"Stew without bread or bread without stew": Children's understandings of poverty in Ethiopia

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Abstract

This paper explores children's understandings of poverty, illbeing and wellbeing in
Ethiopia using data collected through group exercises with children aged 5-6 and 11-13
participating in *Young Lives*, an international study of childhood poverty. In some respects
the characteristics of poverty reported by children resemble those reported by adults
participating in similar exercises. However, the children's addition of appearance and

clothing, and their explanations of the reasoning behind the importance of these indicators of wellbeing reflect growing inequalities in Ethiopia, where experiences of relative poverty and social exclusion are increasingly common. This evidence argues for broadening the focus of child poverty reduction to include the psychosocial costs of lacking the culturally-specific resources required for full participation in society. The paper also illustrates ways that poverty can be explored by asking about illbeing and that children as young as 5 are able to address these themes through well-designed research methods.

Introduction

'Participatory' research into how adults living in material poverty define and experience poverty is increasingly common in developed and developing countries, highlighting the importance of experiential aspects such as being respected and able to preserve one's dignity, and having meaningful choices (e.g. Brock, 1999). The extent to which this process is genuinely participatory and the findings address the poverty of children as well as households remains to be seen. While qualitative research on perceptions of poverty and inequality has been carried out with children in North America and Europe (Attree, 2006; Redmond, 2008), there are fewer studies in developing countries, perhaps because asking poor children in the global South about poverty feels ethically precarious (Bennet and Roberts, 2004).

This paper reports data from a qualitative study that used local concepts of living well or badly to explore Ethiopian children's understandings of poverty. The paper begins with a

review of studies on children's understandings of poverty, mainly from Europe and USA. It asks whether the dominant understanding of poverty in the West as social exclusion, inequality, and stigmatisation is applicable to very different contexts, exemplified by the case of Ethiopia. For example, in rural Ethiopia where children regularly go without food, is it ethical or accurate to maintain that "the long-term effect of being deprived of food for a short period during childhood could be less serious than the effect of being denied access to the means of development and participation throughout childhood"? (Middleton and others, 1997: 53)

The main question for the paper is how understandings of ill-being differ between children of different ages and genders in a range of Ethiopian communities, and specifically the place of material poverty in children's understandings of ill-being. This question is addressed using qualitative data from group activities with children aged 5-6 and 11-13 from two urban and three rural communities in the five most populous regions of Ethiopia (*n*=100).

Literature Review

In her child-centred study of children living in poverty in the UK, Ridge (2003: 9) emphasises that while her respondents were "active social agents" and used a range of strategies to enhance their participation, "they were also engaged in an intense social and personal endeavor to maintain social acceptance and social inclusion within the accepted cultural demands of childhood – a struggle that was defined and circumscribed by the material and social realities of their lives". She characterizes this as "the relational impact

of poverty" (ibid: 7). Redmond (2008: 1) observes similarly that **"**what concerns children is not lack of resources per se, but exclusion from activities that other children appear to take for granted, and embarrassment and shame at not being able to participate on equal terms with other children". For children in Europe and the UK this involves inability to participate fully in education (Taylor and Nelms, 2006) or recreation (Daly and Leonard, 1997; Roker, 1998) and fear of exclusion through not having the right signifiers (Middleton and others, 1994; Daly and Leonard, 2002; Attree, 2004). Willow (2001: 7) describes the "subtle badges of poverty [that] cast poor children and young people aside from their peers".

Although previous research has found that these 'subtle badges of poverty' are different in Ethiopia, awareness of them is equally sharp. For example, a recurrent theme of Tekola's (2009) study of children living in poverty in Addis Ababa is the importance of being able "to stand equal with other children" and have the appropriate resources for participation. This meant that children who were unable to get pocket money or earn wages tended to be permanently excluded. One of her respondents, Endale describes how sad he becomes when local children exclude him from their football matches because he only has a ball made from discarded plastic bags: "they play with their own ball - the big one - and when they refuse to let me in I say to them 'didn't I allow you to play with my plastic ball' and they would say that my plastic bag ball did not compare with their big ball and would refuse to let me in" (ibid: 76). Endale's experiences demonstrate that the way poverty undermines children's social interactions and relationships with others can be far more important to them than material deprivation.

Boyden and Cooper (2006: 9) illustrate these processes with an example from rural Bolivia where "despite knowing full well that chronic shortages of water have a significant effect on livelihoods and on the survival and health of humans and livestock, children highlighted above all the humiliation of being unable to wash and therefore being labeled smelly, dirty, and poor".

Stigma and shame emerge as important themes in child poverty research with children. According to Attree (2004: 59) "the constraints on social participation associated with poverty mean that children begin to understand the reality of being 'different' at an early age". Boyden and others (2003) also note that "the fact that children are so sensitive to the pressures and opinions of their peers helps to explain why they experience the humiliation of poverty far more deeply than adults generally assume". This can lead to children blaming their parents or themselves for their poverty (Willow, 2001) and internalizing negative stereotypes that increase their sense of isolation (Witter and Bukohe, 2004; Weinger, 2000; Fortier, 2006).

Previous studies also report worrying examples of lowered expectations, what Attree (2006: 54) describes as "a gradual narrowing of their horizons, both socially and economically [...which] can lead to the perception that economic and social limitations are 'natural' and normal, thus impacting on children's life expectations". Children apparently try to protect their parents from finding out how poverty affects their lives, and are acutely sensitive to their parents' financial pressures. For example, children moderate their demands for things

they need or want and exclude themselves from activities they know their parents will not be able to afford (Ridge, 2002; Van der Hoek, 2005). Middleton and others (1994: 150) describe the psychological costs of this strategy as while children limit their demands on parents when they know they cannot fulfill them "they continue to want the same things […] what is clear is that many poorer children experience daily frustration of their economic aspirations".

In addition to examples of self-exclusion, the studies report experiences of discrimination (e.g. being chased out of local officials' offices in Uganda, Witter and Bukohe, 2004: 650-1) and visible inequalities which were "as much about processes of interaction, choice, trust, acceptance, autonomy and interdependence as they were about material possessions" (Backett-Milburn and others, 2003: 618). Nonetheless, material inequalities were important. While these were primarily in relation to quality of schooling, one respondent in Fortier's (2006: 122) study feared they might extend to the life beyond: ""'I wonder if I pass away...it'll be… like a poor heaven?'"".

Three distinguishing characteristics of children's understandings of poverty have been noted by child-focused studies conducted in developing countries (e.g. Bonn and others, 1999; Harpham et al, 2005; Johnson, 2006). The first is the subtlety of children's understandings, for example, Boyden and others (2003) observed the level of detail used by children in Bolivia in discussing poverty and their sensitivity to the various degrees and gradations of impoverishment. This insight is supported by Harpham and other's (2005) participatory child poverty assessment in Vietnam where children distinguished those who

eat rice with salt and sesame from those who eat it with fish or meat. Children in these studies also identify ways in which 'rich' children can be poor (Witter and Bukohe, 2004; Tekola, 2009), for example, in the quality of their relationships (their parents may work long hours in the formal sector), or because of intra-household discrimination (as an orphan or foster-child they may not have the same access to household resources).

The precision of children's accounts relates to the second distinguishing characteristic which is their grounded and context-specific nature. The studies reviewed suggest that children's understandings of poverty are relative and informed predominantly by their own experiences and those of their social circle (Backett-Milburn and others, 2003; Boyden and others, 2003). While the "personal effects of alcoholism, family separation, ill health and so on, are far more immediate and dramatic than, say, structural adjustment programs" (Boyden and others, 2003: 77), this does not mean that children are not aware of the social and political factors underpinning individual misfortune. See for example, the historical sensitivity shown by children in Bonn and other's (1999: 602-3) study of attitudes towards poverty and inequality in South Africa: "it is because our forefathers used to be servants to the whites and were paid only with food and so they did not have money to educate their children, so we have poor people, because they did not have the chance to go to school".

Despite the grounded nature of children's accounts, their third distinguishing characteristic was their thematic breadth, spanning personal, emotional, spiritual, family, and historical factors, and this is especially evident in studies where the same methods were used with adults (Witter and Bukohe, 2004; Harpham and others, 2005; Camfield and Tafere, 2010). I

return to these three characteristics at the end of the paper, having presented the data from Ethiopia.

Methodology

Site selection and sampling

Five sites were selected from the five regions selected for the Young Lives longitudinal surveys, which are based on a much larger sample of 3,000 children and their caregivers in twenty sites. The five sites comprised two urban communities (*Atkilit tera*, Addis Ababa and *Leku*, Awassa) and three rural, two of which were relatively remote (*Leki,* Oromia, *Semhal*, Tigray, and *Tach Meret*, Amhara; see Camfield and Tafere, 2010 for details). Pseudonyms have been used throughout the paper to protect the identities of children and their communities. After the sites had been selected, 100 children were sampled (60 case study children and 40 reserves) using age (5-6 or 11-13) and gender as the main criteria.

Methods

  The researchers used a methodological toolkit developed as part of a broader qualitative study, including methods based on conversation, drawing, and writing (Crivello, Camfield and Woodhead, 2009). The data analysed in this paper come from a 'well-being exercise' where children were asked to think about and draw 'a girl or a boy of their age in the community and living a good or bad life'[i]. Children drew pictures individually and explained their meaning to the group, often eliciting critical or challenging responses (for example, debates over whether a 12 year old child was too young to chew chat, a mild narcotic). This was followed by a collective discussion with children's suggestions written

on a flip chart divided into columns for 'good life' and 'bad life' so the suggestions could be more easily turned into 'indicators' which the participants ranked. Individual children's ideas and rankings were recorded and these were usually followed up in individual interviews. The exercise was conducted separately with ten boys and ten girls in each site, split into one group of older boys, one of older girls, and a mixed group of younger children (15 groups in total).

Ethical aspects

1. Building a rapport: The qualitative research team comprised equal numbers of men and women who spoke a mix of languages (Amharic [the language of official communication], Oromiffa, Tigrinya), enabling respondents to speak in the language with which they felt most comfortable. The researchers were able to build on the long term relationships developed by the survey teams who have been visiting the communities since 2000, and the lead researcher ensured that one researcher who had previously done fieldwork in that community accompanied the team on the initial visit to facilitate introductions. During the fieldwork, group activities were scheduled before individual interviews so that children and caregivers would feel more familiar with the researchers. Researchers tried to participate in children's daily lives as much as possible, for example, playing games with them and visiting their houses.

2. Obtaining informed consent: Although formal consent was obtained from participants at the start of the study as part of securing ethical approval, the team regularly checked

participants' willingness to participate and reminded them of their right to disengage whenever they wanted to. This right was exercised on several occasions. For example, in *Atkilit tera* some adults and children declined to participate in the interviews, and in *Semhal* two children asked to leave in the middle of the group activities and were taken home by their caregivers (Morrow, 2009).

3. Asking children about illbeing and poverty: Asking about poverty, however obliquely, presents specific methodological and ethical problems (Weinger, 2000; Willow, 2001; Attree, 2006; Sutton and others, 2007). These reflect the power that poverty has to homogenize – obscuring subtle differences between children's understandings and experiences – and to stigmatize. Sime (2008:66) warns about the danger of assuming that "for people living in deprivation poverty is the first frame of reference" as "many children [in the study] saw their family as 'resourceful' in terms of social and cultural capital, although they talked about their families having limited finances to access other, more expensive services". Young Lives pilot work with children in Peru concluded that privileging economic indicators narrows the lens of observation (Johnson (2006), but questioned the appropriateness of asking about wellbeing in situations of severe deprivation. The holistic and subjective focus of wellbeing approaches could be perceived as intrusive and fieldworkers may not be prepared for people to respond with experiences of depression and abuse. Abstract concepts such as illbeing and poverty and the use of creative methods in general may be difficult for children with little experience of schooling. For example, in *Leki* there was a noticeable difference between two participants who had been going to school for three and five years respectively who were "free, easily

communicating and responding quickly", and the other three who needed assistance in writing and drawing and "responded slowly with great fear and frustration" (fieldworker's notes). Similarly, in *Semhal* one of participants seemed "very shy and looked worried" because she is "the only one who is still in grade one and is not able to read and write [so] she was isolated and [felt] less important than the rest of the group and she was repeating what the others said". Although the facilitator tried to make her feel comfortable "there was a tendency that when the girls were asked to think about a girl of their age who is not doing well, they were all turning their face and staring at her, which worsened the situation of the girl, and they were openly discussing about her not going to school. Similarly, when they were asked to think about a girl of their age who is doing well, they were looking at one of the girls who look good, well dressed and clean".

On one occasion the exercise didn't work at all: it was in the researchers' first field site, a remote community in Tigray (*Semhal*), where there are no preschools and young children rarely meet children outside their household. When they were asked to 'think about a girl or a boy of their age in the community living a good or bad life' they did not respond, even when the question was asked in many different ways. [….]The other facilitator started to ask them in a different way, just by asking them specific questions like what do they like to eat…" For this reason the younger cohort data from *Semhal* (not reported here) tells us that a good life involves "locally made bread, biscuits, oranges, banana, and carrots" and that "dogs are kind".

Results[ii]

As background to interpreting the results of this research it is worth noting that Ethiopia is one the poorest and most donor-dependent countries in Africa with a history of centralised and authoritarian rule dating back to imperial times (Bevan and Pankhurst, 2007). Poverty in Ethiopia has a complex socio-political history which incorporates issues of patron-client relationships and subordinations of different forms that inevitably shape children's understandings. Nonetheless, the focus of this paper is the extent to which these understandings are socially or materially based and the coexistence of relative (social exclusion) and absolute poverty.

Tables 1 and 2 report criteria or poverty 'indicators' generated by the younger and older children in the study and ranks them according to how frequently they were mentioned[iii]. Tentative comparisons are made between these age cohorts, bearing in mind that that there were only four groups of younger children, and the content of the highly ranked indicators is discussed. This relates the thought processes behind them (for example, clothing is important because it enables participation in economic activity) to the themes from the literature.

 [Insert Table 1 here]

The most frequently mentioned indicator of poverty for children aged 5-6 was housing, followed by appearance. Three indicators that were mentioned only by younger children were sleeping on a bench rather than a bed, working, and being friendless. The most frequently mentioned indicators of poverty for children aged 11-13 were food, clothing, and

education, although housing and appearance were also important. Three indicators mentioned only by older children were attending government rather than private schools, being landless, and meeting 'basic needs' (n.b. older children may have learnt this term in school 'civics' classes).

[Insert Table 2 here]

Looking across all groups in the study, the five most frequently mentioned indicators were education, clothing, appearance, food, and housing. For example, in *Atkilit tera* older girls described how a child living badly would either have no access to education or access only to a government school, or without school materials. Boys explained the consequences of not having a "proper education" – he would disturb other children at school, wouldn't continue his learning and might end up a thief. Older girls in *Leku* recounted the experiences of girls whose parents either couldn't send them to school or couldn't afford to support them while they were there - "her parent registered her at school (registration cost is not burden for them) but after that they have no capacity to fulfill what she need [...] Thus she does not have any opportunities. Unable to get what her friends have, even if she learns, she doesn't understand properly". Consequently she feels she is falling behind her friends because "when she is learning rather she thinks about her life. She faces different problems and her mind become full of tension". Boys in *Leku* whose parents couldn't afford a 'good' school would be taught at "a school with no chairs and not well made; it is a government school with no water for drinking, no books, and no place for studying". Younger children in *Leku* described how the absence of schooling or what they perceived

as poor quality schooling (for example, religious schools) reduce children's ambition and encourage them to "spend their time with badly behaved children". In *Leki* and *Tach meret* boys described having to herd cattle rather than go to school. They observed that if they went to school it would be "'wearing only a shirt on top" (*Tach meret*) as their parents couldn't afford to send them to school and clothe them.

The twin themes of clothing and appearance were important to both boys and girls, albeit for different reasons: for example, in *Leki* older boys observed that children 'couldn't work without clothes'. In *Semhal* four of the top five indicators for girls related to appearance – being thin, having hair that hadn't been oiled and dressed, wearing torn, old clothes, and having a dirty body because the household couldn't afford soap. Boys also mentioned having sandals rather than shoes, worn-out clothes, and dirty hair. Physical stature was a recurrent theme, reflecting the high prevalence of stunting and wasting in rural Ethiopia, for example, older boys with "thin, spindly legs" and girls who "look hungry" in *Tach meret*. Among younger children dirtiness was associated with ugliness (see also Johnson, 2006) and not having any friends because of their appearance (*Atkilit tera*) or because they don't "fit in" (*Tach meret*).

On a methodological level the data supports the proposition introduced in the literature review that children's understandings of poverty are subtle, grounded, and impressively broad. It confirms the emergent themes of exclusion from valued activities and social exclusion more broadly, shame, inequality and discrimination. Lowered expectations are also a theme, but only when the respondents talk about their imagined 'others', implying in

some cases that (other) children living in poverty have brought their misfortunate upon themselves: "he has no ambitions and doesn't think about the future, preferring to spend his time gambling" (*Leku*, older boys).

Discussion

The data reported here demonstrates a subtle understanding of relative poverty from children as young as five who know what it means to be appropriately dressed and feel ashamed when they cannot meet these standards. Appearance and clothing are important social markers, linking to Adam Smith's (1776) famous reflections on the linen shirt and more recently Townsend's (1979: 88) focus on having "the activities, customs and diets commonly approved by society". Children in our study reported stigma from being labeled as poor because their parents were daily labourers, they received support from NGOs, or even because they participate in *Young Lives*. They alluded to the effects of chronic poverty, for example, the sense of the fragility attached to any benefit (c.f. the title of this paper). They also described the tension caused by never having more money than they need to survive and being continually distracted by the things that they lack. Another emergent theme was the moral dimension to poverty, for example, the persistent belief in a 'culture of poverty', which includes aspects such as not knowing how to plan and save or not having a positive attitude towards education and work. While this belief relates more to how respondents position themselves than to any external reality, it seems likely that the efficacy of the "empowerment interventions" currently promoted in Ethiopia as a means to

move out of poverty (e.g. motivational videos for farmers) is further reduced by "a habitus developed in a childhood of poverty" (Pankhurst and Bevan, 2007: 10)

Studies of poverty in developing countries that focus on individual experiences and broaden the lens to include subjective and relational alongside material dimensions (Montcrieffe, 2009) are often criticized for taking the politics out of poverty. Their focus on subjective experiences is said to obscure the role of context and macro-level influences (White, 2009). This can reinforce a voluntaristic focus on the individual already evident within policy circles where "attention is diverted away from the state and other actors with the power and moral responsibility to intervene and bring about change, with populations living in poverty being charged with using their own resources to support themselves through crisis" (Boyden and Cooper, 2006). Nonetheless, 'wellbeing approaches' are not inevitably politically naïve (Camfield and others, 2009) as local understandings of illbeing recognize the influence of dynamics within the household, community, and nation, etc. They also enable exploration of the *social* construction of values, standards, and norms that affect how people experience and evaluate their lives, which are particularly evident in the group activities reported in this paper. Data generated through reflective group activities can increase understanding of people's values and experiences. In the case of children it illustrates the importance of age, beyond the crude adult child dichotomy, and in interaction with gender, socio-economic status, and location.

The concept of social exclusion can extend understanding of the factors sustaining poverty and disadvantage in childhood by highlighting its multi-dimensionality and location in a

particular place and time. Talking in terms of social exclusion rather than poverty denaturalizes poverty and inequality by emphasizing firstly that it is something people do to others and have done to them, and secondly that it is not inevitable. Interventions to address childhood poverty should provide resources for social participation as well as survival, and recognize the operation of mechanisms of power, both directly through coercion and indirectly through shaping children's understandings of their lives.

Acknowledgements

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[i] The author has been conducting research in Ethiopia since 2002, largely with the same research team. She collaboratively developed and piloted the methods, trained researchers in their use, facilitated debriefings when researchers discussed their experiences of using the methods, and conducted multiple visits to each site. She has benefitted from lengthy discussions of the meanings of particular phrases with collaborators during analysis.
[ii] All data is taken from the fieldworkers' notes, which were written immediately after the activity and supplemented by listening to the audio-recording and noting verbatim quotes.
[iii] The older cohort also ranked the indicators within each community and we have noted where these rankings differ from the picture given by a simple count of frequencies.