

Poverty, Shame and Social Exclusion

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Co-constructing shame: the experiences of people living in poverty in the UK

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Introduction

This is a synthesis report of key findings from analysis of qualitative interviews with adults and young people living in families on low incomes in the UK and carried out between May and October 2011. This phase of the work was primarily concerned with soliciting first-hand accounts of the experience of poverty within distinct cultural settings, to understand if, and if so how, people experience shame associated with poverty, and to engage respondents in reflection on the implications of such experiences.

Methodology

Research sites

Two research sites in the South East of England were selected using data from national (i.e. England) deciles of income deprivation as measured by the Income Deprivation Domain of the Indices of Deprivation 2007. These data are presented at Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) level. There are 32,482 LSOAs across the whole of England, each with a population of approx 1500 people. Participants for the research were drawn from localities situated among the two most deprived deciles in England.

Research participants

Interviews were held with a total of 42 adults (11 men and 31 women). All adult participants had dependent children ranging from 1 to 7 (average of 2.1 and mean of 2) children. Two of the adults (one male and one female) were the primary carers of grandchildren, and two adults (both male) were the primary carers of children with registered disabilities. Interviews were conducted with 22 children and young people with an age range of 5 to 19 years. Participants were selected as eligible to participate in the research if they lived within the defined geographical area and fulfilled the criteria of a) having dependent children; and b) having ever been in receipt of one or more benefits (including job seekers allowance (JSA); income support (IS); employment and support allowance (ESA) or tax credits).

While six children and young people were identified through parents who were interviewed as part of the study, the remainder of them (16) were identified within the same geographic localities through a range of youth and community services. The research design was approved by departmental (Social Policy and Intervention) and inter-departmental research ethics committees at the University of Oxford with due consideration given to informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and data protection.

Research method

Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted using topic guides (one designed for adults and one for children and young people). Additional data on demographic profiles, household composition, approximate household income, employment status and housing tenure were gathered from adults using a simple supplementary information questionnaire (employed at the end of interviews). Interviews were inductive, allowing research participants to lead the discussion in relation to a range of key topic areas and beginning with a broad prompt such as '*tell me a bit about your current situation*'. Using a series of subsequent prompts to guide the discussion at appropriate points, adult participants were asked about their perceptions of: their current financial situation; the types of difficulties (if any) that they were facing; the types of strategies they employed to mitigate economic hardship; the sources and types of support (if any) they felt they had access to; the extent to which those not facing economic hardship understood the difficulties they might be facing; how the circumstances of people on low incomes were presented in the media and in policy discourses; and what could be done to better support people facing economic hardship.

Children and young people were encouraged to talk about their views on: the area in which they lived; their school; the sorts of things they did in their free time; sources of money; things they liked about their lives and things they found more difficult; ways in which the family in which they lived coped when there was a shortage of money; and sources of help and support (if any). All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder, with the prior permission of research participants, and then transcribed. A thematic analysis was then conducted of all transcripts.

Findings

The following section begins with a brief overview of the range and type of hardships faced by people participating in the study. Subsequent sections examine in detail the psychosocial impact of poverty including the emergence of shame, its co-construction and its impacts on individuals, communities and ultimately on society in general.

Experiences of hardship

All research participants, without exception, lived with or had known economic hardship. The combined narratives of research participants articulated the constant financial struggle that was routinely experienced by them. Words and phrases such as *'struggling'*, *'it's really hard'*, *'nightmare'*, *'going round and round in circles'*, *'struggling to keep head above water'*, *'scuppered'*, *'stuck in a rut'*, *'scrimp, save, borrow, beg and steal'*, *'robbing Peter to pay Paul'*; *'battering your head against the wall'*, *'I just struggle me, full stop'*, all alluded to the constant difficulties of living on low incomes.

The constant anxiety of how to stretch limited resources to meet the financial demands of running a home and supporting a family were spoken of repeatedly. Almost all adults interviewed described having to make tough decisions on a daily basis over whether to pay bills or provide food and clothing for children. Several spoke of having a shortage of food in the house, having to go to food banks (charity church organisations which handed out non perishable foods and assisted with debt management), having to ask family or friends for food or money, or having to compromise the quality of food, by necessity buying unhealthy, cheaper foods instead of healthy ones. Several lived in over-crowded conditions, were temporarily homeless or were forced to occupy poor quality housing which had a detrimental impact on their own health and that of their children.

Several people reflected on changing circumstances which meant that they experienced economic hardship on a scale not previously known to them. Divorce,

separation or bereavement left some women and men in severe economic circumstances and with few work opportunities conducive to their responsibilities of caring for young children. Others had faced redundancy for themselves or a partner, or had had to stop working due to illness or disability – and hence the family had been reduced to a single income or were dependent on benefits. Mike, for example, had previously spent seven years working in a local factory. After the death of his wife, he was forced to give up work to take care of his one year-old disabled daughter, a change which had a profound impact on his circumstances,

‘But once I lost my job, I just couldn’t possibly make ends meet. I was just getting deeper and deeper in debt and, in the end, I just had to stop paying them (debts), because I couldn’t do it. I’d never been in this situation and I just didn’t really grasp the sort of bare bones of it, you know... like how much you have to struggle’.

Financial issues often coincided with other forms of hardship which could be either a cause or effect of economic hardship. Tina, for example described fleeing domestic violence with a two year old son and pregnant with her second child. After spending 19 months in a shelter, she was struggling to adjust financially to bringing up two young children on her own in rented accommodation.

These personal struggles were more generally framed by a consensus that within the present economic climate (viewed as a result of a combination of the recession and the austerity measures brought in by the current coalition government) everyone was finding things ‘*tougher*’ than say in the previous year. Rising food and fuel (gas and electricity) prices, increased VAT, limited work opportunities, exorbitant bus fares and rises in the general cost of living were impacting on everyone, it seemed, and those on minimum wage incomes or on benefits were feeling the brunt of it.

The emergent psychosocial impacts of economic hardship

The language of shame – the self-labelling; self-deprecation

Either integral to their descriptions of hardship, or in response to further prompting about how their stricken circumstances made them *feel*, participants used a range of words and terms which were synonymous with the concept of shame, particularly when such terms were contextualised by the situations they described. ‘*Ashamed*’, ‘*awkward*’, ‘*embarrassed*’, ‘*guilty*’, ‘*rotten*’, ‘*degraded*’, ‘*crap*’, ‘*useless*’, ‘*worthless*’, ‘*a failure*’, ‘*uncomfortable*’, ‘*funny*’, and ‘*dirty*’, were all used to convey how people felt about themselves or were made to feel in certain social and bureaucratic interactions.

These terms, what we refer to as *colloquialisms of shame* (expressions which denote the emotion but do not actually name it), constitute the body of language through which people described the psychological impact of failing to meet certain goals or expectations set by themselves, others, or society in general. While there is a robust theoretical distinction drawn between ‘*shame*’ and ‘*guilt*’ (Lewis, 1971; Tracy & Robbins, 2006; Tangney et al, 2007) – the former associated with a negative evaluation of the global self, or sense of failure, over which one has little or no control; the latter with an internal negative assessment of certain behaviour which is controllable or could have been avoided – the words were employed largely synonymously by research participants and the distinction between them frequently became blurred.

There was however, an important distinction made between times when these emotions (whether shame or guilt) emerged from a self-assessed sense of inadequacy, and when they were imposed from outside - the two processes frequently combining to construct shame in complex ways.

Feeling shame

The settings within which people felt ‘*awkward*’ or ‘*embarrassed*’ at one end of the spectrum, and ‘*worthless*’, ‘*a failure*’ and ‘*crap*’ at the other were multiple. The first hints of such awkwardness emerged in the course of the interviews when participants frequently lowered their voices when talking about sensitive issues such as being out of work, being on benefits, being a single mum, or having no money. Various other bodily signals associated with feelings of shame were also

intermittently observed by the researcher, including gaze aversion, head down or a slumped posture (Gilbert, 1998; Tangney, 2007).

The social context of shame

There were multiple accounts in which the *colloquialisms of shame* were employed by participants to indicate the discomfort emerging from having inadequate resources to meet social expectations within certain social spaces and contexts. Tony's assertion of how he felt '*pretty worthless*', for example, was in relation to a recent incident where he did not have the money to buy the subsidised breakfast for himself and his four year old daughter at the Saturday morning fathers' group. On that occasion, someone else in the group had bought them a bacon sandwich. While he considered this to be a '*quite sweet*' gesture, it made him feel acutely inadequate and he concluded the anecdote with, '*yeah, poverty stinks*'. And there were numerous other occasions described where social interactions heightened the scope for a sense of shame.

Jessica's embarrassment stemmed from having become '*a second hand Rose*', everything she wore, she said, was passed down to her from friends. While many other participants spoke of how car boot sales, charity shops, and donations from friends and neighbours were important sources of everything from clothes and shoes to Christmas presents for children, this appeared to provoke greater discomfiture for some people than for others. Stuart, for example claimed that at the age of eight, his daughter was still happy to receive '*hand-me downs*' which made life easier for him, while Sonia feared that if she put her two sons in second hand clothes or cheap trainers and football boots they would be teased or bullied at school.

And a lack of money also impacted on the ability to maintain appearances, which in turn damaged confidence and self-esteem. One of Trevor's main anxieties was how to keep his flat looking and smelling nice when he could no longer afford polish and constantly had to look at whether he had enough money on the electric meter before he could switch on the Hoover. For Tony, it was his inability to have a haircut which epitomised his lack of dignity,

'I can't even afford to get my hair cut... I feel like a frazzle - that's half the reason for my lack of self confidence. I mean if I look in the mirror and see crap, I feel crap. I can't afford to get my haircut... that's my concern now'

The social impact on young people facing economic hardship was complex and those who participated in the research spoke of how they worked hard to sustain viable social identities with few economic resources. Despite qualitative differences in the perceived degree of poverty experienced, young people similarly strove to be accepted by those around them. School was a space in which many children felt constantly compared with others both by their peers and by adults. Jacob, aged 14, felt that it was at school in particular that the differences in income emerged and where he felt he was treated unfairly. Anticipating that he would be reprimanded for not having the correct school uniform, he spoke of how he avoided the situation,

'If you don't have a piece of correct uniform, they will send you home to get changed. So I decided that because I haven't got any school trousers at the minute in time, I'm not going to come in (to school) until I get them. What they're not understanding is that I can't always go out and buy new things that I need...It's my head teacher I don't like, I think she's really cruel'.

Paul, also 14, commented that school was a place where he was chided for being a recipient of free school meals. He felt this was teasing rather than bullying but reported being labelled for it, *'they say, "oh you're poor... benefit bum", and stuff like that'*. He responded to these insults, he said, by pointing out that everyone receiving child tax credits was essentially on benefits and said that, on the whole, he was able to ignore the teasing.

For many young people, the emphasis on having certain things became a mark of social acceptance. Jake, aged 16, spoke of how the rapid technological advances meant that whether or not you could acquire the latest phones, computers and other electronic equipment became a means of gauging how well off you were compared to others and such gadgets became part of the image that you were expected to project,

'These days everything is about image. You know, you have a nice watch, you have a nice car, you have a nice phone.. and you have to keep that up along with everyone else 'cos everyone else thinks they're in competition with everyone else.... it's a shame'

Billy, aged 10, cited school as the place where he had felt deeply 'embarrassed' when he brought in a new toy to show his friends and 'then the next day somebody else brings something even bigger and better in and they like show you up, like "look what I've got"'. Hamish, also aged 10 said that when people boasted at school about what they had or asked him if he had certain things, it was just easier for him to say that he had them rather than explain why he didn't.

Shame and the family

Family support often made the difference between 'keeping your head above water' or sinking. Christine, for example, commented, 'two or three times a week sometimes I have to see if mum can actually feed me and the kids because I haven't got what you would call a decent meal to give them'.

However, family also became the locus of shame as various participants spoke of a heightened discomfort with having to resort to family help. This 'awkwardness' for Hilda, for example, stemmed from the fact that, 'I am a mum now myself and I should be able to do it myself and not have to go to my mum all the time just for a pint of milk or a loaf of bread'; and for Tina because, 'it's all to do with admitting the fact that you can't cope. Obviously it was my choice to have the children, and probably not being able to afford them is a horrible feeling'.

Others described 'feeling horrible', 'embarrassed' or 'dreadful' about having to accept help from others or not managing to provide for family. For Greg, this was acutely associated with the expectations he had of himself as a man. His dependence on his partner for 'the food in my belly', he said, made him feel 'like shit... I'm the man of this relationship. I am meant to be the man... to take care of the missus and my kids. And I don't, and I hate feeling like I do with myself because of it'.

All interviewees had children to care for and there were numerous examples of adults sacrificing their own needs for clothing or food or small luxuries or going into debt to pay for things their offspring needed or wanted. Iterations of *'feeling guilty'*, *'feeling rotten'*, *'awkward'*, *'useless'*, *'letting myself down'* or *'ashamed'* were common in relation to how people viewed their inability to provide for children. Jake, aged 16 observed that he thought his mother *'feels a bit ashamed'* at not being able to provide everything he needed, an emotion he tried hard to counter by making it clear to her that he did not need particular things that she thought she should provide for him.

Most parents felt conscious of the level of awareness their children had about the degree of hardship that they were facing and that emerged for some at a very young age. Tina repeated the words of her five year old daughter, *'mummy when you've got enough pennies in your purse can I start doing ballet again?'*, words she said which made her feel guilty. And there were many other examples of children not asking for things that they wanted, such as an ice cream or Easter egg, making do or resisting having toys that others had were all indicative of an empathy with parents about the difficulties they were facing. Having to watch all the other children on the estate eat ice cream and not be able to buy one for your own children; not being able to go on holiday or having to apply for a hardship fund to pay for a child's school trip, or being unable to meet the demands of children for sweets when out shopping, were all commonly experienced examples of having financial difficulties publicly exposed.

The conflation of *'shame'* and *'guilt'* emerged on occasions where participants on the one hand negatively assessed their behaviour, they felt *'guilty'*, but on the other felt unable to do anything about such behaviour – they had no or limited options. Tina, for example, illustrated how acutely aware her son (aged 4) was of the difficulties that she was facing in terms of debt and how he had tried to help alleviate the situation:

My son was given a Nintendo DS for his birthday and I was talking about selling things on the phone to my sister. And he brought his DS to me and he said, 'sell this mummy and you can pay this (bill)'. And we did, we sold his DS

to pay bills and I think that is how aware he is of our situation. It is a guilty feeling, but I think he saw me selling all of my things, my jewellery that sort of thing and he is doing the same.

Kate was insistent that she felt inadequate, not because of what others thought about her but because of an internal sense of failure – drawing perhaps an important distinction between shame and guilt,

'It's not because of the stigma of being on income support, you know...people have hard times and that's life. I don't know, it's probably my work ethic. I've always worked really, really hard for everything I've ever had. So I feel, I don't know, maybe it's just me letting myself down...that I am not fulfilling my children's needs as I should as a parent... I don't really care what other people think... I feel guilty, I do feel guilty sometimes'

Similarly, Jenny described her 'guilt' at having to empty her son's savings account to pay off debts when *'I had the bailiffs threatening'*. Her shame, or anticipated shame, about her behaviour arguably evidenced by her inability to tell her son, *'When he asks about it (the money), I keep telling him that the money is in the bank and I can't touch it yet because it is for his future... but it's because there is nothing there'*.

Being shamed

Practically all adults interviewed described various ways in which others in society in general, or within the institutions with which they came into contact, stigmatised them or acted negatively towards them because of their economic status. Here, the *colloquialisms of shame* were used in a slightly different way to describe how those with power and status generated, or attempted to generate, feelings of inadequacy and insignificance. The verbal and non verbal indications that others disapproved of or thought lesser of research participants were variably listed as, 'looking down on', 'turn their nose up', 'judge', 'think we're all the same', 'don't get to know you', 'treat you like shit', 'look at you like you're shit', 'look at you like crap', 'prey on people like us', 'exploit people like us'.

A number described different reasons for being judged such as being a young single mother, or not working, or being on benefits or living on particular 'estates'. Jenny, for instance described an interaction with the head teacher of her son's primary school and the fact that she felt she had a total lack of voice because of how she was judged on a range of different fronts:

'The headmistress, she's got a little tick box and she's like, "well, she lives on A (name) Road, that ticks her off as one bad parent; she's a single mother; she doesn't have a job. Well we can clearly see that she's got emotional problems and she's struggling. Son's got behavioural problems"... so when I go to that meeting, she's there thinking, "oh my God, it's just another one of those mothers", and she couldn't give two monkeys about what I'm saying'.

Susie, recounted her meeting with a prospective landlord and his candid views that people on benefits should be willing to accept poor standard housing,

'I said, "I see you have a mould problem, I am not bringing my son to live here"... and then they send you to a place where there is a hole in the ceiling and they say, "oh, don't worry the bath leaks through that occasionally". And I said, "you actually expect people to live here", and he said, "yes, but you are on housing benefit!"

Others found that when they had fewer resources, they experienced a process of being socially ostracised. Several talked of how they felt treated differently by others once it was realised that they had no money, this social distancing acutely felt by those who had experienced changing circumstances. Debbie referred to the silent disapproval people had of her once she no longer had money and was dependent on benefits, *'they never say anything but it's the way they stop asking you out and the way they don't visit you like they used to'*; and Deva similarly spoke of how a close friend had stopped visiting him once he was struggling financially, and had not even come to acknowledge the birth of his new son, six weeks after the event.

Equally, there was a spatial dimension to how people felt they were perceived and viewed by others. Certain 'estates' or 'areas' were associated with social or moral

deficiencies such as places of high unemployment, high rates of young motherhood, crime or drug use. Gary, aged 19, who had lived on the same estate all his life commented, *'a few of my friends won't even come to where I live because where I live has been given a bad reputation by certain people that live here. That kind of blankets the whole estate really'*. Similarly Karen commented, *'they class X and X (names of places) as benefits estates you know? ...full of down and outs. And I'm like, "I'm no down and out and I'm living there"'*.

These stereotypical portrayals of housing estate residents, it was felt, also fed the dominant media representations which closely associated them with criminality, dysfunction and indolence. Mike, for example, commented, *'there's a stigma isn't there, there's a stigma attached to it. You know...living on a council estate, being on benefits, ra,ra,ra... it's like the image portrayed in the media and stuff – you're this kind of asbo-hoodie'*. The benefit family with numerous children, making large demands on tax payers' money was described as the archetypal representation of people on benefits and this construction, in which they saw elements of themselves, was acutely felt by many interviewees. Tina commented, *'people don't have the understanding of people that are on benefits, because it is the status and the whole scrounging element of it almost'*. The unfairness and insensitivity of these assertions was also commented on. Aida, reflecting on the media depictions of people on benefits said, *'There's some writing lacking in wisdom, or maybe they don't know what the person is feeling. You have to put yourself in that position and somehow you have to feel the same spirit... you have to live it on a daily basis to understand what someone is thinking. Some experience discrimination, racism, some are discouraged, some of them maybe mentally sick ... you know you cannot blame everyone and say that they're lazy'*.

And Trevor who was a recipient of disability living allowance (DLA), which had recently been stopped after a health assessment commented, *'it comes across in theory as scroungers on the dole, or on the DLA, you know...I can't get enough money on the dole so I'll go on the sick'.. Again it's a stigma, it makes you feel like scrounging.. I'm not scrounging.. I'm asking for what I put into the system'*.

Equally, feeling degraded, looked down on, judged and not listened to were ubiquitous in people's accounts of interactions with welfare institutions. With a few exceptions, where particular benefits advisors were described as helpful and supportive, these encounters were typically frustrating and soul destroying. Being treated as a group, or *'just a number'*; having to explain circumstances over and over again to different people; having to constantly complete forms; being made to feel small; and people not bothering to get to know you as a person were repeatedly iterated as examples of how the process of claiming benefits became dehumanising. Sonia, for example, commented:

'If you check my work record, you can see that I haven't always claimed benefits.... and I just thought "if you checked that, you wouldn't make me feel so bad about sitting here".'

Debbie took issue not only with the fact that those working at the employment office, *'look at you like you're crap'*, but also that she resented the personal restrictions on her when she entered the office (having to turn her phone off, not being allowed to wear a *'hoodie'*, sanctions for being five minutes late when she was caring for a small baby etc). And many people alluded to the awkwardness and stigma attached to being in receipt of benefits. Greg commented, *'I feel like I'm sponging'*.

The perceived regulation and inflexibility of the benefits system provided a further layer to people's sense of aggravation. A number of people commented on the fact that the system was not only dehumanising, but that it was becoming increasingly punitive. Hayley described her six monthly review meetings while being on income support. Currently with a four year old attending school part-time and a four month-old baby, she resented the fact that she still had to attend, *'back to work reviews'* when the logistics of her returning to work in her current circumstances were prohibitive.

The criteria for means-tested benefits were repeatedly described as becoming increasingly stringently imposed. This shift was closely associated with the change to the coalition government and what was viewed as a *'crackdown'* on exploitation of the benefits system. Some people described being forced to participate in obligatory

back to work courses which were perceived as a '*waste of time*', serving little or no practical purpose in terms of helping them find work. The threatened sanction for not attending such courses, however, was reportedly a cut in benefits such as JSA, one which several people interviewed had borne the brunt of. And whereas before there had been additional supports in place to help people make the transition into work, such as money to subsidise new work clothes or to meet the payments for housing for the duration of the first months work, the perception was that these additional supports had been withdrawn.

A further source of shame emerged around the accumulation of debt, a significant difficulty for the majority of people we spoke with. Owing money to banks, social funds, credit card companies, mail order catalogue services and personal loan companies were all common. So too was being in arrears with electricity, gas and water bills or being behind with payments for council tax and rent. Having poor credit rating, no regular income and limited wider family resources to draw on, people described having little or no choice than to turn to private loan companies for money. Feeling they were perceived as profligate, on the contrary, participants described a multitude of different circumstances which had culminated in them losing control of their finances and drifting into debt.

The stress of debt and the pressure exerted by debtors, bailiffs and loan companies through constant phone calls, reminder letters and final demands, provoked a great deal of anxiety. George arrived at the interview with a final demand letter for a debt of £1,500 in his back pocket. Repayment of loans from benefits via standing orders, a common strategy to manage debt, meant that available resources were restricted even further. Ironically, the drift into debt was frequently prompted by the need to keep up with social, family and other demands and to just maintain the norm of contemporary life. Stuart, for example had been offered the opportunity to take his daughters on holiday for free with a close friend. Despite his best efforts, he had not managed to save the money for the trip (travel, food and spending money) and predicted that he would have to take out a loan to manage, something he had to do at least once a year to '*cover one thing or another*'.

Feeling ‘swamped’ by debt and having to ‘fob off’ or hide from debt collectors were common concerns. Some people had been evicted from homes, while others had succumbed to declaring bankruptcy, bringing with it further limitations on their future prospects of accessing financial support when it was needed. Tony, spoke of how he could not even get together the £90 required for a debt relief order which would enable him to wipe out £10,000 worth of debt and relieve him from the constant stress, *‘cos I’ve got bailiffs knocking on the door, I got people I owe money for bills and things phoning me up five times a day, even on a Sunday’*

The impact of debt and its associated anxieties and stress was pervasive across families, children sometimes being acutely aware of its ramifications. While discussing some of the financial difficulties he had seen his mother face, Harry, aged 12, described an occasion when she anticipated a visit from the bailiffs:

‘There was one time I remember that, um that I’m not sure what they’re called... people that come...oh bailiffs I think, they were meant to come round our house and take all of our stuff. But the bailiffs didn’t come thankfully, but my mum was just sat on the sofa, you could see it on her face that she was just worried’.

The impact of feeling shame

Grappling with pride

Throughout the course of the research, participants frequently engaged with the notion of ‘pride’ which was used in sharp juxtaposition to shame. While there were no instances for example where people spoke of a pride in having no money or work, there were many examples where pride was described as something that needed to be retained at all costs. Thus it became a reason for not asking for help or assistance no matter how hard things became. Susie spoke of how she worked as a support worker in a children’s centre on a low wage alongside health visitors and other professionals who were earning a lot more than her. However, she explained

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why she could not let them know how much she was struggling since this would place her in a category alongside others who were *'hard up'*.

'Because that would make me the same person that I'm trying to help. That's what I was there for, I was part of the support network for someone else. And if I let my guard down – how could they help me? What, go to a food bank? Have you ever been to a food bank? Your name goes down on a piece of paper.. I don't like the thought of me being on pieces of paper that I'm hard up'

Pride was also frequently expressed in relation to having a strong work ethic, having a good history of working, or bringing up children in particular ways – for example making sure they had access to a range of activities, learning opportunities, and being fully engaged in their education. Mike for example rationalised, like a number of other people, that he should not feel any embarrassment about being on benefits since he had *'paid into the state long enough'*. Not only that, he felt *'proud'* of the way he had made the transition to primary carer for his daughter with special needs after the death of his wife.

For many, there was an evident pride which emanated from working or having worked in the past and frequent reference to the non-monetary advantages of working. For some people, their mental and emotional wellbeing was tied up closely with being able to get out of the house and engage with others in the work place, have a sense of camaraderie and feel that they were making a useful contribution to society. Tony, for example, explained that over and above earning more money, working again would enable him to meet people and *'have a routine'*. Two and a half years of being unemployed, he said, had *'just ground me right down to the floor'*.

Others saw working as a means to meeting their financial responsibilities linked to having had children and for whom they felt a duty to provide. Many spoke of having a strong *'work ethic'* which had been instilled in them from a young age and which they felt it was important to inspire in their own children. The *'work ethic'* manifested itself in working long hours, sometimes in several jobs, and was frustrated by situations where options to work clashed with child care responsibilities, poor health or lack of

job or training opportunities. Some people took up volunteer jobs in order to access some of these benefits which they were unable to gain in the paid workplace.

One of the most pertinent non-monetary gains associated with work, however was a sense of dignity and respect that it afforded. Even if there was limited financial gain compared to not working, a number of people talked of '*feeling proud*', '*feeling better about myself*' and having '*status*'. Working showed that you were coping and '*doing it for yourself*'. Gary described how he had spent hours trying to dissuade a close friend from quitting his low paid job, emphasising to his friend how '*horrible*' it was to be without work, how he was experiencing a lack of confidence since leaving college which '*gets worse every day*', and that '*it's also about the perception that other people have of you which changes from being unemployed to being in a job*'.

Yet for many, jeopardising pride to a greater or lesser extent became an inevitable part of getting by. Pride thus became something that you had to '*swallow*', '*lose*' or '*bury*' in order to survive or maintain a family. Stuart reflected on how it felt to ask for food handouts through the church and commented, '*It's not a thing we like to do but... if you can't swallow your pride, then forget it*'. He went on to say that he felt embarrassed by having to ask for help in this way and was constantly haunted by the principle instilled into him by his own father - that if you didn't have the money to do or have something, then you should go without – one, he felt, which was difficult to live by when you had a family to support and few resources.

However, there was also some hesitancy in equating a '*loss of pride*' with a sense of shame. It was far more common for participants to allude to the demise of pride or the emergence of '*embarrassment*' rather than to articulate the word '*shame*'. Mike, for instance, commented in the course of his interview, '*pride is something you have to lose when you're on benefits*'. When asked whether he ever felt '*the opposite*' of pride, he responded,

'I don't know about shame.... I don't know if I'd go that far. I mean perhaps, yeah. I mean, if I was ... on the rare occasions that I go out, um... if I meet someone and I'm chatting to them and that, I don't really say, "I'm on the dole", I just parrot fashion my last job, I just say, "Yeah I work in the factory". It's a pretty faceless job anyway. So yeah, so I suppose there's probably a

little bit of shame in there somewhere. It's that you're a bit embarrassed that you're not working, you know'.

Some young people rejected outright the notion of poverty even when its denial sat in stark contrast to the personal circumstances they depicted. Ella, aged 16, for example, described a lot of hardship at home, having been a carer for her grandmother from the age of about five and then later for her younger siblings since her mother was dependent on drugs. She spoke of constantly struggling to find money to pay for what the family needed, finding herself, on one occasion, having to sell drugs to earn some money. Her aspiration, she said, was to have *'a nice house, know that I can settle down, go home and have no arrears to pay...have like perfect council tax and that (not owing any) and not 'worry about being able to put food on the table for my child'*. She spoke of not talking to people outside the family about the situation at home but expressed a strong reaction to any sense of embarrassment being the reason for this, rather citing a concern that others could use information against her if she gave too much away. She then went on to reject the notion of poverty and talked of her reasons why she felt she would not class her family or anyone she knew as poor,

'To be honest I wouldn't care what they thought about me or my family, I wouldn't care. Because I know for a fact that I ain't a poor family but I ain't a rich family. I know there's other people living around this estate that are living the same life as me, but they've got their mum to take the role, like not the kid'.

Ella was adamant that no one on the estate where she lived was *'poor' and that 'Africa'* was the only place that one could *'officially describe as poor'*, since they had *'dirty water, no clean clothes and no food'*. She felt strongly that submitting to the notion of being *'poor'*, implied being defeated or giving up, whereas in fact, in her view, economic hardship was a temporary setback and one which you could overcome with determination and resilience,

(If) you get kicked back, yeah, you get straight back on your feet and try it again. I've had three rejections from three jobs, you don't see me sit back thinking, "yeah sod that, I'm 16, I can be at home, I can be a young mum'.

This idea that admitting to being 'poor' could undermine the self was reiterated by thirteen year-old Patrick who was adamant that *'you shouldn't call yourself poor'*. When asked why he replied *'it lowers your self esteem'*, an adage which, he claimed, his mother had firmly instilled in him.

So while young people cited incidences where they were made to feel different, inferior, embarrassed or awkward due to their lack of wherewithal, they appeared to respond to these situations in a variety of ways; sometimes withdrawing from the situation, at other times confronting it head on. Many young people spoke of the relative insignificance of money, Charlie, aged 15 commented, *'Money doesn't make you happy'*; and Joe, aged 16 reasoned that if his friends couldn't accept him for who he was, including the fact that his family were struggling financially, then who needed them as friends. On the whole, despite feeling overwhelmed in some situations, young people demonstrated much resilience to their circumstances and spoke with optimism about the future. Many envisaged a better life for themselves and how this would enable them to provide and make life easier for their parents. Harry, at the age of 12, had set his sights on becoming a professional sportsman which would enable him to give his mum everything she needed. Billy, aged 10 intended to join the army or become a spy, his ultimate aim to travel and see the world.

Hiding and pretence

Lack of income and resources was commonly described as a reason for consciously withdrawing from certain social situations. Jenny, for example, described why she would be unable to attend a close friend's wedding,

'It's quite far away and already I'm 'oh God, everybody's going to need new clothes; I've got to get the train to get there; I've got to stay in a B&B – that's about £58 a night. It's my best friend's wedding and I can't go'.

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Not having money to buy anything to wear to a wedding or to afford a gift; not having enough money to buy a round of drinks in the pub; or having nothing smart to wear to go out on a date with a new partner or indeed to finance a new relationship were variably described as obstacles to engaging socially. This inability to have a social life was limiting, as Geoff put it, *'it kind of pulls your life in a bit tighter'*. Many spoke of how they would like to get out more often to be able to relax with friends and socialise, but were unable or unwilling to consider spending scarce resources on themselves. This left them feeling isolated and socially ostracised. And others described how it was often difficult even to take the children on outings with other families. Teresa for example commented,

'My other friends are like, "oh we're going here, or we're taking the kids to town". I can't really do that because Jamboree (children's play scheme) is £5.00 for each child and I've got all my four children... I can't afford for them to go and play somewhere unless it's free. I can't do it... can't do it... can't do it at all. All of that's scratched... Your life is just totally different when you have no money'.

Similar dilemmas were faced by young people when they repeatedly did not have the resources to join friends on outings to the cinema, shopping in town or similar activities. Paul, aged 16, for example said that, on the whole, friends who were generally better off than he was, were *'quite understanding'* when he said he had no money. It became slightly more difficult, however, when he repeatedly had to say that he was unable to join in with them due to lack of funds. This culminated, he said, in a feeling of being *'left out'*.

And when times are hard, Sonia said she wondered what the point was in socialising when there was little to talk about:

'Sometimes there ain't no point in socialising, 'cos what are you going to talk about? Your bills? Your debt?.. So, yes, that does make you withdraw I suppose... there's nothing to talk about except that you feel a bit depressed, you haven't got enough money to pay that bill or eat that day'..

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Similarly, Tony, who lived alone and had care of his daughter three days a week, spoke of how he often felt he wanted to hide away rather than see anybody, despite the best efforts of his friends to empathise with his situation:

‘When I’m feeling too bad, I’ll turn the phone off, shut the curtains and just hide away... I don’t like to bore people...you know, I don’t like to be the victim’

While George, on the other hand, spoke of how he frequently contemplated withdrawing totally and running away from it all *‘I just feel like getting up and going, moving out of the whole country... just changing my name and just going’*.

Several people talked of the level of pretence they maintained to mask their feelings, the degree of hardship that they were facing or the reality of their circumstances. Rosemary described how she stoically always gave the impression that everything was fine, even when she was really struggling. Both Gary and Teresa spoke of avoiding sharing information about where they lived, anticipating that certain negative assumptions would be made about them if they did. Sonia described the efforts she went to hide the fact that she was on income support,

‘I don’t like people knowing I am on benefits. If I didn’t know you, I’d tell you I worked. I class this as a proper job (working as a volunteer), that’s why I wear the identity badge that way (back to front) so no one sees that I’m volunteering... so it looks like I’m doing a proper job’

And similarly Trevor commented,

‘To be truthful, if I’m out and somebody says to me, ‘what do you do for a living’, I just say, ‘I’m a labourer’, I don’t say I’m on the sick... a lot of close friends of mine don’t realise that I don’t work’.

Impact on relationships

Repeatedly, people spoke of the negative impact of financial worries on relationships with significant others and of the regularity of arguments over money and how best

to spend available resources. When debt was accountable to one person within the relationship, this commonly created a rift between them. Graham spoke of how he argued with his partner over money all the time and how he was exasperated by his partner's alleged inability to manage money, despite his own frugality. Stuart, thought that it was only through the support of a close neighbour who helped mitigate the stress of a lack of money, that his relationship with his wife had remained intact. And Karen spoke of how, despite being married to her husband for 25 years and *'loving him to bits'*, she could not cope with the fact that he was no longer working and contributing to the household. She described how, in a moment of desperation, she had asked him to leave. Similarly, Teresa spoke of the stresses and strains on her relationship with her partner as a result of money worries.

On another level, overcrowding and in particular lack of sleeping and living space created friction among families and, added to other financial stresses and anxieties. In the case of Karen, sharing a three-bedroom house with eight people including a new born grandchild meant that home had started to become a place which she wanted to avoid:

'We're a bit overcrowded. You can imagine living in that house with all those people and it's like, "oh, do we talk to her today". It's like walking on egg shells in my home some days. The thing is, 9 o'clock in the evening comes, it's time to go home and it's like, "God, I've got to go back there".'

More broadly, for people living on benefits, the practical ramifications of changing the family structure meant that it was difficult to consolidate relationships or to live as a family. Both Jake, aged 16 and Harry, aged 12 both commented, for instance, on how step fathers could not come to live in their respective homes because this would affect their mothers' access to benefits.

Impact on self

Poor mental and physical health emerged as significant issues for many of the research participants including some children and young people. Several people described chest infections and respiratory conditions as a result of damp housing.

Hayley's young son, for example, had had to be admitted to hospital just a few weeks after he was born due to bronchiolitis brought on from the mould in the flat where they lived. Whether a cause or effect of financial hardship was unclear but discussions and reflections of mental health issues were closely intertwined with monetary considerations. Stress was often attributable to money worries but also frequently coincided with other factors such as being a lone parent, relationship breakdown, death or bereavement or poor physical health. People talked of losing sleep or not sleeping at night, experiencing small '*highs*' on the day that money was paid into their account, only to realise that it was gone the next day from just paying for basics. Hilda commented, '*once it's gone into my bank it's gone again, I'm back to square one*'.

A range of terms was used to signal the psychological impact of economic hardship; '*depressing*', '*makes you very low*', '*gets really down on us*', '*pulls your life in a bit tighter*', '*plays on the mind*', were all terms used, Tony commented that '*in my 37 years, I've never been this low before*'. Anxiety and worry over how to pay bills, repay loans or provide food and clothing for children were repeatedly expressed. The consequences of money '*worries*' were frequently described as physical or psychological symptoms: Karen said that money worries made her physically sick; Jessica attributed her hair loss and psoriasis in large part to the financial stresses she was under; and Deva felt that the same stress had been a contributing factor to his recent heart attack.

While struggling to find money for enough and the right type of food against rapidly increasing price rises was discussed by many people participating in the study, for others food had taken on different dimensions. Katrina and Susie, for example, both spoke of how comfort eating to alleviate the stresses they experienced had led to problems with being overweight. Similarly, Jake, aged 16 who had recently experienced acute depression coupled with extreme obesity (he had recently lost five stone over the previous three years) indicated that his mother's comfort eating had had a lasting effect on his own attitude towards food, qualifying this observation with '*we all have our ways of coping with stuff*'.

Particularly for young people, and especially boys and young men, dealing with anger was mentioned repeatedly as an important issue which they had to grapple with. The extent to which such anger was attributable to economic hardship or its related difficulties was hard to determine but it appeared to be tied in with other 'stresses' identified by young people. Paul, for example, identified a vague notion of 'stress' as being at the heart of behaviour that had got him into a lot of difficulties, particularly at school. While he desperately wanted to change what he deemed as his 'bad' behaviour, he found it hard to articulate its source.

Similarly Freddy and Dominic, both aged 12 talked about 'getting angry' as a significant difficulty in their lives. It had led to them both being referred to a counsellor for guidance on anger management. While both claimed that money was not a major problem in either of their households, they equally cited not having the money to do or have things that others did as frequent sources of anger. Freddy explained this point and hinted that in certain situations, in order to save face, he pretended he had more money than he actually had,

'I just don't like getting angry and like when other people have stuff and they're like gloating about it and that, and you're like "oh yeah, well like I'm getting one next week", like trying to make up things like to try and sound like... so you don't look stupid'.

A number of people talked of being on or having been prescribed medication for depression. Trevor commented, *'I'm not going to take anti-depressants and that, I wouldn't. But, yeah...you lie awake at night thinking "shit, I've got that bill coming in next week". I mean I've got Thames Water on my back at the moment ... I phoned them up because they were going to send the bailiffs'*. Tony too, spoke of the impact of economic strife on his mental health: *'I don't manage. I just get very depressed... very depressed, you know? That's not managing ...just stay in bed all day or watch the TV, its soul destroying'*. And Mike, who had two weeks previously started medication for depression commented, *'it's like a cloud over you almost, you know... because there's no possibility of me changing - 'cos I can't go out to work because of her (daughter's) medical needs. So at least the next couple of years are going to be spent like this'*

Several people spoke of how they had contemplated or attempted suicide as a result of not seeing a way out of their current circumstances. Jessica reasoned that she was so troubled by her financial situation prior to accessing the help she needed that, *'I was going to give my life up because of the debt and stuff'*. Similarly, Julie, spoke of how the financial situation combined with a relationship breakdown and the strain of coping with two sons, one of them with learning difficulties, had led to a suicide attempt, *'that's how far it went, so I got so depressed and couldn't cope with the situation and money and everything else that was going on...it was just too much'*. Tina talked about the desperate circumstances she saw other women facing in the women's refuge where she had lived with her two young children for 19 months. Some, she said, had killed themselves, and others had seen no alternative but to return to violent partners.

Others commented that they could empathise with why people felt like giving up and ending their lives. Kate reflected on how these feelings may emanate from not being able to keep up with social expectations irrespective of your background,

'I mean even people that drive around in four by fours and have seven-bed roomed houses, you hear about people killing themselves when they're in so much debt and they're afraid of being judged by friends and families'

Yet, the sense of disintegration resulting from meagre resources, appeared to be reversed quite quickly by having just some reprieve from the relentless concern about money. Some people reflected on times which had been somewhat easier and the positive impact that this had had on them. Geoff described how previously having some disposable income meant that, *'you could blend in a bit more 'cos you had that little bit of money'*. And Susie described how her sense of self expanded, *'I found a part of myself that I didn't even know existed'*, at a time when she had fewer money worries.

Fiona who had previously struggled on income support, spoke of the significant change in her quality of life since beginning her university course and having access to various grants and loans to enable her to study,

'Well it's nice not to have to worry about the whole, you know just the general stress of things, having money. I know they say it's a trivial thing, but having money does make life a lot easier. And general fulfilment of life I think, because obviously it's quite nice to be able to say, right okay, we can do this. We can do that. Like I've booked a holiday which last year I could never have afforded to turn round to the X (son aged 4 years) and say, "let's go on a nice holiday"'.

Lack of agency

Throughout the course of the research, there were numerous allusions to people feeling that they were 'stuck', and powerless to change their circumstances. A significant dilemma for many was in relation to continuing to depend on welfare benefits or take the risk of jeopardising these by attempting to return to work. So while on the one hand many people felt that this risk was too great, on the other they felt that they were being backed into a corner, feeling forced into situations and threatened by punitive sanctions if they failed to comply with institutional regulations and norms governing benefits.

There was a strikingly common reference to '*they*' in people's narratives where on the whole '*they*' referred to the government and people with power to make decisions. Such people were considered far removed from the circumstances of research participants, had '*no idea*' or '*no clue*' about how much they were struggling and, it was agreed, would have '*no chance*' surviving on such limited resources. This personification of the system was ultimately focused on the Prime Minister at which point the narrative '*they*' became the '*he*', and a number of people placed responsibility for their hardship squarely on the shoulders of 'David Cameron'. This verbal distinction between the '*them*' and '*us*' was perhaps indicative of how removed participants felt from the political process and of an internalised sense of powerlessness. Rather than viewing themselves as citizens with as much right to a say in the political systems and structures as anyone else, there was a strong sense of being passive recipients, forced to accept the outputs of political processes over which they had no control.

From community cohesion to projected shame

To some extent, there were strong conceptions of social reciprocity and communality among people living in the same locality or sharing similar economic hardship. Several people referred to *'being in the same boat'* and *'being in this together'* with others around them. Hence, despite the inherent stigma associated with certain housing estates, people living on them referred to a sense of loyalty to where they lived, believing that people were caring, and looked out for each other and each other's children. Several young people spoke about the freedom they had to walk into other houses on the estate, about feeling safe and secure and that someone would be *'watching your back'*. A shared understanding and empathy of what people were facing in some ways set them apart from, what 19 year old Gary termed as *'the upper class or middle class person who has never had to worry for example where money is coming from'*. He went on to say that despite all the negative representations of people living on estates and on benefits portrayed through programmes such as *'Shameless'*, to some extent people on the estate could relate to the programme because it does give that sense of *'community'*, *'you can go to someone's house, you can stay over for a while... things like that'*.

And several people also alluded to the fact that it was people with a shared experience of hardship that were most likely to help, not those who had resources and status. Deva commented, *'Money'd people never help you...only the poor people help the poor people because they understand how difficult it is'*. Conversely, those who are better off were perceived as more likely to judge, *'they've never experienced having no money...you know, like living on nothing'*. Christine commented on how she had to frequently ask a neighbour for help when she ran out of toilet roll half way through the week and had no money to buy more. Though embarrassing on one level, she said, she knew that she was equally likely to be asked for tea bags or a cup of sugar as the week went on and neighbours were struggling to make ends meet.

For some, economic struggles had been compounded by other stresses such as their immigration status and it was the camaraderie and support of others that had helped. Rosemary, for example, talked fondly of the support she had derived from

'the network of friends who were sailing in the same boat', in terms of trying to secure their status here in the UK. For Marianne, it had taken her seven years to acquire leave to remain in the UK on humanitarian grounds. After splitting up from her partner and with a young child and no access to benefits, she survived for about three years solely through the support of friends that she had met from attending a group for people living with HIV (her HIV status only being discovered after the birth of her daughter).

Despite these shared experiences, however, there were evident flaws in the sense of community cohesion and a profound sense of social positioning of people in relation to others. Hence a social stratification emerged among people facing economic hardship within which others were classified as inferior to themselves according to certain comparative criteria; those who were working and those not working; those who had previously worked and those with a more chequered work history; those with one or two children and those with large families; people who were considered 'citizens' and others who were viewed as 'outsiders'.

There was, for instance, a profound sense of othering that could be observed among those who were working but still facing financial hardship. Having a strong work ethic and a track record of previous work provided a moral trump for certain people and enabled them to distance themselves from those they considered to be *'happy'* not working or *'not bothered about'* claiming benefits.

And this same tendency of 'othering' was mirrored among those who were not working and claiming benefits. While participants desperately wanted to distance themselves from the archetypal benefit claimant portrayed through the tabloids, they often identified others who they felt fed such stereotypes. Helen's assertions, for example, typify this view,

'I think they do exist (ie tabloid stereotype). There was a girl and she lived just down the road from where I live and for example she came up to me and she said, 'oh, I'll be moving soon' and I said, 'oh will you, why's that?'. She said, 'I'm pregnant'. So she had the fourth, another child, to overcrowd and then got a brand new build at x (name of place) which makes me see red. Because

she's very young, left school, you know...and there's only so much ... I know there's only so much you can give to children to bring them up to some sort of level of education if you're on your own. And it's a lot of work if you're going to do a half way decent job. And I think it's wrong that children are being brought into low income families where the education isn't there. You've had a generation of uneducated mothers having babies and now you've got another one. I really don't think it's right.'

And equally people defended their position of being on benefits and not finding work by focusing on immigrant workers who they claimed, '*have taken all the jobs and housing*'. Aida neatly summarised this process by signalling with her hands a hierarchy of classifications (used by her synonymously with class) which she had observed,

'With all these things it's about class... they classify you that you're on benefit, they classify you down there... if you're working part-time, you come a bit...one level up. If now I go full time, like now I want to go to university, they give me a place, I'd be there (at a higher level)'

So, while on the one hand examples of self-deprecation abounded in people's narratives, on the other, there was an apparent need to salvage elements of social and moral standing by positioning themselves higher up the social ladder in relation to others and hence a collectively-imposed social hierarchy began to emerge. This 'projected shame' – shame imposed on others who do not meet an acceptable standard of attitudes and/or behaviour paralleling our own – appeared to help mitigate any shame or anticipated shame which people were prone to experience as a result of their economic circumstances.

Discussion

Throughout the course of this research, emotions of pride, dignity, embarrassment, awkwardness, shame and guilt were intertwined in complex ways in people's narratives, often certain terms – for example shame and guilt – being used interchangeably and often shame being alluded to without being named as such;

hence our coining of the '*colloquialisms of shame*'. Equally, there emerged a complex interface between shame and poverty, and an evident degree of difficulty in disentangling responses which are born out of poverty per se and those which reflect the shame or anticipated shame of living in poverty. These complexities aside there is a coherent thread that runs through these narratives – people facing economic hardship frequently face interactions with others in family, social and institutional settings in which they are made to feel inadequate and unworthy.

The triggers for these emotions are both internal and external. They are borne out of a sense of inability to meet the expectations that individuals place on themselves in terms of progressing along certain trajectories; providing or caring for others; or remaining independent of institutionalised welfare support. Equally such emotions are generated by dominant cultural norms and values and the essentially regulative (Foucault, 2001; 1975; Bernstein, 1990; Butler, 1990) discourses generated by the contemporary British society. Certain public and lay discourses have hence become accepted as prevailing truths - those on benefits are '*work shy*', '*scroungers*' or '*can't be bothered*' - within the media, politics, policy and practice. The dominance of these ideas is sustained through the ways in which the mass media portrays the issues of unemployment, people on benefits, housing or 'sink' estates and, to a large extent, by politicians with power and influence who then instigate policies which are formulated on the back of these assumed truths.

Ultimately, these processes generate a society where shame is simultaneously self-inflicted and employed as a tool to perpetuate feelings of inadequacy. Hence policy and media responses are punitive – serving ultimately to differentiate those deemed as socially deserving of support and those who are not, social constructs surrounding poverty that have been sustained for centuries and certainly since the introduction of the Medieval poor laws. The more insidious effects of such discourses are observed, however, via the social divisions and hierarchies that begin to emerge as individuals strive to distance themselves from the socially constructed '*undeserving*' recipient of welfare.

From about the mid C19th an important difference in sociological and political debate began to emerge between people living in poverty, '*the poor*', and those defined as

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'paupers'. This distinction was conceptually framed as an essentially moral one, paupers characterised as being apathetic, having '*adapted to their poverty*', something which had become '*their distinctive feature*' (Matza, 1964). In fact as early as 1912 Robert Hunter characterised '*paupers*' as follows:

'Paupers are not as a rule unhappy. They are not ashamed; they are not keen to become independent; they are not bitter or discontented. They have passed over the line which separates poverty from pauperism.'

More derisive connotations were inherent in the Marxian concept of Lumpenproletariat (Marx, 1852)- or 'scum' –those alienated from the category of worker and therefore barred from being part of the revolution on the grounds that they were unproductive. From the mid C20th Oscar Lewis (1959; 1971) began to describe a 'culture of poverty'. This, he said, was not just about a lack of resources but an inherent value system over time. Out of this value system emerged a sub culture which '*develops mechanisms that tend to perpetuate it, especially because of what happens to the world view, aspirations and character of the children who grow up in it*'.

While the language over time has become tempered – the '*hard to reach*', the '*problem family*', and the contemporary '*multiple problem family*' – the underlying assumption remains- that there is a residual core of people living in poverty largely of their own making, and that they inculcate a '*value system*' which is transferred from one generation to the next. Hence in political and public discourse, there is a rapid conceptual shift from the construct of '*intergenerational poverty*' and notions of '*lack of aspiration*', '*learned helplessness*' and '*the culture of poverty*'.

Each of the participants in this study had come to their circumstances through different routes. Events had conspired to make it increasingly difficult for them to provide for themselves and their families. Some had become ill, some had acquired disabilities, others had experienced redundancy, separation or divorce, others still had taken on caring responsibilities which made working an unrealistic option for the foreseeable future. Yet despite these different trajectories, the majority of people felt an acute sense of being treated and judged the same – there was an intensely

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dehumanising aspect to how they were viewed and treated by the media, the general public, by politicians and policy makers as a homogenous category of people who were ‘*not bothered*’, ‘*spongers*’, ‘*scroungers*’ or ‘*benefit bums*’.

On an individual level, there were countless examples and manifestations of shame which emerged from this research in the UK – albeit couched in other guises. Many people felt inadequate, awkward, embarrassed about not having the necessary requirements to function in society as providers and/or social beings. Irrespective of the degree of hardship they faced, there was evidence of people variably, avoiding situations which would expose their lack of resources; pretending that they were coping better than they were; making out they were working when they were in receipt of benefits; and not asking for help because it would mean a loss of pride or face in admitting that they were not coping or managing.

Similarly, children and young people employed a range of strategies to sustain control and agency within contexts where they felt they were likely to be taunted for their lack of wherewithal. They variably rationalised their situations - implementing a discourse of prioritised life values (*‘money is not the most important thing’*, *‘money doesn’t buy happiness’*, *‘It doesn’t bother me if they call me names’*), resisting notions of poverty or shame and their associated stigma and labelling, or actively avoiding social encounters which risked highlighting their lack of material wherewithal.

The response to shame varied from embarrassment and temporary withdrawal or hiding at one end of the spectrum, to attempted suicide and permanent social withdrawal at the other. Ultimately poverty-related shame, therefore, has the power to eliminate those from society who feel that they cannot measure up to the normative expectations of society.

Yet the emergence of shame appears as a constituted response to a society in which shaming has become an inherent social fact. Financial hardship aside, people experienced or were made to feel shame for a whole range of reasons including experiencing chronic mental illness, being a lone parent or teenage mother, being from an ethnic minority or living in a certain area. Thus class, race, gender ethnicity,

geography and social and moral status provide an intersection for shame which is highly complex and nuanced. Similarly at a structural level too, welfare institutions and those who mediate them are perceived to apply shame and disdain as types of moral tools which accentuate people's sense of inadequacy, and undermine core emotions of dignity, pride, self-esteem and confidence.

There appears to be evidence of shame being a dynamic, cyclical process which becomes an intrinsic part of society. If one feels shamed, are they more likely to feel the need to shame others? Almost all adult participants in the study identified other individuals or groups who they categorised as having a lower social or moral status than themselves. Young mothers who had lots of babies allegedly to access housing and benefit payments; people who claimed benefits and worked illegally; the 'foreigners' or 'asylum seekers' who usurp available work opportunities by accepting lower than average pay or have apparently easier access to housing and accommodation than 'local' people. Hence, to some extent others provide an excuse and an alibi for one's own circumstances and arguably make us feel better about ourselves.

Conclusion

Dahrendorf (1959) wrote, '*The need to assess one's place in the world is presumably an existential need; it includes the necessity to place oneself in the social universe of reference*' (p.282). Reflecting on the dynamics of individuals within groups around the same time Simmel (1950) pointed to the fact that the 'mass', or society, is made up not of individuals but of fragments of individuals which coincide with those of others and therefore become part of the mass. Hence, '*society claims the individual for itself, making him 'a form that it can incorporate into its own structure*' (p.x). These observations may begin to partly explain why the personal individual struggles described by research participants – largely attributed to factors outside of their control- might appear to sit at odds with their observations that (some) others may be experiencing hardship partly of their own making.

There were ubiquitous examples throughout the research of people placing themselves within their social universe and in so doing allocating others to their

proper place. It appears as though the normalised judgements surrounding benefit claimants or those not working, or those who just struggle to get by – which permeate public consciousness via the fictional and reported media, via the institutions and structures that make up the welfare state, and which are vocalised within day to day exchanges - make people on benefits or facing economic hardship feel the need to put some social distance between themselves and the stereotyped benefit claimant, person on the estate, lone mother etc. These constructions of the 'other' have thus become part and parcel of the society to which they, or rather *fragments* of them, belong. Is shame therefore at the heart of a growing fragmentation of society? Do welfare systems and structures which are essentially residual rather than universal in fact only accentuate differences and divide societies along a fault line of shame and shaming? If so, then how do such trajectories become reconciled with the vision of the 'Big Society' or indeed with any other grand political vision which may be in the making?

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