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**Unpacking the Relationship between Parenting and Poverty: Theory, Evidence and Policy**

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## **Unpacking the Relationship between Parenting and Poverty: Theory, Evidence and Policy**

*Policy discourses around child poverty and its causes and effects on families emerged in the 1990s, culminating in the Coalition Government's emphasis on the quality of couple relations in improving child outcomes and in reducing child poverty. This article reviews and updates the current evidence base around the relationship between parenting and poverty. Evidence suggests an intricate relationship between complex and mediating processes of, for instance, income, parental stress, disrupted parenting practices, and neighbourhoods and environments, as opposed to a simplistic causal relationship between poverty, parenting, and child outcomes. The article then proceeds to suggest responses to enhance the evidence and research. Lastly, it considers the implications for child poverty policy, arguing that current responses are too simplistic and do not sufficiently reflect the evidence base.*

**Key words:** parents, poverty, dynamics, research, social policy.

### **Introduction**

It was during the 1990s that policy discourses emerged in the UK in response to tackling child poverty and action was taken by the Labour Government to reduce it as part of a wider poverty reduction strategy (Edwards and Gillies, 2004; Tavistock Institute *et al.*, 2014). The emphasis was largely, though not exclusively, on measuring child poverty in terms of fiscal and household income and raising levels of income through higher welfare benefits and inclusion in the labour market. Such

policies were perceived to enhance parents' ability to nurture children, both emotionally and financially. Assistance with parenting in the form of parenting classes was also perceived as complementing the fiscal aspects of poverty reduction (Asmussen *et al.*, 2007; Avis, 2007; Axford *et al.*, 2012; Davis *et al.*, 2012).

On assuming power in 2010, the Coalition Government commissioned an independent review on poverty and life-chances which considered the case for reforms to child poverty measures, particularly the inclusion of non-financial elements and of addressing the underlying roots of poverty. The resulting document (Field, 2010), and a subsequent report on early intervention, (Allen, 2011) concluded that focusing on reducing poverty by fiscal means was not the solution to determining whether children's potential could be realised in adult life. Consequently, an alternative strategy was required to reduce the chances of the cycle of deprivation by which poor children eventually became poor adults. As a result, the key focus is now on the strength and stability of adult relationships and their effects on child-wellbeing outcomes (Field, 2010; Allen, 2011). This marks the beginning of a significant shift in emphasis away from the parent-child relationship to the importance of the couple in family policy. A key element lies in supporting home environments, stemming from the belief that children who grow up in stable families with quality relationships stand the best chance of a positive future.

However, this same period has witnessed significant reductions in income for many families, particularly for those least well-off. Reforms to the welfare benefit system and pressure to take up employment, no matter how low-paid and insecure, bring increased financial and practical difficulties for many families. The housing benefit cap and the under-occupancy penalty ('bedroom tax') may mean some families have to move home, disrupting children's education and existing social and

community networks (Gentleman, 2012). Furthermore, it has been argued that the shift to the strength and stability of adult relationships in securing positive child outcomes is merely an extension of neo-liberal ideology which emphasises the individuation of relationships and the moral responsibility of parents to provide effective parenting (Robson, 2010). For example, parenting classes accentuate the neo-liberal tenet that parents are primarily responsible for reducing achievement gaps and inter-generational disadvantage (Daly, 2011; Hartas, 2014). This approach sidelines socio-economic status and material poverty, ensuring parents have to live up to the standards of neo-liberal tenets (Gillies, 2005a; Daly, 2011; Reay, 2013) in an era of increasing structural inequalities (Hills *et al.*, 2010).

Research points to the need to improve the circumstances of children living in poverty who experience significant disadvantages in terms of cognitive development, socio-emotional functioning and physical health problems (Newland *et al.*, 2013). Living with financial hardship has profound effects for parents in terms of psychological distress, marital conflict and stress (Furstenberg *et al.*, 1999; Ross and Roberts, 1999; Cawson *et al.*, 2000; Pheonix and Husain, 2007). However, the current knowledge base around parenting, poverty and child outcomes is often grounded within ideas of ‘parenting problems’ (Katz *et al.*, 2007a; Gillies, 2007), the implication being that parents who live in poverty display a deficit in parental abilities due to the increased difficulties which financial hardship brings. It is true that poor parents are more likely than more affluent ones to be confronted with a range of material and non-material disadvantages. These can include isolation, poor health, lack of access to jobs and services (Katz *et al.*, 2007b; La Placa and Corlyon, 2014a), and relationship difficulties that disrupt ability to parent adequately. However, this stance inevitably misses the complexity and multi-dimensional

construction and experience of poverty (Smith and Middleton, 2007; Boyden *et al.*, 2012). The disadvantages outlined above may act as linking independent predictors, but are also likely to converge and be constituted in and through interactive processes that mediate the ability to parent, producing other processes and outcomes and to proceed beyond issues around parenting ‘problems’. This makes it all the more challenging in disaggregating the effects of parenting on child outcomes and poverty.

Understanding the complex construction and experience of poverty is central to theoretical debates around the roles of structure and agency among social policy makers and researchers (Giddens, 1984; Alcock, 2006). The structural approach accentuates the primacy of structural social circumstances and wider determinants in influencing life-courses, life-chances, and economic outcomes, such as economic growth, neighbourhood context, and social policies. The agency approach emphasises the central importance of individuals’ abilities to actively and discursively construct and reframe their lives, practices and circumstances through choice and agency. As a result, a school of thought has emerged that combines both structure and personal agency (Giddens, 1984; La Placa *et al.*, 2014). Social environment and structure is both the medium and the outcome of social action and individuals negotiate through this reflexively, producing change over time and space.

In this article, poverty is conceptualised as dynamic and contingent (Gordon and Nandy, 2012) and produced and experienced through an array of intricate interacting and intermediate factors, including families, parenting, and neighbourhood and environment. It proceeds beyond unilinear frameworks of absolute and relative poverty (Gordon, 1998; Lister, 2010) to a multi-dimensional approach that focuses upon how deprivation, social practices and outcomes emerge through and by structure and agency (Alcock, 2006). Linked to this is the emergence

of 'poverty dynamics' (Smith and Middleton, 2007) whereby poverty is conceptualised as a complex process, meaning that there are different forms and experiences of and pathways into poverty.

The article refers to parents as individuals who provide significant care for children on the physical, emotional and social level (nurturance and socialisation), including grandparents and other relatives and adults not biologically related to the children (Katz *et al.*, 2007a). This is to maximise inclusivity and ensure the review covers a diverse range of families and contexts. Parenting is conceptualised holistically (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Belsky and Vondra, 1989) and constructed within influences from cultural contexts, communities and characteristics of parents. These contexts often influence parenting styles and types, usually defined in terms of how responsive they are to or demanding of their children (Baumrind, 1991).

The major themes of recent research on child poverty have primarily focused upon objective measurements and indicators of poverty, standard child outcomes, and the mechanisms through which cycles of poverty can be severed through material means i.e. higher incomes (Ermisch *et al.*, 2001; Yaqub, 2002; Katz *et al.*, 2007a). They have rarely considered other complexities such as the role of parents and parenting processes in the relationship between poverty and child outcomes. This article reviews literature addressing the potential relationship between parenting and poverty, the key issue being the extent to which poverty itself affects parenting or whether other characteristics and contexts of parents who live in poverty, such as family relationships or neighbourhoods, have an impact. Intrinsic to this is the extent to which poverty can exert separate effects which are distinct from other risk factors encountered by materially deprived parents, and whether parenting itself can operate

as a protective buffer to the deleterious effects of poverty. It then proceeds to explore the implications for further research and policies around child poverty.

## **Methods**

Evidence was generated through a narrative review which uses various sources from which conclusions are produced into holistic interpretations, based on reviewers' own experiences of existing theories and models (Popay and Mallinson, 2013). It provides an interpretative synthesis using findings from various sources. Reviewers produced exhaustive inclusion criteria to generate the most effective evidence in providing information about potential links between parenting and poverty. The primary inclusion criteria were that research should be primarily from a credible academic perspective (i.e. not anecdotal or unpublished evidence) and that literature focused primarily on links and relations between parenting and poverty. However, it appears that much of the literature often focuses primarily on material poverty and child outcomes, with parenting conceived as a secondary variable. It pays little attention to parenting's potential role in mediating between different outcomes.

To increase the range of evidence no cut-off date for articles was established. Evidence was also included if it originated from countries with similar social, economic and demographic characteristics to the UK such as the USA, Canada, and members of the European Union. Evidence was excluded if it originated from other countries different from the above or was overly focused upon outcomes with no regard to parents. As a result, relevant key search terms were drawn up and employed to guide the selection of relevant evidence. For instance, 'parenting practices' and 'poverty' were combined as search terms. Another example was the combination of

the search terms, 'parental practices' and 'neighbourhoods'. The search engines International Bibliography of the Social Sciences, SwetsWise and JSTOR were used to select sources. In total, 171 sources were identified initially through reference to the title of the relevant article/document. This was further reduced to 113 through extensive reference to the abstract/introduction to ensure rigorous adherence to the inclusion criteria and relevance to an exploratory narrative review. All 113 sources are cited in this article.

The review is skewed towards studies from the UK and US from where most literature originates. Research from mainland Europe is still sparse, as it was in past reviews (e.g. Katz *et al.*, 2007a). However, this is not to gloss over the fact that child poverty has a global dimension (Alcock, 2006) and that international evidence is as valid to UK policy. The review consists of quantitative and qualitative sources. This enables a focus upon broad structural determinants and quantitatively measured outcomes, but also sheds light on qualitative and interactive processes. Data sources were critically appraised for relevance, usefulness and validity of findings (Hill and Spittlehouse, 2003). Key themes were generated through the application of a thematic analyses and synthesis of data approach (Gibbs, 2007). Similar concepts and findings were summarised under thematic headings and tabulated to enable identification of prominent themes after rigorous reading and coding of data. As a result, themes could be deconstructed to enable identification of the sub-themes and processes which comprised the overall theme. The advantage of a narrative review was its ability to provide a plurality of diverse research and information, bounded into a comprehensive question and research topic, but one which enabled a reflexive position to be taken when reviewing literature. However, it is important to acknowledge that the evidence base often takes child outcomes as the primary focus, with limited focus upon process

and pathways. It is also frequently predicated upon ‘snapshots’ of parents in poverty, often comparing them to affluent parents.

### **Parenting and poverty: the evidence**

The article posits that five discernible themes emerge that capture the literature: the culture of poverty; stress; poor environments and neighbourhoods; parental resilience; and parental involvement with education. Evidence tends not to claim that income differences are the absolute determinant of parenting ability; but neither does it posit that economic hardship and income have no bearing upon parenting. Neither are emergent themes mutually exclusive, but are often a combination of structural and individual contexts.

#### ***The culture of poverty***

The culture of poverty theme premises that the persistence of poverty is the product of a culture, in which poor people have their own distinctive patterns of attitudes, behaviour and priorities of values which are transmitted between generations through socialisation. This leads to successive generations experiencing poverty and disadvantage. As a result, fiscal measures are not viewed as the answer to lifting the poor out of poverty: the solution is to interrupt the cycle of transmitting negative values by changing attitudes, lifestyles, behavioural drivers and parenting styles of materially poor parents (Welshman, 2007).

Yaqub (2002) argued that the persistence of poverty across several countries is significantly down to inter-generational transmission of parental values around low expectations of work and education. However, whilst socio-economic background strongly influenced behaviour, child outcomes were not solely determined by them. Through resilience and ‘plasticity’ (capacity to reverse psychological and social damage) parents could counterbalance the effects of poverty at almost any time through the life-course. Family outcomes were also affected by childhood poverty, family disruption, contact with police, educational test scores, fathers’ interest in schooling and insecure attachment bonds between parents and children due to the stress of coping with poverty (Hobcraft, 1998; Chen and Caplan, 2001; Moulin *et al.*, 2014). Lexmond and Reeves (2009) argued that parents’ resilience and confidence in themselves to transmit ‘character capabilities’ to their children mediated the effects of material poverty. However, in the absence of studies of the parenting styles of individuals who experienced very different socio-economic conditions and upbringings from those of their own children, it remains unclear as to what extent intergenerational similarities are factors of learned behaviour, compared with responses to the parenting environment. Archer *et al.* (2012) pointed out that family ‘habitus’ and cultural capital interplay with economic capital and can make aspirations more ‘thinkable’ for middle-class children than for working-class children.

In the light of this, the review uncovered more consistent findings in relation to poverty and family structure, especially lone parenthood (Marsh and McKay, 1994; Berthoud *et al.*, 2004). O’Neill (2002), Curtis *et al.* (2004) and Holmes and Kiernan (2010) posited that lone parenthood caused poverty and, as a result, produced negative physical and behavioural child outcomes (when income and neighbourhood were controlled for) compared with two-parent families, where incomes were larger.

However, Rigg and Sefton (2004) point out that even two-parent families can experience a temporary decline in income, particularly at the birth of a new child which often reduced opportunities for one of the parents to take up paid employment. Lundberg *et al.* (1997) focused on routes of income distribution within families, demonstrating that when mothers were the main earners more money was spent on children than where fathers were. Regardless of evidence, Gillies (2008) and Hartas (2012) posited that the culture of poverty thesis often negated situated contexts of deprivation, promoting false neo-liberal beliefs that responsible parenting, rather than collective policies to reduce poverty, is essential to social inclusion.

### *Stress*

The second theme suggested that materially disadvantaged parents experience more stress than affluent ones and viewed stress as a significant intermediate process in the link between parenting and poverty (Kumar, 1993; Oakley *et al.* 1994; Spencer, 1996; Bradbury, 2003; Turner, 2006; About Families, 2012). Evidence often perceived stress as the various processes that precipitate negative psychological and physiological reactions originating from attempts to adapt to the demands of parenthood (Elder, *et al.*, 1985; Larzelere and Patterson, 1990; Harris and Marmer; 1996; Ghate and Hazel, 2002; Sastry, 2015). This causes parents to be more depressed, agitated and/or angry. As a result, they tend to display more authoritarian and/or inconsistent parenting patterns, impacting negatively on child outcomes. Much of the evidence bears out this chain of events and suggests stress is at least partly responsible for differential outcomes in poor families (Waylen and Stewart-Brown, 2009). Moore and Vandivere (2000) ascertained that poor, stressed parents are less

likely to provide optimal home circumstances and more likely to display coercive and harsh disciplinary methods. Evidence has also highlighted the negative effects of financially induced stress on health and wellbeing and, more specifically, on birth-weight, diet and life-chances (Jefferis *et al.*, 2002).

Conger *et al.* (1995) found that adolescents whose families moved from affluence into poverty displayed negative emotional wellbeing and behaviour. This was mainly the result of disruptions in parenting rather than material poverty. The disruption was caused by distress, depression and deterioration in marital relations. Russell *et al.* (2008) found that depression and ‘despair’, associated with poverty and stress, were perceived to impair parenting and to enhance self-doubt about parenting ability. Throughout the literature, one notable aspect of stress related to the gender of the parent, and especially, the impact of depression on mothers. Generally, the review suggested that lower income mothers are more at risk of depression than higher income ones. Contributing factors to maternal depression were, typically, absence of a strong relationship with significant others, number of children, and a disrupted relationship with their own mother.

Meltzer *et al.* (2000) found that children from unemployed and/or unskilled working-class backgrounds in the UK were three times as likely to develop mental disorders as those from professional backgrounds. Furthermore, the likelihood of children experiencing mental health difficulties was also closely linked with their parents’ negative mental health. This demonstrated that children with mental health problems and ‘difficult’ children were closely associated with stressed parents. Evidence also suggested that there was no straightforward relationship between poverty and emotional abuse, inadequate parental supervision or harsh discipline; neither was there adequate evidence proposing that ‘parenting deficit’ is related to

poverty or level of income in itself (McSherry, 2004). Rather, the enhanced risk predictors associated with poverty and a stressful environment increased the likelihood of use of physical/authoritarian discipline. Nevertheless, access to a higher income has a protective effect and reduces the stress associated with material poverty.

Whilst the weight of the evidence favours the stress/disrupted parenting/poor outcomes argument as the principal device of the parenting/poverty link, there is no universal agreement around this. Mayer's (1997) analyses of cohorts in the US found that parents' incomes had only a modest impact on stress, and that stress exerted a minimal influence upon child outcomes such as educational attainment. Rather, it was poorer parents' failure to take advantage of economic and educational opportunities that affected child outcomes and prevented effective parenting (regardless of income levels). However, this research failed to acknowledge that parents are often excluded from mainstream economic opportunities by structural inequalities and low social capital as much as by personal failings (Katz *et al.*, 2007a).

Nevertheless, debates around the effects of income, stress, and poverty will continue to inform debates around the impact of employment and welfare-to-work schemes in lifting incomes, reducing stress, and producing positive outcomes. Research does not universally endorse the argument that increased parental income through labour market participation or higher welfare benefits directly improves parenting capacities or generates more positive child outcomes and reduction in stress and/or anxiety (Epps and Huston, 2007; Ridge, 2009; Alakeson, 2012; Levitas, 2012). What is more, the review suggested that parenting style and practice are themselves historically and relatively stable constructs (Katz *et al.*, 2007a). Modification may occur in response to crises such as loss of income, but not so readily to more subtle changes in family circumstances such as a child's under-achievement at school.

Changes to income are not invariably combined with changes in consumption or lifestyle and behaviour. Income reduction can be counterbalanced by drawing upon savings, and increases in income may be adversely affected by the requirement to pay off debt.

Future research needs to direct attention to the overall effects on families of income changes and disaggregate the differential effects on different groups of parents with various parenting styles and practices. Another gap in the research on stress is the effect of children upon parents. Children can be either stressors or buffers to stress and adversity, depending on their health status, behaviour, and needs (Epps and Huston, 2007; O'Connor and Scott, 2007; Sastry, 2015).

### ***Poor environments and neighbourhoods***

The poor environment and neighbourhood theme posited that parents' characteristics and parenting styles are significantly influenced by the neighbourhood and environment (Pinderhughes *et al.*, 2001; Caughy *et al.*, 2003; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Barnes, 2004; Gutman *et al.*, 2005; Van Ham *et al.*, 2014). Neighbourhoods which comprise similar levels of material deprivation but different levels of social capital or 'social disorganisation' will produce different types of parents, with varying child outcomes.

Jencks and Mayer (1990) posited four theoretical models through which neighbourhoods may impact upon parenting. The epidemic or contagion theory suggested behaviour is learned or emulated in that the presence of anti-social young people can spread problem behaviours such as substance abuse or delinquency. Collective socialisation emphasised role models, local social norms, alienation, acceptance of anti-social behaviour and instability in the community. Parents may be socialised into patterns of inappropriate parenting as a result. Competition theory highlighted competition between families for social and material resources available in the community and the resulting challenges from the inability to mobilise them. Competition enhances the likelihood of an underclass with access to the least resources. Relative deprivation theory advocated that individuals judge their social position in comparison to neighbours. This can result in exclusion and demoralisation if other families appear more affluent, harming community cohesion.

The contagion and collective socialisation explanations assumed that socially mixed communities may enhance child development, leading to better health and behaviour outcomes (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Competition and relative deprivation explanations asserted that competition from advantaged neighbours can be deleterious to children in poverty. Research, particularly in the US, has discovered that higher rates of child maltreatment are more common in areas of significant exposure to risk factors at the individual and household levels resulting from inequality in the neighbourhood and/or community (Fauth *et al.*, 2007). Contrasting research, however, demonstrated that direct neighbourhood predictors had only a marginal effect on child outcomes. Rather, parenting styles and the perceptions of poor neighbourhoods are more significant, and can often mitigate neighbourhood and environmental effects (Ghate and Hazel, 2002). Parents' own backgrounds, children's

personalities and family relationships remain the most significant predictors, even when movement between deprived and mixed communities and depth and duration of poverty is accounted for (Sanbonmatsu *et al.*, 2006). Being a lone parent (particularly a lone mother) can reduce income and produce negative emotional and behavioural child outcomes, regardless of the economic consequences of the locality, as can having a large family (Dyson *et al.*, 2009) and lacking affordable childcare. The quality of the neighbourhood affects children's educational attainment less than the home environment and parental interest in children's education does (Feinstein *et al.*, 2004), with the latter being related to class and income, material deprivation, maternal psycho-social health and lone parent status rather than the neighbourhood (Epps and Huston, 2007; Gutman *et al.*, 2009; Friedrichs *et al.*, 2013).

Most parents in poor neighbourhoods can also parent as effectively as families in less deprived areas (Ghate and Hazel, 2002). Social support and integration within the community and strategies to ensure that family resources are utilised economically and distributed fairly can act as buffers against stress and potentially harsh discipline (Moran *et al.*, 2004; Attree, 2005). Although such 'snapshot' studies do not suggest a causal association between parenting and poverty outcomes, they do indicate that parents living in poor neighbourhoods are more likely than those in less deprived areas to face stressors and psychological constraints, resulting in higher levels of anxiety and depression. Neighbourhoods that encourage educational development, take-up of social capital, and access to high quality services improve the experiences of poorer, stressed parents.

### ***Parental resilience***

Whilst an array of parenting styles is present across all socio-economic groups, the review indicated that there was no causal relationship between income and parenting style (e.g. Peters *et al.*, 2008; Moulin *et al.*, 2014). Whilst child maltreatment and lack of parenting capacity was predominant in lower income parents, the review uncovered resilience in parenting even in adverse circumstances. Parental capacity is located within wider contexts of communities, networks and children's characteristics, which mediate between material incomes and affect parental resources such as resilience and strategies to cope with and manage adversity (Belsky, 1984; Parke and Buriel, 1998; McDonald *et al.*, 2012). Various studies (e.g. Middleton *et al.*, 1997; Ghate and Hazel, 2002) found that parents often sacrificed food and resources so that their children had more. Lindblad-Goldberg (1989) and Fram (2003) reported that material poverty was mitigated through development of coping mechanisms such as positive family concepts around loyalty, the home, adequate communication, and stress-reducing access to neighbourhood, family and friendship networks. Parents were then less likely to exert harsh discipline and more likely to gain more adequate access to services and employment, despite material deprivation.

### ***Parental involvement with education***

One other specific aspect that recurred in the literature was that of class, family economic resources and parents' abilities to raise children's educational attainment through involvement in their education. (Ashworth *et al.*, 2001; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Blanden and Gregg, 2004; Feinstein *et al.*, 2004; Sullivan *et al.*, 2010; Kiernan and Mensah, 2011; Holmes and Kiernan, 2013; Park and Holloway,

2013). Dahl and Lochner (2005) and Cooper and Stewart (2013) argued that past and current material income constitutes the most significant variable in enhancing children's scholastic achievement, concluding that enhanced income would effectively raise attainment and enhance parenting practices. Feinstein's (2003) longitudinal study of British children also argued that children from higher socio-economic backgrounds performed better overall in school, even tending to improve educational scores when they had initially scored less well than children from lesser backgrounds. Type of schooling had no overall effect. Nevertheless, there was evidence to suggest that income and deprivation can be partially influenced by factors within the home environment such as parental inclusion in learning and schools in the form of library visits, and parental emphasis upon success and aspiration, as well as their own educational qualifications and quality of learning environment (McCulloch and Joshi, 2001; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Hartas, 2011; O'Connor and Scott, 2007; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010; Gregg and Washbrook, 2011). Borgonovi and Montt (2012) contended that parental involvement should not be construed similarly across all cultures and countries, and that specific forms of involvement assist children's cognitive and non-cognitive abilities at different points.

Otter's (2013) longitudinal survey of a Swedish cohort born in 1953 discovered that parents' beliefs around children's educational aspirations and involvement significantly enhanced educational attainment in families with fewer economic resources, challenging the idea that poorer parents were not involved. However, it was also the case that involvement was higher in families with higher levels of income and social capital. Otter (2013) warns against the idea that responsibility for children's educational is only with parents as opposed to economic resources. Similarly, Gillies (2008) found that working-class parents with

academically struggling children often assisted them to cope through accentuating non-academic characteristics and practices. Whilst parents were keen to stress the benefits of academic achievement, they played down the significance of low achievement. Gillies (2005a; 2005b) and Hartas (2012) argued that class remained important in focusing upon the role of parents in facilitating education and social improvement, particularly working-class parents, who often face considerable adversity. They contend that lower working-class achievement was often the result of material poverty rather than lack of parental resourcefulness and aspiration. This is coloured by tendencies to apply middle class standards to interpret parental resourcefulness in contexts where material poverty renders it harder to live up to them.

### **Current evidence**

Current evidence indicates an intricate relationship between poverty, parental stress, inclusion in children's education, and neighbourhoods and environments. There appears no simplistic causal relationship between poverty, parenting, and child outcomes. Different people respond differently to adversity. Elements of length and depth of poverty, family structure, neighbourhood, and social support interact with parents' behavioural drivers which mediate and affect responses to adversity. Poverty exerts a significant influence in that it engenders some parents to be more stressed, depressed or agitated, which disrupts parenting. Disrupted parenting, rather than poverty, can constitute the key determinant in affecting child outcomes. Nevertheless, this relationship is not straightforward, given the parental resilience uncovered in the review. Furthermore, the direction of the relationship currently remains unresolved. It is possible that parents who have a history of, or are temperamentally pre-disposed

towards stress, are more likely to become stressed and consequently less likely to hold down employment (Katz *et al.*, 2007a).

There are various processes and outcomes inherent in relationships between poverty and parenting. Socially excluded and low-income parents may face depleted levels of social capital and parenting ability for various reasons. Evidence suggests that once women have children they often find themselves taking lower skilled and/or lower paid jobs due to the high costs of childcare, inflexible jobs, and the lack of high-quality part-time work (Alakeson, 2012). As a result, individuals who previously parented adequately may fail to do so when faced with new challenges. Clearly, this can disrupt a family's income, relationships and parenting capacities.

### **Further research**

The current evidence base requires responses that focus upon the complexity and dynamic contingency of poverty as produced and modified on the individual and structural levels. Evidence is often predicated upon objectively measured child outcomes, viewing parenting as an isolated variable working in conjunction between other 'external' variables such as poverty or neighbourhood disorganisation. However, to grasp the complex inter-relationships between the two, we advocate the need for more poverty research that will capture the dynamic and multiple processes and experiences within them (Smith and Middleton, 2007; Lister, 2010).

As Boyden *et al.* (2012) assert, poverty is as much a process that is transmitted through the language of human, financial, social and cultural 'capital' as it is through structural social circumstances and wider determinants. Rather than simply asking

how much poverty affects parenting, research and subsequent policies need to shift to more subtle questions around how do changing levels of income make a difference to parenting? What are the particular features of poverty and its specific mechanisms by which it affects different aspects of parenting, such as discipline and involvement in education? How is poverty affected through different types of parenting and neighbourhoods? Focus should shift to families and communities as key co-constructors in the process, rather than intermediate variables in the production of measurable child outcomes, as is the case with much of the evidence. For example, how do parents potentially change parenting practices and styles in relation to changes in household income or children's ages? Do these changes have short or long-term effects on children? How do parents actively draw upon the individual and structural rules and resources within the community (Giddens, 1984) and incorporate them into parenting styles and practices?

As a result, more longitudinal research to complement existing studies (e.g. Feinstein, 2003; Borgonovi and Montt, 2012; Otter, 2013) is required. This should be grounded within poverty dynamics research that pursue parents as they manoeuvre in and out of poverty, assessing changes in parenting style and experience over time. This might focus upon children maturing (O'Connor and Scott, 2007) and subsequent effects on parents of movement between different neighbourhoods, increases or depletion in social capital, and perceived support and control over their situation (regardless of affluent neighbours). It would track changes in parenting styles in response to different situations and dynamic changes in children's behaviour and provide for more detailed context. Attention should be directed to parents who shift in and out of poverty and those who remain there, the emergence and interpretation of risk factors, and the pathways to particular child outcomes.

There is also a need to focus on comparisons between the parenting of people in poverty and those who are not, but face similar personal and environmental stressors. There is space for more evidence on poverty's effects on parenting style as differentiated from those on parenting practices and beliefs. These three dimensions come into play independently but it is not apparent how poverty interacts independently with them. More evidence and research should also be directed towards comparisons of differential impacts on parenting of anti-poverty strategies, particularly ones that assist parents into work or those that raise income through welfare benefits (Levitas, 2012).

### **Policies**

An enhanced and detailed evidence base is increasingly important to inform current social policies around child poverty more effectively in the light of the Coalition Government's emphasis upon the strength and stability of couple relationships and effects on child-wellbeing outcomes (Field, 2010; Allen, 2011). Based on the evidence, it is too simplistic an approach. The current evidence suggests that quality of adult and couple relationships cannot be conceptualised as isolated and developmental variables (Gillies, 2013), separate from other structural and individual processes such as behaviour, income and environment (Gillies, 2011). Neither is there sound evidence that the strength and stability of a couple relationship alone produces 'effective' parenting, as if the former is an inevitable pre-condition for the latter, or that it will reduce child poverty. In fact, Jensen and Taylor (2012) argue that such concepts are themselves austerity discourses that accentuate neo-liberal concepts of personal morality and responsibility, whilst negating poverty and deprivation. Effects on relationships and their outcomes should be located within a

more dynamic and contextualised approach as outlined above. It is also simplistic to demarcate the parenting practice of ‘good’ parents from that of ‘bad’ parents on the grounds of ability to improve or maintain quality couple relations (without a focus upon household income, familial characteristics, and environmental contexts). This can lead to the conclusion that the latter are unsuccessful because of personal failure to create stable/quality relationships and are therefore personally responsible for their poverty, cementing neo-liberal ideology and policy (Robson, 2010).

In our view, it is irrational to assume that simply because there is an intricate link between parenting and poverty that the solution is to encourage parents who find it hard to cope to emulate affluent ones, regardless of wider contexts. Relational aspects are important but taken alone offer a reductionist solution to the consequences of structural neighbourhood or community poverty. Current UK policy, which will see poor families most adversely affected by the reductions in welfare benefits (Brewer *et al.*, 2013), will reduce the ability of families to cope, exacerbating stress, reducing resilience, and exerting more pressure on couple relations and ability to parent.

The automatic assumption that stable couple relationships will extend to better parenting practices and relations does not sufficiently fit the evidence. Policy makers need to examine more closely the complexity of existing empirical evidence. They need to heed the limitations identified in the knowledge base and put forward coherent initiatives which will meet the aim of giving children the best possible start in life, promote effective parenting, and prevent poverty. This means focusing upon financial and structural issues, as much as relational questions; and developing policies which address the material impact upon relationships in all its complex forms, objective and subjective. It also means contesting the current terrain of neo-

liberal family ideology through recourse to the above evidence around complexity and dynamism and reframing policies and research. The emergence of a critical concept of ‘wellbeing’, particularly its dynamic and multifaceted nature (La Placa and Corlyon, 2014b; La Placa and Knight, 2014), might assist in provision of a new framework to locate research around parenting, life-chances and children’s quality of life that contest current conceptualisations and assist in confronting increased economic and health inequalities. This would also emphasise the active and dynamic agency of families as they construct their lives and interpret their environments.

### **Conclusion**

This article has reviewed the evidence around the relationship between parenting and poverty. The evidence suggests an intricate relationship between complex and mediating processes of income poverty, parental stress, disrupted parenting practices and neighbourhoods and environments, as opposed to a simplistic causal relationship between poverty, parenting, and child outcomes. It then proceeded to suggest responses to enhance the evidence base. Finally, it considered the implications of the evidence for child poverty policy, positing that current responses are too simplistic and do not sufficiently reflect the evidence base.

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