

Growing up in the age of austerity: Understanding the impact of poverty and policy on low-income families and children

Professor Tess Ridge

University of Bath

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Understanding the context



- If reflecting on early years we need to understand wider context for those children growing up poor in affluent society
- Need to understand policies and practices from the perspective of the child who will experience them and be affected by them - what do changes in regulation or practice mean in childhood for children
- Changing political landscapes mean changing ideologies, different agendas, different expectations, different discourses and of course implications for practices and funding!
- Understand the ways in which children appear in the policy process, the ways in which their needs are recognised and their interests are understood
- In particular – how are children (and their families) who experience poverty viewed, addressed and supported – or undermined - through the policy process
- We need to be cautious about assumptions
 - of the reproduction of poverty and pathologies of poverty and culture.
- Be child-centred – ask ‘where do children come in this’?

Children and policy



Rhetoric

Children are attractive to political parties and policy makers

Reality

Children's rights and needs often over looked and under represented

Children are high consumers of policy and main targets of many programmes

Policy rarely informed by what children need and their concerns and issues

Rights and policy

Policy tensions between the rights of parents and interests of the state – children poor third

Citizenship and governance - Children are not full citizens

Problematic for low-income children – rights through parents, poverty devalued social position

How many children in poverty in UK?



(CPAG, 2019)

There were **4.1** million children living in poverty in the UK in 2016-17. That's 30 per cent of children, or 9 in a classroom of 30. (*Child Poverty Action Group, Households Below Average Income Statistics 2018*)

How many siblings affects poverty - Children in large families are at a far greater risk of poverty – 42 per cent of children living in families with 3 or more children live in poverty

Childhood poverty - Risks and myths ?



Key risks for children experiencing poverty

- Lone parenthood, ethnicity, sickness and disability, large families, unemployment, underemployment, low-wages

Danger of conflating problems – myths and media

'Children are in poverty because of parental drug and alcohol abuse'

One in four working age adults living in a couple with children are poor, but fewer than 3 percent are alcohol dependent and less than one percent drug dependent' (HBAI, 2011, Gould,2006, JRF,2012)

In 2018 Social Metrics Commission – Independent body - found that middle class people consume more drugs and alcohol than the poorest

'Children in poverty live in workless families'

Two thirds (67%) of children in poverty live in **working families** (HBAI, DWP 2018)

Poverty amidst affluence is particularly problematic



Poverty amidst affluence can lead to:

- Hidden needs
- Heighten stigma and isolation
- Stigmatising welfare support
- Problems with social reciprocity
- Costly social participation and lack of access to affordable opportunities
- Impact upon the delivery and quality of welfare support

The impact of poverty on parenting



- Parents who are poor are not 'poor parents'
- 'Poor parents' are found right across the socio-economic gradient
- Poverty can have an impact on parenting, it can be difficult, stressful and challenging, and poor maternal health, extreme parental stress, inadequate neighbourhood and social support can adversely affect parenting
- Parents are generally resilient and resourceful, coping with parenting under the most difficult circumstances, often going without, especially mothers
- Challenges imposed by low-income are exacerbated by lack of control and choice, insecurity and everyday demands of family life
- On top of which there are for many the demands of low-income and insecure work and or disability/long term poor health
- To be in poverty is also to be intensively governed by complex rules and regulations

Coping with the benefit system



Support from benefits or services are essential for many families, working and non-working

But they can exacerbate rather than alleviate problems:

- Inadequacy and complexity
 - Not easy to commit fraud but easy to fall foul of the rules, or misunderstand entitlement
 - Little information about claims and complex rules
 - Lack of advice and support
 - Little or no legal aid to challenge rulings
- Penalties for getting it wrong are now severe – sanctions
 - lone parents more likely to be sanctioned unfairly
- Universal Credit problems – including 5 week wait for support have resulted in increased debt and food bank use.
 - Trussell Trust gave out 1.6billion food parcels last year more than half million to children. Top three causes of need in 2017-18 were: ‘income not covering essential costs’, ‘benefit delays’ and ‘benefit changes’.
- Stigma is key issue in the delivery of support – constant backdrop, affecting take-up and support seeking

The impact of poverty on children?



- Poverty is experienced in childhood amongst peers
- Poverty permeates every area of children's lives. At home, in their neighbourhoods and at school
- It affects children materially, socially and on a deep personal level
- Some children are at much greater risk of experiencing poverty than others
- A poor childhood does not happen in isolation
- Poverty for many comes on the heels of upheaval and change
- Media images and discourses can have a significant impact on children's everyday lives

Growing up in poverty in the last 20 years



Labour – a period of expansion – social investment approach

- Child poverty pledge
- Childcare
- Improved benefits and tax credits
- Every Child Matters
- Sure start children's centres
- Welfare to work support
- Child Poverty Act 2010

Growing up in poverty in the last 20 years



Coalition and Conservative governments 2010 - 2019 – a period of contraction

- Recession and austerity results in historic cuts in welfare and public services
- Closure of Sure Start Children's Centres
- Cancellation of support programmes
- Severe cuts in social security spending
- Localising the Social Fund
- Deep cuts in public services
- Rewriting of the welfare contract

Those at greatest risk? Low-income children and their families

The '*longest, deepest, sustained period of cuts to public service spending since (at least) WW2*' (Institute of Fiscal Studies)

The 'family work' project



Started in about 2003, an in-depth 15 year study of low-income lone mothers and their children:

The research team: Prof Tess Ridge & Prof Jane Millar University of Bath

1. Aims: To examine the impact of paid work, and the everyday challenges of sustaining low-income employment over time
2. Four rounds of interviews (funded ESRC, DWP, JRF)
50 women and 61 children in early 2004.
Final wave case studies 15 women and 17 young people in 2016/2017
3. Mothers and children – lives over time
4. Exploring policy assumptions
 - from *work is good for you* to *work is your obligation*
 - from expansion to austerity

Louise wave 1 – 13 years old



Large family 5 brothers and sisters, single mother initially working but unable to sustain work

Before her mum worked

'I felt like poor, but I didn't dare tell my friends cus it'd be embarrassing, cus like all my other friend's mum's have got jobs and they're like, I wouldn't say they're rich, but they've got quite a lot of money compared to us'

Why she liked her mum working

'I've got like more education ahead, and we get like more money in for like people's presents and food and everything'

But she did not like her childcare

'I'm like shy in front of people and I don't like, like going to toilet without asking and it were embarrassing. And it were quite boring. So I told my mum I wanted to stay at home and she let me'

Without childcare her mum's employment faltered and failed

Louise wave 2 – 14 years old



Louise's mother was still unemployed, no further work, except temporary 'sliver' job that did not last and caused damage to her hands.

Worried about her mum - *'I just feel sorry for her like 'cos when your friend asks you to go somewhere and you haven't got no money it's embarrassing.'*

School - likes learning, but unhappy with teachers, too strict and worried about having right kit etc. Pleased with changes in FSM delivery. Less stigma but still struggling with school costs

'PE kit were a bit hard 'cos my sister's lost hers so we have to share now. She has it on Monday, Wednesday, I have it on Friday so it's alright'

Now working, has two jobs, paper round and Saturday job at hairdressers. Looking forward to leaving school and going to college to do Health and Social Care

Louise wave 3 – 17 years old



Louise's left school now living with her auntie, fallen out with her mother who now has a severe disability. Louise was doing a lot of caring work. Working - Irregular wage £4-500 month depending on what work was coming in. Does office work where her auntie works.

Looking back at school and having no money

'If we went on trips because I used to have free dinners, like, if I went on a trip I'd only have to pay half but I get embarrassed to tell that to my teacher that I only need to pay half when everyone else listens. There were one when we were all going to go to Alton Towers and that were quite a lot of money to go there so I didn't go to school because I didn't want to go and tell them that I couldn't afford to go. So, I didn't go at all'.

Had to do an extra year at school but EMA helped her to stay on. Uncertain about going to college and lacking confidence. Feels she needs to prove that she is more independent before she can go. *'I want to, but there's like something pulling me away, but I don't know what, I don't want to go on my own because I'm scared of what they'd do whenever we meet. I just want to go nowhere on my own. So, I just want to prove, like, I can do stuff on my own and be more independent'*

Shane wave 1 – 12 years old



Shane lives with his mother, an only child his mother returned to work full time

Before his mum worked

'It was good because she spent lots of time with me, but then the bad thing was that you couldn't do anything at that time because there was no money coming in, you had to limit on stuff, using the gas and everything really, it wasn't good in that way, but it was good 'cos my mum was staying with me'

Now she was working

'Yes, more money coming in now, its better now because of everything, everything's just changed completely and not just a bit, just completely because of the money'

But more responsibilities for Shane

'Coming home, using the key, locking up, um drying up the dishes and all that, making my own food using the grill and the oven and what do you call it, the cooker thing. Yeah, using the matches to do that, I learnt that ages ago'

Shane Wave 2 – 13 years old



At the next interview he is still living at home, his mother still working full time

Still some money worries

'Sometimes when, in like in the week when we need shopping and my mum doesn't have enough money for shopping she'll get the essentials like bread, milk, sugar and she'll get them and she wouldn't get stuff, little things like cookies and stuff like that, but when we did have, when we do have, when mums alright with money we just get, we don't have to like worry about what we're getting, we just stuff it in the trolley'

His time with his mum has changed

'She has to keep working, so I go to my Aunties which is in Birmingham and I don't see her, well most of the holidays I don't actually see my mum, 'cos she's got work'

Shane Wave 3 – 16 years old



He is living at home still. His mother has had a car accident and now has a disability. She is back to work. He is at college and has applied for EMA

Thoughts on his mother working

'It's been a good thing. I mean obviously where we are now, it's just because she's been working. You know, working away, so she's been working away and basically we've just got where we are really. 'It's been stressful, but I guess worth it at the end. It's not the end though. I mean it's worth it in the longer run, it's worth it. I mean, as I say, again you've just got to work to get what you want anyway, you've got to work'

Future fears

'So, I'm worrying how to get, you know, how I'm going to get enough cash. But then again, there's another worry of where am I going to be living? What am I going to be doing? What job am I doing to have?'

Shane – Wave 4



Children now young adults

Want to work but many found themselves in lifeless, insecure dead-end jobs

Shane now 25 years old

Left college with GCSEs , BTEC and a National Diploma

But fell out with his mum, left home and lived in a Foyer - unemployed for a year and a half

Successfully applied to two universities but did not go

Risk averse and afraid he would be unable to afford housing etc

Working as a security guard, patrolling council machinery with a dog

Minimum wage – shifts 7 days a week 7- 12 hour shifts, mainly at night

Shane wave 4 – 25 years old



On work

'If I don't do the shift – say tomorrow if I don't do the shift, somebody else will take that shift and then maybe they'll take the next shift the next day after that so I have to be consistently there.

Otherwise 'I find myself on the outside... Last year I took three days, four days off, and I ended up - because someone took my shifts over - he wrote someone in for two weeks..... I can't just take a day off. If I'm ill I have to go in.

Reflecting on his childhood

I feel like I lost a lot of my childhood. Stressing. That's one major thing. I think it's a big burden. When you see your parent having to go through hard times and hard ship and then still be able to look after you as well, you feel like you're, I believe, in a way, you're obliged to obviously give it back.... the pressure is on for you.

Reflecting on his future

'I don't want to get married and have children or anything to give them nothing.....

I just can't do it because of the stress. I mean, sometimes in my life I've felt suicidal. I've not gone that far to actually do anything. Emotionally, though, mentally, I've thought, wow, I can't do it anymore. I can't do it. I need to - I need to, you know, I need to rob a bank or I need to do something to just get out of this life.

So I wouldn't you know, do that with my kids.

Key study findings mothers



1. Tenacity and commitment to work
2. Family support and relationships – the ‘family work project’
3. The long shadow of domestic violence
4. Health problems
5. The limits to in-work progression and advancement
6. Long-term low income
7. Security slow to achieve and often fragile
8. Loss of tax credits when children grew up or left home caused debt, anxiety and further insecurity
9. The cost, as well as benefits, of work – for mothers & children
10. Mothers often lack resources to help children to independence

It was hard to pass on any advantages

Growing up in a low-income working family



Key elements children's accounts over time

- Poverty and the fear of stigma and difference
- Struggling to manage school lives and expectations
- Flux and change in working life and family life/ changing time and family practices
- Exercising agency under the constraints of poverty
- Difficulty in embedding security in face of insecurity
- No resources in young adulthood to recover from mistakes

The experience of poverty in childhood is profound

It continues to echo, rebound and shape lives in young adulthood and beyond

Despite support and mothers best efforts children grow up in the shadow of poverty

Unable to face the future with confidence and certainty

Policy insights from child research



- Instability in employment problematic for children
- Children protect their parents from poverty
- Stress and poor parental health are highly damaging
- Small interventions can make big differences
- Children are very aware of stigma

- Money matters – small increases can make a difference
- School and early years care important settings for making a difference – but also for reproduction of inequalities
- Social lives extremely important for children

- Poverty for most children is very localised experience
 - Housing neighbourhoods, schools, services and transport are all important for children

Where are we now after a decade of cuts?



- Repeal of the Child Poverty Act
- Increased risk of insecure employment, zero hours contracts, under employment and low wages
- Rise of, pay day loans, food banks, baby banks
- Significant problems with Universal Credit – no universal roll out yet
- 2 child policy in Tax Credits and Universal Credit
- Austerity continuing for low-income families as cuts still coming in to force
- By 2021 there will be £40bn a year less spent on social security with £4bn cuts still to come according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies
- Child poverty is rising
- Brexit!!

Children matter



- Cumulative impact of cuts on children's lives is considerable
 - Costs of austerity are both evident and hidden
- We must not assume that children are passive in this process
 - It is children who will try to mediate and manage some of the worst effects of austerity
- Childhood poverty is being privatised
 - Children slipping back into the margins of policy
 - A punitive climate for parents is also affecting children
- There is an unresolved tension at the heart of Britain's 'austerity' measures – the poorest children are suffering the most
 - This represents a significant step back in low-income children's visibility, citizenship, and entitlements within society

Final thoughts



- We find ourselves in a time where there is no vision for Britain's poorest children
- Without the Child Poverty Act we have no local and national child poverty strategies, and no plan
- It is critical to support children both within and beyond the early years, to understand the context in which children are growing up in poverty: the complex social, economic, relational, environmental and political landscape for children
- To recognise the corrosive impact of stigma, uncertainty and the insecurity
- To understand the ways in which policy and practices shape and bound low-income family life – to acknowledge that choice, stability and security are rarely an option for these families
- Easy to think know a family, but much will be hidden, and overall backdrop is hugely important
- Focus on families may obscure children / Focus on children may ignore children's roles within families
- Brexit has created a policy void and the poorest children and families are bearing the brunt of austerity measures
- The children you care for and support now will, in the future, encounter the challenges, demands and disappointments that these older children have articulated

The work that you do has never been more challenging or more vital