, telling stories about themselves and others. This, in turn, suggests that children's poverty and its impact on their identity *matters from a very early age*. Further, the sociology of identity suggests to us that identities established in infancy and early childhood are less flexible than identities acquired subsequently, thus establishing that the lived experience of children *over time* matters.

The sociology of identity also suggests to us that selves, while constituted interactively through internal and external definition in the context of social institutions, are embodied (Jenkins, 2004). We engage with the broader society and interact with others *through the medium of our embodied selves*. In Goffman's (1969) terms, the 'presentation of self', and the strategies of 'impression management' illustrate the performative dimension of identity formation, a 'performance' undertaken by the embodied self as actors supported by a variety of props. While acknowledging that we draw on a variety of resources in processes of self-identification (for example, social relationships constituted through the social institutions in which we engage), the embodied nature of self suggests the importance of a person's material capacity to achieve desired corporeal representations of self – through, for example, clothing, residential location, possessions. Given that identification is dialectical, how others 'see' individual children is not the only issue, how children see themselves is also important. In other words, children's experience of poverty and its impact on their identity is as much a function of their reading of themselves as it is of others' reactions to them. This can be understood as the individual order of identity experience – in Jenkins (2004) terms – the 'embodied individual and what-goes-on-in-their-heads'.

Second, by acknowledging the dialectical and interactional nature of the process of identity formation, the sociology of identity provides us with a conceptual framework for appreciation of the centrality of children's agency over and above that suggested by the individual order of identity. Again, Goffman's (1969) notion of impression management encapsulates this. We all, children included, engage in active negotiation of our identity. This suggests that we need to attend to the strategies children pursue in negotiating constitutive social relations in the contexts and institutional settings central to their lives. Such insights complement those of the new sociology of childhood which suggests that children acquire the capacity to engage competently in the dialectic of identity formation (James, 1993). Indeed, work exists in that genre which points, for example, to the moral competence of children in the context of friendships and other relationships (Dunn, 2004, 1988).

The sociology of identity through, for example, the work of Bourdieu (1988) and Rose (1999; 1989) suggests that identity is consequential. That is, it has material outcomes in and on people's lives, including those of children. In similar manner to the notion of Goffman's 'spoiled identity' (1968) Rose, in the tradition of Foucault, pointedly illustrates that certain identities ('subject identities' in his terms), constituted discursively within particular regimes of power and 'truth', are subsequently authorised by those same regimes to inhabit social spaces and locations in which they access very particular sets of experiences. He specifically nominates particular regimes of discipline and attendant forms of intervention, in for example, institutional settings such as those associated with the business of psychiatry. His insights however, are equally applicable to the experiences of particular childhood subject identities to the regimes of discipline and intervention in, for example, educational settings. Bourdieu (1988) on the other hand, illustrates the material outcomes of 'habitus' – that constellation of personal attributes, dispositions, and characteristics which constitute an identity – with its peculiar access to different forms (and quantities) of economic, cultural and social capital. His work suggests, for example, that cultural capital would moderate the manner of children's engagement with forms of recreation and leisure which, in turn and in combination with differential access to the other forms of capital, would 'fix' children in particular class locations. As Jenkins (2004: 50) suggests: 'The world is not really *everyone's* oyster...some identities systematically enhance or diminish an individual's opportunities...The materiality of identification in this respect, and its stratified deprivation or affluence, cannot be underestimated (*italics in original*)'.

Taken together, the new sociology of childhood and the sociology of identity offer insights into the issues attendant to children's lived experience of poverty. Both bodies of theory rest on similar epistemological and ontological assumptions which, in turn, have quite specific implications for how research into such experiences should be undertaken. It is to this we now turn.

Researching Children's Lived Experience of Poverty – Some Implications

Drawing on the new sociology of childhood and on the sociology of identity this paper has suggested the following:

1. That children are not embryonic adults but are rights bearing human beings of the same ethical status as adults.
2. That children are competent social agents on a number of levels.
3. That children's identity is constituted dialectically and interactively.
4. That children's identity is embodied, a status that has material consequences.
5. That children enact strategies to 'manage' the embodiment of their identity.

These insights suggest that children are constituted discursively, and are not sociological dupes but active agents engaging in contexts in which the social relations are themselves shaped by a generational (as well as class, gender and racially constituted) social order. It suggests an approach which can attend to both the influence of structural processes as well as the children's agency in its various forms, and the interactions between the two. Further, the insights summarised above clearly suggest a particular epistemology which also presents as a particular ethic which acknowledges children's agency, and more specifically, their competence. This means that engaging in research about children's lived experience of poverty has methodological implications at two levels – ontologically/epistemologically and (for want of a better descriptor) morally and politically. While not suggesting that each is not implicated in the other, here the two dimensions are treated separately to encourage appreciation of the nuances of both, and the importance of attending to both in undertaking research into the lived experience of children's poverty.

In regards to the first, it suggests an overall approach which is constructivist, but within a framework that acknowledges the ongoing regularities and impact of the social order. It is an approach which draws, for example, on developments in feminist theory, such as standpoint theory (Harding, 1991; Smith, 1974) which suggests that a socially oppressed class (in this case – children) can access/have knowledge unavailable to the socially privileged (in this case, adult researchers and policy makers). In particular, this knowledge, from a standpoint view, is knowledge of social relations and their constitutive effects. It also draws on some of the recent developments in ethnography – particularly critical ethnography. Building on traditional ethnography, critical ethnography incorporates the tenets of critical theory, thereby encouraging researchers to develop an appreciation of the discursive production and reproduction of both social structures and subject identities, as well as the implications of these dialogical and discursive processes both in terms of the society and in terms of (doubly) marginalised populations in society such as poor children (Madison, 2005).

In regards to the second, the two bodies of theory employed suggest a methodological approach which attends to an ethic and/or a politics which suggests that research into children's lived experience of poverty must be research that is *with* and *by* children, as well as *about* and *for* children. This is a stance eloquently articulated by new sociology of childhood scholars⁴. It is one which suggests, for example, children are represented in research in one of four ways: as object, as subject, as social actor and as participant/researcher (Christensen and Prout, 2002). And it is the latter stance which is most appropriate for research with children. Clarifying why, Christensen (2004: 165) suggests that researchers should not assume that a specific approach or particular methods are needed for research with children because children are children. Such a stance repudiates the ontological and epistemological approach brought to understanding children implied by the new sociology of children and by the sociology of identity. It also repudiates the notion that children are competent social actors who have worthwhile contributions to make not only about the content of any research, but how it may best be undertaken.

Taking the ontological, epistemological, and ethical cum political imperatives arising from research into children's lived experience of poverty from both the new sociology of childhood and the sociology of identity it becomes quite clear that research in this genre should, in overall terms, be constructivist, critical, qualitative and participatory. As such, it could not be more different from the bulk of social policy research which has in the past (and will in all likelihood in the future) explored children's poverty. It is also clear that the methodological implications pose significant challenges to researchers which, on one level, de-stabilise the dominant identity of researcher-as – expert. Not only that, the methodological implications challenge the very practical sets of activities – the practices – that are undertaken in the name of 'research'. These challenges, when accepted, have the capacity to assist researchers to develop 'knowledge' hitherto untapped in social policy.

Conclusion

This paper is clearly concerned with capturing children's voices – particularly those of a doubly marginalised group, to facilitate appreciation of the implications of their voices for social policy. As Prout and Hallett (2003:1) suggest, social policy has not, as a rule, thought about children as having a voice and as having a valuable contribution to make to policy research, development, implementation and evaluation. Social policies are, inevitably, sets of discourses which are in a discursively constitutive relationship with social institutions and social practices. As such, they also constitute children. A key question posed, however, is what child do they assume? Clearly this is one question, albeit a very important one, but as this engagement with the new sociology of children and the sociology of identity suggest, only part of the equation. Not only do we need to find a notional space for children to be heard and understood in social

⁴ Here, we note that the methodological literature developed by this body of knowledge provides an extensive and rich source of eminently *practical* suggestions for how to undertake research within this ontological, epistemological and political framework.

policy, we need to go one step further and develop understanding about how children – in the complex contexts of their daily lives – constitute themselves. To do this we need to engage with the ontological, epistemological and ethical/ political challenges posed by the theoretical approach. Then – and perhaps only then – can we be in any way assured that our policy ‘settings’ are (more or less) on the same page as children living with poverty.

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