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The role of society in shaming people living in poverty: views and perceptions of the general public

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Introduction

In the two previous phases of the research project, we examined the cultural representations of poverty and shame in the UK (see Work Package 1 report); and the experiences of people living in poverty (see Work Package 2 report). This current component of the research was designed to gain a better understanding of the views and perceptions of the wider public about poverty within the UK.

The aim was to examine broader public perceptions and to consider whether, and in what ways, these might play their part in contributing to the shame experienced by people living in poverty in the UK. This report can be read in conjunction with the findings from the analysis of a random sample of national newspapers (Work package report 3b) which provides further evidence of how the media combines with public and political discourses to contribute to the poverty-shame nexus.

As in the other participating countries, this component of the work consisted of a series of focus group discussions with people not currently living in poverty. The discussions played a dual role in the sense that they provided opportunities for participants to air their own views and attitudes in relation to poverty in the UK and to test these out in relation to the views and perceptions of others. At the same time, the groups created a forum for participants to reflect on wider societal views on poverty, how these were generated and the sorts of impact that they had or were likely to have on people experiencing poverty. The focus group methodology (despite small numbers of participants) proved to be a powerful arena for generating discussion and debate and for highlighting the complex dynamics of personal and collective views on these issues.

Method

Adults not currently living in poverty were selected to take part in focus group discussions via street recruitment using a sift questionnaire. In total 21 adults took part in 8 focus group discussions of varying sizes (a breakdown of participants together with demographic and economic (self-reported annual net household income) is provided in Appendix 1. Children and young people participating were accessed via one private and one state comprehensive school respectively. A total of 38 young people took part in four focus group discussions – two in a state secondary school (a mixture of both males and females) and two (all male) in a private secondary school. (**NB** analysis of the discussions with young people will be included in a forthcoming working draft paper).

The focus group methodology adopted a largely inductive approach allowing the participants' narratives about poverty to emerge in a language defined by themselves. Group participants (both adults and young people) were asked to think independently to start with about the reasons why they had heard that poverty existed (if at all) in the UK. They were encouraged to think about a range of different ways in which they might have heard about poverty – through the media, from discussions with others, from listening to conversations in public spaces etc. These were not necessarily ideas/perceptions that they had to agree with. For each group, these '*dominant*' views generated a frame of reference for discussions about the perceived causes of poverty.

These ideas were written down as statements on post-it notes and then pooled. Members of the group were asked to pick a statement at random, read it and then say whether or not they agreed with the statement and why. Others in the group were then encouraged to contribute to the discussion which subsequently took on a dynamic of its own. On the whole, participants had much to say and were keen to share their views and experiences about the topic.

With the adult groups (which tended to be smaller and where there was more time available), discussions stimulated by the statements (described above) were supplemented with a series of vignettes presented to research participants to promote further debate. The vignettes were developed from the earlier research phase in which we conducted interviews with people on low incomes (see Work Package 2 report). Participants were asked to read the vignettes and then to comment on a) their reaction to the situation described; b) whether the situation surprised them and if so in what ways; and c) whether they had ever come across a similar situation to the one described. The vignettes presented to each group (a selection used for each focus group discussion) are listed in Appendix 2 to this report. Individual responses to each vignette then prompted further debate and discussion within the groups.

Adult focus groups lasted typically between one and a half and two hours (the longest 2hours and 12 minutes). Focus group discussions with young people in schools were limited by the curriculum timetable and typically lasted about one hour). All focus group discussions were recorded (with the prior permission of participants) and then transcribed. A thematic analysis of the transcripts was then completed.

Findings

Very similar themes tended to emerge within each of the groups, focused around some key rhetorical debates. Broadly speaking these included the meanings and understandings surrounding poverty and what it meant to be poor; the sorts of language that people employ to engage with issues of poverty; the perceived causes of poverty (the structural, individual and other cultural factors); how these views and ideas were formed; the impact of poverty and the perceived role of government in terms of causes and potential solutions. These themes are each considered in turn below. While the key debates in relation to the vignettes presented are integrated into the body of these findings, some more detailed responses to each vignette are included as illustrations in **Appendix 3.**

Meanings and definitions of poverty

Participants within focus groups varied in their views of what constituted poverty but essentially the debate centred on ideas of '*absolute*' or '*abject'* poverty compared to '*relative*' poverty. There was a constant distinction made between how poverty might be experienced in somewhere like India compared to the UK. While absolute or 'real' poverty was perceived as something that could easily be identified (and in fact had been seen firsthand by a number of people) in Africa, in countries of South America or in Asia, it was not readily identified as a phenomenon in the UK. To an extent, people were often stuck with the international image as the blueprint of poverty and from there struggled to know where other definitions of poverty in the UK fitted in relation to it; *'Other countries have poverty that I would consider a struggle on a daily basis to live'* (FGD1).

Some people saw the difference between relative and absolute poverty in terms such as, '*food on the table but no digital TV'* (relative) and *'you can't afford to feed yourself*' (what was termed as '*abject poverty*') *(FGD4).* One participant recalled a comment from a local MP visiting a project she was working on in the 1980s, '*I do not see children roaming around these streets with no shoes on, and that's all I'm interested in'.* (FGD4)

Yet, others argued that relative poverty meant that *'you can't engage in normal society'* ,in practice meaning *things like sending kids to school in clean clothes, taking the bus or taking them swimming etc*. And people became quickly absorbed in the debate over whether being without a computer, a mobile phone or certain '*white goods'* constituted poverty, usually concluding that it did not. One man commented that people in the UK might be considered as being in a '*hard time zone'*, rather than a '*poverty zone*' but not one that was '*bad enough for people to put themselves out sufficiently to change it'*. Others, while recognising a difference between poverty in somewhere like 'Africa' with that in the UK, nonetheless felt that there was still a Dickensian style poverty which

persisted in the UK. The most commonly expressed defining line between being in poverty or not, however, was whether or not you could afford to feed and house yourself and your family.

> '*My definition of poverty, true poverty is, you know, if you can't afford to put food on the table, if you can't afford to clothe yourselves or your children, that's poverty'.* (FGD3M3).

Another participant in the same group asserted,

'*As far as I'm concerned, poverty is about making stark choices, food or heating, you know, that sort of stuff*' (FGD3M2)

And yet another participant squarely rejected the appropriateness of the word poverty in the UK,

> '*The reality is, when I hear people talk about poverty to me it just gets a little bit under my skin because I just, you know, I've worked with people who are allegedly within the bracket of poverty and as you say, you know, I kind of think well I don't have the gadgets they have. ....the word poverty really grated with me... when I hear media talk about poverty within the UK, you know, I can understand there are certain areas which are very deprived etc... but generally, I don't like the word poverty where the UK is concerned'.* (FGD3M1)

A woman in a separate discussion group claimed that there was no absolute poverty in the UK because the benefits system provided a safety net. A couple of participants agreed that there was a difference between hardship and poverty, with poverty having more permanence about it and hardship being more temporary, a step towards or indeed away from poverty.

As mentioned earlier, people in the adult group discussions were presented with a series of vignettes and asked to comment on them. Interestingly people, who prior to reading the vignettes rejected the notion of 'poverty' within the UK context, went on to describe the situations portrayed in the vignettes as descriptions of '*poverty'.* When asked about this inconsistency they variously reflected that; they felt to some extent that they '*lived in a bubble',* cushioned from these sorts of difficulties; and that the vignettes had dealt with the nuances and details of actual poverty – something which society and the media would not normally take into consideration: '*Unfortunately society doesn't have time generally to really understand the detail because it's too difficult... it's too complex'.* (FGD3,M3)

Language applied to those in poverty

Various words and terms were used to identify people in poverty during the course of discussions. ***'They'*** was used repeatedly as a tool to indicate others who were different to or in a different category to **'us'**, those participating in the groups. Other terms used directly to describe people in poverty or locations where they lived included: ***'a social burden'*** - attached to recipients of benefits, particularly those with children; and '***sink estate',*** defined by one participant as '*a place where the desire to do better is crushed out of you as an individual'.* People were categorised by some participants, but not by others, around labels such as '***deserving'*** and '***genuine'*** on the one hand and *'**undeserving'**,* '***working the system'*** on the other. Choosing to go down the '***State-supporting route'*** rather than the '***self-supporting route'*** was another distinction made. The notion of people '***choosing to live in poverty'*** was commented on by a number of participants who felt that others, not themselves, held this view. A number of participants described people as '***happy being on benefits'*** and that they had become part of a *'**culture of dependency'***. Equally they were considered responsible, at least in part for the '***vicious circle'*** of poverty and disadvantage referred to by a number of people who often linked the inevitability of poverty in the next generation to the *'**lifestyle choices'*** made by adults now. People who were consistently poor had become, what one participant termed, '***impoverished' –*** lacking things that gave them

fulfilment in life and a condition which kept people where they were. Such attributes were also closely associated with what were described as '***disjointed families'*** and '***fragmented families'*** and the consequent hardship that such family disintegration was said to trail.

Similarly, other participants echoed terms such as '***scroungers';*** '***benefit bums'***; and '***welfare dependents'*** which they said were used widely in society and the media, even though they did not necessarily apply them themselves.

Perceived causes of poverty

Macro factors

Most participants began by identifying broader structural issues as underpinning people's experiences of hardship in the UK. These wider macro economic factors included the global recession; the current austerity measures employed by the coalition government to cut debt; high unemployment (cited as being worse in some regions than others); lack of training programmes and apprenticeships and the mismatch between a growing service economy in the UK and the skill-set of those looking for work. More broadly, the level of unemployment and the uncertainty surrounding employment opportunities was said to cause a generalised stress and a diminished collective confidence to, for example take risks, be innovative etc. One participant commented that financial backing from the banks was no longer available to try out new ideas. These wider factors played out at the level of individual homes where rising food, fuel and commodity prices were affecting everyone yet it was those on lowest incomes who were hit hardest.

A further dimension to the structural causes of poverty, however, was the wider inequalities which almost all participants recognised – the gap between rich and poor perceived as ever increasing in the UK context. However, while this perceived 'fact' was widely registered, it did not necessarily always play out in people's subsequent analysis of why people continued to live in poverty. Hence the structural causes were to some extent listed as a separate entity to other causes closer to home. Often participants drew the link from the macro to the micro causes of hardship via the benefits system which was broadly perceived as being '*too easy;*'to access. Importantly the majority of adults and young people taking part in discussions repeatedly drew a causal link between poverty and not working and relatively very little time or consideration was given to the notion of the '*working poor*' .

Micro factors

Participants then tended to move quite quickly to a range of individual or micro factors which accounted for poverty in the UK. Generally while the macro factors provided a backdrop to these discussions, it was the micro factors which people tended to focus on and it was here that most of the discussion was centred. While some identified factors such as family commitments and personal difficulties in entering the work place (such as long-term unemployment or caring responsibilities), discussions frequently soon turned to certain deficiencies among those living in poverty: an unwillingness to work; a lack of 'work ethic' (often said to be inherited from previous generations) a lack of capabilities and limited aspirations in life – what one person described as '***a poverty of aspiration'***. The work ethic was something to be instilled in people from an early age, many people participating in the groups citing it as something which had made them be different to people on benefits. One man (FGD3,M1), for example, was particularly critical of people that did not share his own work ethic,

> *' I've come from humble beginnings and I've worked very, very, very hard, you know, to turn things around. I'm in a very lucky position now, but that's a combination of luck and work. So it's about being dependable, hard working, always smiling. People who don't have a positive attitude to work or helping others, I'm sorry I have less sympathy for them, and that's just my own prejudice I guess'.*

This 'work ethic' was considered by some to be more evident in 'poor countries', typified by people willing to take any job going, than in the UK where some people were said to consider certain jobs to be beneath them. The notion of a sound work ethic as a route out of poverty was very strong and there was also a firmly entrenched idea that while some people seemed able to '*embrace*' opportunities, others appeared to lack the moral fibre to make the most of them. One woman contrasted two low income families that she had worked with; one where both parents had several jobs and all the children had *'paper rounds and Saturday jobs',* and another *'down the road where the parents and the kids just slobbed around'.* (FGD2,F2)

The subtlety of the assumptions made by participants about those people living in poverty was often quite striking. In particular, a number of participants were prone to suggest various measures that those in poverty should adopt in order to improve the quality of their lives or make ends meet, such as learning to cook; developing community gardens etc; making better use of the environment and 'free' activities for children (rather than those which required expenditure). These repeated solutions to hardship appeared to be underpinned by suppositions about the ineptitudes of those facing hardship and the ideas that they would not be capable of considering, nor had they considered, these alternatives themselves.

Others asserted that people living in poverty often had a propensity to not take responsibility for themselves; and had developed a skewed sense of wanting '***rights without responsibilities'***. While these criticisms were aired by some participants themselves, at other times they were described as being meted out by those who were better off and who took the view that people had *'**created their own poverty'***.

An important debate centred on the choices that people made and the fact that certain '*lifestyle choices'* led to poor outcomes for individuals and their families. The assumption that people had choices to make and frequently made the '*wrong choice'* was widely held even when there was a degree of empathy expressed over the difficulty of weighing up the options.

One woman (FGD3, F1) spoke of how she worked in a local primary school and found herself teaching children of previous pupils. She spoke of how these girls were '*falling into that...going down that route.....they are 'suffering hardship because of that choice'.* This *'breeding of single parents'* who have *'no aspirations to get out of that rut',* was, she considered, a major cause of poverty. They were, she felt, perpetuating the '*vicious circle'*.

Another woman commented, *'I don't think it's a lifestyle choice really to have kids and get a house, its hard work, you don't get much money'.* (FGD2, F2). This conflicted with the view of a man within the same group who felt that ultimately it should be a choice not to have children if you cannot afford them, and cited China's one-child policy as a strategy that should be much more openly debated within the UK context.

While some participants cited an increased likelihood of those not working being fraudulent (particularly in relation to claiming benefits), other respondents recognised illness and incapacity, mental health issues or low self confidence or self-esteem as reasons for not being able to engage with work and consequently living in poverty. Several people acknowledged how quickly people could '*slide into poverty'* as a result of circumstances beyond their control. Redundancy with no *'big pay off*', for example, had been experienced by a number of participants in the past.

Benefits debate

Across all of the focus group discussions, participants drew an apparently inevitable link between not working and poverty. They recognised the difficulty of making the transition to work from benefits, and the fact that, all things considered, there may be no or few financial incentives to enter the work place. In fact many knew people personally who were working and who felt they would be *'better off'* claiming benefits.

Yet, such people chose to carry on working due to reasons of '*pride', 'responsibility' or 'wanting to develop a career* '. They were held in stark contrast to others who were seen as '*choosing'* to remain on benefits. There was now, it was claimed, a social acceptance of living on benefits – something that had changed over the past two to three decades,

> '*Now there are people who are basically living their life and expect to continue to do so, on state benefits. They appear, well they certainly appear and they act as if they're just above, what we're now calling a threshold of poverty. But they're not sufficiently into that level of poverty to want to actually get out of it'.*

This lifestyle, it was felt, then became ingrained as the norm within families and '*estates*' where it became '*easier to conform to the norm than to be different',* although there were always exceptions to this rule, *'I have met people from the worst sink estates with some of the best aspirations and they are achieving'* There was little tolerance of people who were said to '***work the system',*** having *'**a nice life'*** at the expense of others and who, along with those who were in the UK *'illegally'*, were starkly contrasted with others who were '*deserving'* of support or *'genuine cases'.*

Working was not only seen to have potential financial benefits (although admittedly these might not always be reaped in the short-term) it also reportedly provided social networks; generated social capital, developed confidence, self-esteem, and pride. Those people who had, in the past experience of being on benefits, were adamant that such social protections were only necessary as a temporary measure and that everyone could, like them, *'pick yourself up and get back into the working environment'.*

Meso factors

Other intermediate or meso factors were identified as partly explaining people facing hardship. The notion of limited social sanctions around not working was powerful as was the idea that times had changed and societal attitudes were more accepting of people living on benefits – '*there is no stigma attached..people don't question people as much (as before) about why they're on the dole , why they don't go and get a job... people don't even think about that these days*'. Equally, a number of people commented on how other changes in cultural norms and values over time exacerbated the financial difficulties that people faced. These included a different attitude towards debt – '*have now, pay later'*; the post-war frugality of war– '*make do and mend'* contrasted with our '*throw away'* and '*consumerist'* society; the waning expectation that young people should contribute to the household income; and a propensity (especially it seems for young people) to gain instant gratification through stealing what they could not pay for, something not culturally acceptable in previous times.

The number of single-parent families (with limited work opportunities and scarce access to affordable and accessible childcare) and dwindling extended family support (and the failings of familial support in the UK in particular) were also cited as factors contributing to financial hardship. So too were the social pressures on people to keep up with the level of consumerism of those around them, an issue felt to be particularly poignant when people had children. Various participants cited the daily advertisements on national TV offering instant loans as a way out of financial difficulties. There was also a geographical dimension to people's hardship, certain cities or regions identified as being particularly expensive to live in and where a disproportionate amount of available household income had to be spent on paying for accommodation and utilities.

Perceived impact of poverty

Participants recognised to varying extents the potential psychosocial impact of living in poverty over time. They cited a lack of self-esteem and confidence; feelings of embarrassment and shame; a sense of inadequacy and needing to hide the difficulties that they were facing as potential outcomes of poverty. One man commented, '*personal ideas shift from what would I like to do... to how can I keep my head above water'* (FGD3M3)

The idea that people needed to motivate themselves out of poverty; think differently, take control and responsibility for themselves, was softened by the empathy that some had of the difficulties of trying to find a way out of poverty when you are living day-to-day, *' just getting through the day money-wise and sanity-wise'* (FGD2, F1) . This said, the intergenerational impact of poverty was referred to by many but was frequently associated with not working – hence the discussion frequently switched to children living in homes where three or more generations of family members had '***never worked'***.

The impact of poverty on children, on the whole, provoked a more empathetic response among participants than where adults alone were affected by it. Some respondents commented that they had not thought about the effect of poverty on children before coming to take part in the discussion.

> *'Often the perceptions you hear about are, you know, people who will sit at home, you know, watching satellite TV kind of not wanting or not being able to get out and get the job that they want but one is always more sensitive to these situations where there are children involved than if it's just an individual'.*

Some of the vignettes used in group discussions which presented the child's perspective had greater resonance than the voice of adults because they clearly demonstrated the potential impact of hardship. While poverty of adults appeared to be acceptable to some extent, it was more disconcerting to research participants when it affected children. Some participants expressed anger at the fact that parents placed children in situations where they had no choice. They felt they themselves had made wiser choices – having children only when they were old enough and secure enough in their lifestyles and financially to adequately support them.

Several people described the demoralising impact that they had previously experienced themselves of being out of work for any length of time. They had experienced, they said, being treated differently by others who seemed to imply that not having found work was their own fault. Over time this had a disintegrating impact,

> '*Your self-esteem is dented and you have to fight back. But if it goes on and on and on, how do you pick yourself up and carry on. No. I can honestly see how some people would say, "I'm just not really bothered, I'll do what I can...just so long as I get through the day'.*

Hence, the link between poverty and poor physical and mental health was referred to by a number of people. Equally, a number of people spoke of how a form of inertia can set in and a belief that things are never going to get any better. Such feelings were exacerbated some thought by the stigma attached to not working – something which was considered by some as counter-productive, *' it should be about social acceptance... you have to feel that when you get there everyone's going to feel so much better about you but they're not going to pillory you if you stay where you are'.*

Stigma/shame

People participating in the study cited instances where they had seen others being publicly humiliated for their poverty; a woman made to get off a bus with her young children for not paying enough fare and not having the money to pay it *' no one wants to parade their poverty'* (FGD4). One man spoke of how he had seen a woman vilified in the employment office because her child had spilt some crisps on the floor. She had been told, '*look after your children properly... they shouldn't even be here'*.

A number of people had had to engage with the benefits and/or employment office in the past, usually when they were temporarily out of work. They confirmed the experiences of others we had spoken to about how such interactions were degrading, '*the way they talk to you, it's not nice'* (FGD2 M1) One woman, for example, asked the question – '*what must it feel like to have the focus on **you** all the time? – are you getting back to work? – are you claiming too much benefit'* - hence, she felt, the whole system was set up to *'name and shame'.*

Another man commented on his own experience of the employment office, '*you can see the other people when you're in there looking round thinking, "what are you doing in here?, why haven't you got a job?"You can see it on their face. I certainly have done it, I must admit and you're thinking, "oh, but that's curiosity rather than... being judgemental".* The shame imposed by the benefits system, used as a mechanism to force people into '*becoming productive members of society'* was widely recognised and something which several participants had direct experience of. Some said they had been made to feel like '***scroungers'***, '***like crap'*** or '***guilty'*** yet the assumption was that you would feel fine about claiming,

> *'There is a sense in which when you're trying, rightly or wrongly to get people out of benefits, there's an assumption that they don't feel shame...they're just lolling around on benefits and laughing almost. And there's that sort of sense of 'we're going to make it really tough, we're going to reduce benefits to a level that is almost impossible, we're going to name and shame those people who are scroungers'.* (FGD4, F2)

One woman (FGD5) recalled how she felt '***small and full of shame'*** whenever she had to claim her benefits at the employment office and that people quizzed her as though she was not telling the truth. Yet, she commented, '*I know this is gonna sound absolutely horrible and snobbish but the people that were sitting around me I didn't feel like I belonged in that circle of people'.* Another woman in the group who frequented the employment office with her clients confirmed the feeling that '***you never see anybody like you in there'***.

Another man (FGD3) spoke of his previous personal experience of being unemployed for four months (something that was only revealed towards the very end of the group discussion).

> *'It's incredible to go from the situation, most people recognise as being incredibly busy and therefore the snobbery of busyness ... the self- importance of busyness... to suddenly becoming increasingly invisible. Nobody is calling you, day-to-day, you're just mooching around the place. You get less respect. You go down the job centre and you're just sort of among the crowd, 1 in 10 or whatever. Nobody is relying on you for anything and, yes, you do start to become invisible'.*

People, it was agreed were often defined by their work and given validity by society for working. Such views could be reinforced by the consumerist society within which people became defined by their gadgets. Yet how people coped with these challenges and prevented themselves from withdrawing and feeling '*worthless'* , was dependent on both individual character and the support available to them. Some people recognised that shame would be an issue for people who could not provide for their families or '*keep up with Jones'*. Attempting to do so, they felt often resulted in making impractical decisions to say, dress children in the best new clothes in order to sustain a degree of social standing.

This said, a number of respondents thought that people experiencing hardship were less stigmatised now than they would have been in the past. This was partly felt to do with the fact that the image of poverty was less obvious, whereas before children would '*have no shoes and their faces were dirty*' now *' you could have a millionaire in a shell suit next to a guy from a sink estate and you wouldn't necessarily know...'* (FGD1 M) . Similarly, the view that not being 'self-supportive' carried less stigma than it had once done was held by certain participants. One respondent commented, *'I would feel ashamed if I went on benefits'* (FGD1), implying that others would not feel such shame. However, he went on to say that he would feel '*partly justified'* because he had paid taxes all his life. In fact, several people described what they thought was a lack of discomfort for some people on benefits. Indeed they knew people who were ***'happy on benefits'*** and had no intention of working. '*Some people choose to live on benefits they struggle to actually get up for work in the morning, get there... I mean basic stuff*' (FGD3, M2).

Educational poverty

A further discourse centred around the notion of educational poverty and opportunity and its consequent negative impact on people's aspirations and long-term outcomes. Such educational poverty again was attributed to a range of structural (macro), individual (micro) and intermediate (meso) factors. At the macro level, limited training opportunities; appropriate apprenticeships; the inaccessibility of higher education for those on low incomes were all identified. More readily identified, however, was a lack of parental interest in education linked with low aspirations for themselves and their children. At times this was seen as a result of the parents themselves never having had successfully engaged with learning, consequently unable to read and write or '*to move the family forward'.*

At a meso level, low expectations of children from poorer families coupled with family issues getting in the way of educational access culminated in low attainment or young people not fulfilling their potential.

> *'There seems to be less and less interest in education - more and more young people don't see it as a route out of their situation and a route out of poverty... and there seems to be a bit of a, " so what? , it's alright get the dole, I'll be alright". There's a lack of interest in using education to push on ... that seems to have been lost somewhere.'* (FGD3, M2)

Another woman in the same group commented, '*It's something to do with the social, with the way that they've been educated from generation to generation possibly ... these ideas breed ; they don't get the opportunities, they don't look at the wider picture' (FGD3, F1)* . She went on to say '*they become institutionalised into that way of living'.*

And while it was accepted that there were exceptions- some people from deprived backgrounds had done very well – the intergenerational effects of poverty were thought to be 'prominent'. Similarly, the youth unemployment currently experienced was likened to the 1980s which '*generated a sense of not working, not getting up; not going to school; not thinking that these other things that other people aspire to were for them'*

One woman however spoke empathetically of her experience of working with families in poverty and how it was nigh on impossible for some families to get their children to stay in school for a complete day and on a regular basis let alone think about their educational trajectories in the long-term. The difficulties experienced at home, she felt, beginning with the '*stress of not being able to feed your kids',* inevitably impacted on the children's engagement at school and generated other issues such as perceived behavioural problems etc. Another man commented that those who had no educational *'capabilities'* were unable to have a voice and were consequently often '*pushed aside'.*

In one group comprised of three participants (FGD6) –all of them had come from poor backgrounds and all had done better financially and educationally than their contemporaries within those communities. However, when asked about how this had come about, given their own trajectories, they still spoke about the inevitability of intergenerational poverty, each responded by saying that they viewed themselves as the '*exception rather than the norm'*.

How views are formed

The Media

People's views, perceptions and analysis of poverty-related issues were undoubtedly influenced by a range of media, both in terms of political persuasion and form. Collectively participants read a range of newspapers including broadsheets and tabloids leaning both left and right of the political spectrum. The power of the messages disseminated through the press was frequently referred to. One woman commented, *'you get all the popular press which talks about scroungers and people creating their own poverty and then you have... I get the*

Joseph Rowntree Foundation findings which go into the more complicated reasons of why people are in poverty' (FGD4, F2)

In addition, people picked up and reflected on other media such as television and radio and on stories which had been prominent in the weeks preceding the group discussions. One particular example was a documentary by John Humphries – '*The Future of the Welfare State'* (October 2011) which was referred to by a number of participants. This had emphasised the argument that the benefits system generated 'dependency'; that people were failing to take up the work opportunities available to them and that there was no longer any stigma attached to being long-term recipients of benefits.

The role of the media in relation to issues of poverty and society's response to it was complex. On the one hand the media, in its various forms, generated the normative lifestyle aspirations while on the other set the standards of acceptable values and behaviours to achieve them. It generated enormous pressure to 'have' things and offered ways of having things easily – interest free credit on goods or instant loans (something repeatedly mentioned by participants) – and vilified or mocked those who did not acquire such things or did so through means considered not credible.

The media could move from the specifics of individual lives of people in poverty to the generalised 'sink estate'; 'benefit scrounger' etc in quick succession. While some people argued that there was less stigma attached to not working than before, others questioned this. One participant argued that there was '*a danger that we are encouraged to look back and think that somehow people were just more decent 50 years ago'*. He went on, '*I get sick and tired of hearing that sort of stuff. Essentially, human beings don't change. The culture forces certain things upon us but I don't think people are any different to however they've been. I don't think people are less decent now or less willing to help than they've ever been, it's just the societal context'.*

People frequently made reference to the print media and their awareness of how certain stereotypes of particular groups of people were fed to them. Some were affected by the headline- grabbing tabloids, one person having recently read about a family with lots of children in London receiving 80K a year in benefits, which, he said, made his '*blood boil'*, he was ' *gobsmacked'.* Others claimed that they avoided the *'popular press'* and *'reality TV'* which fed such stereotypes.

Several people were clearly savvy about how this distilled type of story (lacking in any detail or perhaps truth) was the mechanism through which the media forced a particular view on issues and provoked social divisions. One person commented,

> *' and so you get a sort of Daily Mail particular headline on something and you think well, there's a different story behind all of these things, they're complex but it's not interested in nuance because* (then) *it's not an easy story that people can get angry at and start their day feeling better than anybody else'.* (FGD3,M3)

People were aware on one level that '*stories of people spending loads of government money sells newspapers'.* These stories were said to be so marketable because, perhaps, people were able to feel superior to others who were e.g living on benefits or abusing the system! The media, they felt, had the power to lump everybody into a single category and to juxtapose the '*decent' and 'hardworking'* with the '*idle'.* Equally it fed the impression that benefits were generous and that people were living extravagant lifestyles at the taxpayer's expense.

Several people said that they refused to buy the tabloid papers because of the type of stereotypes that they perpetuated. A number of people considered themselves to be better informed and more knowledgeable about issues of poverty than most other people – they were *'educated';* 'more analytical'; or *'informed by a wide range of media'.*

Yet the media was also seen to play a key role in political posturing. One participant recalled a statistic of 2.7 million families living in poverty in the UK which he had gained via the TV in the previous week. So while on the one hand the media vilified people living on benefits '*tarring them all with the same brush*' it was quick to take up the mantel of de-personified inequalities more generally. Yet others felt that the media and politicians worked together in a conspiratorial and mutually-controlled way –reviling young mothers or those not working in order '*to take the heat off themselves'.*

Proximity to the issues

Many people participating in the group discussions, particularly adults, claimed to have gained an understanding of hardship through proximity to it. Having family members or friends who were struggling financially; having a professional working relationship with vulnerable families or having first-hand experience of poverty (even if in the short-term) – either in adulthood or earlier on in life as children - were all cited by participants as ways in which they had become familiar with it.

This was seen to provide insights into the complexities of poverty and, on one level change, people's views and attitudes. One man spoke of how he watched his son's continuous struggle with limited work opportunities or low-paid insecure work. Witnessing these struggles, he claimed had changed his political views '*I used to be anti a lot of the things that I perceived the state to be doing. ...if you're not directly affected, it can be difficult to see why that need is there'*

One woman spoke of how her sudden and '*shocking'* awareness of the degree of poverty experienced had come via her job as a school-based child and family support worker in an area of high deprivation. She frequently met children who relied on the school dinner for their only nutritious meal of the day and who lived in damp and overcrowded housing. She described herself as '*blissfully ignorant to be honest before I went to that job' (Female, FGD2)*. She still struggled, she admitted, with understanding why many of these families chose to have dogs and why they appeared to lead such chaotic lifestyles,

> ' *it's just all, it's just chaotic, it's just crazy, crazy, chaotic days and oh... you know, just bonkers.. But for them, that's totally normal'.*

Others reflected on while they felt quite well informed about the situations of those who were struggling, they knew others who were *' cocooned by their big houses and their grandiose salaries...who look down on others and say they have created their own poverty'.* One woman spoke of the awkwardness at dinner parties of speaking to people who held certain views about people who were not working or living in poverty. On such occasions, she said, it was important to *'bring the conversation back to a level playing field'.*

Yet a different sort of proximity was also expressed – that which confirmed people's views that, unlike themselves who worked hard for a living, those on benefits were '*doing better than they were and lived in nicer houses'.* One woman commented, ' and I'm paying for that and that makes me quite cross ... *I am living in a shit-pit with holes in the floorboards and I see all these single parent families living in beautiful houses with 50" flat screen TVs'.* Other people too claimed to know others who were content to live on benefits and had never worked in their lives. Similarly, those who had experienced hardship directly in the past were prone to feel a sense of moral superiority at having pulled themselves out of difficult circumstances by their own sheer hard work – they could not understand why others had not done the same.

Some people spoke of academic learning or reading they had completed in related subjects which gave them a deeper understanding of the debates and discourses surrounding poverty. One woman referred to the influential work of Charles Murray and his criticism of the welfare state as the basis of 'the benefit trap', and its role in 'undermining independence' – a view that sat at the heart of current welfare discourses.

Perceived role of government

People's commentary on current or previous anti-poverty policy provided an additional lens through which attitudes towards poverty could be observed.

Some people were against the level of state benefits currently available and felt that they should be capped; people should learn to '*look after themselves'* (FGD1M). The state creating dependency was a further theme expressed, centred on over generous benefits and the ease with which responsibility could be devolved to the state. One example given was of men no longer having to take responsibility for '*getting girls pregnant'* because there was the *fall back of the state* coupled with society's acceptance of teenage single mothers. Others disagreed however, believing that if people could stand to gain a '*living wage'* from working then there would be no need for them to be on benefits.

The legacy of previous governments, particularly the 'Thatcher' government were thought to have had a lasting influence on contemporary society. Growing individualism, consumerism and more generalised inequality were considered by many to have their routes in an era of Conservative politics during which the focus was on economic growth to the detriment of equity in terms of distribution of wealth. Likewise, the current cry by the coalition government to embrace the notion of 'the Big Society' was felt to have little or no meaning to the majority of people who required resources before they could feel a part of such a society. Others criticised initiatives such as *Private Finance Initiative* (PFI) schemes introduced under the previous Labour government as having been detrimental to public services.

There was general consensus that education should be more targeted towards the work place, the over-emphasis on higher education and the limited investment in apprenticeships was considered detrimental to young people's employment prospects. Similarly re-training opportunities for those not working needed to be expanded. Learning new skills could breed confidence, give people (back) self-respect alongside respect from family and peers '*it's like a self-propagating wave... once it gets hold, the individual wants to keep going'* (FGD1M) . Other countries, such as Sweden and Switzerland were cited as providing far better systems of support in terms of provision of benefits and return to work programmes.

So while the state should be there to give some support, it should also be putting the '*brakes on support...to bring down the ceiling of support*' and encourage people along the '***self-supporting route*** *as opposed to the* ***state supporting route'*** (FGD1M) Others felt that the current welfare system was punitive and that an alternative should be put in place which incentivised people for doing well rather than imposing a system of sanctions and penalties for not performing – such as with the current conditions of job seekers allowance . Others too felt that the current cuts affecting youth work and early intervention with vulnerable children and families were likely to generate further problems in the long-term. Similarly the closure of day centres along with other services with no or limited public consultation were dramatically impacting on local communities (FGD2M&F). On the whole, politicians it was felt were too far removed from the reality of people's lives.

The degree of exploitation by landlords could be reduced through the introduction of clearer quality standards of practice for landlords – instilling a system of more ethical property management of rented accommodation. Likewise, previous policies involving selling off council housing with no on-going support to families on low incomes had generated large areas with poorly maintained housing.

More generally, many felt, politicians needed to engage with the complexities of people's circumstances and realise that it is not about policies which provide' *strap lines or headlines - it's about understanding the dynamics – about where someone has come from and where they want to go'.*

Conclusions

Adults participating in the focus group discussions were by no means a representative sample of the population at large in the UK. They came, on the whole from medium incomes (see appendix 1), many of them readers of the Guardian or other broad sheet newspapers and drew their information from a range of other media (including radio and television). They had, on the whole, chosen to attend the groups because they were interested, '*passionate'* even, about these issues. Many in fact had experienced times during their childhoods or more recently when they had experienced financial hardship themselves. They were not all universally damning nor shaming of people living in poverty and often flitted between highly empathetic responses to particular circumstances (of family members or situations portrayed through the vignettes presented to them) and broad sweeping generalisations about '*these people'*.

There were widely different views and opinions expressed in the groups, particularly when people drew their knowledge and understanding from different sources. Importantly people's views and opinions were rarely watertight and they tended to shift their ideas and stance on particular issues in response to a range of other factors – the views of others in the group; the scenarios depicted in the vignettes; or the prompts from researchers moderating the groups. In one group for example, participants started by claiming that there was no '*real*' poverty in the UK, in fact one or two felt angered by this assertion, but ended up describing some of the scenarios presented to them as ones indeed depicting *'real poverty'*.

Those who came across as mainly empathetic with the situations presented to them, felt that their own family and friends either shared similar views to themselves, (they came from similar personal or professional backgrounds) or held views that were at odds with their own views. One participant spoke of how his family would think that people living on the street should be forcibly conscripted into the army and that they '*deserved'* to be there. He commented that they all tended to have money which he felt gave them a sense of '*self-righteousness'.*

To some extent, most people recognised the wider structural causes of poverty and felt that these were becoming increasingly significant given the current economic climate. However there was a dominant association between poverty and not working and hardly any recognition of the fact that in the UK a substantial number of people in poverty are currently employed. This focus on the unemployment-poverty nexus allowed participants to quickly put to one side the macro level causes and to focus on the more immediate, personal reasons for poverty. A range of inadequacies, deficiencies and failings were identified as explanatory factors, particularly for long-term poverty; the '*not bothering'*; '*not accepting responsibility*'; '*not being able to'*; '*being happy as they are'* etc. Hence a wide range of words and phrases were used to describe people living in poverty which, even when subtly employed, served uniformly to draw the distinction between those participating in the groups and the 'others'.

People showed varying degrees of empathy with the scenarios presented to them, some vignettes provoking more sympathy than others. They were able to engage with the detail, complexity and nuances of each situation, just as they did in relation to the anecdotes they told from their own experiences. Yet they still largely retained a 'we'/ 'they' discourse – with repeated references to the 'they' as people who had different lives, different values and had made different choices to themselves. This shift from the engaging with the detail to sweeping statements was at times seamless and especially where particular groups of people were identified; single mothers, large families, the long-term unemployed, those who have *never worked*, and those thought to be abusing the benefits system.

While quite a number of people in the groups had experienced financial hardship at some point in their lives, they were often the most ardent about how it was possible, with the right work ethic and enough moral fibre, to improve your situation and improve your circumstances. This improvement, largely understood as making the shift into employment, was achieved through making the right choices. There was a strong sense that many of

those currently living in poverty, and particularly those not working, were essentially making the wrong lifestyle choices. Of course, not everybody expressed these views, and they were insinuated to different extents. In fact one person in particular consistently countered every stereotype that was presented throughout the course of the discussion.

Irrespective of their own views, all participants confirmed their awareness of the vilification and shaming of people living in poverty that took place in society more generally and the role of newspapers, television, radio and political and public discourse in this process. Many referred to the tabloid '*headlines'; the stereotypes* and the *Daily Mail-type* comments with which they were all familiar. While many tried hard to distance themselves from these, this appears to be only partially achieved, witness perhaps to the highly pervasive and insidious ways by which the media and political discourse influence public thinking and attitudes, irrespective of individuals' political persuasion.

Appendix 1 – Overview of adult participants in focus group discussions

No.	Male / Female	Ethnicity	Age bracket	Household income category	Newspaper read
1.	M	WB	45-54	Not completed	Not completed
2.	F	WB	35-44	16	Guardian
3.	M	WB	55-64	15	N/A
4.	M	White Irish	45-54	17	Times/Guardian
5.	F	WB	45-54	17	Daily Mail
6.	M	WB	35-44	17	No
7.	M	WB	45-54	Not completed	Not complete
8.	F	WB	45-54	Not completed	Telegraph/ Guardian
9.	F	WB	45-54	17	Guardian
10.	F	WB	35-44	14	N/A
11.	F	WB	45-54	17	Guardian
12.	F	White Other	25-34	17	NZ Herald
13.	M	White Irish	35-44	Not completed	Not completed
14.	F	Black African	35-44	Not completed	Not completed
15.	M	WB	35-44	Not completed	Not completed
16.	F	WB	45-54	17	Times
17.	M	White Irish	45-54	17	No
18.	F	WB	35-44	17	Independent
19.	F	White Other	45-54	17	Yes not specified
20.	F	WB	45-54	17	Time, FT, Guardian/Indpendent
21.	F	WB	45-54	17	Yes not specified

WB White British

Annual income scales as cited ('A rough calculation of net household income') **Scale 17** - £40,000 +; **Scale 16** - £37,5001-£40,000;**Scale 15** - £35,001 - £37,500;

Appendix 2: Vignettes (drawn from interviews with adults and children on low incomes)

For each of the following participants were asked to think about the following:

What is your reaction to this situation?
Does the situation surprise you in any way?
Have you ever come across a similar situation to this?

Vignette 1

You can't tidy the flat properly 'cos you can't afford the polish to polish it properly to make it look nice. You have to look at your electric before you even hoover up to make sure you've got enough electric until you get some more money so.....I have to put gas on, I have to find that money to put £6 on so I can use the gas.... it's not nice, not the situation I want to be in.

(Mike, single father of son age 16)

Vignette 2

Researcher: How often would you say then that there's not much money in the house?

Harry: 75% of the time... sometimes we have to borrow some money from my Nan and gramp and we have to pay it bit by bit.

Researcher: Are there times when mum struggles to pay bills do you think?

Harry: Yeah, 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.

(Harry, aged 12)

Vignette 3

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. (Jacob, age 14)

Vignette 4

I: I take home £44 a week because they are taking money back that I owe them from years ago, like crisis loans and budget loans. They are only recouping money that's theirs so it's fair enough.

R: Tell me what that's like then to live on £44 a week.

I: It is an absolute nightmare... well, I'll tell you how it is. I live like a rat during the week, well not even a rat any more, I live like a little dormouse now. And then when M (daughter comes) I can treat her and we can do things like I can take her swimming, to the cinema, and we can do things that we both enjoy. Monday to Thursday I'll just do nothing, I can't even afford to eat sometimes, that's how bad it is.

(Tony, single dad with daughter aged 3 living with him Thurs pm-Sunday)

Vignette 5

'Financially I wasn't any better off (working) and it was really hard, because you'd still have to get the children up, get them to the childminder, do your work, miss the part of the day that they're happiest and then still feed and bath and bed them when you got back. I had a lot of personal issues, family issues, so consequently I went on to Income support and I've been on Income support since then. My brother's got mental health issues, he suffers from bipolar, so I'm his carer. 'And yeah, I am definitely financially and personally a lot better off not working than I would be working'.

(Rebecca, single mother two children aged 9 and 10)

Vignette 6

'I'm not a scrounger, I'm just in a difficult situation where I have to come and claim and this culture has told me that I'm entitled to those benefits, so why not, Why should I be looked on as a scrounger. I'm not, I'm educated and it's just that I can't get a job'. There are those... I'm not going to lie... I do know some who are capable of working and they choose not to. Those guys make me angry.... Yeah I do see where the tabloids get that from because there are people who are like that. You know, girls who will just keep having kids because they refuse to go to work. It's not that they're taking care of their children, they look on their children as a burden but they're getting benefits because of the kids. So there are them out there, tabloids have got it half right, but we're not all like that, not all of us'.

(Teresa, living with partner, four children aged 7,4,3 & 4 months)

Appendix 3 – Summary of responses to scenarios

Vignette 1: ***Man cannot afford to tidy the flat properly (no polish).***

This prompted a range of responses beginning with those who were not sure if having no polish was an indication of hardship – why after all did you need polish to clean the house when you can use an old T shirt and spit (‘*I have been in the army and cleaned the floor with a toothbrush’).* Comments were made about the man being poorly brought up, or possibly ***‘lazy’*** or ‘***uneducated’.*** *Others however* empathised with the man’s need to keep up appearance, feel in control etc. Most did however recognise the hardship of having scarce resources for electricity or gas, one woman citing families she had worked with who would run out of electricity half way through preparing lunch and have no money to put in the meter. Some people questioned how realistic the scenario was, they were, they said, not sure how much money people received on state benefit. Others felt many others had experienced similar hardship at times in their lives, for instance when they were students or during their childhood. The statement by the person in the vignette that they were in a situation that they did not want to be in, prompted some responses along the lines of ‘ *well what are you going to do about it then?’* , implying that he was waiting for someone else to step in and make the situation better rather than looking at ways to improve the situation himself.

Vignette 2: ***Waiting for the bailiffs, (from perspective of 12 year old boy):***

Many people recognised how easy it was to slide into debt and how people taking out higher purchase orders could easily find themselves in situations where they were unable to pay them back. The scenario generated divisions in views and attitudes in some of the groups. Some recognised the specific difficulties of a single mother, with few job opportunities and the likelihood of lower wages. Yet while some held sympathy with people facing this situation others put the blame squarely on people who *‘have not budgeted properly’*; *‘it’s a lack of planning’*; ‘*its living for today*’. This was countered by the view that in many cases people would never have the opportunity of doing or having things otherwise (ie if they did not borrow money) – overall their life prospects meant they would never be able to afford the desirable lifestyles portrayed to them through the media so why not borrow to have things which make life just that bit ‘*more pleasurable’.*

Irrespective of the causes of debt and the ‘*life choices’* that the woman had made to end up in this situation, most people reflected on the impact on the child, some of them shocked by his level of awareness at the age of 12. Some felt that there was a risk that he would grow up thinking that this was ‘*the norm’,* or that he would become disillusioned with life and always look for an *‘easier way to make money’.* The broader issues of a culture of ‘*debt’* and the constant promotion of loans at exorbitant repayment rates were also frequently mentioned.

Vignette 3: ***Boy avoiding school because he does not have the correct uniform:***

Responses varied to this vignette depending on people’s experiences and knowledge of the issues. Some people were horrified at the fact that this could be happening in the UK today. Others posed questions about where the parents were in the scenario and why they had not prioritised the uniform over other things. They were aggrieved by the fact that the boy, Jacob, had to deal with the anxiety that the situation generated. Others focused on what they deemed an inappropriate response on the part of the school and on what was essentially a breakdown in communication. There was general consensus that there should be resources available to support children in this position and that the school should be appraised of? what was happening. Most participants recognised that it would be very difficult for Jacob to instigate a discussion about an ‘*incredibly personal and embarrassing situation’* (FGD3, M3).

Others commented on the rising cost of school uniform (although it was still considered preferable to not wearing one) and also on the longer-term impact of Jacob not attending school regularly. More broadly it gives him a message that those in authority are cruel and not worthy of respect, considered not to be a healthy message for life.

Vignette 4: *Dad on low income saving money for when daughter comes to stay:*

Most people found this vignette shocking and were appalled at someone being expected to live on £44 a week. While some people recognised the need for saving money to do things with his daughter, others criticised this use of money, feeling that he could have instead worked out locally available activities that are free ('*you are living like a rat but you can still afford to go to the cinema'* *FGD5). One woman commented that she felt that people living in poverty wouldn't do that because*, 'if they have any spare money they'll buy cigarettes because that's 'instant gratification' and they want that'.* One person in the group was more empathetic and recognised the need for the father to entertain his daughter so that she had fond memories when she went home to her mother.

Some people focused on how the situation must become '*demoralising'* and '*depressing'* over time and how the man was able to cope. One man commented that although he had experienced a similar situation, he had been able to fall back on family for their support until he could get things sorted. Importantly, in one group participants who had rejected the idea of poverty even existing in the UK appeared to change their views in response to this vignette. In fact, they described the situation as being '*definitely poverty'* and this '*sounds like poverty to me'.* One person felt anger at the fact that the protagonist was being expected to pay back social fund loans when he was clearly struggling so much. *'the Government is recouping small amounts of money from people like this who are vulnerable and on the verge, or if not on the verge are in poverty – but yet it's willing to lower taxes to a phenomenal degree for major corporations'.* Others however were less sympathetic one man reflecting on what he saw as a cultural problem in contemporary society,

> *'We expect to get everything now and pay later' ...'and so I don't have sympathies with people who've had their toys, you know, years ago and they're having to pay for them. Why should my tax have to pay for the fact that you now can't afford to pay back something you already had before'.* (FGD3 M1).

Another woman within the group went on to claim that whether or not she had any sympathy would depend on the reason why he had taken out the loans, an assertion agreed to by the man cited above. Other people however felt that it was more complicated than that and that '*things happen... life doesn't pan out as we plan it '.* One man pointed out how most people take a huge risk with taking out a mortgage (essentially a massive loan) but that they were not judged in the same way as those who took out loans to buy what they wanted or needed.

Others focused on the long-term impact on the three year-old daughter but judged that this seemed to be *'a pretty decent dad'*.

Vignette 5: *Mum stopped working (previously working) because no better off:*

Again this scenario generated a mixed response from those that felt that this was the 'right' decision, given the circumstances – a single mother with two young children and a brother requiring care due to his mental health difficulties. Several women, from experience, recognised the benefits of staying home with children rather than working and understood the complexities of managing work and home as a single parent. But there were concerns that it would set a precedent for the children and *'inform the way they look at the world and they'll think, "well maybe I won't bother getting a job"'.* So while the mother's decision to stop working was considered valid it raised the broader question of how to get people out of these situations (ie not working and on benefits). On one level she was seen to be '*taking a step backwards'* and that it was easy to see why the media would consider the

choice as wrong. Why for instance, had she not considered part-time work which would help her balance caring opportunities, give her the potential of '*being part of a different social group',* (ie one that was working); raising her ' *self-esteem'* and create a situation where she was '*contributing a bit to society'* and '*providing a role model for the kids'.* One participant however emphasised what he saw as the inherent inequality in the situation,

> *'The crux of the matter is she is making a valid choice, deciding to care for children and her brother with mental health difficulties. She is replacing the care of the state for him. The people who are paid the highest in our society are the people who contribute least to the humane aspects of society'* (FGD3,M3)

A further view was that the children and caring responsibilities easily became an excuse not to work, a means of rationalising a decision based on the fact that you didn't enjoy working or saw no purpose in it. One woman participating in the groups claimed that she herself would be better off not working than doing the job she did but, she said, ' *I refuse to set my daughter that example... you've gotta get off your arse to work to pay for the things you want in life'.*

Vignette 6: ***I'm not a scrounger:***

This scenario prompted a range of responses, some people recognising the need for the character in the vignette to distance herself from the label of '*scrounger'* as highly significant; others focusing immediately on the debate surrounding whether or not she should be expected to work with four young children. People spoke of how while it was easy to be *'black and white'* about these issues, that each situation was complex and unique. Yet they quickly entered a discourse of people they knew or had come across who would '*do anything not to be on benefits'* and others who *'can't be arsed'* or who exploited the system – '*I know two brothers who walk with a crutch until they are on the football field'.* (FGD2, M1). The irony of disassociating herself from the label of '*scrounger'* and then inflicting the same label on someone else was also picked up on by participants.

Some raised the issue of why she had four children when she clearly could not afford them. The fact that she claimed to be '*educated'*, also prompted a response that perhaps these were temporary hard times. One woman struggled with, on the one hand, her view that perhaps the woman in the scenario should have limited the number of children she had and, on the other a policy muted by government the previous day which had '*horrified her'* – to limit the number of children that people on benefits can have. These kind of internal debates happened frequently throughout the course of discussions – one woman ending the evening with a comment, '*I am not sure if I will sleep tonight – I don't know what I think anymore'.* In another group participants began by being highly critical of the decision of the woman and her partner to have four children and then reflected on the possibility that they might have hit hard times. One woman commented, '*What if Teresa and her partner had had decent jobs, had a decent life (before) and could afford four kids?'.* The rest of the group then thought about how they had been quick to assume that Teresa and her partner had always been on benefits and that they were in fact ' *scroungers'* when they could have been ' *a very successful couple'.* One participant in the group however concluded that the comment '*so why not'* (ie claim benefits),*'lumps her into the group of people who think " I'm gonna take what I can get rather than I am gonna use it until I can better for my children'.* (FGD5).

Importantly one woman felt , she said, differently about the scenario once she knew it was real – in retrospect she felt her judgement had been ' *harsh'* and felt, she said, *'instantly guilty about any negative comments I'd made... I should have probably given a much more considered and empathetic response'.* (FGD4).