

Poor Mother?

A Critical Review of Current Measures of Maternal Poverty and Their Limitations

Across developed world governments, the last two decades have seen an increasing interest in the measurement of levels of poverty, and close assessment of policies intended to reduce those levels. However, the way that governments have developed national poverty measures means that the poverty of mothers is often hidden. This article highlights the methodological reasons for maternal poverty being underestimated in current measures by considering problems at three different levels: for the whole population, for women, and for mothers. The implications of these problems are then considered and some potential remedies suggested. Although it seems impossible to develop one “perfect” measure that will capture the full extent of maternal poverty, a number of improvements on current methods are proposed. The author goes on to argue that different researchers need to develop different measures in different contexts if maternal poverty is to be properly explored, and some ways of developing such measures are put forward. The article concludes by highlighting the paucity of research into maternal poverty and arguing that much more work is needed if it is to be understood and measured correctly.

When considering the theme “mothering and poverty” one immediately faces the question “what is poverty?” and by extension “which mothers are poor?” Among the many possible answers to the first question, Bryan Perry’s (2002) is outstanding in its simplicity: “A person or household can be said to be poor when their resources do not satisfy their needs...” (102).¹ This article will focus on answering the second question. Its central argument is that existing poverty measures routinely underestimate the number of mothers in poverty. Many mothers who are materially deprived do not meet governmental definitions of “poor.” A number of serious flaws in the way governments define and count mothers in poverty can be identified, and these will be described, with

suggestions for further reading. The aim of the article is to encourage social researchers, theorists, and anti-poverty activists to broaden the category of “mothers in poverty” and to recognise that a greater number of mothers are poor than generally considered. It will also be suggested that any cast-iron definition of which mothers are poor, and which are not, is likely to be inadequate and render many poor mothers invisible. The implication of this is that different ways of measuring poverty need to be developed in different research contexts if maternal poverty is to be properly understood. Most of the discussion will focus on the situation in the United Kingdom. However, the points made apply more or less equally to most countries in the developed world.

My recent research has involved interviewing mothers in north-east England about their finances. All were in two parent families with one full-time wage earner, and all were in receipt of state financial help (tax credits) intended to ensure their material needs were met. Yet I met mothers who couldn't afford to keep their homes warm, mothers who hadn't had a holiday for a decade, mothers who had no money to decorate their homes, mothers who couldn't pay for a hair cut, mothers who had nothing to spend on their own leisure, mothers reliant on extortionate doorstep loans to buy their children's Christmas presents and mothers who owned only one pair of shoes. Without opening up the endless debates on the exact definition of terms,² it was clear that these women's resources did not meet their needs. However, none of these mothers met the UK government definition of “in poverty.” This focused my thinking on the ways governments define poverty, and the reasons why mothers who are unable to meet their material needs are officially classed as “not poor.” Three sets of problems with the way conventional poverty measures define those in poverty became apparent. Firstly, problems that apply to the population as a whole, secondly, problems that apply only to women, and thirdly, problems that apply specifically to mothers.

Problems with measuring poverty across the whole population

Having given his definition of poverty, Perry (2002) goes on to point out how deceptive its apparent simplicity is; “...this begs the question of how to define resources and needs and how far these have to differ from each other for a household or individual to be identified as poor” (102). Deciding what “needs” are and what resources are needed to satisfy them has fallen to government statisticians (Veit-Wilson, 2000). Almost all modern governments draw a “poverty line” (or threshold) based on household income; those households whose income falls below this line are considered “poor” and those whose income comes above the line are “not poor.”

How the poverty line is calculated varies from country to country. In the European Union, including the UK, a relative poverty line is used. The EU uses no less than eighteen different poverty measures, but the headline measure is income below 60 percent of the national median household income before deducting housing costs (The Poverty Site). All household incomes are after

deduction of tax and after adjustment (“equivalization”) for household size and composition.

In contrast to the relative poverty measure used in EU countries, the United States Government defines poverty in absolute terms (Fisher, 1992). In the 1960s, Mollie Orshansky of the Social Security Administration developed an absolute poverty threshold based on three times the cost of the economy food plan (the food estimated to be necessary for a minimum healthy diet). The measure gave a range of income thresholds, adjusted for family size, sex of the family head and farm or non-farm residence. These SSA thresholds have been the basis of poverty measurement in the USA since 1965.

Canada lacks an official poverty line, but the Low Income Cut-Off Line is often used (Statistics Canada, 2006).³ The basic assumption is that families on a low income spend 20 percent more of their income than the average family on the basic necessities of food, shelter and clothing. An income threshold below which families are expected to be spending this extra 20 percent was estimated based on the 1992 Canadian Family Expenditure Survey. A number of different cut-offs were estimated for varying family compositions and geographical areas. These thresholds are then compared to family income from the Survey of Consumer Finances, to calculate the number of families on a low income.

Although these different measures give different poverty lines and different estimates for the number of the poor, they share many of the same flaws and are all open to the same basic criticisms. Any attempt to define a family as simply above (“not poor”) or below (“poor”) the poverty line faces the obvious problem that distance from the line is not measured; is the household “prosperous,” “near poor,” “poor,” or “very poor”? (Smith and Middleton, 2007). In addition, real changes in the lives of the poor, such as improvements in housing conditions, health and local transport, will not impact on the poverty figures (Veit-Wilson, 1998). Moreover, a poverty line is unable to differentiate between households on the basis of their varying housing, heating and transport costs. Another problem is that a poverty line measure only provides a “snapshot” of income at the time the survey was conducted; in many ways, the longer-term income trends of families are more important in determining their material well-being (Brewer et al., 2007; Willitts, 2006; Ruspini, 2000). Steven Jenkins and Martha Hill (2001), for example, found that a UK family with children had only a three percent chance of remaining in income poverty for three consecutive years. Conversely, Neil Smith and Sue Middleton (2007) showed that over an eight-year period a third of the UK population experience poverty at least once. This model is termed the dynamic approach.

One way of assessing the dynamics of poverty is to consider the actual material circumstances of households (i.e., what goods and services they can afford). A material deprivation measure is based on measuring whether individuals or households have the necessities expected in their society and the means to do the things most people take for granted. This requires the establishment of what “basic necessities” are, and a number of different methods have been

suggested (Morris and Deeming, 2004; Gordon, Pantazis and Townsend, 2006; Alcock, 1993). The UK government has recently adopted a material deprivation measure based on 21 common items such as owning two pairs of shoes, having a warm home, and access to play equipment (DWP).

Unfortunately for statisticians, income poverty measures and material deprivation measures do not correlate well. Perry has shown that 21 percent of the UK population is poor on an income measure and 21 percent on a material deprivation measure, but only ten per cent are poor on both measures. This approach gives three groups of poor households; those poor on both measures, those who are income poor only, those who are materially deprived only. Thirty-two percent of the UK population would fall into one of these three groups. Jonathan Bradshaw has drawn very similar conclusions using slightly different measures (Bradshaw and Finch, 2003). This lack of overlap between household income and what goods and services that household can access calls into question the usefulness of poverty line measures. In short, many households below the official poverty line are not materially deprived, while many households above the official poverty line do suffer material deprivation.

Problems with measuring women's poverty

Alongside these serious problems with poverty measurement across the whole population, there are a number of issues around measuring the poverty of women. In 1987, Charlotte Glendinning and Jane Millar (1987) described "Invisible Women, Invisible Poverty." They argued that poverty in Britain was highly gendered, with women experiencing poverty more often than men. They also showed that the gendered aspect of poverty was almost invisible in research and public policy; in most official statistics, a woman's poverty is hidden behind the poverty (or otherwise) of the household in which she lives. It might be assumed that research and policy are today better focused on women's poverty. However, in 2003, Jane Millar concluded that fundamental problems remain. In the same year, Jonathan Bradshaw and colleagues (2003) carried out a review of research and policy on women's poverty. They concluded that poverty in Britain remained highly gendered, and that this was largely ignored by government.

The most obvious symptom of this is the way poverty is measured. The UK Government (like most governments in the developed world) records poverty based solely on *household* poverty (DWP). This appears to be disaggregated by gender. However, this is highly misleading, as the figures given do not refer to *individual* poverty but to numbers of women *living in poor households*. Most of the gender difference in official poverty levels can be explained by women's over-representation in two of the poorest types of household; single pensioner households and single parent households. (See Bradshaw et al. [2003] for the UK; and Daly and Rake [2003] for comparisons with Europe). Governments simply don't look below the household level, on the assumption that "all individuals in the household benefit equally from the combined income of the

household” (DWP, 2008: 1). John Ermisch (2003) has described this as the “unitary model,” because the family (or household) is seen a single unit. Other names include the “common preferences” or “benevolent dictator” models (Huddard, Hoddinott and Alderman, 1987).

Extensive research has now shown the assumptions of the unitary model to be deeply flawed (Lundberg, Pollak and Wales, 1997; Ward-Batts, 2008). Ever since Jan Pahl’s (1989) groundbreaking work, researchers who have opened up the “black box” of household finances have revealed that resources are unequally distributed within the household. This is due to unequal earning power and unequal power relationships. The work of Jackie Goode, Claire Callender and Ruth Lister (1988); Hilary Land (1983); Nicola Charles and Marion Kerr (1987); Hilary Graham (1987); Heather Laurie and Jonathan Gershuny (2000); and Glendinning and Millar (1987) have all confirmed persistent gender inequalities in how resources are distributed within British households. Neither resources nor domestic work are shared equally between men and women.

A better approach to measuring women’s poverty is to look at the spending patterns of individual household members. Sara Cantillon and Brian Nolan (2001) surveyed a number of little known studies which conclude that women suffer financially in a number of respects. Women may save money by reducing the household heating in ways that affect them but not other household members. Women are also likely to scrimp on their personal food consumption when money is tight. Other studies suggest that women go longer without new clothes than their male partners, or choose second hand clothes instead. Car use is often skewed in favour of men. Spending on leisure has also traditionally favoured men, with numerous constraints on women’s leisure time and spending. In Jan Pahl’s 1989 survey of 102 households, 54 percent of couples spent more on the man’s leisure than the woman’s, with only 17 percent spending more on the woman.

This brief survey of an extensive literature reveals that, within the household, spending in all areas will tend to favour the male partner over the female, and that any household level analysis will render much of women’s poverty invisible.

Problems with measuring the poverty of mothers

A very important aspect of the way mothers manage their resources is self-sacrifice. For over 30 years, feminist writers have been criticizing the doctrine of maternal self-sacrifice. In *The Economy of Love and Fear*, Kenneth Boulding (1973) first discussed the danger of the “sacrifice trap” in which the giver becomes “locked into an identity that may demand too much sacrifice” (28). Carol Gilligan’s 1982 book, *In a Different Voice*, identified self-sacrifice as a defective part of women’s care ethic: “the tendency for women, in the name of virtue, to give care only to others and to consider it ‘selfish’ to care for themselves” (213). This book sparked much literature with many different

versions of the “care ethic,” but generally accepting the idea of self-sacrifice as flawed. While it is hard to imagine parenting without self-sacrifice (Bahr and Bahr, 2001), the central concern for feminist writers is the degree to which parental self-sacrifice falls unequally on the mother.

In a study of families living on state benefit (welfare) conducted by Goode, Callender and Lister (1999), all 31 couples agreed that meeting the children’s material needs was the woman’s responsibility. Women often had to adopt “vigilant restraint” (36) over both their own and their partner’s spending in order to prioritize the children. Women were much more explicit than men about “going without” (37), and mothers’ going without even extended to food and essential toiletries. In 1996, Elaine Kempson surveyed 30 studies of family life on a low income, concluding with a description of the ideology of female self-sacrifice:

Surviving on a low income means going without ... Women tend to bear the brunt of trying to make the available money go as far as possible. They ... were the family members most likely to make sacrifices for their children. (2)

Much of this maternal self-sacrifice is hidden, even to social researchers. Sara Cantillon and Carol Newman (2005) analyzed the *1999 Living in Ireland Survey* (2,800 households) to establish whether the presence of a spouse in research interviews affected the answers women gave. Without allowing for the affect of spousal presence, wives’ deprivation scores were actually lower than husbands. However, after adjusting for spousal presence it was revealed that wives’ deprivation was considerably higher than husbands’. “It would seem unlikely that a respondent would admit, for example, to going to bed hungry or going without new clothes if the beneficiary of their self (or coerced) sacrifice is present” (33). Their conclusions, that spouses should be interviewed separately and that the presence of a spouse should be considered when analyzing results, are important and run counter to accepted practice.

The implications for the study of mothers in poverty

A number of profound flaws in current methods of counting those in poverty have been suggested. The household income measures preferred by governments are simple to collect and use, but render maternal poverty largely invisible. In summary:

- Some mothers are both in income poverty and materially deprived, other mothers are in income poverty but not materially deprived, and other mothers are materially deprived but not in income poverty.
- Household level income tells us little about the actual material circumstances of mothers.
- Mothers are generally poorer than their male partners and their

children, but just how much poorer is difficult to estimate.

- Maternal self-sacrifice means that mothers are likely to deprive themselves in favour of their children, but may hide this from researchers and even from their own partners.
- Maternal poverty is often “invisible” and difficult to “make visible” in research studies.

The plain fact is that the only honest answer to the question “how many mothers are in poverty?” is “we don’t know.” We can be certain, however, that it is a higher number than conventional measures suggest.

What are the implications of these findings for the study of mothers in poverty? Firstly, we need to develop better measures of maternal poverty. As long ago as 1991, Sarah Payne argued for a poverty measure that would enable the gendered nature of poverty to be explored. Such a measure should:

- focus on the *individual* experience of deprivation *within* the household
- include both material and social elements
- highlight experiences which might differ for each sex
- include measures of social isolation or deprivation
- incorporate the value of unpaid work in the home.

Yet, in 2003, Jane Millar emphasized that despite some substantive attempts, no such measure had been successfully developed. Whilst almost all commentators on women’s poverty argue that current ways of measuring poverty are inadequate, no one has yet developed a workable alternative for large populations. As a result, some of the most useful work on women’s poverty produced over the last 25 years has been qualitative or discursive (for example Pahl, 1989; Glendenning and Millar, 1987; Goode, Callender and Lister, 1988; Hooper et al., 2007). In developing better measures of maternal poverty researchers must not be prescriptive; there are many different, and valid, approaches.⁴

As a review, this article cannot be a presentation of my own research. However, the way I have attempted to develop a poverty measure that meets Payne’s (1991) standard may be usefully described here. When interviewing mothers, I adapted the 21 items in the UK government’s new material deprivation measure (DWP) into fifteen short questions. Five questions measured the level of maternal deprivation; five focused on household deprivation; five were about the children. Items included basic social and leisure activities, a family holiday, a warm home, a bicycle etc. For each question, the respondent could answer, “I have this,” “I don’t want to have it,” or “I would like to have it but can’t afford it.” The questions enabled a crude “deprivation scale,” ranked from zero to five, to be produced for the mother, the household and the children. Unsurprisingly, the mothers consistently scored higher than their household and their children on these scales. These scores were supported by a range of

open-ended questions in the interview, asking what the mother spent money on, how the family budget was managed and so on. These produced a range of data which supported the deprivation scoring, and in many cases explained how and why household finances were organized in ways that disproportionately deprived women. This is just one of the many possible ways that measurement of maternal poverty could be conducted.

The second implication for the study of maternal poverty is that a lot more research is needed. The poverty of mothers has received scant attention from the UK government (Lister, 2006; Rake 2001), and this is mirrored in academia. Within the work that *has* been done in the field, two themes dominate; paid work and single motherhood.⁵ Both these areas are important for understanding maternal poverty, but much of this research subtly pathologizes poor mothers; they are either defined as without a man or without a job, both of which are considered undesirable. Yet in the UK 60 percent of households below the official poverty line have two parents and 57 percent have an adult in work (DWP, 2008: 64). In fact, as has been argued throughout this article, what poor mothers lack is resources; all of the mothers in my own study were in families with two parents and a full-time wage.

Research not dominated by single motherhood or paid work is often focused on the effect that growing up in poverty has on children, rather than on the effect living in poverty has on mothers, for example *Support for Parents: The Best Start for Children* (HM Treasury/DFES 2005). A handful of books have directly dealt with the day to day lives of poor parents, fathers as well as mothers (Katz et al., 2007; Hooper et al., 2007; Ghate and Hazel, 2002; and see Attree [2005] for a synthesis of twelve qualitative studies⁶), but no major academic study of maternal poverty in the UK has been published. The closest thing to an in-depth investigation of mothers' poverty is the first chapter of *Women's and Children's Poverty: Making the Links* (WBG, 2005). Here, Ruth Lister reviews almost a hundred studies, academic articles, and government publications dealing with family poverty. Drawing on these, she concludes there is a strong and complex inter-connectedness between maternal and child poverty. She also finds that poverty has a strong negative effect on the mental and physical health of mothers and the well-being of their relationships. She cites many studies that have made passing reference to maternal poverty, but fewer that have it as their primary interest. Her overview of recent research in this area opens up numerous possibilities for further investigation, and highlights many gaps in our understanding.

The focus of this issue of *The Journal of Association of Research on Mothering* is very welcome and will hopefully make a substantial contribution to our understanding of maternal poverty, but much more work is undoubtedly required. Although, for all the reasons set out above, definite figures are impossible to establish, at least one in three women in the UK will experience maternal poverty at some point, with many resulting negative effects. Naomi Stadlen (2004) has written that "the whole of civilisation depends on the

work of mothers” (2), yet it seems we expect one third of them to do this work without the resources they need. This presents a major challenge both for those mothers and for society as whole.

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¹In fact the exact definition of “poverty” has been hotly debated for a century, but there is not room to explore those arguments here. For a brief summary, see Lister (2004, chapter 1) or Alcock (1993, chapter 1).

²For a description and discussion of these debates, see Lister (2004, chapter 2).

³A number of suggestions for improving the ways we count mothers in poverty can be found in Pantazis and Ruspini.

⁴In the U.S. context, Lee and Goerge (1999) have even suggested that “the number of single mothers receiving welfare [is] a proxy for poverty” (759), presumably meaning that mothers with partners or jobs are never poor.

⁵For a good introduction to similar work in the United States see Magnuson and Duncan (2002).

⁶For an on-line summary of Ruth Lister’s key arguments see: <http://www.cpag.org.uk/info/Povertyarticles/Poverty121/links.htm>.

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