



# *Thinkpiece* *#80*

## ‘To count for nothing’: poverty beyond the statistics

Ruth Lister

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### **About Ruth Lister**

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### **About Compass**

Compass is a home for those who want to build and be a part of a Good Society; one where equality, sustainability and democracy are not mere aspirations, but a living reality. We are founded on the belief that no single issue, organisation or political party can make a Good Society a reality by themselves so we have to work together to make it happen. Compass is a place where people come together to create the visions, alliances and actions to be the change we wish to see in the world

## ‘To count for nothing’: poverty beyond the statistics

All too often political debate about poverty hangs on statistics and the measures used to compile them. Statistics are of course very important, not least to hold governments to account. But my starting point is that we need to move beyond the statistics, if we are to understand the experience of poverty. I’ll then explain how my own understanding developed to embrace the relational and symbolic as well as the material. The material – lack of the material resources needed to meet minimum needs including social participation to paraphrase the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s working definition, which reflects Peter Townsend’s pioneering work – is still in my view the stuff of how we define poverty, however much government might like to play it down. But when we also conceptualise poverty in relational and symbolic terms, it changes the angle of vision to provide a more acute sociological and social psychological understanding. Crucial here I’ll argue is to appreciate the ways in which people living in poverty are shamed and ‘othered’. I’ll then suggest that acknowledgement of their agency, within structural constraints, and also a human rights perspective offer counter-discourses or narratives to this process of othering. I’ll conclude with some brief reflections on possible implications for policy and poverty politics.

### The limitations of statistics: towards a relational-symbolic understanding of poverty

A preoccupation with statistics has contributed to confusion between measures and definitions. How often have you heard the claim that the official definition of poverty in this country is 60 per cent of median income, followed by criticism of its inadequacy as a definition? Well of course it’s inadequate because it’s a measure not a definition! Measures are but imperfect attempts to operationalise definitions.

We know that statistics tend to leave the general public cold. As Paul, a contributor to a recent ATD Fourth World collection, declares ‘We have to step out from the shadows of statistics and come forward to present ourselves as more than just mere numbers’ Ruth Sidel put it beautifully: ‘Statistics are people with the tears washed off’. A social science that ignores those tears is arid. The paradox is that in our preoccupation with counting ‘the poor’, we blind ourselves to how they constitute what Jacques Rancière describes as ‘the category of people who do not count’. My title paraphrases Joseph Wresinski, founder of ATD Fourth World, a human rights organisation working with people in severe poverty: ‘The greatest misfortune is to know that you count for nothing, to the point where even your suffering is ignored’.

That suffering is all too easily masked by what Featherstone and colleagues call ‘the abstract language of expertise’ – be it of the researcher or the professional. But, as part of a

developing interest in the psychosocial and the emotional, some social scientists are trying to understand social suffering, described by Frost and Hoggett as lying ‘at the heart of...the lived experience of the social damage inflicted in late capitalist societies on the least powerful, and the intra-psychic and relational wounds that result’.

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

These insights encouraged me to write my book on the concept of poverty. I then combined this more bottom-up perspective with the more top-down, using in particular work on recognition by the political theorists Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth. I found Fraser’s notion of ‘symbolic injustice’, ‘rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication’ helpful in conceptualising what I had learned on the Commission. More recently, empirical support has come from an important cross-national study by Robert Walker and colleagues. They concluded that ‘despite massive differences in material conditions, the psychosocial experience of poverty is very similar and is much shaped by the shaming to which people in poverty are exposed and the stigmatizing and discriminatory practices to which they are frequently subjected’.

## Shaming and Othering

This has been described as ‘the poverty-shame nexus’, shaped by ‘dominant discourses’. It’s through the lens of discourse – as articulated through language and images – that I’ll explore the poverty-shame nexus and the process of ‘othering’ that drives it. Othering describes how the ‘non-poor’ treat ‘the poor’ as different. It’s a dualistic process of differentiation and demarcation that draws a line between ‘us’ and ‘them’, which establishes, maintains and justifies social distance. As Andrew Sayer explains, ‘othering is likely to support and be supported by relations of economic inequality, domination and social exclusion, and indeed to be stimulated as a rationale for these’.

Othering operates as a discursive practice, which shapes how the ‘non-poor’ think and talk about and act towards ‘the poor’ at both an inter-personal and institutional level. Mark Peel, author of an insightful Australian study, reflecting on the pejorative terms used to describe people in poverty by ‘some of our most respectable citizens’, concludes that ‘to treat poor people so harshly you have to see them as unlike you in a very fundamental way’.

Poverty discourses are rooted in history. The most obviously demeaning examples are the deeply stigmatising labels of 'underclass' and 'welfare dependant', which echo the historical categorisation of the 'undeserving poor' and the Victorian 'residuum' which referred to sewerage waste as well as the city poor. So here we have 'the poor' as social waste or 'trash'. Imogen Tyler argues that contemporary underclass discourses construct members as "human waste"...'. In her analysis of disgust and its role in the Othering process, she also makes the link, via the related abusive term 'scum', with the more recent label of 'chav'. Although 'chav' is not quite coterminous with 'poor', it carries the mark of the 'underclass'. Indeed the website [chavscum.com](http://chavscum.com) was set up so as to taunt 'Britain's peasant underclass that are taking over our towns and cities'. But whereas, Hayward and Yar argue, the 'underclass' label was deployed to mark a pathological relation to production (and I would add reproduction), chav stigmatises what are deemed culturally impoverished or 'vulgar' forms of consumption.

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

Behind these obviously derogatory labels applied to people in poverty there lies a deeper problem of 'representational agency' in the very word 'poor' – and even more so 'the poor', which objectifies and distances, so that I use the term in what Americans call 'scare quotes'. People in poverty themselves are often reluctant to wear what is perceived as a stigmatising label, with its connotations of inferior as in 'poor quality'.

Jan Flaherty, in her illuminating Ph.D. study, concluded that, given people were open about their financial struggles, 'it was not an attempt to hide their circumstances that caused people to reject the idea that they were in "poverty"; it was the word itself and the connotations that its recognition brought'. Recent JRF research found the same. In both studies, there was a tendency to see 'real' poverty as existing 'elsewhere' – in particular developing countries, reflecting an understanding of poverty shared with the wider population. Insofar as it was acknowledged that poverty existed in the UK it was identified with an inability to manage and failings in personal behaviour in contrast to a more ordinary 'normalisation of everyday hardship' that described their own lives. One consequence was a tendency to 'other' other people living in poverty. As Chase and Walker describe it, 'by striving to distance themselves from... humiliating and negative constructions of "the poor"...people who sense being defined as the 'Other' appear to distance themselves from the label by passing it to "others"'.

These multi-layered processes of Othering are reinforced and to some extent shaped by media representations, which often portray those in poverty as 'strangers in our midst'. This is particularly the case in liberal welfare regimes such as the UK and US. A recent analysis of print media coverage of benefits claimants confirmed the bias towards negative representa-

tions (often reflecting political and policy discourse) and found evidence ‘to support the idea that negative media coverage is linked to stigma’.

The new phenomenon of what has been described as ‘poverty-porn’ television has been criticised by many as objectifying people in poverty ‘for the gratification of others’. Too many programmes are premised on and perpetuate what most social scientists view as the myths of ‘workless communities’ and ‘intergenerational worklessness’, all too often propagated by politicians also. Even what I’ve called ‘sympathetic Othering’ can serve to widen social distance by emphasising difference or evoking pity.

Thus, overall, the Othering of ‘the poor’ means that they are typically targets of, at best, the non-poor’s pity or indifference and, at worst, their fear, contempt, disgust or hostility, ‘to be helped or punished, ignored or studied’ to quote Michael B. Katz, but rarely treated as equal fellow citizens. As a consequence people living with poverty often feel shamed, stigmatised and humiliated. Shame has been described as the ‘most pernicious’ of emotions and Walker and colleagues’ research demonstrates how the ‘poverty-shame nexus’ causes ‘social and psychological pain’. They also found that the manifestations of that pain are gendered. Earlier research illuminates how children can find the pain particularly difficult to bear, as it ‘penetrates deep into their social relationships’, to quote Tess Ridge.

Andrew Sayer’s observation that ‘to experience shame is to feel inadequate, lacking in worth, and perhaps lacking in dignity and integrity’, with damaging implications for self-respect, is confirmed by people living in poverty themselves. As one woman put it, ‘You’re like an onion and gradually every skin is peeled off you and there’s nothing left. All your self-esteem and how you feel about yourself is gone – you’re left feeling like nothing and then your family feels like that’.

### Agency: a counter-narrative

I turn now to two, inter-related, ways in which contemporary poverty scholarship and activism are helping to combat dominant Othering narratives. The first is through recognition of the agency of people living in poverty – of their capacity to act – which challenges the characterisation of ‘the poor’ as passive objects be it in the benign form of the helpless victim or the malign spectre of the lazy, work-shy welfare-dependant languishing on benefit. That said, a number of words of caution are in order.

First, agency has to be contextualised within the structural constraints and opportunities that frame people’s lives. Class inequalities and social divisions, notably of gender, race, disability and age – shape and mediate the experience of poverty. For example, a recent JRF evidence review of gender and poverty by Fran Bennett and Mary Daly demonstrates not simply its unequal incidence but also that cause and effect are deeply gendered. Keeping sight of the structural context helps us to navigate the fine line between acknowl-

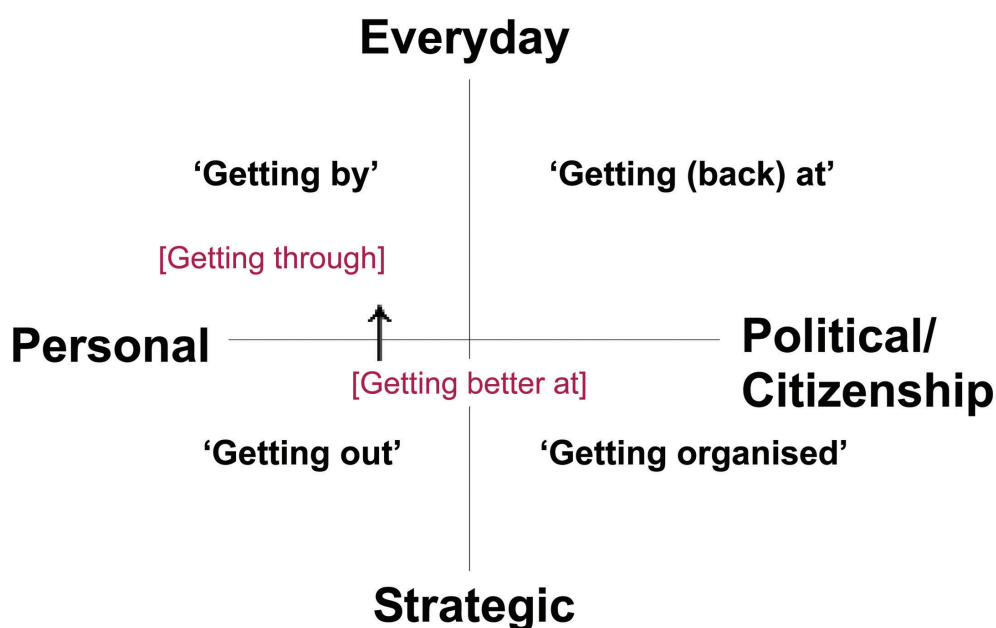
edgement of the agency of people in poverty, including their capacity to make mistakes and ‘wrong’ decisions, just like the rest of us, and blaming them for that poverty.

Conversely, there’s a risk of romanticisation. Not all agency is necessarily constructive either for the individual or others. Agency can be expressed through acts of violence for instance, which can themselves represent a response to shame and humiliation. Moreover, the flip-side of idealising agency (and similarly resilience) can be that those who do not manage to exercise it effectively, perhaps because of depression or malnourishment, may then face even greater contempt, thereby aggravating feelings of failure and shame. Indeed, one of the insights from the study by Walker and colleagues is that the corrosive effect of shaming and Othering on a person’s self worth can itself stunt ‘their agency and overall self-efficacy’.

It’s also worth emphasising that agency should not be understood as quintessentially individualistic. When I lectured in Japan there was some resistance to the concept because of its individualistic connotations. But, agency can be collective as well as individual. And, as David Taylor has argued, ‘the capacity to act...depends upon the ability to mobilise self in the context of and with others – it is relational’.

The capacity to act can be expressed in a number of ways. In my book I proposed a typology of agency based on two continua: from the more ‘everyday’ to the more ‘strategic’, reflecting the consequential strategic significance for people’s lives of the choices they make (vertical axis) and from the more personal to the more political (horizontal axis). The taxonomy categorises actions not actors so that any one individual could be exercising all four forms of agency, identified in the quadrants as ‘getting by’; ‘getting back at’; ‘getting out’ and ‘getting organised’. I’ll say a word about each in turn.

## Forms of agency



## Getting by

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

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

Such vulnerabilities reflect how, in poverty, getting by skates on the thin ice of precarity and insecurity without the buffer of savings to deal with shocks however minor, a factor I think I didn't pay sufficient attention to in the first edition of my book. Analysis by John Hills and colleagues found that it was less the considerable volatility of income among low income respondents that they found difficult to cope with than unexpected spending demands. Participants in a JRF study 'talked about managing their financial circumstances as if they were all walking tightropes that could start wobbling at any time'. As members of ATD Fourth World put it: 'Being poor is first about money: never having enough to repair the washing machine that just broke...Worrying about when the next thing will come through and never having the spare money to solve the crisis. And then falling into debt because you didn't have enough to replace the broken fridge and now having to pay this debt forever...Being poor is to dream that you will have one week when you don't have to worry about money, always dreaming'.

This is corroborated by Kjell Underlid, a Norwegian researcher who concludes that 'The sense of insecurity [generally accompanied by fear and anxiety] is an existential verity for the poor in affluent welfare states' - more acute than the insecurity faced more widely today, as documented in the new Compass report – *Something's Not Right: Insecurity and an anxious nation*. Fear loomed large in the accounts of people who gave testimony to a Commission on Poverty, established by the Bishop of Leicester, which reported recently. A sense of fear, in the face of cuts to the welfare state, was similarly observed by the journalist Mary O'Hara: 'if there was one word to capture the mood during the months that I



travelled the country' she writes, 'it was "fear"...The more the shock waves of austerity were absorbed, the more initial fears about what might happen mutated into a daily dread about how to survive'.

The SL approach helps to illuminate the ways in which getting by and coping with this insecurity involves the exercise of agency. At a very minimum, coping or getting by is an active process of juggling and there is plenty of research evidence to this effect. Much of the poverty literature describes everyday coping in terms of often complex and sophisticated 'survival' and 'budgeting strategies'. The Social Market Foundation points out that 'poorer households manage their finances at least as well as, and often more closely than, wealthier families'. What is often overlooked is how time-consuming this can be.

And it's often women's time as they carry the main strain of eking out inadequate material resources as part of the work they typically do in day-to-day poverty management, often involving considerable self-sacrifice. Also, as Val Gillies' research illuminates, they often deploy considerable emotional resources in trying to protect their children. Two words are used over and over again in the literature to describe the personal resources that are drawn on in the struggle to survive: resilience and resourcefulness.

But countless studies also point to the 'danger of painting too rosy a picture of women's resourcefulness that ignores the strain that it places on many of them'. A vivid picture of this strain is painted by Linda Tirado in her blog and recent book, *Hand to Mouth*, where she also brings out how the purchase of small pleasures, which might be castigated as imprudent budgeting, contribute to getting by psychologically. Elizabeth Harrison observes that resilience 'is not a bottomless pit that can be continually replenished' in the face of economic shocks. It can be difficult to tap into (often depleted) personal resources when exhausted by the very struggle to get by and when overwhelmed by the feelings of demoralisation, hopelessness, powerlessness and lack of control that poverty can cause. This is particularly the case when poverty is associated with ill health, mental and physical, as it so often is. The contribution and costs of children's agency also need to be recognised. According to Tess Ridge, they deploy their 'own strategies of survival – working, moderating needs, covering up, protecting their parents and making do' but these 'are often hidden and can be highly detrimental to children's wellbeing'.

What is hinted at here also is the work that goes into managing the shame associated with poverty. Indeed, the very fact of getting by is sometimes used as evidence of not being poor – another way of distancing oneself from the label 'poverty'. Walker points to the need 'to be seen to be coping' as one of a number of, not necessarily conscious, 'techniques for managing the shame'. Those akin to 'getting by', which perhaps we might label 'getting through', included keeping up appearances so as to 'appear "normal"' and withdrawal from social relations and commitments so as to avoid being shamed. While the latter can be a way also of saving money, the former can be costly, as brought out in a study by Kathy Hamilton. She

found that ‘individuals initiate strategies to avoid the social effects of stigmatisation and alleviate threats to social identity’ in particular through ‘conspicuous consumption, with emphasis on ensuring children have access to the “right” brands’. Although, paradoxically, she shows how these coping strategies ‘fuel further stigmatization’. This is a good example of Amartya Sen’s argument that, while avoidance of shame lies at the absolute core of poverty, the means of doing so are relative to particular societies.

As I’ve said, agency has to be understood in the context of social relations; social networks can represent social resources that buttress personal resources in getting by. Again, it’s mainly women who sustain social networks in disadvantaged communities. Through social networks of relatives, friends – and to a lesser extent neighbours – people can give each other material, practical and emotional support. This is explored in a longitudinal JRF study, which underlined that ‘critically important also was the reciprocal nature of support’. In other words drawing on social resources is often an active process of giving as well as receiving. But this can also mean that in some cases poverty itself can act as a barrier to forming and sustaining social networks and there is often a reluctance to seek material help from family or friends where reciprocity is difficult. For some the stress of poverty is thus compounded by social isolation. An ongoing longitudinal qualitative study of the impact of social security cuts in Newham reported that it was ‘noticeable’ that those not able or willing to access networks, found it much harder to cope and ‘were more worried about a financial emergency arising’.

Networks can – depending on their nature – also help people get out of poverty or start to get organised. Or they can be a source of casual work in the informal economy, which can represent a way of augmenting resources in order to get by, motivated by ‘need not greed’ in the experience of Community Links.

### *Getting (back) at*

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

Resistance can operate at the symbolic/cultural level also. An example is a recent ATD Fourth World project: the *Roles We Play* collection of portraits of people living in poverty is

a deliberate attempt to counter negative stereotypes through recognition of their contribution. As Alison explains 'this is a platform for ordinary people – people who live fulfilling lives, valuable lives, whether they're on benefits or not or whether they're disabled or they've got children, people who have incomparable struggle in their lives – to tell it in their own words instead of being labelled by people who don't really know but who cast negative judgement on people who they believe aren't contributing to the economy'.

Tirado's blog and book, mentioned earlier, can be read as an act of discursive resistance and an expression of the anger at the treatment of people in poverty identified by researchers such as Peel in Australia and Walker and colleagues in their cross-national study. But the latter found that that anger tended to be expressed through 'muted resistance' and 'frustration', typically giving way to resignation 'with respondents feeling that mere survival...required all the energy that they had at their disposal'. In contrast, Tyler, citing the Guardian/LSE study, argues that the British rioters of 2011 were in part responding to 'their sense of being invisible, of being stigmatized'.

### *Getting out*

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

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

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

A body of research into recurrent poverty from the JRF, and in particular the work of Tracy Shildrick and colleagues, one strand of which received the 2013 British Academy Peter

Townsend/Policy Press Prize, throws light on how difficult it is in today's insecure labour market for people to get clear of poverty 'even when they possessed strong, resilient work motivation and biographies that showed them putting this into practice with repeated engagement in jobs' and/or education. The barriers to escaping what has been dubbed 'the low-pay/no-pay' cycle are often just too great. They include structural barriers such as the nature of the jobs available and problems with childcare and transport and personal barriers such as ill health and lack of confidence.

Such barriers can serve to stifle aspiration and optimism among both adults and children. For example a study in Middlesbrough and Glasgow found that negative labour market experiences among older workers could lead to 'a sense of resignation and fatalism...despite their valuing of employment'. Nevertheless the researchers questioned the assumption of many politicians that the problem lies in 'poverty of ambition'. They found that 'despite their long-term worklessness, parents actively strove for better for their children...and young people...clung to normal, conventional aspirations for jobs and hopes for their futures'. But, as a number of studies show, the real issue is the difficulty in realising aspirations when lacking the personal, cultural and other resources needed to overcome the obstacles.

Moreover, the sheer grind of poverty can undermine strategic as well as everyday agency. The very strain of getting by can mean that the future is 'framed in terms of hours and days rather than years' as Daly and Leonard put it. The energy required to exercise strategic agency can just be too much. Paradoxically, benefit cuts aimed at getting people into work can make it harder. The Newham study found that 'by forcing people into stressful situations where day-to-day survival becomes a priority, they are eroding people's readiness...to seize opportunities'.

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

### *Getting organised*

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

I'll focus in particular on those associated with subjectivities and identities, using David Taylor's distinction between related facets of identity – ontological and categorical. Ontological identity refers to a person's unique sense of self. As I've already discussed, it can be

injured by the shaming and Othering associated with poverty. Categorical identity refers to a sense of belonging or sameness with others, which contributes to a sense of collective identity. A number of inter-related factors work against the development of a categorical identity among people in poverty.

First, 'poor' may not even be part of a person's individual identity. Poverty represents a socio-economic position rather than a personal defining characteristic. As ATD Fourth World observe, people living with poverty 'do not want to be seen only in the context of their poverty'. Second, the ascription of a category such as 'poor' does not necessarily translate into a sense of collective categorical identity. This is partly because we're not talking about a homogeneous or fixed group. And partly it reflects the reluctance to identify with the label. 'Proud to be poor' is not a banner under which many are likely to march. Moreover, the divisive 'ripple effect' of Othering of people in poverty by people in poverty impedes solidarity and collective action. Thus categorical identity is blocked by what might be understood as an attempt to protect ontological identity so that, as Chase and Walker argue, people 'can vindicate themselves as valid social beings'.

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

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

### Recognition and respect: a counter-discourse of human rights

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

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

This exemplifies what Clemens Sedmak calls 'blindness to the human aspect' in the disregarded Other in an essay on poverty and dignity, part of a recent British Academy collection exploring the 'power of the concept of human dignity'. As the editor Christopher McCrudden observes, Sedmak is emphasizing 'the importance of relationality...in our understanding of dignity' so that 'socio-economic rights would be rethought, for example, as protecting relational aspects of human flourishing in order to maximise the recognition and protection of our dignity'.

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

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

According to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, a human rights conceptualisation of poverty: 'gives due attention to the critical vulnerability and subjective daily assaults on human dignity that accompany poverty. Importantly, it looks not just at the resources but also at the capabilities, choices, security and power needed for enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other fundamental civil, cultural, political and social rights'. This formulation reflects the increasingly influential capabilities approach developed by Sen and Martha Nussbaum with its focus on what people are able to be and do: the kind of life people need to be able to achieve in order to flourish. It also speaks to one of the

demands of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign for 'power not pity'.

### Voice and the expertise borne of experience: towards a new poverty knowledge

An important element of powerlessness is lack of voice - not being heard as well as not being seen. Having listened to people living with poverty in Australia Peel concluded that 'they need to be trusted, respected and heard'. And 'if they wanted one thing to change, it was that they be treated as knowledgeable'.

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

The participants learned of the commitment required 'to recognize the other as a human being and not as a problem to be solved'. Reflecting on the implications for citizenship and representation, the report contends that 'the knowledge that people who have experienced poverty can bring to the table is uniquely valuable..., as long as they have the opportunity to think about what they and those around them experience. This does not exclude other types of knowledge, but these...can never replace what is contributed and expressed by the poor themselves'.

In developing such a philosophy, the participants helped to forge the kind of 'new poverty knowledge', grounded in the expertise borne of experience as well as more traditional forms of expertise, called for by Alice O' Connor and hailed as another counter-narrative that challenges dominant processes of Othering.

### Some implications for policy and politics

#### *Policy*

So what happens if we use this 'new poverty knowledge' in the formulation of policy? I only have time to suggest a few signposts, starting with those provided by the cross-national research into shame. The researchers conclude that 'in order to shift anti-poverty policies from being shame-inducing to dignity-promoting, policy reform should start with a critical evaluation of its framing', aimed at 'changing the foundational discourses shaping the policy-making process'. I think there's an important lesson there for the next government whatever its political complexion.

With regard to specific policies, the challenge posed to policy-makers is 'to find ways of shame-proofing' them. The delivery of benefits and services all too often heightens rather than lessens shame, thereby reducing their effectiveness. The UK researchers were repeatedly given examples of how 'the process of claiming benefits became dehumanising'. Dignity-promoting treatment can be encouraged by the development of a human rights approach. But, as the Equality and Human Rights Commission has shown, 'it requires a change in attitude and culture'. Poverty activists argue that this culture change must involve an understanding of what poverty means and of the damaging effects of disrespectful treatment. One tool is the involvement of people with experience of poverty in the training of professionals and officials, as pioneered with social work students.

This involvement is indicative of another key plank of a human rights approach to poverty, which according to the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, 'requires active and informed participation by the poor in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of poverty reduction strategies'. Participation acknowledges agency and the expertise borne of experience. However, in practice it can all too easily be phoney rather than offering genuine voice and power: 'the ultimate disrespect' as we were told on the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power.

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

### *The politics of poverty*

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

Reading recognition theory alongside the narratives of poverty activists suggested to me 'a politics of recognition&respect'. But whereas a politics of recognition is typically associated with the assertion of group difference, in the case of people living with poverty it's a struggle for recognition of and respect for their common humanity and dignity. Like Nancy



Fraser I believe that the struggle for social justice requires the integration of a politics of redistribution and of recognition&respect. So, for example when low paid workers demand a decent wage what is at stake is the socio-economic question of how much they are paid for their labour relative to others, the symbolic question of what that wage says about recognition of their worth and both questions with regard to whether it provides for a 'life in dignity'.

I'd like to finish with a short poem, written as part of an ATD creative writing project involving people in poverty. It expresses so well much of what I've been saying with the eloquence that can come from first hand experience.

All people, all human  
I'm telling the people with power  
that I have power too.  
If you stifle my voice,  
and deny me a choice,  
I will show my power to you.  
I will not come with a weapon,  
I will not come in fear.  
I will come with others  
as sisters and brothers  
and a voice you will have to hear.

I'm telling the people with knowledge  
that I have knowledge too.  
If you ignore my words,  
and deny what you've heard,  
my knowledge will be lost to you.  
I will not come in anger,  
I will not come in pain,  
I will come as me,  
with dignity,  
and your denial will be to your shame.

I'm telling the people with control,  
that I have control too.  
If you put me in chains,  
then hatred reigns,  
and fear gains control of you.  
I will not come as a prisoner,  
I will not come broken to you,  
I will come with pride,

and stand by your side,  
because I am human too.  
because I am human too.

(Moraene Roberts, reproduced from Liz Prest (ed) *Out of the Shadows*, 2000, ATD Fourth World)



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