

Making poverty more present: how to represent hardship effectively

A report on a study trip to the UK in June 2015, supported by the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust

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This report is dedicated to all those currently living in poverty, many of whom currently lack a powerful voice in mainstream debates. It has been the aim of my research trip, and everything that comes out of it, to try to help restore to them some of that voice.

1. Introduction

The issue

Around 800,000 New Zealanders live in poverty. Of that number, between 130,000 and 285,000 children, depending on the measure, live in poverty.¹ This poverty has serious implications for the families that experience it, and for all New Zealanders, as it is a major barrier to people's ability to achieve success and happiness, lead lives that they themselves value, and participate in society. Yet many New Zealanders remain unaware of the extent of poverty, and current attempts to convey the reality of that poverty appear to be meeting with limited success. There is clearly a need for new strategies and methods in this area.

At the same time, reporting on poverty raises many complex issues. It is easy for the voices of people living in poverty to have the reporter's own frames and narratives imposed on them, and their stories used in ways that are inappropriate. Reporting sensitively and respectfully on the lives of those who experience poverty is a difficult task.

Some of the answers to these problems, especially where they concern Maori and Pacific Island communities, can be found in New Zealand. But in general there is a paucity here of discussion, strategies and new ideas for documenting poverty more effectively. This implies that engagement with discourses overseas may yield useful new ideas.

The UK is an obvious starting point for looking at how these debates are playing out in other countries. In contrast to New Zealand, the UK has a long history of engaging with these issues. Publishers and journalists in Britain have established traditions of conveying poverty, and many British academics and thinktanks are engaged in an ongoing discussion about how to present the voices of people living in poverty in a way that preserves their autonomy and dignity. Furthermore, as the UK has a culture relatively similar to ours, lessons learned there have a good chance of being applicable in New Zealand.

For the above reasons, in June 2015 I travelled to the UK, on a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust fellowship, to examine methods used there to communicate the reality of poverty and articulate the voices of those who experience it, and to understand how the same work might be carried out in New Zealand.

¹ Bryan Perry, *Household incomes in New Zealand: trends and indicators in inequality and poverty 1982 to 2013*, Ministry of Social Development, Wellington, 2014.

My background

Before embarking on this trip, I had made contributions to the representation of poverty in a number of fields. In the early years of my career, I worked principally as a journalist. In the UK, I edited specialist magazines and freelanced for newspapers such as the *Guardian*, writing about issues including regional poverty and communities trying to regain control of their local economic development. In New Zealand I had written articles on poverty and related issues for a variety of major news outlets, including a piece for the *Listener* in 2012 in which I lived in a boarding house for three weeks, in order to describe the issues faced by marginalised people in extremely inadequate housing, and a long investigative piece for *New Zealand Geographic* in 2015 on homelessness.

More recently, my work has expanded to include book-length explorations of the issues around poverty. In 2013 I edited the book *Inequality: A New Zealand Crisis*, which contained chapters from academics book-ended by personal stories of people living in poverty. I have continued this exploration of inequality, which is the wider context in which poverty sits, in further books including *The Inequality Debate: An Introduction* (2014) and *Wealth and New Zealand* (2015).

I also work in the academic sphere, having in 2014 been made a research associate of the Institute for Governance and Policy Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. There, my research interests have focused on concentrations of wealth and privilege, and the ways in which they help to bring about the wider social problems of which poverty is one manifestation.

The challenge

In New Zealand public awareness of poverty and inequality has risen greatly in the last few years.² However, that greater awareness remains confined to certain parts of the population. Internal polling carried out by political parties is understood to show that 60% of National voters, for instance, disagree or strongly disagree with the proposition that there is real poverty in New Zealand. Other polling and research shows widespread misapprehensions, such as a belief that poverty is primarily the result of individual lifestyle choices. Furthermore, public concern about the issue is yet to translate into tangible action to reduce poverty; the policies announced in the 2015 Budget, aimed specifically at child poverty, were described as being likely to have only a "marginal" effect by child poverty experts.³

² Roy Morgan, 'Finding No. 6239', 10 July 2015, available at: <http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/6329-roy-morgan-new-zealand-most-important-issues-june-2015-201507100417> (accessed 21 February 2016).

³ Jonathan Boston, 'Child hardship package will have only a marginal impact on child poverty', Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 21 May 2015, available at: <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PO1505/S00281/jonathan-boston-child-hardship-package.htm> (accessed 21 February 2016).

It is impossible to say with certainty why there is not greater and more defined concern about poverty, but there are several likely causes. One is that simply not enough people are aware of the facts around the issue. However, a growing volume of research shows that facts alone often fail to convince.⁴ Personal stories and a clear, compelling argument for why poverty matters are just as important when it comes to changing public opinion.

Yet there are relatively few attempts to present stories of poverty in ways that are compelling and respectful (as discussed above), apart from notable exceptions such as Bryan Bruce's 2011 documentary *Inside Child Poverty* and John Campbell's broadcasting on *Campbell Live*. Newspapers regularly cover stories of people in poverty, but generally only very briefly – as the 'box-out' or human interest angle to a much longer story – and not in a way that engages the reader deeply or answers many of the questions they might have.

The challenge therefore is to find ways to present poverty in New Zealand in a way that is both respectful to the lives of those who experience it and compelling to a wide audience.

Research methodology

From a research perspective, the key feature of my trip was that it was explicitly multidisciplinary. Presenting poverty has both theoretical and practical dimensions, and a wide range of practitioners are involved in both aspects. Knowledge of how best to carry out this task does not reside exclusively with one discipline.

As a result, I deliberately chose to interview a wide range of people across the following fields: academia, think tanks, trade unions, non-governmental organisations, journalists, polling experts, communications experts, civil servants, and local government staff. As with any approach, this has advantages and drawbacks, but I felt that the value of a wide range of perspectives outweighed the lack of depth in one particular field. In fact, in most cases I interviewed a number of people in each field; and any remaining gaps have been filled in by further reading and interviews via e-mail and Skype.

The way that I located interview subjects is best understood as a series of concentric circles. I started by contacting those who I knew, either from contacts in New Zealand and the UK or from online searches, were most active in this field. Once contact had been established, I asked those people for further recommendations; and so on. Where I had too many recommendations to follow up, I prioritised those in fields where I had not yet interviewed anyone.

⁴ See, for instance, George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*, Chelsea Green Publishing, Vermont, September 2015.

Following my usual practice as a journalist, I had a small number of questions that I asked virtually every interview subject, such as what examples they could show of effective presentations of poverty, what they thought were the main barriers to doing this well, and so on. For the most part, however, I wanted to let their insights emerge freely, and most of the questions I asked were not pre-prepared but were in response to statements earlier in the conversation.

Where useful, I have included in this report direct quotations from my interviews with individuals. The only exception is for those who were working in government departments, whose discussions with me were had on the basis that they were strictly for background purposes and not to be reported. Although their thoughts are not recorded here, they were extremely valuable, and I would like to thank these interviewees for giving their time generously.

2. Key findings

The following are the key lessons from my research trip.

Stories of poverty:

- Although depictions of poverty must make clear its negative consequences, they must not do so in a way that is disempowering or robs those portrayed of any agency in their lives
- It is important to show similarities between people above and below the poverty line, especially in the motivations and choices that everyone faces
- The false distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' people in poverty must be avoided: those portrayed should not just be the most conventionally 'virtuous' or acceptable to non-poor viewers
- Producing positive stories about people in poverty, and finding innovative ways to put them up against more negative portrayals, can be effective
- Effective stories 'make sense of' the numbers, closely combining qualitative and quantitative research
- Portrayals of poverty have to show its complexity, including the nature of choice

Working with those depicted:

- People living in poverty should be offered extensive media training before telling their stories, in order to prepare them and help them understand the likely consequences of media appearances

Campaigns and commissions:

- Campaigns by newspapers and other media had have a significant and demonstrated impact on public opinion
- Commissions of various kinds, such as the various Fairness Commissions and the Poverty Truth Commission, can also help start community discussions about poverty and related issues
- Providing people with concrete information about the incomes and budgets of those living in poverty can be highly effective

Understanding public opinion:

- Greater knowledge is needed of the public's attitudes towards poverty, in order to understand what they will bring to the discussion and how to address their concerns
- 'Framing', which is the exercise of appealing to people's values and emotions, is an important mechanism in which facts and stories can be embedded
- Discussions of poverty must engage with questions about, and attitudes towards, the welfare state and the world of work, particularly when it comes to solutions

- Current definitions of poverty are often difficult to understand or have little public resonance, significantly impeding attempts to foster debate on this issue
- Consideration is needed about whether narratives on poverty should be embedded in wider narratives about inequality

Solutions:

- Talking about solutions is important, because it helps reinforce a sense of agency, and, by reducing the sense that poverty is intractable, makes the public more likely to engage in discussion around this issue

3. Detailed findings

In this section, I present the findings from my research trip in more detail. As with the selection of interview subjects, the arrangement is concentric. I start by collating the findings on the core issue of how to represent the lives of people living in poverty, before moving onto the wider issues in which this core task sits – for instance, the public's attitudes towards those living in poverty, or the mental frameworks that shape how people feel about economic and social issues.

1. PRESENTATIONS OF POVERTY

As a rule, interviewees strongly affirmed the importance of telling people's stories as a means to convey the reality of poverty. One interviewee, Jackie Cox from Church Action on Poverty, put it bluntly: "Stories are much more powerful than statistics." How to use those stories appropriately, however, presented significant challenges.

1.1 Avoiding disempowerment and exceptionalism

Many interviewees stressed that although depictions of poverty must make clear the negative consequences of that situation, they must not do so in a way that is disempowering or robs those portrayed of any agency in their lives.

We need to enable people to see that people in poverty are just like us. It can't be a narrative around pity or helplessness. (Baroness Ruth Lister)

Others agreed with the importance of showing a common humanity between people above and below the poverty line. Bobby Duffy, of polling firm Ipsos MORI, said that organisations telling such stories should ask themselves whether they were aiming to inspire sympathy or a belief in the "capacity" of people in poverty. In doing the former, he said: "You can undermine what they [people in poverty] bring ... You do want to show need. And that it needs to be addressed. But is that [appeal to] sympathy saying, 'Christ, they can't do anything'?"

Duffy also pointed to the success of the 'I Am an Immigrant' campaign, which ran posters in public places depicting immigrants and their contribution to British society. The posters did not depict 'extraordinary' people but rather the many 'ordinary' contributions that immigrants made, in terms of the work they performed and the things they did in their communities. As Duffy put it, "Don't talk about [Olympic medallist] Mo Farah – [people know] you can always find an exception, so it works against you. Talk about the average rather than the extraordinary."

The apparent success of the campaign supports this view. According to its website:

This campaign has really caught the public's imagination as it provides immigrants with a platform that allows them to tell their story ... The campaign received amazing response [sic] nationally with mentions in The Independent, The Guardian and The Huffington Post and the campaign video has received over 54,000 views. Media interest continues. Additionally, it achieved an enormous amount of support from international mainstream journalists, campaigners and other members of the public across the world. As such, [the organisers] believe that this campaign has already influenced change in the immigration debate and are confident that this will continue.⁵

Baroness Ruth Lister, a leading writer on poverty, noted the value of portrayals such as *These Four Walls*, a documentary following the lives of people in northern England. This documentary showed people's stories in depth, allowing for the complexities of poverty to be explored and individuals to speak in their own words, at length. However, the impact such a documentary has on the wider public is debatable, given that it screened late at night on British TV and had – at the time of writing – just 609 views on YouTube.⁶

On a related note, Jackie Cox of Church Action on Poverty stressed the importance of not reinforcing the unhelpful and false distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Avoiding that distinction required different kinds of people to be portrayed, including, for instance, ex-offenders, who are often viewed as 'undeserving'. Cox noted examples where such stories had been presented in a way that showed the complexity of factors leading people to that situation, and which retained a sense of agency for those portrayed – arguing they had been trying to do the right thing to better their lives, even if unsuccessfully. This helped reinforce their common humanity with the viewer. Emphasising the role of choices, and forcing the viewer to ask themselves, 'How would I cope?', were important ways to get people to think differently and stop "othering" those in poverty.

1.2 Countering negative portrayals

Many interviewees discussed the – in their view – unfortunate success of the prime-time television series *Benefits Street*, which told the stories of people living in poverty but in a simplistic way that homed in on certain behaviours likely to anger non-poor viewers, and failed to show the complexity of poverty or the reasons why people might be in that situation.

As a counter to the programme, Church Action on Poverty had developed a video series called *Real Benefits Street*, which allowed people to tell their story in a more accurate and sympathetic way. Jackie Cox, who led the group's work, said the series was motivated by the desire to "enable people to exercise power: not us doing things for

⁵ MAX, 'I am an immigrant poster campaign', available at: <http://www.iamanimmigrant.net/i-am-immigrant-poster-campaign> (accessed 21 February 2016).

⁶See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xM7kSlegfiY> (accessed 21 February 2016).

them, but creating spaces where they can do that". Echoing the messages above, Cox said the series' starting point was to emphasise the fact that "people have shared experience. Otherwise the message people [in poverty] get is that it's their problem and it's their behaviour and their moral character."

The *Real Benefits Street* videos were screened at the same time as *Benefits Street*, and the group's staff "hijacked" the *Benefits Street* hashtag on social media as a way to insert a more sympathetic portrayal of poverty into online debate. This got significant coverage in the mainstream media, including being the top story on local television, coverage on 11 BBC local radio stations, and some national coverage. It also allowed them to interact directly with those holding negative views about poverty.

1.3 Linking quantitative and qualitative research

Discussions with academics stressed the importance of putting the experiences of people in poverty at the heart of research, and linking stories with data. Prof Tessa Ridge, from Bath University, who works primarily with children's stories, said: "The most important thing is that you put children and their lives more centrally ... If you put the child at the centre of your practice, you start to see things differently." On a related note, staff at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation said they were "trying to involve people in poverty more in the design of policy and messaging", something few organisations achieve.

Ridge stressed that telling the stories of children in poverty could enable the public to see how "disadvantaged kids accrete that disadvantage in more and more ways". She likened this to "the concrete overcoat of added disadvantage ... It makes it harder for kids to raise their heads."

Researching in these ways also helped policymakers to "think about how children mediate poverty". Children employed various strategies for ensuring their parents could stay in work, sometimes at their own cost, such as by moderating their own genuine needs, caring for siblings, or going to school when unwell. "All these things are going on inside the house, and unless you look inside, you are struggling to make policy."

However, any stories needed to be based on a body of research "so that you are not cherry picking, [and] people can't say it's anecdotal. You need to produce qualitative research that makes sense of the quantitative research."

Ridge also noted that longitudinal work with children often produced the strongest case studies. However, it was important to ensure that children's anonymity was protected, because they became more identifiable to the public the more that researchers knew – and wrote – about them.

1.4 Working in multiple dimensions

As a final note, research discussed by interview subjects pointed to the need to present poverty in a multidimensional fashion – including acknowledgement of the role played by individual choices – if it was to be convincing to the public. A Joseph Rowntree Foundation report on public attitudes to poverty showed that people

...recognised that the portrayals on popular TV programmes such as Benefits Street do not accurately reflect everyone living in poverty; they know that not everyone is living off the state while making no effort to help themselves. However, they do see this as being part of the story and one that it is important to acknowledge – something they do not believe happens at present. They suggested that coverage of people in poverty is binary; those who are poor are either portrayed as being victims (for instance, of circumstance, location, background, the economic crisis) or, much more commonly, as ‘scroungers’ who are unwilling to help themselves, and there was thought to be very little coverage of all the different types of people in poverty that exist between these two extremes. Given how multi-faceted the experience of poverty is felt to be, media portrayals were thought to be very one-dimensional and lacking in realism, which in turn meant they were not engaging.⁷

2. EMPOWERING INDIVIDUALS

In my research, depicting the lives of people in poverty raised other, related issues, particularly around building capacity and connecting with the media.

Neil Jameson, of the campaign group Citizens UK, outlined a strategy that did not directly target mass public opinion but worked to mobilise support for anti-poverty campaigns through one-to-one meetings with individuals who wanted to make change in their communities. Those meetings revealed that “while people have different interests, they do want to make a difference as an individual or for their family”.

It's the development of people that we are most preoccupied with. Otherwise, the movement is just an empty suit of armour. (Neil Jameson)

Jameson also stressed the importance of doing "rehearsals" with people before they spoke in public on issues such as poverty.

This was echoed in the work of Church Action on Poverty's 'poverty media unit'. The unit put a strong emphasis on seeking out people living in poverty and helping them to be effective advocates for their own position. That involved extensive media training, helping people understand why they would want to engage with media and overcoming

⁷ Suzanne Hall, Katrina Leary and Helen Greevy, *Public Attitudes to Poverty*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York, September 2014, p.39.

their fears about dealing with journalists. The training covered issues including what journalists were likely to want, and how to deal with the fact that someone's story might be heavily condensed or presented without a right of reply.

Jackie Cox noted that although the poverty media unit's ultimate audience was the general public, building relationships with the mainstream media was a key target. The unit wanted journalists to see people living in poverty as the best experts on the subject. "We are trying to get the media engaged, so they are helping drive that conversation. When people talk about expertise, they think of 'experts', but actually it's people living in it."

Cox also stressed that the effective presentation of people's lives required organisations to be good at both reacting to media requests *and* proactively creating media interest through events and finding new angles on stories that had news value. Video material had to be "engaging and watchable", made with a good quality camera, well framed and short.

3. NEWSPAPER CAMPAIGNS

While most of the above examples involve people working *with* the media, in some cases media organisations are proactive in their coverage of poverty. One recent and sustained depiction of poverty in the UK came through the *York Press* newspaper's 'Stamp Out Poverty' campaign. The paper's news editor, Gavin Aitchison, noted that the idea for the series had come from the realisation that although many people, including its inhabitants, thought that York was an exclusively wealthy city, there were in fact extensive areas of poverty, often hidden from view.

The campaign involved numerous stories on poverty-related issues; an issue guest-edited by Joseph Rowntree Foundation director Julia Unwin; and specific sub-campaigns such as one to bolster the supplies of the local food bank, a large food collection exercise labelled the Yorkshire Harvest. One of the campaign's aims was to help people not feel so "paralysed" by the feeling that nothing could be done, and "show [them] that you can make those small steps".

Aitchison said the response to the campaign had been "slightly more positive than negative". While initially there had been resistance to the idea that there was poverty in York, the ongoing effects of the global financial crisis and financial austerity had made people more sympathetic to the campaign. Overall he believed that the campaign "helped shift opinions, coupled with people's experiences, of course. It's helped raise awareness. And it's probably helped people believe that they can do something about it."

4. COMMISSIONS

As well as media portrayals, other forums can be used to show poverty effectively. Seeking to make the reality of poverty more prominent, UK institutions have made increasing use of commissions of various kinds.

Staff at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation noted their role in funding the rollout of the Poverty Truth Commission, which began in Glasgow and had spread to places such as Leeds.⁸ The commission focused on bringing people living in poverty face-to-face with key decision makers in government, allowing their voices to be heard and to shape policy.

Also notable were the 'fairness commissions' run in cities such as York and Leeds, which sought to increase awareness of the reality of poverty as part of a wider conversation about what a 'fair' city might look like. Most such commissions have held multiple public meetings in addition to presenting a final report or reports. Ruth Redfern, who led the York Fairness Commission, said the commission had had various impacts, notably for Travellers, the largest ethnic minority in York. Whereas their concerns had previously been ignored, that had "completely changed".

Sharon Squires, who was leading the implementation of the recommendations of the Sheffield Fairness Commission, noted the involvement of 'fairness champions' in the ongoing Our Fair City campaign.⁹ The campaign had recruited over 80 champions in five months, and was working with them on action they would take on issues around fairness and poverty. Squires also believed that the commissions had played a role in explaining the reality of poverty in an increasingly polarised society.

What's hard to know is the changing nature of circumstances in this country, and the urban area. A lot of it [poverty] is hidden. If you aren't involved in it, you don't know. A lot of that is invisible. The city has changed, and a lot of the old structures have gone. (Sharon Squires)

5. OTHER PRESENTATIONS

Journalist Dawn Foster noted the success of the report *Getting by? A Year in the Life of 30 Working Families in Liverpool*, which presented detailed budgets of local families struggling to make ends meet.¹⁰ The report was widely publicised and sparked extensive debate in Liverpool, thanks to the unusual level of detail and the concrete nature of the information presented, which gave a much deeper insight into the financial challenges families face than is usually presented in the mainstream media.

⁸ See, for instance, <http://www.faithincommunityscotland.org/poverty-truth-commission/>.

⁹ See <http://www.ourfaircity.co.uk> for more details.

¹⁰ Getting By? Project, *Getting By? A year in the life of 30 working families in Liverpool*, Liverpool, February 2015.

This emphasised the importance of good-quality data, especially of a concrete and relatable nature, in affecting public opinion.

6. PUBLIC ATTITUDES

Many respondents stressed that effective depictions of poverty had to be embedded in an understanding of the public's attitudes towards the issue. A deeper understanding in that area would allow those doing that work to know what values, attitudes and ideas viewers were likely to have, and to address ahead of time the questions and objections they were likely to raise.

Ruth Lister noted that a narrative of 'welfare dependency' was strongly entrenched in UK society. "In the public mind, the problem is associated with benefits, and therefore with people who are [thought to be] not doing enough for themselves." That attitude was not limited to Conservative voters; British public attitudes polling showed a significant hardening towards beneficiaries among Labour voters. This could be attributed in part to the unwillingness of the last Labour government to make more of its anti-poverty work or to build a constituency that strongly supported tackling poverty.

On a similar note, interviewees pointed to research showing concern about people perceived to have 'chosen' a life in poverty. The public was also thought to strongly believe that people on benefits did not and would not make a reciprocal contribution to society. This was a major block to building support for anti-poverty campaigns.

However, interviewees also noted evidence to suggest that the difficult economic circumstances of recent years "have served to soften people's views in relation to poverty". People had a greater appreciation that poverty could affect anyone, given the increased precarity of general life, and were less willing to accept that employment was a guaranteed route out of poverty, given the reality of low wages and unstable work.

7. FRAMING

Many interviewees showed an increased interest in 'framing'. The term draws on the work by neuro-linguists such as George Lakoff and communications experts such as Anat Shenker-Osorio, whose work argues that 'frames' – sets of beliefs, experiences and feelings that allow us to make sense of the world – are often what determine our view of particular issues such as poverty, in addition to an understanding of the actual facts. Changing people's minds on an issue therefore requires the articulation of a particular frame – that, for instance, society should be nurturing and caring towards children in poverty and their families, rather than acting as strict disciplinarians – and doing so using language that is compelling and moving. To quote Jackie Cox: "The battle about poverty is not about policy, it's about attitudes. But framing is often ignored."

Duncan Exley, from the Equality Trust, suggested that poverty could be embedded in “a story of national loss, the demise of a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work”. However, he noted that many people would be uncomfortable with talking about nationalism or other related issues.

In Exley’s view, the three pieces of the “communications jigsaw” that were needed but not being done well, or at all, were:

- The big narrative story, which had to be compelling, and repeated
- The facts (which could be relied on too much in isolation)
- The benefits of tackling inequality/poverty (often not well articulated)

Both the Child Poverty Action Group and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation noted that they were working with communications firms to develop better framing around poverty issues.

A number of interviewees cautioned against “myth-busting”, the explanation of facts that supposedly puncture an opposing viewpoint. Neuro-linguistic research showed, according to interviewees, that such exercises were either ineffective or in fact harmful, because the reiteration of the myth served to reinforce it in the public’s mind, regardless of what was said afterwards.

Richard Excell, from the TUC, noted the need to communicate the shared experiences of people in work and on benefits – who might swap roles at any given point. This emphasised the way that “the benefit system is a safety net for workers that we all might need at some time”.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation staff noted the importance of acknowledging the role of individual choices, even while making a largely structural argument about the causes of poverty: “We haven't been very good on choice and personal responsibility, but we are looking at that now, the role of individual agency in getting people out of poverty.”

Foundation research also stressed the importance of engaging people with the root causes of poverty through a ‘life course’ narrative; this could “prompt discussion about why a child living in poverty is viewed with sympathy, while an adult who grew up in poverty is not”.

8. THE WELFARE STATE AND WORK

Many interviewees argued that the public's attitudes towards people in poverty were closely linked to their beliefs about the welfare state. Furthermore, any solutions to poverty would have to take into account the role of the welfare state and employers. Therefore, portrayals of poverty needed to be anchored in an understanding of the welfare state, how it worked and how it might be reformed.

Prof David Gordon, of Bristol University, noted that countries with low poverty rates were successful not primarily because the welfare state – as was commonly thought – took from the rich and gave to the poor. "Really, it is about equalising incomes over the [individual's] lifespan. It [the welfare state] takes money from middle age and gives it to the same people with children and as pensioners."

In Scandinavian societies, which typically had low poverty rates, three quarters of welfare state transfer payments were across individual lifespans, rather than from one individual to another. In the UK and Ireland, that figure was 50%.

Gordon also noted the importance of discussing low-quality work. Research by the Poverty and Social Exclusion project showed that those in the bottom 20% of the workforce (according to certain specific classifications) had well-being no better than that of the unemployed, and half the people in that position had remained there for some time. That raised questions about the ability of work to improve well-being.

Prof Ridge noted the need to anchor portrayals of poverty in the reality of a highly precarious modern world. Her work with single mothers showed that many were in work where the hours could change frequently, the nature and location of the work could fluctuate, and their wages were not reliable. State support and child maintenance payments also fluctuated. This was highly damaging to families, she argued.

Baroness Lister noted that although the public often believed that 'people in work' and 'people on benefits' were in separate categories, "the reality is that people move between being in work and out of work."

Finally, Richard Excell noted: "It isn't an answer to people's concerns about abuse of the benefit system to point out that only 0.7% of spending is fraudulent. It is the unfairness they are concerned about. [So] one of the things we have to do is argue for our own reforms to welfare that are egalitarian but also respond to concerns about reciprocity."

9. DEFINING POVERTY

Many interviewees felt that one of the biggest obstacles to any effective portrayal of people in poverty was a profound lack of understanding on the public's part about what actually constituted 'poverty'. Measures of poverty based on people falling below a set income threshold, although important from a research and academic point of view, were often seen as abstract and an unhelpful way to measure the issue.

Interviewees had various suggestions for how to address this, though no consensus was apparent. Joseph Rowntree Foundation staff described their work on the minimum income standard, the amount of money needed to buy a certain basket of goods, which

attempted to 'square the circle' between income-based and material hardship measures. Foundation staff also noted their new definition of poverty – when people's incomes are substantially below their needs.

Interviewees noted research showing that even the word 'poverty' was difficult for many people, since they felt it existed only in developing countries. Some research indicated that 'need' and 'people in need' were better terms, and that it was better to use definitions based around material hardship and people's not being able to afford specific items:

Describing poverty as an inability to meet basic needs was felt to be a more accurate way of identifying poverty than by income alone, as long the needs were clearly defined as fundamental needs everyone has, such as food, energy, housing, education and healthcare.¹¹

Prof Gordon noted Demos polling showing strong public support for a multidimensional approach, such as that employed in Mexico, where income was measured alongside factors such as whether people enjoyed basic social rights, like housing, health and shelter.

Stewart Lansley described his work over many decades working with focus groups to establish what things the public believed no-one should be without – known technically as a consensual budget standard – and then polling the public to see how many people went without those items.

One key finding from that work was that although focus group participants often started with a subsistence-only definition of poverty, discussion shifted them towards a much more generous definition that stressed the importance of social participation. "People start with subsistence, but when you probe, it's clear they are relativists. [They understand that] people can't lead hermetic lives."

On a similar note, the Fabian Poverty and Life Chances Commission had found that while telling people income-based poverty statistics did not affect their views, using statistics that conveyed what people were doing without had been more effective.

10. POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

One relevant question in portraying poverty is whether it should be embedded in a story about income inequality – in the sense of the income gaps existing throughout society, including those between the rich and others – or whether the focus should be squarely on those who do not have enough.

¹¹ Hall et al., *Public Attitudes to Poverty*, p.5.

Interviewees had mixed views on this subject. Duncan Exley argued that showing the link between poverty and inequality was essential, given the way that very high incomes often came at the expense of – and therefore caused – very low ones. In addition, unless people with high incomes were brought within the frame of the discussion, it was hard to justify measures to address poverty that involved higher taxes.

Conversely, Joseph Rowntree Foundation staff argued that it was entirely possible to tackle poverty without discussing wider inequality, and that modelling suggested that attempts to reduce high-end incomes could be counter-productive, because they simply led to lower tax revenue to distribute.

Baroness Lister argued that while inequality had use as a wider frame, it was easier to say that poverty by itself was intrinsically wrong. However, Rachel Orr from Oxfam said polling showed that while people were concerned about both inequality and poverty, the former evoked stronger sentiments than the latter.

11. SOLUTIONS AND RELATED ISSUES

Not all interviewees were directly involved in advocating for solutions. But many noted the value of talking about solutions, not least as a way of emphasising that poverty could be tackled and therefore avoiding narratives of hopelessness, deficit or defeatism. Solutions-focused discourse also opened up space for talking about the positive qualities of people in poverty and their ability to have agency and make choices.

When it came to solutions, Neil Jameson stressed the importance of understanding the public's likely tolerance and "start[ing] with people where they are". Recent Citizens UK campaigns had concentrated on two things that both seemed winnable: tackling injustice in immigration, and improving care for the elderly. Working incrementally and emphasising reciprocity and the gift relationship were also important.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation staff noted that they also tried to be solutions-focused. That was valued by both policymakers and the public. "Once you show people that there are solutions, they buy into it a lot more – the idea that poverty is real, but it isn't inevitable. And if you could get agreement on that, you would be a long way down the road [to tackling poverty]."

Foundation staff cited research showing that the public supports an anti-poverty strategy based more on carrots than sticks, using tools such as rewards to encourage people to work or encourage employers to offer a fair deal, rather than regulation of firms or cuts to benefits. Focus group participants also showed an awareness of poor quality and low-paid work, and the shortcomings of the work-focused approach to tackling poverty.

Sharon Squires noted that talking about solutions – both highlighting existing ones and proposing new ones – could be an empowering step. While anti-poverty reports typically made wide use of statistics, her experience showed that “poor communities hated the use of statistics, because it stigmatises them. And the more affluent [people consulted] said, ‘We know the statistics, but what do we do?’ So the mandate [we settled on] was, [let’s] showcase what is happening. And allow people to get behind what's happening.”

Finally, a number of interviews noted that they often sought to recruit “surprising” figures to their cause, because their words had much greater impact than those of the “usual suspects”. That could involve historical figures, for instance through the use of Winston Churchill quotes, or current ones, as when Unicef had Fraser Nelson, the editor of the conservative *Spectator* magazine, speaking at the launch of a report.

5. Future implications

The central benefit of my research will be to enhance New Zealanders' understanding of the extent and nature of poverty in their country, and thus provide a stronger foundation for discussing how to address this very serious issue.

The research undertaken on this trip has significantly enhanced my understanding of how poverty can be presented effectively and compassionately. This will be directly reflected in my own work as a journalist, which includes news writing, long-form feature writing, blogging and contributing opinion pieces to major news sites. I also work closely with Bridget Williams Books, my publisher, and I would expect that this research will inform future projects that the company carries out.

Perhaps the most immediate output from this research will be a publication or publications summarising what I have learned and raising questions as to how it can be translated into a New Zealand context. This report is one such output, and I will be sharing it widely. I also plan to produce a report that is more directly aimed at practitioners in New Zealand, including academics, researchers and campaigning groups.

In March 2016, the Equality Network will be holding a conference on how to better engage the public in discussions about inequality, and I will present a report for practitioners at that conference. This should help the lessons from my research be widely disseminated throughout different organisations.

Ultimately, the overall benefit to New Zealand from this research will be to provide a foundation for others to take action on this very serious issue. There are of course very many things that could, or should, be done to address poverty and its effects, but the likelihood of their being done will remain lower than it should be unless there is an increased and widespread understanding of the nature and extent of poverty in New Zealand.

Appendix

The following is a list of people whom I met during my research trip.

Date	Name	Organisation	Location	Relevance
2. June	Neil Jameson	Citizens UK	London	Campaigning on Living Wage and other poverty-related issues
3. June	Michael Messum and Paul March	Child Poverty Unit, UK government	London	Work on child poverty policy
3. June	Baroness Ruth Lister	House of Lords	London	Senior academic and writer on poverty
4. June	Duncan Exley and John Hood	Equality Trust	London	Campaigning on inequality
4. June	Jessica Sinclair-Taylor	Child Poverty Action Group	London	Campaigning on child poverty
5. June	Dragan Nastic	Unicef	London	Campaigning on child poverty
8. June	Peter Matejic and John Shale	Department of Work and Pensions	London	Work on poverty-related policy
9. June	Jane Holgate	Leeds University	London	Academic specialising in labour market issues
10. June	Danny Dorling	Oxford University	Oxford	Senior academic and writer on inequality
10. June	Dawn Foster	Journalist, Guardian newspapers	Oxford	Writer on poverty and related issues
15. June	David Gordon and Eldin Fahmy	Bristol University	Bristol	Senior academics working on poverty-related issues
15. June	Tessa Ridge	Bath University	Bath	Senior academic working on poverty-related issues
16. June	Graham Room	Bath University	Bath	Senior academic working on social issues
16. June	Paul Gregg	Bath University	Bath	Senior academic working on poverty and labour market issues
17. June	Andrew Graham	Oxford University	Oxford	Senior economist and member of Scott Trust
18. June	John Hills	London School of Economics	London	Senior academic working on poverty-related issues
22. June	Andrew Sayer	Lancaster University	Lancaster	Senior academic and writer on inequality
22. June	Imogen Tyler	Lancaster University	Lancaster	Academic and writer on marginalisation, stigma and related issues
23. June	Gavin Aitchison	York Press	York	News editor of paper campaigning on poverty in York
23. June	Chris Goulden and Abigail Scott Paul	Joseph Rowntree Foundation	York	Key funder and creator of research and comms on poverty
24. June	Ruth Redfern	Kirkless Council	Huddersfield	Former head of the York Fairness Commission
25. June	Jonathan Bradshaw	York University	York	Senior academic working on poverty-related issues
25. June	Sharon Squires	Sheffield Executive Board	Sheffield	Leading implementation of Sheffield Fairness Commission report
25. June	Gordon Dabinett	University of Sheffield	Sheffield	Senior academic working on spatial inequality
26. June	Jackie Cox	Church Poverty Action	Manchester	Campaigning on poverty-related issues
29. June	David Coats	Work Matters Consulting	London	Think-tank work on labour markets and inequality
29. June	Bobby Duffy	Ipsos MORI	London	Polling on poverty and inequality attitudes
30. June	Deborah Hargreaves	High Pay Centre	London	Work on drawing attention to inequality of pay
30. June	Stewart Lansley	Townsend Centre/Bristol University	London	Writer and academic on poverty-related issues
1. July	Rachael Orr	Oxfam	London	Campaigning on inequality and poverty