Poverty and its impact on parenting in the UK: Re-defining the critical nature of the relationship through examining lived experiences in times of austerity

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Abstract

Current political rhetoric and some media commentaries suggest there is a yawning gap of understanding between policymakers and the reality of families living in poverty in 21st century Britain. A key reason identified for the disconnect between policymakers and families is the absence of the voices of the families in public discourse. In this paper accounts of the lived experiences of parents in poverty are examined in four UK qualitative studies published in the period 1998-2016. Their accounts highlight how problems of disadvantage can be cumulative, compounding and enduring. The struggle to provide the basics of family life and the role of supportive communities and relationships are explored. The impact on parents of financial stress, the sense of shame and stigma often experienced and the consequences for their physical and mental health are highlighted. Under the government's austerity policy, there is an increase in poverty even in working families, an increase in homelessness and considerable evidence emerging on the damaging consequences of food and fuel poverty on the health of children and parents. Listening to the lived realities of individual families provides a much greater understanding of family poverty and its causes and consequences, provides a corrective to the critical pejorative rhetoric and lays the foundation for the provision of appropriate government support.

Key words: Poverty, parents, austerity, parenting, lived experiences

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Introduction

Recent estimates are that 3.9 million children were living in poverty in the UK in 2014-15, i.e. 28 percent of all children, or 9 in every classroom of 30 (Child Poverty Action Group 2017). Such headlines can still shock, and child poverty in these times of government driven austerity is increasing. Current political rhetoric and some media commentaries suggest there is a yawning gap of understanding between policymakers and the reality of families living in poverty in 21st century Britain (Pemberton et al. 2016, Shildrick et al. 2016, Kent 2016, Ryan 2017c). Shildrick and colleagues remind us that 'the propensity to blame those experiencing poverty for their own predicament has a long history but it is a trend that has developed with renewed vigour' (Shildrick et al. 2016, p.2). Not only are parents portrayed as bearing responsibility for their own misfortunes but they are also accused of ruining the life chances of their children. Erik Pickles, when Minister for Communities and Local Government, articulated this view in a widely reported speech on 'problem families':

> The moment some children are born their life chances are simply written off. From day one their lives are defined by the problems that surround them. Drugs. Alcohol. Crime. Mental illness. Unemployment. They grow up in chaos and their own lives are chaotic. (Pickles 2011, cited by Shildrick et al. 2016, p.2)

The public discourse has often become one-sided and shaped by such political repetition, particularly in England. One of the reasons why there is so little open and informed debate about the impact of poverty on families, it has been argued, is that 'the voices of the families are largely absent' (Morris 2013, p.199). Rectifying the absence of families' voices is building on a low baseline, with notable exceptions, such as the work of Wilson and Herbert (1978) whose study of fifty-six families living in the poorest areas of a large English city includes parents' accounts of their daily lives. Holman (1998) notes that the smallest section of a bibliography compiled in 1997 (Beresford et al. 1997) of individuals and groups who had produced materials relating to their own social exclusion contained just five references concerning experiences of poverty.

However, vigorous efforts are being made to right this state of affairs. They include the work of groups with experience of poverty (such as ATD Fourth World) and influential individuals with a public profile (such as Jack Monroe, Foreword in Garthwaite 2016 and Linda Tirado 2014); passionate journalists and writers (such as O'Hara 2015 and Ryan 2017); and long standing campaigners against child poverty (such as the Child Poverty Action Group, Family Rights Group and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation). A promising feature more recently has been examples of

collaboration and co-production by individuals and groups with academics and professionals. One such example is a pioneering project in Northern Ireland of collaboration with resident and community associations in areas of multi-deprivation and using a range of more novel methods such as digital storytelling and digital dissemination (Kent 2016).

There are critical issues about how the lives of families in poverty are presented and the meanings that are attributed to them. Holman (1998) draws attention to the misleading nature of 'snapshots' that are based only on brief impressions or encounters with those living in poverty which can lead to oversimplification and generalisation. He gives as an example the work of Charles Murray on an 'emerging underclass' in Britain (1990):

> He [Charles Murray] blames much poverty, immorality and crime on a growing number of feckless young men and women: the men choose not to work and opt to take drugs, which pushes them into crime: the young women choose to have babies but not to live with male partners, they are irresponsible towards their children who therefore grow up wild, delinquent and work-shy and so perpetuate the next round of poverty. Murray takes Easterhouse as a home of the underclass. His understanding of the place and its people appear to be based on one short visit. He presents a snapshot of certain poor people and then concludes the characteristics displayed by them at that moment are their prevailing features. (Holman 1998, p168/169)

Holman advocates we should be listening to stories of the lived reality of individual families, hearing from their direct experience how their difficulties have built up or changed over time and how families have survived. As a result, a very different picture emerges. Their narratives are infinitely more nuanced and complex than those often presented in political discourse and by some commentators.

Ruth Levitas (2012) also raises doubts about the way families' lives are presented, in this case in relation to the report, *Listening to Troubled Families*, by Louise Casey (2012), then head of the UK Government's Troubled Families Programme*.* Levitas observes:

> 'Doubtless families with backgrounds and circumstances as difficult as Casey documents exist – although there might be quite other ways of telling their stories than in the narratives presented here. There are sixteen of them. They are at best (or worst) a tiny minority of those suffering severe and multiple deprivation, a tiny minority of those children living in poverty and those families struggling with the consequences of recurrent poverty and increasing austerity' (Levitas 2012).

It is these 'quite other ways' that need to be explored where families recount their stories, thus providing their own evidence of the impact of poverty on their lives, so that there can be a significantly greater shared knowledge. Linda Tirado, a writer with her own experience of poverty (Tirado 2014), urges:

We should stop allowing people to define us: we bring them the data. So you think we're not trustworthy, our lived experience doesn't count against the opinions you've formed about it? Fine. Here's the science. Here's the data. (Tirado, Afterword in Garthwaite 2016, p.161)

Lived experiences of parents in poverty

We have selected four different texts where parents are telling their stories, either written themselves or told to those who recorded them. To complement the growing body of literature on children's perspectives of living in poverty, we have chosen to focus on the adults who have the responsibility for parenting children in these circumstances. The aim has been to listen to parents talking about their lived experiences of poverty, about how it affects their day-to-day choices, decisions, relationships and behaviours as parents, what they worry about and how they survive. Our approach has been led by the themes and issues which recur in these accounts.

The four texts span the first two decades of this century. They are geographically diverse. The first text contains the accounts of seven residents of Easterhouse, a huge council housing scheme on the edge of Glasgow. The residents were encouraged and commissioned to write their stories by Bob Holman (Holman 1998). The second is an extensive UK-wide study by Deborah Ghate and Neal Hazel (2002) about parenting in poor environments, carried out under the government's children's research initiative, *Supporting Parents*. In this study, 1700 parents or main carers of children living in environments 'high in certain indicators of community and individual disadvantage and poverty ' were the subject of face-to-face survey interviews (Ghate and Hazel 2002, p.16) In-depth qualitative interviews were held with a sub-sample of 40 parents. It is significant that this study was commissioned during a time of 'unprecedented activity and development on the family support front' (Ghate and Hazel 2002, p.10). Interest in such issues was high on the policy agenda and in the context of 'the boldest social policy goal' of the New Labour government to end child poverty (Dean 2012, p.233). This ambitious target was set in 1999, to be achieved by 2020.

In rather different political and economic times with the level of poverty once again increasing, Bob Holman inspired the third text in 2014 by inviting its nine authors to write a report on contemporary poverty and inequality in the UK. Holman related his invitation to a report, *Our Towns: a close up* (Bondfield 1943), written 70 years earlier by members of the Hygiene Committee of the Women's Group on Public Welfare. Produced during the Second World War, the report exposed what had been a largely invisible level of poverty and deprivation and 'described the impact this had had on families who experienced such harsh conditions … and the extent to which those struggles were misunderstood and misinterpreted by others' (Zipfel et al. 2015, p.8). Tricia Zipfel and her colleagues responded to Holman's invitation by telling the stories of 22 people from across the UK who were 'struggling to make

ends meet and doing so against the odds', and presented their report to the Westminster Parliament in November 2015 (Zipfel et al. 2015).

The fourth text is an important ethnographic study by Kayleigh Garthwaite (2016) of foodbank use in a town in the North-East of England, Stockton-on-Tees. The study includes, over an 18 month period, 80 interviews with people using the foodbank and was undertaken as the UK was experiencing an unparalleled explosion in the geographic spread and use of foodbanks (Garthwaite 2016). By the time these last two texts were produced, national targets to reduce child poverty in the UK had been abolished; the numbers of children living in poverty were increasing again, thereby reversing the reduction achieved in the decade to 2010; profound and highly contentious welfare benefit system reforms were being implemented; and politically driven 'austerity' had become the dominant language of government fiscal policy.

Under the government's austerity policy, poverty has increased even in working families, there has been an increase in homelessness and considerable evidence is emerging of the damaging consequences of food and fuel poverty on the health of children and parents. Discussion in this paper about the impact of austerity measures on families is illustrated by the findings of three recent reports from Cardiff University, the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. For the purposes of providing some wider context and to demonstrate the increasing level of public awareness of the constraints under which families are struggling, we have added reference to social welfare articles in the public press and to selected journal articles addressing the lived realities of poverty.

Factors influencing parents who find themselves in poverty

When listening to parents' voices in these four texts and in related academic papers, such as by Shildrick and colleagues (2016), it is evident there is no one set pattern to the history of how parents have come to be struggling with family life in poverty. Each parent has an individual and different story. Some parents talk of relatively happy and stable early childhoods, but others describe family life disrupted from early on by illness, addiction or abuse, loss of key family members, financial crises, homelessness, constant moves or times spent in care, and they have continued to experience disruption and poverty in adulthood:

> Carol reveals both the despair of a single mother whose child is taken from her and the courage of regaining her. Anita [widowed just before the birth of her seventh child] portrays the distress imposed by waves of tragedies along with her struggles to survive. Erica tells, in almost a matter-of-fact way, how she was abused as a child, how she drifted into prostitution, and how she came out of it into a life of poverty. Penny details horrific ups and downs, the ups of loving her children, the downs of being cruelly treated and harassed by her drug-abusing partner. Denise records a childhood of being in and out of care and an early adulthood of coping with three small children with little money and poor housing. (Holman 1998, p.154)

For other parents, hardship has come later when as adults they have been in work, and have homes and young families. Events, large and small, have occurred and then further problems have happened and accumulated. Parents find themselves living in poverty or moving in and out of poverty because of an immediate income crisis or because of longer-term income insecurity. In Tanya's story, there was 'hidden poverty' in a household that appeared to have an adequate overall income, brought to a crisis when domestic abuse as well as financial abuse were exposed (Zipfel et al. 2015):

> 'I came to the refuge last month with my son and daughter. We left our home with nothing. We are in a new town and I know no-one here except the refuge workers. No-one will visit us because I can't risk telling anyone where we are. I used to have three jobs. One was working night shift at the hospital and so I left my children with their father. My son told his teacher that he slept with a hammer under his bed to protect himself and his sister from their father. The teacher told me and I decided in seconds that I had to take my children to a safe place… My husband worked part time but didn't help with the bills… Now I can't pay off all the debts. I have applied for Jobseeker's Allowance and Child Tax Credit.' *Tanya's story.* (Zipfel et al. 2015, pp.21-22)

For some parents, the daily struggle with debt has had a devastating impact on mental health. 'This is a two-way process', Zipfel and colleagues observe, 'Mental illness makes poverty more of a risk, and poverty and debt in turn exacerbate mental health problems' (Zipfel et al. 2014, p.24). Marcus and Louise's story and Anna's story describe these processes.

> Marcus and Louise and their four children were subject to the 'bedroom tax' [introduced under the benefit reforms as an 'under occupancy charge' for families with more bedrooms than deemed essential to their requirements]. They lived in poor housing and their benefits were delayed, leading to uncontrollable debt [and hardship]… Marcus had worked hard all his life, but had no choice but to give up work because of his long-standing mental illness. After waiting several months for his benefits to be sorted out, he found himself caught in a vicious circle and struggling to support his family. *Marcus and Louise's story.* (Zipfel et al. 2015, p.24)

The experience of life-changing events such as bereavement, job loss or relationship breakdown can be 'tipping points', as Garthwaite (2016) found in her study of foodbank use. Such events can precipitate people not previously living on a persistently low income into financial crisis, so that they 'can find themselves walking though the church doors [into the foodbank], red voucher in hand' (p.93):

> Anna [a foodbank user for herself and her child] had… been running a self-employed craft business but that started to fall apart as a result of her mental health deteriorating after she left [employment in] the police force. In the space of six months, Anna was struggling with her mortgage repayments and found she could no longer afford the TV licence, her car tax and eventually,

food for herself and her 11-year-old daughter, Daisy. (Garthwaite 2016, p.102)

These accounts by parents speak of lives of severe and multiple hardships where poverty, as Ghate and Hazel found in their study, is 'the common thread running through the various difficulties, underlying and compounding stressors at the individual, family and neighbourhood levels' (Ghate and Hazel 2004, p.11).

Bullock and Parker (2014) discuss how problems of disadvantage can combine and accumulate:

> If a disadvantage is severe it is generally multiple. If it is multiple it is generally severe. However, there are complicated ways in which severity and multiplicity combine… Although the assessment of degrees of severity has been a prominent feature of welfare and medical systems, its multiple character has tended to be overlooked. Yet, if anything, it is a more complicated concept (and reality) than severity. (Bullock and Parker 2014, pp.4-5)

Amanda Duncan's story told to Shildrick and colleagues (2016) records the complexity and multiplicity of her hardships:

> Her account demonstrates the long-range effects of early hardships – abuse, specifically – and the complicated interaction of later troubles. A snap-shot view, *frozen in the present*, might identify her problems with alcohol, *or* her depression, *or* her constant shifts of address, *or* the stress of living in a difficult neighbourhood, *or* her complicated and strained family relationships, *or* the way she has been victimized by men. It is difficult to 'see' all these problems at once – and almost impossible to see how they have become intertwined. (Shildrick et al. 2016, p.8)

Bullock and Parker reflect on how different elements of disadvantage may be linked. They conclude they may be causally linked or they may follow in sequence or interact in ways that bring certain conditions into prominence, and the effects may 'ripple' by creating disadvantage for the people with whom they are closely associated (Bullock and Parker 2014, p.5). Shildrick and colleagues characterise these features of disadvantage as troubles that 'come not as single spies but in battalions' (p.13). They observe:

> It is not necessarily the case that problem A led to problem B and then to problem C. It felt more like that A and B and C often came simultaneously or in quick succession and were piled on top of each other. (Shildrick et al. 2016, p.8)

Thus, the problems being described by parents can be seen as cumulative, compounding and, for many, enduring, with poverty underlying and further compounding their difficulties and hardships.

However, the accounts we have read also speak of 'the powers of endurance that those living in poverty have to find within themselves and deploy just to get by' (Zipfel et al. 2015, p.22). Holman, at the conclusion of the stories of their lives written by residents of Easterhouse, observes:

> The contributors do record many lows in their lives. They did experience despair, anger, sadness, breakdowns, even thoughts of suicide. Yet one of the perceptions that emerges from their words is that within all these traumas and apparent weaknesses, they are also strong people… How did they survive? In the end, the answer must be that each possessed a *resolve to endure.* (Holman 1998, pp.166-170)

Tanya, now a single parent, homeless and unemployed, and living with two children in a refuge, demonstrates that *resolve to endure* when she says:

> 'We will move out of the refuge. We need help, but we will do it. I will get a job – three again, if need be – and we will have a home.' *Tanya's story*. (Zipfel et al. 2014, p.22)

Her words speak of the determination to escape the situation in which she finds herself and to better the position for her and her children, but she recognises she will need support and opportunity to do so.

The narratives from parents not only give us a broader understanding of poverty and its underlying causes but also reveal from where parents draw their strength and how they cope, and how some are able to bring about change for themselves and their children. This provides an alternative perspective which is important as a corrective to the pejorative and negative judgements that are often publicly voiced about poor and disadvantaged parents' strengths, motivation and capacity for change and growth.

In the next sections we examine how parents describe the challenges facing them and how poverty influences their parenting choices and behaviours, and then turn to the impact of poverty on parents themselves.

The challenges parents face in providing the basics of family life

The parents' accounts talk graphically about the daily challenges they confront as they struggle to make ends meet and the difficult choices they have to make to provide the basic necessities for their families. These include fundamental issues of how to feed and clothe their families and keep their homes warm enough:

> 'Poverty is a terrible thing. I just cannot cope with what I am getting in income support. I just wish I could feed and clothe my children but it is impossible with what I receive.' *Anita, widow with 7 children*. (Holman 1998, p.96)

Erica, one of the contributors from the Easterhouse estate, knows she should not keep her son off school but in the absence of shoes, she has no choice:

'*Monday*… Gilbert is still off school because he has no shoes. I can't help it but on Wednesday I'll go round the secondhand shops to see what I can do because I must get him back to school quick.' *Erica's diary*. (Holman 1998, pp.70-71)

Parents also describe how they go without adequate clothing themselves in order to ensure their children have clothes and shoes for school:

'My husband hasn't even got a coat because I just haven't been able to buy him one. That's not fair I know, but it just means him having to wear two or three jumpers when he goes out in the winter just so they [children] can have school shoes.' *Mother, bad accommodation, large family.* (Ghate and Hazel 2002, p.208)

The foodbanks become a source of welcome variety of food that parents cannot normally afford:

When Ronnie brought the food over [at the foodbank], Daisy [aged 11] asked if she could have a look at what was in the bags. She started rifling through them excitedly, saying 'Oh look Mam, we've got corned beef.' Daisy looked up at me and said 'We haven't had meat for six weeks'. (Garthwaite 2016, p.118)

Erica has experienced a life of complex disadvantage and hardship but has managed together with her husband, who has had problems of alcohol abuse and now long standing mental illness, to get their lives sorted out and to have their four children living with them. 'The only problem we have now', she writes, 'is the same as always and that is MONEY' (Holman 1998, p.65). She keeps a diary which shows how difficult it is to afford enough food for her growing children. At the same time, her diary describes the family activities which they undertake together:

'*Saturday*… I have £5.75 left. I have asked the kids to help clean up for me. They moaned but they did it. We all sat and watched TV. The TV set is on its last legs and I don't know what I'd do without it. The kids ask for some bread. I could only give them one slice each because it is all that was left. Ivor [husband] has not got up today. Me, Deidre and Charlotte had a game of cards and I won. The kids went to bed. I wanted to go for a bath but I have to keep the hot water for Sunday for the kids. We had mashed potatoes and meat balls for tea (potatoes 0.69 pence, 2 tins of meat balls 0.98 pence). I have £4.08 left. I am off to bed now.

However, as Erica finds, the choice may be between feeding the family and having enough money to turn on the gas to heat their home:

Sunday… From the shop got bread (0.69 pence), salt (0.35 pence), 5lb potatoes (0.69 pence), 2 tins beans (0.60 pence) and 2 tins chopped ham (£1.58 pence). Just a few pence left. I need some gas but I don't have enough so we will have to put up with the cold till morning. It is quite cold in the house.' *Erica's diary, mother with 4 children*. (Holman 1998, pp.76-77)

Kim, a single mother with two children, dreams of earning her own money and being able to provide weekend breaks with the children and 'luxuries' for the family. She worries particularly about her energy costs and how to contain them, when her children are only wanting to do what other children are normally doing:

> 'I want what everybody else has. Weekends away with the kids, things like that. I want to earn my own money to get the luxuries I want, to feel I've earned it.' Kim was particularly struggling with energy costs. Her kids switch the TV on all the time, leave lights on, have long baths and plug their hair straighteners in. She doesn't really nag them to stop, as 'kids shouldn't have to worry about things like that.' *Kim, single mother with two children.* (Garthwaite 2016, pp.89-90)

The absence of financial reserves to fall back on for additional or emergency needs or the absence of nearby kin or friends to provide a helping hand means that it is not surprising that many parents' accounts include reference to having to borrow money and how terrified they are when trapped in a cycle of mounting debt:

> 'I am still in debt paying for last Christmas. I am still paying for the kids' clothes. Sometimes you have to borrow to eat. Once I lent from a man and put down my child benefit book. I worked out that he took £450 to lend me £220 for Christmas. It was robbery but I had no other option.' *Erica's diary.* (Holman 1998, p.77)

Ghate and Hazel gave the 1,700 parents in their study 'a short list of eight items that most families in Britain would take for granted as basic aspects of family expenditure' (Ghate and Hazel 2002, p.65). Parents were then asked whether there was anything on the list they could not afford. The findings reflect the parents' stories that we have heard. Nearly 1 in 12 families lived in homes in which heating was not always available when needed, and the same proportion could not afford basic toys and sports gear for children. One family in 20 said they could not afford warm winter clothes for all children in the household. Parents usually managed to ensure that their children had at least a decent meal once a day but, even so, a small minority of parents (3%) reported having to skimp themselves on hot meals in order to provide this. Almost 1 in 7 families could not have a family day trip or outing once a year and two thirds of families could not afford a family holiday away from home once a year (Ghate and Hazel 2002, p.67).

More recently, the *Poverty and Social Exclusion* project found in its 2012 large scale survey that 'more and more families in Britain face little more than a hand-to-mouth existence, missing out on a range of the most basic of contemporary needs' (Lansley and Mack 2015, viii). Their findings echo those of Ghate and Hazel (2002). Because of lack of money, they report, 1 in 5 children were living in a home that was cold or damp, 1 in 10 children lacked an essential clothing item like a warm coat or two pairs of shoes, and 1 in 20 households could not afford to feed their children adequately (Lansley and Mack 2015, xiv).

The importance of communities and relationships

The influence of 'community' on a child's development and on child and family wellbeing has been given greater prominence through the ecological approach articulated by Bronfenbrenner and others which recognises the significance of wider family, community and structural dimensions of family life (Bronfenbrenner 1979, Jack and Gill 2003). 'Community' is a slippery concept but the journalist and cleric, Giles Fraser, suggests that it used to refer to 'the social togetherness contained within a particular geographical area', more difficult to sustain now in fast changing urban areas and in areas of increasing social fragmentation:

> 'Its key stations were the pub, the church and the shops. In the general hubbub of such places, a magical chemistry of mutual attachment would soften the hard shells of our defensive individualism and bind otherwise very different people in a sense of common enterprise. And when people get to know each other like this they tend to look out for each other, including the most vulnerable among them.' (Fraser 2017)

An initially surprising finding of Ghate and Hazel (2002) is that most parents living in poor environments like their localities and comment on the friendliness of neighbours. Even for parents living in 'extremely poor' areas, 'respondents were still almost twice as likely to rate the area as 'good' as they were to rate it as 'poor' (Ghate and Hazel 2002, p.99). The level of support available in a neighbourhood, such as informal support from personal networks, family and friends, is often voiced by parents as making a critical difference to their coping either with unanticipated crises or with long standing difficulties. Such support can make the unbearable possible, even in the most difficult of circumstances. One mother explains how she is supported in her community:

> 'Everybody is about and they're interested in my well being – they are just there for you; if you need anything they're there. They're supportive, not just financially, I mean – my mam has nothing really but if they've got it, they'll give it. If you need emotional support, they're just there. They're willing to have [child] every week, they would have her every weekend for me… It's the same with a lot of families up here. There's quite a lot of extended families on this estate…' *Mother, sick child.* (Ghate and Hazel 2002, p.121)

Those parents without such accessible kinship and friendship networks, especially lone mothers, are the parents who are most hard pressed when they have nowhere to turn.

A poor environment may, however, increase the level of vulnerability of children and this can add to parenting stress. Parents' accounts show concern about their local neighbourhoods and awareness of environmental hazards as well as health and safety issues. Ghate and Hazel found over half of parents in poor environments felt personally affected by the problem of dog fouling. Other problems parents frequently identified included litter and rubbish in the streets, danger from traffic, stray or loose

dogs, and (less so) pollution from traffic or factories (Ghate and Hazel 2002, p.88). Parents worry about 'dirty streets and parks that curtailed their use of (already limited) grass and play areas, and traffic danger prevented children from playing out safely near their houses' (Ghate and Hazel 2002, p.89). Restricting children's freedom of movement may be the result of parents' concerns about the risk to children of being bullied or getting involved in drugs and the risk of assault, physical or sexual, from individuals or groups outside the home (Holman 1998). A neighbourhood with these risks can strengthen parents' desperation to move:

> 'I dread to think what the future holds for my kids if I don't get away from Easterhouse soon while they are still young. I know in my heart that they will either turn to drugs or end up in prison.' *Anita, widow with seven children.* (Holman 1998, p.98)

The impact of poverty on parents – stress, shame and stigma

A pervading theme in parents' accounts is the effect financial stress has on them, while they are struggling at the same time with multiple other hardships. It affects their view of themselves as individuals and as parents. For many it can be seen to erode their sense of self-worth and self-confidence, often accompanied by anxiety and depression:

> '*Sunday*… I didn't want to get up today because I felt so fed up with my life. It's the same thing day-in, day-out. I don't get to go out with Ivor [husband] or on my own because we can't afford it. I don't know the last time we went out together. We don't get to go on holiday… Enough of my moaning.' *Erica's diary.* (Holman 1998, p.70)

Denise similarly talks of how fed up she feels:

> 'I am stuck in most of the time… I can't remember having new clothes for myself. My sister hands me on some of hers. At times I do get really fed up and think I can't be bothered. Then I might have a bath and go to bed for a wee greet [weep] to myself. We've got each other and we've been together six years.' *Denise, married, three children, low income, poor housing.* (Holman 1998, p.109)

For some parents, there is often no-one with whom to share these feelings:

> 'You have good days and bad days, don't you? I do have good days. I'm not always like this – you've just caught me on a bad day.' *Mother, difficult child, low income, lone parent.* (Ghate and Hazel 2002), p.212)

Holman says the Easterhouse writers 'reveal three major components of poverty: hardship, powerlessness and monotony' (Holman 1998, p.158). The parents endure multiple hardships on a daily basis but it is 'the hardships endured by the children which most hurt the parents' (Holman 1998, p.158). The fervent desire for their family lives to be different but without the means or opportunities to bring about change is at the heart of parents' sense of powerlessness:

'[Denise] is powerless to obtain more money, powerless to change her circumstances, powerless to look after her children in the way she wants.' Holman 1998, p.162)

Both Erica and Denise's stories demonstrate the corrosive effect of the monotony of their lives which are dull, repetitive, insular and restricted, with little scope for exercising choice or having respite or diversion. It is not surprising that two of the parents from Easterhouse had seriously considered taking their own lives (Holman 1998, p.163). Garthwaite (2016, p.133) records the desperation of a foodbank user, who made two attempts to commit suicide following the breakdown of her relationship with her husband and her worsening pre-existing ill-health problems.

At the same time, parents are acutely aware of the way they are branded by others as 'shirkers' and 'scroungers' and 'feckless parents'. They know the criticisms levelled at them for what are considered unhealthy and 'expensive' habits or bad choices. Smoking is one example:

> 'Must have my cigs or I can't get through the day. I hate it that people say that because you are on social security you shouldn't smoke. But it's like Valium, it calms me. I wish I could give it up. I have tried and failed.' *Erica's diary, husband long term ill health, four children*. (Holman 1998, p.75/76)

Keeping pets can be another reason for criticism:

> 'With the dogs, I'd hate to let them go, we've given them a good home for years but I'm having to buy a cheap bag of pasta and I'm feeding them pasta in with their dog food… Even just getting the dog food is a bit of a feat because it's a 15 kilo bag of dog food, which is the cheapest way to feed them. I went on the bus yesterday for it and there were men on the High Street aghast that I was carrying a 15 kilo bag of dog food and three bags of shopping.' *Anna talking of the lengths she went to so she and her daughter could keep their two greyhounds*. (Garthwaite 2016, p.68)

Garthwaite observes that 'blaming people for smoking, having dogs, tattoos and flatscreen TVs not only stigmatises people using the foodbank, but it also detracts from the bigger picture of the everyday hardship people face…this denial of a right to make choices or have luxuries strips away basic human dignity' (Garthwaite 2016, p.68).

The struggle to make ends meet, to do the best they can for their children, means that parents living in poverty are continually in situations of having to respond to others' demands of them, to make frequent journeys to the Jobcentre Plus, to ask for help, to fill in forms, to explain why something has not happened or seek understanding from an official when public transport services have let them down. They carry with them guilt at failing themselves and their children and are, at the same time, all too often exposed to stigma, shame and humiliation in the face of punitive and abusive responses (Pemberton et al. 2016, Kent 2016). Parents describe how they not only experience public service systems that let them down,

but their problems and difficulties are compounded when they encounter bureaucratic and unsympathetic responses from individual officials. This can leave parents desperate and relying on putting together 'a patchwork of provision' to keep them going (Zipfel et al. 2014, p.24), as in *Mary's story*:

> Mary used her benefit payments to buy the uniform essentials [for three children because the school clothing grants were late] and, when her money ran out, she rang the Scottish Welfare Fund to ask for an emergency payment. Their response was that she should have waited for the clothing grants rather than using her benefit money. They did send an emergency payment but it wasn't enough to cover heating and food until her next benefit payment, and this is why she was referred to the Food Bank. She didn't want to come to us but, as she said, she couldn't send the children to school without uniforms. *Mary's story.* (Zipfel et al. 2015, p.11)

Hussain describes the ritual humiliation of bureaucratic systems and his sense of powerlessness:

> 'Six weeks ago, they stopped my money. They never pay me anything. I don't know what to do. What do I do for the children? When I go to sign on they say 'you take this form, take that form' or ring into the benefit office. But the money is not in my account. So they say take an appeal form. "You do an appeal as well" [they say]. But I am already doing the appeals.' *Hussain, father of four, for almost two decades in stable, full-time, well-paid work until the factory closed. He was made redundant and has been seeking work.* (O'Hara 2015, p.133)

Zipfel and colleagues tell *Richard's story*, a 14 year old boy with autism, living with his parents, who themselves have poor health, and with his younger brother and sister. His mother is his main carer. Zipfel and colleagues observe that his story 'demonstrates the power of public services staff over the lives of people in poverty, the problems created if staff take a tick-box approach to their job, and the importance of their understanding the daily pressures of life in poverty' (Zipfel et al. 2015, p.25):

> When a social worker visited recently, Richard's parents told him that Richard's father had lost his job and his Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) had been delayed. The family had been so short of money that they had used Richard's Disability Living Allowance (DLA) to pay their rent and their electricity and gas bills. The social worker discussed this with his manager, who said that the parents' action constituted 'financial abuse' because it was an inappropriate use of Richards's DLA, which was paid to help his parents care for him – the benefit is in Richard's name. *Richard's story.* (Zipfel et al. 2015, p.25)

In their stories, parents are telling us how poverty combines with multiple hardships to make their lives full of stress, uncertainty, exhaustion and fear, with detrimental consequences for their own physical and mental health.

Discussion

The last decade in the UK has been marked by the government's adoption of a policy of austerity as the means to manage financial crisis, during which poverty has increased. Mark Blyth (2015) defines austerity as 'a form of voluntary deflation in which the economy adjusts through the reduction of wages, prices, and public spending to restore competitiveness, which is (supposedly) best achieved by cutting the state's budget, debts and deficits' (p.2). The ideology of such a policy is widely contested and its construction and politically-induced 'shape changing' is hotly debated (see Clarke and Newman 2012, Blyth 2015 and O'Hara 2015). Most commentators would agree that it is the poor who have been worst hit and not just by welfare benefit reforms and increased costs of living but by the overall focus on reducing public spending on the services that are depended upon by families on low incomes. There is not only evidence of increased poverty under austerity but of more families being at risk of poverty, including households with one or more earners. Work can no longer be seen as providing a guaranteed route out of poverty.

Three reports, from Cardiff University, the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, have recently highlighted some of the serious consequential features of austerity. These include the increase of poverty in working families, the increase in homelessness so that nearly 120,000 children are now living in temporary family accommodation, and the damaging consequences of food and fuel poverty on the health of children and parents.

Research from Cardiff University on in-work poverty provides evidence of the growth of poverty in working families (Hick and Lanau 2017). The research finds that the risk of poverty for adults living in working families has grown by a quarter over the past decade and this is at a time when the number of 'workless' households is declining. It finds that a record 60% of British people in poverty are living in a household where someone is in work but the income of the whole household is inadequate to meet the family's needs (Hick and Lanau 2017, p.3). Furthermore, people living in a one-earner household 'face a very significantly elevated risk of in-work poverty' (p.3). The risk of falling into hardship is especially high for families in the private rented sector, which is characterised as 'a sector with high housing costs and high poverty rates' (Hick and Lanau 2017, p.4). Even in two-earner households, the struggle to make ends meet can increase the risk of debt and poverty, and the threat of homelessness. Ryan (2017a) describes it as the 'scandal of in-work poverty… where you can have a job but still have to go to a food bank to eat or even sleep on the street.'

The report of the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts on the state of the nation's housing (2017) reinforces the Cardiff University findings. From the evidence taken, it concludes that the shortage of housing and the cost of private sector rents have contributed to what are now the very high numbers of families

living in homeless accommodation. The report makes the point that the human costs of the housing shortage in England are emphasised by the rise in homelessness in the last decade. In the period 2015-16, 58,000 households were accepted by local authorities as having become homeless unintentionally, and as possessing a priority need. The numbers of households in these circumstances has since risen significantly. 'By September 2016, [the total number of families living in temporary accommodation] had risen to almost 75,000 households, who between them had 117,520 children' (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts 2017, p.8).

The threat of family homelessness is about income and debt, the shortage of affordable and decent housing and about the cost of private sector rents. Homelessness threatens those in work, particularly in one earner households, as well as families with no-one in work, and covers an extensive range of different circumstances, which include professionals working in the public services, such as the National Health Service and education (as reported by Donna Ferguson in her article in *The Guardian* on Homeless Teachers, Ferguson 2017).

The complex interaction of hardships in these times of a policy of austerity is particularly apparent in relation to children and parents' health. The physical and mental health consequences for parents and their children of not being able to afford the basic items of family expenditure are identified as serious cause for concern in a recent survey on *Poverty and Children's Health* (Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) 2017).

The report highlights that poor nutrition, as a result of the inability to afford enough healthy food, is associated with poor growth of deprived babies and children on the one hand, and rising child obesity on the other. Paediatricians report they are seeing parents depriving themselves of food in order to provide food for their children, which in turn is making their children anxious and frightened. It is noted that some parents are unable to afford other essentials for their families such as clothes, toothbrushes and toothpaste (RCPCH 2017, p.6).

Paediatricians report on the negative child health consequences of poor and inadequately heated housing. Disabled and chronically ill children are especially vulnerable and the conditions of other children are made worse (see also Ryan 2017b). They cite a 2 year old with recurrent seizures (50 in 4 months) living in a house with no heating; children living in overcrowded, shared accommodation who are unwell with back-to-back respiratory illnesses; and cold homes precipitating painful crises and hospital admission of sickle cell patients. Paediatricians also report seeing parents too stressed to cope, living in appalling housing, with no energy to focus on the needs of their disabled children (RCPCH 2017).

Garthwaite supports the paediatricians' findings from her own observations of the effect poverty can have on children's wellbeing. 'Growing up in poverty means being cold, going hungry, not being able to join in activities with friends… Children living in

a cold home are more than twice as likely to suffer from breathing problems as those who live in warm homes' (Garthwaite 2016, p.90).

Conclusion

In this paper we have focused upon evidence from parents themselves of how poverty profoundly affects them and their families. Poverty is a severe constraint as parents struggle to meet the needs of their families amidst their other hardships. Their accounts suggest that careful distinction needs to be made between the damaging impact of financial stress on parents themselves and their parenting behaviours with their children. The two are of course interrelated, as we have seen from parents' stories. David Utting, in his report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on Family and Parenthood, observes 'Living on low income in a run-down neighbourhood does not make it impossible to be an affectionate, authoritative parent of healthy, sociable children… it does, undeniably, make it more difficult ' (Utting 1995, p.40). Rather than the pervasive negative images of parents living in poverty, we have been presented with clear evidence of caring, responsible parents eager to give their children every opportunity possible and endeavouring to do the best they can for their families in these challenging circumstances.

Listening to the lived realities of individual families provides a much greater understanding of family poverty, its causes and consequences. It provides a corrective to critical pejorative rhetoric and lays the foundation for the provision of appropriate government action and support. It reinforces the importance of policy makers and public service providers hearing parents' voices and engaging with parents more directly (long advocated by ATD Fourth World since their research project *Talk With Us, Not At Us,* 1996).

At the point of writing, the national discourse is about the human disaster of the Grenfell Tower fire tragedy in London and the subsequent response. In the aftermath there are signs that the public discourse is changing. A new national conversation is beginning about the imperative of authorities' listening to families, of recognising their individual needs and of working out solutions with each family collaboratively. The conversation includes wider questions about the quality and safety of housing provision for those living in poor circumstances; the unequal impact of austerity and decisions that have been made in the name of austerity; the impact of current welfare reforms; and, not least, the potential for greater engagement with local communities in addressing these issues. Whether the conversation will have a longer term impact and lead to radical change in policies and services for families is another matter. A significant step forward for government and local authorities would be to cease the negative political rhetoric about families in poverty, listen to families about what would make a difference to their lives and together plan effective local support and services. A more radical approach, however, would be to question the wisdom of maintaining a failed austerity policy and move towards the adoption of policies likely to lead to a more compassionate, just and equitable society.

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