

Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Researching the Dynamics of Childhood Poverty

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Abstract

Research on the dynamics of poverty has rarely been explored or explained qualitatively. The following article discusses an ongoing project combining a secondary longitudinal data analysis with qualitative interviews of young people with prior experience of child poverty. Unusually, the data from their years as survey sample methods will be compared to the interview transcripts. By extending the study of child poverty dynamics into whole childhood poverty dynamics, the results will have implications for qualitative and quantitative poverty research, for child development research, and for anti-poverty policies.

Context

Child poverty is the top priority of the Department for Work and Pensions (abbreviated here to DWP) (Hutton, 2006). Its aim is to reduce the cross-sectional incidence of child poverty, that is, the number and percentage of children poor in a given year, to 1.7 million by 2010/11 and to zero by 2020 (DWP, 2003). The poverty measure most commonly reported is a relative measure of the number of under-16s in households with incomes below 60 percent of the median equivalised household income before housing costs. This is similar to the DWP definition (DWP, 2003) as reported in the Households Below Average Income series (DWP, 2007). Other measures are reported alongside in annual releases of statistics, but the most common measure of 60 percent of median income is employed for the purposes of this project. The deliberately technical definition does not require that children in poverty are materially deprived, working class, or subjectively poor.

This policy makes little reference to dynamic aspects, as for example a target of reducing long-term poverty would. This mainstream 'snapshot' view would be enriched by taking into account the large body of dynamic research extant on poverty in the UK and other developed countries (Smith and Middleton, 2007). These show poverty like a film, as opposed to a static image. It shows that poverty is not restricted to a permanent minority, but is more widespread and of shorter duration than previously assumed. Despite

these findings, most qualitative studies investigating the experience of poor adults and children do not state how long participants have been in poverty for, or how long they anticipate remaining in the state. Qualitative researchers have addressed temporal and dynamic aspects of poverty, but rarely as a central interest (Davis, 2006; 2007 is one exception). As a result, the assumptions behind, conclusions to and implications of the quantitative literature have gone unchallenged.

The research described below will enhance and explain the conventional approach to the dynamics of child poverty with the findings of a methodologically novel interview study. The British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) has matured to the point where it is now possible to examine entire childhoods. Combining this analysis with the interview research will allow the study to extend child poverty dynamics into childhood poverty dynamics.

We do not know how the findings of quantitative research income poverty dynamics corresponds to the experiences and perceptions of children as they spend time on variously steady and fluctuating low incomes. Answering this question will entail combining a quantitative secondary analysis of a longitudinal panel survey, the BHPS, with qualitative semi-structured life history interviews with young people aged 15 to 22, who have experience of child poverty, to explore their perceptions of the changing financial circumstances of their families during their childhood. The purpose of the interviews is to explore their perceptions of their year or years in poverty in terms of their overall experience of childhood. For adults, poverty entails stress, anxiety, a reduction in quality, quantity, access, choice, frequency and spontaneity with regard to buying goods and activities, and a reduction in the capacity for short and long term planning, financial and otherwise. Some of these are also likely to hold true for children. In addition, low income causes special embarrassment for children in receiving free school meals, wearing unbranded or cheaper branded clothing, and in preventing them from going on school trips (Crowley and Vulliamy, 2003; Daly and Leonard, 2002). Rural children interviewed by Davis and Ridge (1997) complain of boredom and exclusion from activities. Poverty is thus a salient and negative experience for many children, and the experience may worsen as the length of time spent under the poverty line increases. Some poor children experience a gradual narrowing of their social and economic horizons, the longer they remain in poverty (Attree, 2006), and a greater impact of poverty is felt by the children of long-term claimants (Ridge, 2002).

Less is known about short-term poverty. Dynamic poverty research asks whether it is a problem, but does not satisfactorily answer this question. Short duration benefit claimants in the German city of Bremen analysed by

Leisering and Liebfried (1999) have very similar characteristics to long duration, discontinuous claimants. This hints that the social divide is to be found between people who ever or never experience poverty. Despite this, short-term poverty may be a deliberate choice on the path to future rewards (Leisering and Leibfried, 1999), for parents if not children.

Interview and focus group research in the literature is usually one-off, and researchers usually do not investigate the present vis-à-vis the past and future (though the outcomes of childhood poverty on later, adult life are often of interest to researchers). This stands in marked contrast to the longitudinal quantitative analysis made possible through the repeated interviews of panel studies. Duration, prevalence, frequency and change – central concerns of quantitative researchers – are not central foci of a qualitative literature aiming to describe and perhaps dramatise the plight of the poor in terms of material deprivation, exclusion, and adverse effects on access, diet, health and housing. The body of qualitative research analyses different aspects of the experience of poverty, but little explicit attention is devoted to time. Researchers interested in the temporal aspects of poverty must themselves draw out relevant aspects of wider discussions on saving, borrowing, other income smoothing strategies, events which cause income changes, and reflections on the past and future.

Research Design

There are a number of research projects in development studies which have aimed to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to poverty over time (Adato, Lund and Mhlongo, 2005; CPRC, 2006). This compares to the relative absence of such research in social policy and related fields. Kothari and Hulme (2003) call for more multi-method and particularly life history research on poverty dynamics. Lawson, McKay and Okidi (2006, p. 6) synthesise qualitative and quantitative insights ‘by first reviewing key insights about poverty transitions from the qualitative sources, and then see to what extent these are found to be a more widespread phenomenon in Uganda based on the quantitative data’. They find that where qualitative and quantitative analyses cover similar themes, the results generally confirm or complement one another. Thus, they ‘integrate’ qualitative and quantitative research.

Following Ridge (2002), Van der Hoek (2005), and others, children will be placed at the centre of research and analysis. However, the research will not be participatory; it is the researchers themselves who must take ultimate responsibility for decisions on the progress of research and content and use of conclusions. Implicit in social science research is the assumption that the

actor cannot be the ultimate authority on the description and interpretation of his or her actions (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000). The only theoretical assumption of this research is that children deserve to be placed at the centre of qualitative and quantitative analyses, rather than be analysed via their families, households or parents. In both qualitative and quantitative terms, this is achieved indirectly; through data analysis of adults sharing a household with children¹, and through life history interviews by young adults, reviewing childhood as it was lived.

The research findings in this project will be a ‘triangulation’ between qualitative and quantitative, in so far as they will obtain different but complementary data on the same topic, in order to better understand the research problem (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). However, the overall research design will be *explanatory*, rather than the alternative models described by Creswell and Plano Clark and employed by Lawson, McKay and Okidi (2006): triangulation, embedded or exploratory. The overall purpose is that the qualitative data should help to explain or build upon the initial quantitative results (Okidi, 2006), rather than finding a triangulated point in between. The interviews will enrich the broad understanding of child poverty dynamics available through quantitative analysis, by interpreting in the words of individuals their perceptions of the wider trends in more depth. This entails that the quantitative portion of the research should progress first, followed by the qualitative.

Both components have a number of features in common. They are both investigating, in different ways, child income poverty over the whole of childhood, rather than at a point in time. They begin from the premise that the child is worthy of investigation and analysis as an individual in his or her own right (Ridge, 2005). Thus the unit of analysis in both cases is the child rather than the family or household. Both sub-studies are retrospective, being concerned more with the recent past than the present or future. In the case of the qualitative study, the retrospective interviews look back over time from the perspective of the present. While the quantitative research was collected contemporaneously, it is only now being analysed as historical, that is, retrospectively. These common features will facilitate comparison in the discussion of results, and in drawing conclusions.

¹BHPS interviewers conduct individual interviews with all members of households aged 16 and over, and collect information on under-16s from one adult nominated to answer questions on behalf of the household (Taylor, 2007). From 2008, the successor to the BHPS, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, will conduct interviews with all members of households aged 10 upwards.

Methods and Sample

The research design is novel in directly linking the qualitative and quantitative portions of the research design, by comparing the BHPS records for young people to their own perceptions of their situations. As the interviewees will be drawn from the BHPS sample, they will directly exemplify what experiences coincide with what conditions, illustrating a possible range of experience in the population. This method of approaching former survey sample members for follow-up qualitative interviews has been attempted before (for example, by Sung and Bennett, 2007), but the resulting interview transcripts have rarely been compared to corresponding quantitative data.

The young interviewees fulfil a number of age and income criteria. They were born between 1986 and 1992 inclusive, and have lived in a household which took part in all five waves of the European Community Household Panel component of the BHPS between 1997 and 2001². In addition, their household income must have been non-zero in each year, and less than 60 percent of the UK median in at least one year. Although some fall below the poverty line in one year only, others experience this condition for two, three, four and all five years. Of these 180 individuals, around 30 final interviews are anticipated, in England, Scotland and Wales. Each individual record will be examined for clues about the level of household income in each year, and specifically, possible reasons why it fell below the poverty line. Events such as parents changing jobs or moving house during the five year window will be noted. These notes will be used before, during and after each interview to build a fuller picture of the interviewee and their family. They will be made for consultation by the interviewer during the interviews and to aid analysis afterward. They will contain a list of priority events and questions, which will form the basis of questions, for use either in probing or directly, if they do not arise naturally.

This selection process has several implications. Households which take part in each year of a survey are likely to be more stable than households with a more fragmented pattern of participation, due to, for example, frequent moves or changes in circumstances. Where instability is nonetheless observed, it may be that one or more household members are well-organised in keeping up-to-date with changes of address, or are unusually committed to participation in social research. Either way, they cannot be regarded as, and are not intended to be a representative sample (as for example, recent migrants are excluded). The benefit of studying these unusual individuals is

²Because this is a dormant sample, it was possible to negotiate access through the Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex. This would not have been possible for the ongoing BHPS, despite the benefit of additional data this would have provided.

the extra data gained from the full five year window. It is also possible that this commitment to taking part in interviews may be reflected in relatively high response rates. Only 221 individuals appear continuously in the BHPS (1991-2005) throughout their childhood, from birth to age 14 for those born in 1991, or from the age of one to 15 for those born in 1990. However, thousands of children appear in the BHPS, including some individuals born during the 1970s, who were young during the early 1990s. As the BHPS is a representative sample, it is possible to make quantitative conclusions applicable to the population of individuals who were children during the 1990s and 2000s.

Age and Cohort

The choice of age group allows the widest possible window into childhood between the ages of 5 and 15, as shown in Table 1. In line with the assumptions of much literature on childhood, individuals are expected to remember less about their pre-school years³. Interviews are taking place in 2008 when the young people are between 15 and 22. The quantitative information on their childhood situation refers to the period between 1997 and 2001 inclusive, a five year period when they were between 5 and 15 years of age. This is illustrated by the portion of Table 1 shaded in grey. This allows the exploration of both 'cross-sectional age' (the difference between subjects aged 5 and 10 in 1997) and 'longitudinal age' (those aged 7 in 1997 and 11 in 2001, for example) in both qualitative and quantitative terms (Menard, 1991). The former, cross-sectional age, makes possible explorations of the effect of age and cohort, while the latter, longitudinal age, allows researchers to explore developmental differences within a single cohort (Menard, 1991). Combining multiple birth-years in the sample allows subtler exploration of the interaction of age and cohort not possible in research designs following a single birth-year cohort.

Bane and Ellwood (1986) found that a substantial proportion of all poverty beginnings for children occur when they are born into a poor family. This represents 20 percent of the poverty of children. The shortest spells begin when a child leaves home to become a household head, or spouse of a household head, in this case experiencing an average duration of less than three years. Spells which begin at birth – as experienced by the child - are longest, averaging almost 8 years for a new spell and nearly 17 for a spell observed at a point in time (Bane and Ellwood, 1986). It will not be possible to determine which members of the qualitative sample began their lives in

³Though Attree (2006) notes this may be in part due to the dearth of qualitative research on younger children.

poverty.

Cohort effects may prove to be important in understanding the experiences of interviewees. The window on which the research is especially focused, the years between 5 and 15, are school years. Thus, transitions between schools and the move from primary to secondary may be especially salient. Famously, the Great Depression in the United States impacted children born in 1920-1 and 1928-9 differently. The older cohort experienced relatively economically secure early childhoods, and responded to the depression by taking on responsibilities in and outside the home. Younger children had more behavioural difficulties and negative outcomes (Elder, 1974). Average incomes increased, and child poverty declined during the period 1997 to 2001 (DWP, 2007). We may speculate that the younger members of the sample may have had better experiences than those older sample members who were young during the earlier 1990s.

Year	Born 1986	Born 1987	Born 1988	Born 1989	Born 1990	Born 1991	Born 1992
1986							
1987	1						
1988	2	1					
1989	3	2	1				
1990	4	3	2	1			
1991	5	4	3	2	1		
1992	6	5	4	3	2	1	
1993	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
1994	8	7	6	5	4	3	2
1995	9	8	7	6	5	4	3
1996	10	9	8	7	6	5	4
1997	11	10	9	8	7	6	5
1998	12	11	10	9	8	7	6
1999	13	12	11	10	9	8	7
2000	14	13	12	11	10	9	8
2001	15	14	13	12	11	10	9
2002	16	15	14	13	12	11	10
2003	17	16	15	14	13	12	11
2004	18	17	16	15	14	13	12
2005	19	18	17	16	15	14	13
2006	20	19	18	17	16	15	14
2007	21	20	19	18	17	16	15
2008	22	21	20	19	18	17	16

Table 1: Age by year

Note: section shaded in grey shows the age of the young people in the qualitative sample at the time of the quantitative interviews.

Siblings

Many members of the sample also have siblings in the sample, as the seven year window for birth year is larger than the average birth spacing (Iacovou and Berthoud, 2006), and because standard practice has been followed in attributing the same equivalised household income to all children in a household. Some young people have siblings born before 1986 or after 1992, thus outside the sample. There is no reason to restrict the sample to one child per household. Siblings may have differing perspectives on family income in accordance with their age, birth order, the age at which they experience particular events, and the overall family income trajectory. The potential for exploring such issues in both qualitative and quantitative terms is a distinguishing feature of this research design. Quantitatively, the presence of siblings in a household has counter-intuitive implications for family poverty. Using Millennium Cohort Study data, Ward, Sullivan and Bradshaw (2007) find that poverty risk goes down as a second child is born in a family. Of those families who drop into poverty following the birth of a child, it may be due to the entry of the first or only child. However, we may expect that in some cases, it requires more than one child for poverty to result. From the perspective of the child, where and when is it best to be born in the family? A Cox proportional hazards model will be used to determine whether the age of existing children at the birth of a sibling affects the likelihood of poverty, for both infants and the existing child(ren).

Interview Content

Life stories are recommended as a particularly useful way of examining the perception teenagers have about the impact of childhood poverty, by the Chronic Poverty Resource Centre (undated). It is appropriate to use life history interviews to investigate poverty spells and trajectories, which take place over extended periods, rather than the standard interview practice of asking mostly about the present day. Life histories covering the whole of childhood will allow the data window from 1997 to 2001 to be placed in context. The method allows greater understanding of how a cohort see, experience or interpret social events, and how these link to their individual development (Atkinson, 1998). With regard to poverty, life history interviews have the potential to inform a non-normative view of the condition, more cognisant of dynamics and processes than the mainstream view (Kothari and Hulme, 2003).

It will not be possible to achieve accuracy in recall that matches the level achieved in annual interviews in the BHPS. However, it is to be hoped that the nature of the qualitative interview will increase validity in compensation, through the development of a rapport during the conversations. For example, they may discover 'invisible' income sources, black and grey market income, or activities affecting overall income such as benefit fraud and tax evasion. In general though, the interviews will not aim to question the facts of the BHPS interviews, but their interpretation.

Van der Vaart (2007) recommends making reference to public and news events during a period of interest as a way to stimulate recall. However, a variety of events are remembered by different people, making it difficult to decide which to use in any given interview (Belli, 2007). Thus, public or news events will not be used to jog memory, given the focus of interviews on the person themselves. We will follow Wilson et al. (2007) in using age as a time marker, rather than public events, as historical events may be less salient to young people. The usefulness of the existing quantitative data will be evident during the interviews, when prompts will be available for jogging memory. These will notably include their age in a given year, but also such details as the year that an individual moved home. Dates and ages are the most unreliable facts collected in oral history interviews (Finnegan, 2006). Oral history has been criticised as questionably valid in the absence of external checks (Gittins, 1979). As the principal way of testing the validity of a source is to compare its findings to other sources, as is planned, these points will be addressed to some extent.

Poverty is a word loaded with stigma and prejudice. Most poor people in the UK and Ireland tend to deny that they live in poverty (Beresford et al., 1999; Bradshaw and Holmes, 1989; Castell and Thompson, 2007; and McKendrick, Cunningham-Burley and Backett-Milburn, 2003). Because of this, research on the nature and impact of poverty must be conducted with due consideration for the ethical issues raised, and with sensitivity, particularly where children are a focus (Ridge, 2002). Young people may be keen to retain their privacy, and keep secrets from parents (Ridge, 2007). Words relating to poverty, being sensitive, will not be directly discussed during interviews unless raised by interviewees, the intention being to non-directively place the term in context. The project's focus on child poverty will not be made known to respondents, because it is possible that an emotive word such as 'poverty' may discourage potential interviewees from participation. This approach does not require young people to identify themselves as having lived in poverty. In order to avoid the potential for offence or embarrassment, the word 'poverty' will not appear on written material seen by respondents.

Limitations and Conclusions

The methodological choices in any research project are restricted by practical and technical limitations. Mixed methods research designs may combine the weaknesses of their component parts (Walker, 2007). The combination could be undermined by the findings, if these do not lend themselves to comparison, or are not reconcilable. For example, if interviewees do not engage with the concepts used in the quantitative literature, or do not acknowledge any period(s) of financial difficulty, it will be more difficult to draw together the common points of the qualitative and quantitative portions, and these would then conclude as parallel studies rather than a unified whole. In this study, irreconcilable conclusions would have provocative implications for the dominant approach in quantitative poverty dynamics research, and for the present UK government's child poverty policies.

If interviewees experience their incomes over time in terms of spells and events, it will endorse the quantitative approach. But if these terms of reference do not coincide with lived experiences, it will act as a corrective to such analyses. In other words, are some or all spells of poverty experienced as salient and negative events? Thus, does child poverty deserve its high policy priority if children are oblivious to it, or do not remember the experience as a negative event?⁴

If short spells of childhood poverty are unproblematic, we might then dismiss them as only technical, and rethink our definitions. Conversely, if children are particularly sensitive to change, or experience time more acutely than adults, this suggests that shorter spells in poverty are more problematic. If income dynamics in and out of poverty are unproblematic to those experiencing them, this presents an argument for labelling them as statistical artefacts and adopting a new measure. If the findings reflect this perspective, they would suggest reassessing standard quantitative measures of poverty.

⁴If so, there are still many grounds on which to defend the priority given to child poverty. Any negative outcomes in later life would still provide a justification, or indeed we may still appeal to less empirical and more ideological arguments. My findings can only bolster or query some of the reasons for focusing resources on children.

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