

What should child poverty policy look like?
Disjunctures between what young people, policy-makers and academics think.

Rys Farthing
Jesus College
D.Phil

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Rys Farthing, Jesus College
DPhil (Social Policy)
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This research uses a novel policy writing method to explore young people's subjective understandings of the problems of poverty. Working with five groups of young people, aged 11 – 21, from some of the most financially deprived areas of England, it sought to draw out and explore their "policy imaginary", or the way they viewed the problems of poverty through a lens of ideal policy responses.

It unpacks these young people's policy imaginaries, and the life-narratives they discussed alongside these imaginaries, within a discourse of individualisation. Across four articles, it demonstrates and explores the complexities and ambiguities of these young people's thinkings. This thesis begins by suggesting that many of the problems of poverty they identify as important to their lives are structural, and that their understanding of the role of collective and political agency, rather than their own individual agency, in ending poverty. It then more specifically explores their understandings of their neighbourhoods and houses, which suggests that individualised factors often identified in other research, such as social contagion and epidemic neighbourhood effects, are not what they identify as most important in their local areas. It concludes by identifying a policy gap emerging along similar theoretical lines. Here, this research suggests that much of the policy directed towards these young people focuses on individualised problems, and their individual agency as a route out of poverty, but that this sort of policy response is not what these young people felt was needed.

However, this is not to suggest that these young people downplayed or dismissed their own agency in charting their life-pathways. Indeed, as much previous literature has found, these young people spoke fluently about the agency and opportunities they have in their lives, often seeming 'hyper-agentic'. However, this thesis suggests that exploring these young people's policy imaginary appears to create a medium through which they can talk both about their agency *and* the constraints and limitations low-incomes generate. It allowed them to bridge their highly agentic biographies to their socially structured histories, as they saw them.

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Foreword

This research emerged from a simple, perhaps naïve, concern about the lack of youthful voices contributing to the child poverty policy debate in the UK. As a new entrant to the UK's child poverty policy community, via employment in an NGO, I was struck by the volume of work going on that only fleetingly, if at all, tried to connect with the lived experiences of the young people it purported to assist. It struck me as peculiar that young people were not active participants in shaping the debates that had the capacity to, in turn, shape and structure their lives. Introducing this research, then, perhaps requires a brief overview of the UK's policy landscape, to place this initial concern and locate my research questions.

Introduction

Background and research questions

Over the last decade, policy-makers in the UK have been increasingly concerned with both child poverty, as a “problem” to solve, and children and young people’s participation, as a process to improve policy-making. Paradoxically, however, these twin concerns have not systematically overlapped in the UK; there have been only limited and sporadic attempts made towards youthful participation in child poverty policy development within the UK to date.

While it may have had a much longer genesis as a policy concern – dating back to the Poor Laws (Platt 2005) – child poverty has been the focus of resurgent policy interest over the last 15 years. The previous decade was ushered in by the then prime minister’s historic 1999 commitment to end child poverty (HM Government 2009), and bookended by the *Child Poverty Act 2010*. And the policy interest is on going, with the development of official strategies, such as *Child Poverty Strategy 2014-17* (HM Government 2014) and the establishment of an independent commission to review the government’s progress. This focus, I suggest, also reflects a longer standing policy interest in ‘at risk’ or ‘troubled’ (Bessant *et al.* 1998, Bessant 2009, Kelly 2000, Wyn & White 1997) children and young people. Traditionally, where members of the younger generation have been viewed either as a problem or in trouble – in this case, troubled by a lack of economic integration – government policy focus has tended to follow (see also Furlong 2013, p. 5). The current focus on childhood poverty then, could be seen as a small part of the ‘restless problematisation of the government of youth’ (Kelly 1999, p. 208).

Alongside this, the last quarter of a century has witnessed a subtle change in both the language and the framework within which policy-makers think about and develop policy for children and young people. There has been an emergent ‘acceptance, at least in principle, that children and young people are not simply objects of adult concern, but should be seen as citizens with rights’ (Cairns 2008, p. 217). The most easily evidenced example of this is the near universal ratification of the *UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) (1989). Having been ratified by every country bar Somalia and the United States, the CRC the world’s most ratified human rights treaty. One of the underpinning principles enshrined in the CRC, a principle

through which children and young people's citizenship could come to be recognised by policy-makers, is the right to participate. So important is this right to participate that it has been argued that 'failure to recognise' the legitimacy of children and young people's right to 'contribute to the debate about the construction of social policy is an important factor in understanding the marginal position and social exclusion of particular groups of children and young people' (Cairn 2008, p. 217; see also Brannen & Cairns 2005, and Brown 1998).

Not unlike its commitment to ending child poverty, the UK government's emergent commitment, in principle at least, to participation in policy development is well evidenced. From *Learning to Listen: Core Principles for the Involvement of Children and Young People* (DfES 2001), which presents participation as a core task for all government departments, to *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003) and *Listening, Hearing and Responding* (DoH 2002), the ambition to include children and young people's voices in the development of a broad range of social policies appears resolute¹.

While the rhetoric of participation may have infiltrated the British policy-making terrain in other areas, 'in the rush to combat social exclusion, children have sometimes been left behind as participants' (Davis & Hill 2006, p. 6). Children and young people's participation in child poverty policy production in the UK has been limited to date, despite explicitly targeting this age group. By and large, children and young people have not been extensively consulted with, nor involved in the development of child poverty policy in the UK. For example, the *New Approach to Child Poverty* (HM Government 2011) – the government's first flagship statement outlining its policy attempts to reduce child poverty – was released after five focus groups with 73 young people (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2011). Even this research had been twice outsourced, firstly to the Office of the Children's Commissioner and then to an independent research consultant (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2011). This may have added further to the distance between young people's thoughts and discussions and official policy deliberations. The Government's second and most recent policy, covering 2014-17 and released after the bulk of the field work reported here, fared better, with policy-makers

¹ However, this policy focus on participation is likewise not immune to critique as part of the 'restless problematisation' of youthful governance (Kelly 1999, pp. 208). As Bessant (2003) and Farthing (2012) have argued, it is possible for youth participation in policy making to be used as a technique of management, and a tool to tame otherwise "dangerous" young people via engagement in controlled dialogues.

attending six meetings with a total of 177 children and young people, and received two written submissions by young people² (R. Cienciala, personal communication, July 4th, 2013). Volume of engagement aside, it is difficult to see exactly how the policy-makers producing the strategy included these young people's thoughts, and to judge whether they, therefore, gave children and young people's voices had any influence.

Outside the policy arena, however, there have been many recent academic studies exploring the experience of poverty from children and young people's standpoints within the UK (see for example Davis & Ridge 1997, Attree 2004, 2006, Ridge 2002, Backett-Milburn *et al.* 2003). However, youthful understandings of child poverty *policy* remain an under-researched area (although Ridge (2007) has done some analysis on the impact of welfare to work type programmes on the children of single parents). Much of the extensive grey literature in the UK repeats this tendency, with many charities and think tanks producing reports that document children and young people's experiences of poverty, which is then used to inform the policy positioning of the charity / think tank (see, for example, Barnados 2005 or Willow 2001). Children and young people's actual involvement in the policy decision process has remained limited, never quite climbing above the rungs of 'consultation' (see Hart 1992).

Children and young people living in poverty within the UK, then, remain doubly silenced while policy debates rage around them (Ridge 2006, p. 23); firstly by socio-economic disadvantage and secondly as "minors".

While all this may document a policy lacuna, between youthful participation and poverty policy, it does not necessarily imply that such a gap might be problematic. However, this silence is consequential; failing to include children and young people's voices in the debates that construct social policy contributes further to the social and political marginalisation that poverty induces (Cairn 2008, p. 217). Previous literature around participation in policy outlines two potential reasons youthful participation might be important. Firstly, there is a democratic rationality, which values participation in policy-making as a marker of citizenship. Children and young people have, it is argued, the intrinsic right to participate and involving them heads the resurgent call for the democratisation of policy science (Dryzek 1990). That is, children and young people have the right to participate in decision-making processes

² One of which was from participants in this research

that affect them, as enshrined in article 12 of the CRC and this includes the right to participate in policy deliberations. Not including children or young people's voices in policy-making processes has been described as anti-democratic (Fischer 1998, p. 131), resulting in 'elite-oriented policy analysis, systemic and power-laden distortions of communication' between policy-makers and the community, ultimately thinning out democratic participation (Eubanks 2008, p. 1413). If the policy sciences are about improving democracy, with the ultimate goal of realising 'human dignity in theory and fact' (Laswell 1951, p. 15), young people's human right to participate, the logic goes, must be fulfilled in the policy process.

Secondly, it is often argued that participation in general, including youth participation, has the instrumental capacity to produce better, and more effective, policy. According to deLeon and Longobardi (2002, p. 39), 'based on the knowledge that (people) are best able to articulate their special needs (and given) this voice as a basis for action, government can be more informed and responsive'. Without engaging in discussions with citizens and communities, policy-making arguably becomes an ineffective, impossible (Dryzek 1990, p. 5) technocratic exercise (Fischer 1998b, p. 130), which has, for some authors, has "failed" (Fischer 1998a). That is, without recognition of the grass-roots experiences of the problems policy analysts are attempting to address, gained through conversations with citizens and the community, policy-making will, it is argued, remain largely irrelevant and yield 'bad advice' (Durning 1993, p. 297). It follows then, that input from children and young people, who are active social agents with their own interests and understandings, is needed for better policy-making.

This research started from this simple basis: that there might be normative and instrumental merit in including children and young people in policy-making processes, more specifically, filling the lacuna between UK based child poverty policy and participatory processes. This premise underpinned two initial, and broad, research questions:

- What might child poverty policy look like if young people participated in developing it?
- What, if anything, could this "youth developed" policy tell the policy-making and academic community?

It is important to note here, that this was not intended to develop a "complete", or more correct, alternative to official child poverty policy. Rather, it was simply an

investigation into the ways, if any, that policy might vary if it were developed through participatory processes, and what such variations might mean.

After the fact, it became apparent that the emergent findings and variations documented also provided the opportunity for a novel exploration around some key debates regarding young people's individualisation, their biographical management, and how poverty may impact on the life-pathways young people navigate. These sorts of debates have been central to the questions asked in youth studies about the persistence of inequality; 'are inequalities reproduced mainly as a result of the resources people have access to, or does the answer lie mainly in the differences in individuals' motivations and the ways they try to manage their lives?' (Furlong 2013, p. 8). Exploring young people's "policy imaginary" – the way in which they envisage ideal policy, from their perspectives – is, perhaps, an interesting way of tapping into their subjective understandings of how poverty and inequality shapes their pathways.

These questions, often grappled with within the domain of youth studies, are not entirely disconnected from the world of policy where this research began. Social policy domains in the developed world, including the UK, are increasingly moving towards policy models that seek to affect individual's life-pathways (see, for example, Walters 1997, Thompson 2011, p. 788, Rustin & Chamberlayne 2002). For example, arguing that 'reflexive self-monitoring and individualised life strategies' have become the 'norms of the new social order, a new kind of "governmentality"', Rustin and Chamberlayne (2002, p. 11) suggest that much social policy has adopted individualised orientations. This has been evidenced in youth policy (Walther 2006) and in policies directed towards the "poor":

'During the past decade, social policy regimes in virtually all Western democracies have turned from a rights-based and redistributive model of social governance toward so-called "active" welfare policies that place priority on the development of human capital, individual self-sufficiency, and labor force participation. These reforms are represented as offering the poor a "hand up" rather than "a hand out"' (Brodie 2007, p. 160).

However, even if policy approaches to "poor" children and young people are being premised upon young people's ability to affect their life-pathways, as many authors have suggested (Chamberlayne 2002, Skeggs 2004, Heinz 2009), this does not necessarily mean that children and young people are actually able to craft their life-pathways, ripe for policy intervention. That is, devising policy aimed at children and young people assumed to be "makers of their own destiny", when they may not, in

fact, be such self-making agents, might be one example of the impossibility of non-participatory policy-making (as per Dryzek 1990 & Fisher 1998a).

Given the relevance of these debates to this research, a third research question was subsequently added:

- What, if anything, does this “youth developed” policy tell us about young people’s subjective understanding about their life-pathways and individualised policy?

An overview of the sample

This project aimed to include 12-19 year olds who are – broadly – some of the targets of child poverty policy. Child poverty policy in the UK is directed towards dependent children, and those up to and including 19-year-olds if they are single, in education and living at home, who are living in households with below 60 per cent of median, equivalised household income (DWP 2014, p. 44). Within this research, five groups of children and young people were directly recruited in person, making it impractical to gather detailed knowledge of *household* finances. Instead, this research involved children and young people from “low income backgrounds” as a proxy. This proxy was geographic; each participant came from one of five geographic wards that, at the start of the research, had the highest rates of child poverty in England. In four wards, the likelihood of a child living in poverty exceeded 60 per cent, and in the fifth ward it exceeded 40 per cent. The national average, by this measure, at that time was 20.8 per cent (ECP 2011) (see table one, and appendix one for more detail about each site).

Every participant, therefore, had a “background” of low income; their neighbourhoods, community and peers were affected by poverty. The discussions that took place also indicated that many, if not all, children and young people involved were either living in, or had experienced, difficult household financial situations. They spoke of receiving free school meals and other means tested provisions, living in overcrowded housing, parental unemployment and household debt. Without the ability to probe directly into the detailed household finances of each participant to confirm that they lived below the poverty line, this geographic proxy was the best practicable approach.

	Then child poverty rate	JobSeekers rate	Average weekly earning	Region
Cambus	47 per cent	4.5 per cent	£427	North England
Leighton	64	6.2	£485	North England North England
Morton	64	9.0	£514	North England
Springsville	63	9.3	£813	London
Shelton	62	5.3	£1,100	London
UK average	21	3.5	£495	

Table one: Descriptors of each research location (source: NOMIS 2013)

Once five wards around England had been selected according to their high levels of child poverty, pre-existing youth clubs serving young people under 16, or 16-19 in full time education, were identified as gatekeepers. Young people were recruited directly from existing youth clubs in each area. Because the selection criterion was geographic, and because wards are relatively small geographic units (around 5,000 people live in a ward (ONS, no date)) the nature of the youth clubs that participated differed substantively. As outlined below, this led to the participation of five quite different groups (see table two). More information about each group is available in appendix one.

Area	N	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Disability
Cambus	25	Mixed	11-19, median 15	White British	One learning disability
Leighton	100 +	Mixed	10-19, core group 17-18	Very diverse	Mixed
Morton	7	Female	12-14	Mostly White British, some mixed race	One learning disability
Springville	6	Female	15-16	All British Asian	None
Shelton	6	Mixed	16-21, median 17	Mostly White British, some mixed race and British Arab	Many learning and physical disabilities
Total	144 +	Mixed, more female	11-21, median 16	Diverse	Mixed

Table 2: Descriptors of the groups involved.

An overview of the methods engaged

While participatory projects involving children and young people are often grounded theoretically and methodologically within the body of literature around youth participation, this research does not begin there. Three key issues, raised in recent critical literature around youth participation, instead suggested that an alternative approach could be fruitful:

- The focus of much work around youth participation has been methodological and prioritises thinking and rethinking typologies and models to “do” participation correctly. As Kay and Tisdall (2009, p. 318) suggest, such a methodological focus is ‘insufficient to address tensions in children and young people’s participation and assist in moving this participation forward’ (Kay & Tisdall 2009, p. 318).
- These methodological tools are potentially too hierarchical, and imply that the only goal of participation should always be youth control (see for example Hayward *et al.* 2004 & Tritter & McCallum 2006).
- Thinking around youth participation has suffered under competing and disjointed theoretical justifications (Farthing 2012), where participation is often embraced as an act of faith; a much revered, but little analysed habit (Cleverly 2002, p. 36). This has allowed participation in practice to potentially become a cosmetic device designed to secure young people’s compliance with existing power structures (see, for example, Bessant 2003, 2004).

With these critiques in mind, the methods used in this research were heavily informed by the body of literature around participatory policy analysis (PPA). PPA has a teleological as well as methodological focus, stresses the importance of dialogue and discussion rather than youth control, and has a strong democratic rationale. PPA is a practice informed by policy academics who share an analogous concern about the ability of non-experts and marginalised targets of policy to participate in policy processes, but does not start from a youth-centric, youth participation standpoint. Instead, their line of thinking has generated its own, policy-centric discourse around participation, which as a simple proposal, ‘requires the inclusion and greater representation of those who effect, and are affected by, a given policy’ (deLeon and Varda 2009, p. 60). This is not to suggest that the cannon of

literature around youth participation is incorrect, just that for this research, PPA appeared to offer an alternative pathway forward.

Theoretically, PPA often centralises Habermas's thinkings around communicative rationality and ideal speech (deLeon 1994a, p. 203). For Habermas (1979) and PPA theorists building on his work, rational communication and speech has an unparalleled consensus-making power that, ultimately, could guide all social actions, such as policy initiatives and directives, towards meaningful agreement. However, Habermas and proponents of PPA argue that, too often, the social and political domains where policy is developed do not facilitate such rational, consensus building communication. Instead, they suggest, these suffer from 'systematically distorted communication' (Habermas 1970). This distortion emerges because, among many other reasons, one participant in the conversation has 'a clear and persistent dominance in a policy arena over the other relevant parties and consistently avails itself of that authority' (deLeon & deLeon 2002, p. 482). This one-sidedness challenges the rational basis of any communication, undermining its consensus-making power and ability to generate consensually agreed upon social action. Correcting this distortion would require a continuous interchange of ideas and open discussion between all relevant parties (Fisher 2003, p. 201). Policy developed through such communication, for these theorists, would have transcended political and social systemic biases and be instead grounded in consensus. Given this, coordinated social actions – such as effective and efficient policy and programmes – could easily emerge.

However ideal this may sound, the conditions necessary to generate such rational communication – as Habermas calls them, the 'pragmatic presuppositions' for 'ideal speech' (Habermas 1993, p. 31) – are onerous;

- 1) Generality. No group affected by what is being discussed should be excluded from the discussion.
- 2) Autonomy. Every participant should have the equal chance to both present and critique any ideas that enter the discussion.
- 3) Ideal role taking. Every participant should be able to empathise with and seek to understand where ideas presented are "coming from".
- 4) Power neutrality. Any pre-existing power imbalances between participants need to be neutralised or redressed during the discussions. Power

imbalances must have no effect on the consensus that is developed during discussions.

- 5) Transparency. Every participant must be open and transparent about their goals and intentions, and must not seek to achieve these strategically through discussions (Habermas 1993, p. 31).

In practice, achieving these requirements may require unlimited time (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 91), implementing them has been considered both too time intensive and too cumbersome to be practical (deLeon 2006, p. 52), there has been a host of criticism exploring exactly who might be able to participate in such demanding process (Fraser 1990, Rienstra & Hook 2006), and much debate exists about whether power could ever be neutralised (Ashden & Owen 1999). However, while not buying into these Habermasian demands in totality, if seen as ideal conditions rather than strict requirements, they provides a way of understanding the potential value in including young people's voices in policy domains. According to this, young people need to participate in policy development to ensure the rational validity of the process itself, because ultimately, consensually agreed policy would be both intrinsically better and more democratic.

PPA, as a methodology, has been described as attempts to include citizens affected by policy, in policy development (Eubanks 2008), and at a very basic level, comprises two key, consecutive components (deLeon 1994a, p. 206). Firstly, ordinary citizens need to be engaged in policy processes over time, and encouraged to discursively address their selected issue, with input provided where required from "experts". These discursive conversations gradually build to become the second critical element; 'analytic fora' (deLeon 1994a). Step-by-step learning and communication of "expertise" between participants and analysts enable these analytic fora to become spaces where policy can be developed in a participatory fashion (Geurts and Vennix 1989 in Geurts & Joldersma 2001, p. 305). In terms of methods, this step-by-step learning and communication can be achieved through a wide range of techniques, from citizen juries to public inquiries (see, for example, Rowe & Fewster 2005, Tenbensen 2008). Focus groups, however, are a well-documented, powerful way of creating analytic fora for discussions (Rowe & Frewer 2005), and have been used with children and young people. Indeed they are a common research technique with children and young people more broadly, including those on low-incomes (Ridge 2009).

PPA can be applied to a range of different policy tasks, from defining policy problems to evaluating policies already implemented (MacRae & Wilde 1979, Geva-May 2002). However, as this was an attempt at supporting children and young people to create and develop 'imagined' policies, this research attempted to mimic the policy cycle from problem identification, policy analysis and deliberating on policy instruments to policy selection (as per Althuas *et. al.* 2007).

With this in mind, this research used a series of focus groups with the five groups of young people recruited. Focus groups were used to foster analytic fora, and were held sequentially to allow step-by-step learning. A series of four sequential research encounters were designed and delivered, taking between six to 17 focus group meetings, depending on the group. As the research process was designed to be flexible and responsive to participant's capacities and desires, each group was engaged in a slightly different process, and a fifth research encounter was subsequently, and unexpectedly, undertaken. Appendix two contains a detailed description of the actual methods and activities undertaken in each phase of the research, but they are described briefly below.

Firstly, discussions around what it was like, on average, to grow up "around here" for young people "like them" were facilitated. Using arts and crafts materials, a number of characters that embodied "average young people", like the participants, were developed. The lives, experiences and predicted life-pathways of these characters were discussed and developed. This process was undertaken to depersonalise what could have been a potentially stigmatising research process (Ridge 2002), by allowing participants to discuss sensitive topics by referring to characters lives and life-pathways, rather than their own. This allowed conversations bridging the individual to the social to emerge. Conversations often shifted from '*me*', '*my story*' or '*for my family*' to a character's experiences sometimes within the same sentence, depending on the calculations of the narrator.

It also facilitated some rich deliberation around common and unique experiences and life-pathways, as these young people perceived them. Some youth-friendly statistics were also provided at this stage to assist. These statistics were derived from the child-poverty *Basket of Indicators* data set (DCSF 2010) that official policy-makers would have access to and was an attempt to realise the role of expertise (in this case, my own) in "tooling up" citizens to participate in policy development (as per Durning 1993, p. 305).

This phase, which generally took one or two meetings, produced a range of crafted (and, in two cases, “rapped” characters) to depersonalise the research process, and some lengthy and deep deliberations about what were average experiences and life-pathways for these young people.

Secondly, we moved on to problematizing and appreciating aspects of these character’s lives. This was designed to move from the sort of discussion and consultation phase of the policy cycle, on to problem identification (Althuas *et. al.* 2007). Photo-voice walking tours and brainstorming were engaged to facilitate deliberations. As a research technique, using photo-voice with young people has been described as ‘promoting critical dialogue and knowledge about community issues through group discussion’, and able to reach policy-makers (Wang 2006, p. 147), two key teleological aims of this research.

Photos of their own, and their characters’, lives were taken individually, presented back to the group and sorted into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ aspects of theirs’, and their characters’, lives. This listing activity was highly deliberative and a rich source of information, with discussions covering why participants captured certain images, whether they thought they were good or bad, neither or both. For example, one photograph showed a local ethnic market where cheap food and ‘*knock off trainers*’ were sold. The intent of this image, as described by the photographer, was to show the ‘good’ market and the ‘good’ multiculturalism in their area. However, the discussions with the group then turned to explore why they felt their neighbourhood had *one* designated ethnic area, and why ethnic food was not available on the high street. They then went on to discuss the poverty that many ethnic families in their area face, and question if poverty had led to ghettoization, quite literally leaving them living in a different world (and walking in different shoes) to the “rest of the community”. The photograph was then moved on to the bad pile, and described as an image of ethnic divisions. Brainstorming activities then fleshed out these visible lists (by for example, adding items like ‘*cuts to EMA*’) into “completed” lists of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ as the participants saw them.

The final outcome of this second phase, which took between one and three meetings, was a deliberately produced list of what the participant’s problematised or appreciated about theirs and their “average” youthful lives.

Thirdly, the group moved on to designing policies by collectively imagining, deliberating and deciding on solutions to the '*bad*' issues they had listed, and ways to enhance the '*good*' aspects. Using brainstorming or drama, the groups discussed, wrote and re-wrote hundreds of policy ideas to address all of the items on their '*good*' and '*bad*' lists. This included suggestions such as '*build bigger houses*' or '*clean the streets more often*'. Suggestions were made by individuals, but each one was interrogated by the whole group, discussed and decided upon. Their final list of ideas became their policy document, and took between two and eight meetings to construct.

Fourthly, the group engaged in discussion around, and undertaking, youth-led actions. Each group was invited, should they want to, to take some actions around their policies, and here the research agenda was then handed over to groups. Participants decided that they wanted to take some actions, and were supported to (among other actions) launch their policies at an event at Parliament supported by the APPG Poverty (APPG), directly fix "problems" they identified, and peer-to-peer replication of the research. The outcome of this phase, which took anywhere between three and 15 meetings (although many actions are still on-going), was a national meeting with policy decision-makers, a series of local meetings with local decision-makers and a set of localised actions.

Fifthly, and finally, an unexpected national component followed. While most of the previous four phases were completed by early 2013, this phase took place in 2014. In late 2013, the APPG approached me to see whether it would be possible to develop a national "youth developed" anti-poverty policy, as part of their programme of work running up to the national election in 2015. This invitation was passed back to participants, accepted, and support from a charity capable of coordinating the logistics and safeguarding of such a venture sought.

The national policy was written over two residentials held in 2014, a two-day residential in January and a three-day residential in August. Thirty-eight participants, representing all five local areas, were selected via convenience sampling. Young people who were able to attend did so; in some areas, all initial participants came, while in others, only some attended.

The residentials' activities mirrored the earlier local methodologies. For example, we began by replicating phase one, where we constructed average "English lives" for

young people “like them”. The characters developed in the local work were all re-presented, and used as food for thought to deliberate on common life-pathways and experiences for low-income young people around England. Phase two, where we brainstormed the problems/ good aspects of their lives and life-pathways, was also repeated. Here too, we built on their earlier work. Each group, for example, presented the ideas they outlined in their own local policy, and then discussed and deliberated around if these were common, unique or important to the English characters, “like them”.

From this process, the group deliberated and developed a national child poverty policy by repeating phase three. They called their final policy a ‘*Manifesto so Poverty Ends Now*’. This manifesto is much shorter than their local policies, however, as article four outlines, their brevity does not reflect a lack of thought, and they are planning some actions around this too.

The data gathered, and analysis

Each and every focus group held during phases one to four was recorded and transcribed. This generated an incredibly rich data set of 115 hours of focus group transcript. In addition, there were multiple sources of visual data, from posters of characters, 600 plus photos of ‘goods’ and ‘bads’ from the five regions, to raps and speeches delivered. Importantly, however, five local policies were developed (see figure one), and one national policy (included in the fourth article).

The analysis of this data was heavily informed by Bacchi’s (2009) methodological proposals for analysing policy documents, Blumer’s (1969) idea of ‘sensitising concepts’ and the focus in grounded theory on deriving inductive findings from systematically collected data (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

Firstly, analysis began by working from the policy documents produced by the young people. In many ways, these documents represented the agreed upon synthesis of the young people’s thinkings, as deliberated on and prepared by the research participants themselves. This is not to suggest that conflicting discussions, debates or silences were overlooked or ignored. Indeed, many of the findings presented in the articles below explicitly unpack inherent silences and contradictions within their policy documents. Rather, the documents themselves were prioritised as a starting point to generate sensitising concepts.



Figure one: two examples of local policies.

Sensitising concepts provide a ‘general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances’ and rather than providing definitive descriptions of what to see, suggest ‘directions along which to look’ (Blumer 1969, p. 148). As a number of authors have noted (Gilgun 2007, p. 7, Bowen 2006) research often begins with some sort of pre-sensitised concepts in mind, whether ‘researchers state this or not, and whether they are aware of them or not’. This research explicitly aimed to develop sensitising concepts from the policy documents developed by these young people, rather than from deductive reasoning. In this sense, it aimed to also start the *analysis* from the standpoints of the young people themselves.

To develop the sensitising concepts, the approach of Bacchi (2009) – ‘what is the problem represented to be’ – was applied to the policy documents. In this approach, Bacchi (2009) argues that policy documents themselves can be meaningful artefacts, embodying the policy-authors’ intent and understandings about the very nature of the problem they are trying to address. She suggests that policy documents themselves are ‘problematizing activities’ (2009, p. xi), and that meaning can be “read off” from them. Her approach

‘challenges the all-too-common tendency to describe policy-makers as “problem solvers”, as if “problems” sit outside the policy process, waiting to be addressed and “fixed”’. By contrast (her) approach recommends “working

backwards” from concrete proposals to reveal what is represented to be the “problem” within those proposals’ (2009, p. 3).

To work backwards from a policy document to uncover the core nature of the problem it addresses, Bacchi (2009) proposes a methodological tool, in the form of a series of six questions:

- 1) What’s the “problem” represented to be in a specific policy document?
- 2) What assumptions underlie this representation?
- 3) How has this representation of the problem come about?
- 4) What has been left out of this problematisation? Where are the “silences” in a document, can the problem be thought about differently?
- 5) What are the effects of this problematisation?
- 6) How/Where has this representation of the problem been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned or disrupted?

This approach was intended for analysis of published, and implemented “official” policies (Bacchi 2009), meaning all six steps were not equally relevant to these young people’s documents. The first four questions were applied to all the young people’s policy documents, local and national, to make explicit the nature of the problems, the silences and the assumptions behind their perceived problems. Less reflection around the effects of this problematisation, or its dissemination, was afforded. This is because these particular policy documents were not disseminated nor implemented, in order to generate large-scale effects. Rather, they simply point to these young people’s policy imaginary. The ideas generated from this activity formed the sensitising concepts that then drove the thematic analysis of all research data, including policy documents, field notes, transcripts and letters to politicians.

The analysis, guided by these sensitised concepts, was inductive and sought to generate themes from the data. The thematic analysis here bore some resemblances to the analysis undertaken in grounded theory. That is, it involved the ‘search for and identification of common thread that extended throughout’ the data set (Morse & Field 1995, p. 139). Further, these were not immediately apparent, but required line-by-line coding, as well as paragraph and whole “data unit” coding (be it a focus group transcript or a drawing of a character) to unpack. As Morse and Field (1995, p. 139) put it, this required stepping back from the data and considering what “these folk are trying to tell me” (as the theme was hidden beneath the surface’ of the data. However, once themes were identified, they seemed almost obvious, and often

linked large swathes of data together coherently (as per Morse & Field 1995, Bowen 2006).

While constant comparisons, and data analysis conducted alongside collection was initially intended and largely undertaken – as is central to grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1990) – the demanding nature of the sequential research encounters meant this was not always possible. For example, where groups chose to meet again the next day, as it was term break and they wanted to organise actions or finalise policies before school returned, for example, it was impossible to transcribe and code data overnight, alongside typing up post-it notes or preparing other materials for the next day's meeting. In this sense, the ideal timelines of the research encounters were trumped by the desired timelines of the participants. Again, this prioritisation of participants' timelines over researcher's timelines was informed by principles of participation and a desire to allow participants to drive the research agenda. However, the vast majority of the analysis was undertaken during the research phase, to allow as much constant comparison as possible.

This thematic coding was conducted using Dedoose software. Dedoose was chosen pragmatically; at the time, NVivo did not work on Macs, and the University did not have student licences for N*dist. Other computer assisted qualitative data analysis software, such as QDA miner, Qualrus and Max QDA, did not have the ability to code multi-media data, such as photographs. Further, Dedoose's ability to upload data from remote locations appealed, as reams of large data files (such as high resolution images or sound recordings of raps) were generated from around various research sites.

An overview of findings and articles presented

This thesis-by-articles presents four journal articles that distil this analysis, and address the three research questions from different angles, with different audiences and publications in mind.

The first article 'What's wrong with being poor? The problems of poverty, as young people describe them', is intended for *Children and Society*, and therefore a

practitioner audience. It is an attempt, largely, to address the first research question: 'what might child poverty policy look like if young people wrote it?' It aims to describe the problems these young people talked about in their local policies, as well as the methods engaged in their production. It describes three common problems of poverty, from these young people's standpoints;

- Problems of housing: which were described by research participants as both symbolic and real. Living in ugly, run-down neighbourhoods left the young people involved in this research feeling unimportant, while poor quality housing reduced their quality of life.
- Problems of education; which framed schools, colleges and universities as "ill-fitting" institutions for their lives. High costs mean these young people could not make the most of these institutions, and they were not designed to do what these young people felt schools, colleges and universities should do.
- Problems of crime: which appeared to be rife, but representation of criminals and what ought to be done lacked consensus.

It also argues that a different type of agency and a different role for politics in shaping these young people's experiences, as they see it, emerges from this research. When contrasting this research to other research around child poverty from young people's standpoints, this article suggests that these methods highlight a role for more collective and political types of agency (as per Lister 2004), whereas previous research emphasised everyday and individual agencies. In this sense, this article suggests that academics undertaking, or practitioners utilising, research from young people's standpoints consider how the methods engaged may frame the types of agency that emerge in their research findings.

In terms of reflecting on both the democratic and efficiency rationales justifying participation in policy, this article also suggests that moving from young people's subjective narratives about their lives on low incomes, which much previous research has documented, to policy about their lives, *ought* not be as simple an exercise as matching the stories they tell to the problems policy addresses.

In part, the purpose for outlining these findings had an academic telos, to answer the first of my research questions, by describing what child poverty policy developed by young people from low-income backgrounds addresses, and why. It also had a partly practical telos, to communicate with practitioners engaged in child poverty policy debates in the UK.

The second article, 'Ends effects: Neighbourhood effects as young people describe them', is intended for *Housing Studies*. It is also oriented towards describing what policy written by young people might look like, but moves on to explore what this might mean for policy-makers and academics. It explores one specific area described by the young people in this research, neighbourhoods and housing, and compares this to academic and policy discussions that are concurrently exploring this issue.

The specific problem of local areas was not chosen randomly from the collection of problems that these young people identified. Rather, it contributes to and informs the broader narrative connecting all four articles. As Furlong and Cartmel (1997) note, while late-modernity might be marked by processes of globalisation and transformations of time, local places and spaces remain crucially important mediators of life-pathways for many young people (see also Mitchell et. al 2010, p. 219, Shildrick et al. 2009, Furlong et al. 1996). Exploring how these young people perceive "the local" as shaping their life-pathways contributes to the broader analysis of how low incomes affects their subjective pathways, and their understandings of local agency and global structures.

This article suggests that while many academic studies have explored the impacts of growing up in deprived neighbourhoods on young people – "neighbourhood effects", as they are often referred to – albeit with little consensus around the nature and extent of this impact, this body of literature is largely unified by the accentuation of adult voice in defining the effects that might matter. Young people's perspectives on what "neighbourhood effects" might matter, have been, largely, absent. While currently, 15 theories about how deprived neighbourhoods affect young people have been proposed (Galster 2010), ranging from social contagion models to postcode stigma, this article outlines the problems and mechanisms the young people in this research described. It documents these young people's problems with run down housing and run down neighbourhoods, and how both of these issues were described as reducing their quality of life and making them feel angry about being abandoned to deteriorating neighbourhoods by those with power and authority. It suggests that, for the young people involved in this research, "neighbourhood effects" around the perceptions of physical surroundings, relative deprivation and institutional discrimination punctuate their experiences growing up in deprived neighbourhoods.

The purpose of this article was an attempt to insert some youthful voice into a (policy relevant) area of academic debate that has, so far, spoken a lot about what might matter for young people, but little to young people. It aims to both contribute to the on-going academic discussion around “neighbourhood effects” and encourage some reflection on the potential merits of youth participation in these debates. *Housing Studies* – as far as I am aware – appears to be the leading journal in discussing “neighbourhood effects”, so seemed to be the ideal home for this alternative, youth-centric interjection.

The third article – ‘Writing in a role for structure’ – moves on to addressing the final research question; ‘what, if anything, does this “youth developed” policy tell us about young people’s subjective understanding about life-pathways and individualised policy?’ It is intended for the *Journal of Youth Studies* and explores what these young people’s imagined policy discourses say about how they understand the impacts of poverty on their life-pathways.

It starts from the literature around the impacts of individualisation on young people’s lives, suggesting that while there is much discussion around the (positive) possibilities of ‘choice biographies’ (du Bois-Raymond 1998) and self-making among the young that individualisation opens up, there is also discussion and debate around the (more sinister) possibilities of ‘epistemological fallacies’ (Furlong & Cartmel 1997), which blinds young people, and academics, to the limits of their self-making capacities. This article interrogates this idea of ‘epistemological fallacies’ for the young people involved in this research. It compares the focus group discussions they have about their lives with the local policies they wrote to address the problems of their lives, suggesting that they are far less blind to the limits of their own agency than individualisation theorists may predict, and are in fact acutely aware of ‘how impossible the task of finding biographical solutions’ (Beck 2007, p. 685) to social problems can be.

It also suggests that this policy-writing method might go some way to addressing the problematic silence around structure that emerges when researchers talk to young people about their lives and life-pathways. For example, Brannen and Nilsen (2007, p. 157, emphasis added) suggest that ‘even though (many young people) *may not refer to them in interviews or focus groups*’ they ‘continue to think about their lives in the future in ways that are set within the current opportunity structures and the

resources that are available to them' (see also Brannen & Nilsen 2002, 2005, Nilsen *et al.* 2002). The particular policy-writing method engaged here seems to have created a safe medium through which the young people involved in this research could clearly talk about the opportunity structures and resources that they felt shaped their lives.

In some ways, this article shifted the attention of my data and findings into a theoretical terrain. It aims to shed light on a well-explored academic discussion – individualisation and its impacts on young people's life-pathways – but refracted through a different methodological lens. So while much previous research has grappled with these ideas, it has often relied on biographical methods to understanding youthful transitions (Furlong 2013, p. 9), both subjectively (via qualitative research such as Lehmann 2004, Thomson *et al.* 2002) or objectively (via comparative policy research such as Walther 2006). However, 'research and analysis in this field (of young people and social change) has a tendency to either over-emphasise the continuities of deep-seated structural influences or to over-emphasise the discontinuities and changes in young people's lives' (Evans 2002, p. 246, see also Woodman 2010, p. 247). Some theorists, such as Gudmundsoon (2000 in Evans 2002), suggest that this dual over-emphasising is partly a methodological artefact and argues for a greater diversity in research methodology to bridge or explore the two. This article then, attempted to offer a different perspective on this structure/agency debate in explorations of young people's life-pathways, by using policy-writing methods.

The fourth article – 'Choosing not to choose' – bridges and connects the third and fourth research questions, exploring how these young people describe the limits of their agency in their own life-pathways, and what this potentially means for policy that targets them. It is also intended for the *Journal of Youth Studies*.

It is underpinned by a premise that social policy is a particularly telling domain of analysis through which to explore theories of individualisation. Beck (2007) argues that "proof" for the theory of individualisation is to be found in the relationship between the state and the individual, between the changing conception of citizenship and statehood. He critiques the idea – evident in much youth studies (including my own modest contribution in 'Writing in a role for structure') – that individualisation is a subjective phenomenon concerning self-identity. Beck suggests instead that the 'falsification (and with it also the empirical proof of the individualisation hypothesis) is

not to be found primarily in the contingency of attitudes and modes of behaviours of individuals... but in the *relationship between state and individualisation*' (Beck 2007, p. 681). This article attempts to take up this challenge, in part, by exploring official policy discourses targeting the participants in this research. It explores the relationship between the state and "poor" young people, as crafted (or performed) in the official English child poverty policy. However, assuming that there is still merit in understanding young people's subjective understandings of the state and its impact on their lives, this article also explores these participants' relationship to this official performance.

It argues that while there has been much focus on young people's subjective experiences of individualisation – especially within youth studies – there has been less focus on the extent to which, and ways in which, young people are being *institutionally* individualized (Beck 2007). It explores how the young people involved in this research appear to be individualised "from above" by policy, using England's current child poverty policy as a case in point. It then contrasts this institutional "policy push" towards individualised self-making, directed at low-income British young people, with the alternate national policy these young people developed. These young people's (imagined) national policy offers a counter-performance of collectivism and universalism, in contrast to the institutional "push" directed at them. It suggests that there is, perhaps, a fruitful discussion to be had about the ways young people potentially are individualisation "from above" and potentially resist or reject such pressures.

Combined, these articles are located within a discourse of individualisation, and their conclusions explore how current academic and policy debates often do not match these young people's unique policy imaginaries; it documents an array of disjunctures. Previous research with low-income children and young people, or research addressing neighbourhood affects, for example, often highlights different types of agency, or different affecting issues, than these young people's policy imaginary outlines. Further, academic understandings around young people's subjective experiences of individualisation, and official performances of individualisation aimed at them, potentially clash with what these young people describe. This, perhaps, suggests that this method, or this particular research, has elucidated a different vision of these young people's reality than previous research might have predicted. Here, instead of unadulterated feelings of personal and everyday agency, these young people are aware of structural limitations and the

need for collective and political agency to tackle them. Instead of viewing individual problems as central to poverty and the perpetuation of deprivation in their neighbourhoods, structural problems take prominence. Different subjective visions of the agency versus structure debate have emerged from this research.

The policy and academic relevance of these disjunctures are unpacked in the concluding chapter, but in short, return to the aims of this research. These disjunctures suggest that policy made in a participatory fashion may differ from policy made through official processes, and that this might be meaningful in so far as democratising policy-making and academia matters. If the democratisation of policy-making matters, then reflections around the mismatch in policy agendas, and the potential desire for an alternative policy discourse is essential part of democratising policy-making processes. That is, including young people in policy-making deliberations is required, and as this research suggests, could subtly alter policy foci. In terms of democratising research, where this can be considered to be developing a more nuanced canon of knowledge about the understandings of research subjects themselves, and including them in research agenda-setting, this research has suggested that methods such as those undertaken here could be useful. These methods generated some different and new insights into young people's lives and life-pathways, as well as suggesting that the nature of the research encounters engaged may shape research findings in ways that were previously not documented.

Conclusion

This research emerged from an initial concern about the lack of youthful voices in the UK's child poverty policy debate. The lack of participation might be problematic because it has the capacity to both violate young people's right to participate, and also reduce the quality of policy debates. The aim of this research, then, was to explore what "filling this gap" might look like, and what could be learned from undertaking such an exercise. It asked three, interconnected research questions;

- What might child poverty policy look like if young people participated in developing it?
- What, if anything, could this "youth developed" policy tell the policy-making and academic community?

- What, if anything, does this “youth developed” policy tell us about young people’s subjective understanding about their life-pathways and individualised policy?

It used a repeated focus group method, informed by the body of literature around participatory policy analysis, to explore these questions. Five groups of young people, over 144 in total, from some of the most financially deprived parts of England took part in these focus groups, where they wrote their own local and one national child poverty policy. Aside from writing these policies, these young people provided rich descriptions of their life experiences and life-pathways, as they navigate them.

Their discussions and policies informed four articles presented in the subsequent chapters;

- ‘What’s wrong with being poor?’ which outlines the problems of poverty identified by these young people in their five local strategies, and highlights a different type of agency that is emphasised from their standpoints
- ‘*Ends effects*’ which outlines how these young people described their problems of neighbourhoods and housing, and compares these to current academic debates
- ‘Writing in a role for structure’ which outlines these young people’s subjective ideas about their own agency, and how despite describing themselves as highly agentic, they were very aware of the structural barriers limiting their lives and life-pathways
- ‘Choosing not to choose’ which documents contemporary policy performances of individualisation directed at young people on low-incomes, via the official child poverty policy in England. It then contrasts this to the performances of collectivism and universalism demonstrated by these research participants in their own national policy

Table three outlines how these four article intersect with the three research questions posed above.

These four articles, in sum, locate this research within an academic discourse of individualisation by exploring these young people’s policy imaginaries. They use these young people’s local and national policy imaginaries, and the deliberations they undertook in describing them, to problematise government and academic

discourse which may suggest that individuals themselves are responsible for the problems of poverty. Before I can turn to develop this overarching argument, however, each article needs to be presented.

Research question:	Addressed in:
What might child poverty policy look like if young people participated in developing it?	‘What’s wrong with being poor?’ – which describes the types of problems (and non-problems) these young people spoke of ‘Ends effects’ – which describes the types of problems around neighbourhoods and housing that these young people identified
What, if anything, could this “youth developed” policy tell the policy-making and academic community?	‘Ends effects’ – which specifically outlines how these young people’s policy suggestions challenge current policy and academic discourse around neighbourhood effects ‘Writing in a role for structure’ – which outlines the role of structure and agency, as described by participants, in shaping their life-pathways. It also describes how this methodology may challenge the “silence” around structure that previous research has found
What, if anything, does this ‘youth developed’ policy tell us about young people’s subjective understanding about their life-pathways and individualised policy?	‘Writing in a role for structure’ – which suggests that these young people felt that policy should not target their individual agency to address their problems of poverty, but rather more structural issues ‘Choosing not to choose’ – which suggests that official policy performances targeted at low-income young people in the UK “pushes” them towards individualised self-making projects, but that these young people rejected this, and instead, place value on policies that emphasise collectivism and universalism.

Table three: The research questions and the articles that address them

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Legislation

Child Poverty Act 2010 UK

Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 UN

What's wrong with being poor? The problems of poverty, as young people describe them

This article explores how young people living in low-income neighbourhoods problematise their own lives, using data generated as part of a participatory policy project with five groups of young people, aged 11-21. Three common problems were identified; housing, education and crime, as well as one common silence around their own agency. This silence is perhaps substituted by a focus on collective agency and politics, suggesting that perhaps young people can see poverty as a more collective problem than previous research may highlight.

The last 15 years witnessed an increasing policy focus on child poverty in the UK; ushered in a historic commitment to end child poverty within a generation (BBC 1999), the '00s were bookended by the *Child Poverty Act 2010*, while policy work on child poverty continues (HM Government 2014). At the same time, there has been a broader push for participation in policy-making processes, especially for children and young people (Davis & Hill 2006, Tisdall & Davis 2004, Pinkerton 2004). However, these twin concerns – around child poverty policy and youthful participation – rarely overlapped, leaving children and young people often silenced in these poverty policy debates (Ridge 2006, p. 23, Davis & Hill 2006, p. 6).

In the research domain, however, there was an emergent recognition that the children and young people are experts in their own lives (Qvortrup *et. al.* 2009, Percy 2003), that they have unique insights in to the experiences of living in poverty (Ridge 2002, Redmond 2008), and that these insights are policy relevant (Ridge 2009). This lead to a wide range of (policy relevant) studies of the subjective experiences of poverty for children and young people, which, for the purposes of later analysis, are very briefly sketched out below.

A number of literature reviews/meta-analyses (Attree 2004, 2006, Ridge 2009, Redmond 2008) collectively identified four inter-related, common themes among the vast diversity of subjective explorations of child poverty. Firstly, the social nature of poverty was stressed across a range of studies (e.g. Ridge 2002, Crowley & Vulliamy 2007, Attree 2004), with children and young people talking about, for example, insurmountable costs to socialising (Willow 2001, Ridge 2002, p. 64), or the damaging shame and stigma of poverty (Daly & Leonard 2002, p. 137, Willow 2001,

Sutton 2009). School was also often discussed as a particular space where the social experience of poverty felt amplified (Ridge 2002, Fortier 2006, p. 121). Secondly, previous studies discussed the impact of low-incomes on family dynamics, with children and young people emphasising the family stress poverty can induce, from tensions over limited resources, a lack of time together as parents juggle work and childcare, to boredom because there wasn't enough money to do anything together (Crowley & Vulliamy 2007, Walker *et al.* 2008, p. 433). Thirdly, neighbourhoods and housing emerged as crucially important, with children and young people describing their neighbourhoods as lacking resources and services (Wager *et al.* 2010, Morrow 2001), and being unwelcoming and unsafe (Morrow 2001, Daly & Leonard 2002, Sutton 2008). Poor quality housing was described by children and young people as a cause of ill-health, anxiety and a general sense of unhappiness (Ridge 2002, Rice 2006).

Finally, and importantly for the analysis developed below, the strong mediating capacity of children and young people's agency was highlighted. They were not described as *passive* victims of their family's low-incomes but active agents who crafted their own experiences. Most studies stressed 'the extent to which children's agency matters, firstly for themselves, to make sense of their situation and to interpret positively or otherwise; secondly, for their parents and families, to help them cope' (Redmond 2008, p. 1). Sophisticated coping and mitigating strategies were described, from limiting their own expectations (Attree 2006), not going on school trips (Ridge 2002), to circumnavigating poverty via part-time work or complex saving strategies (Ridge 2002). To some extent, this focus on agency may reflect the theoretical framework embraced by many of these studies – the New Sociology of Childhood (Redmond 2008, p. 1, Fairbrother *et al.* 2012, p. 529) – that starts from the premise that children and young people are competent social actors, who use agency to construct their social worlds (Prout & James 1997, Qvortrup *et al.* 2009).

Methodologically, a range of different research techniques have been used to tap into these subjective understandings, from one-to-one interviewing (Ridge 2009, Redmond 2008, Attree 2004, 2006), to more novel techniques like photography (Morrow 2001, Percy 2003) or puppetry (Willow 2001, Fortier 2006). However, participatory research methods (while often used in qualitative research with low-income adults [Ridge 2009]) are rarely used in research with children and young people living on low-incomes. Sutton (2007) is, perhaps, a notable exception, by

involving participants in setting the research agenda and providing feedback about the findings.

While many typologies of youthful participation exist, specifically focusing on research, Mason and Urquhart (2001) suggest that there are three types of participation:

- 'Adultist' research; adults control the agenda and often frame children and young people as developmentally incomplete
- 'Child rights' research; frames children and young people as competent social actors with the right to speak and be heard
- 'Children's movement' research; encourages and enables children and young people to 'set the agenda and remain in control of the agenda and use it to effect political change' (Redmond 2008, p. 10)

Most of this previous literature appears to fit within the "child rights" research model, engaging youth-friendly techniques to enable children and young people to *speak* about growing up on low-incomes and be *heard* via research outputs. Research encouraging children and young people to take charge of the research agenda and use it to effect political change has, to date, been largely absent.

Such "child-rights" research has, however, still produced policy-relevant subjective insights, and generated data able to be integrated in to policy-making processes *by* adults. (Questions around the efficacy of children and young people's participation in policy-making processes have been raised [Elsley 2004, Tisdall & David 2004], making such research all the more important). However, this article describes one attempt to go one step beyond this process, and explore what, if any, subjective understandings of child poverty emerge when children and young people are encouraged to complete this policy-making process themselves, and take control of the research agenda and use it for political change.

Five groups of young people¹ from some of the most financially deprived areas within England were engaged in this participatory process, and assisted to develop their own child poverty policies. This article begins by describing this process, and goes on to explore the different problems (and solutions) that these young people identified; including issues around housing, education, crime, a silence around their

¹ This research uses the language of "young people" rather than "children". While either could be the majority of participants in this research, this was the preferred language of the participants themselves.

own agency and a focus on collective issues and problems. This potentially suggests that the understandings that emerge from this process are more able to emphasise the role of collective political problems, as these young people see them, than previous research methods.

The nature of the different problems that young people on low-incomes articulate matters – they take aim at the heart of what we understand to be the problems of poverty for young people and, ultimately, what ought to be done.

Involving young people in writing policy

Five groups of young people were recruited for this research, from youth groups in wards with high levels of child poverty across England, (four above 60 per cent, and one above 45 per cent, the UK average by this measure was 20 per cent (ECP 2011)). Groups were selected by convenience sampling – some wards only contained one existing youth group, in others, a number were contacted and the most interested pursued. As a result, the sample was diverse, covering different ages, genders, ethnicities and disability status (see figure one). Many of the discussions and personal narratives offered by participants suggested that they were, however, unified, by their experiences of a low-income, both their own and their communities.

Area	N	Gender	Age
Cambus	25	Mixed	11-19, median 15
Leighton	100+	Mixed	10-19, core group 17-18
Morton	7	Female	12-14
Springville	6	Female	15-16
Shelton	6	Mixed	16-21, median 17
Total	144+	Mixed, more female	11-21, median 16

Figure one: sample groups

How the project was explained to participants

Interested youth groups were met in person, over one or two regular youth-work sessions (cooking clubs, skating trips, etc.). Here, the research was described as a project to see what young people like themselves, who are often the targets of attempts to improve their lives, would actually like to happen. Participants were

described as “experts in their own lives” and the research as a way for them to share this expertise. While initial discussions were not couched in the language of poverty, due to potential stigma (see Sutton 2009, p. 279), the research was framed as a sort of “response to” policy-makers, including those writing poverty policy about their areas/lives. Much of the subsequent discussion was not policy-oriented, reflecting the self-directed research agendas the young people generated. However, they were invited to explicitly create an alternative to their local child poverty strategies (at phase 3, below), and some of their actions continued this policy focus.

The research process itself involved a series of four sequential investigations, spread over six–17 meetings held (mostly) weekly for phases one to three (below), but spread over a year including all actions discussed here. It was designed to loosely mimic the ‘policy cycle’ (Althuas *et. al.* 2007).

The same researcher moderated all focus groups, and while there was some dynamics, the vast majority of participants attended all of the sessions, and some are still involved in on-going actions.

1. Discussions around what it was like, “on average”, to grow up “like them”

There is much potential shame associated with being “poor” (Lister 2004), and therefore, much risk involved with labelling young people as poor during a research encounter (Ridge 2002). While focus groups were necessary to facilitate the collaborative inquiry this research was oriented towards, they also ran the risk of ‘leaving a child painfully exposed’ (Ridge 2002, p. 9). To minimise this risk, each group began by “depersonalising” these discussions; using arts and crafts, a number of “average young” characters were constructed, based on discussion about what it was like “on average” to grow up for young people “like them”, “around here”. Later discussions bounced between ‘*me*’ and ‘*my story*’ and these “average” character’s experiences, depending on the participant’s preference.

Two groups decided instead to rap about what life was like “on average”. This also generated an early sense of collaboration in developing the research process.

This phase took one or two focus groups, and facilitated rich deliberations about what was an “average” life for young people like the participants.

2. Problematising and appreciating aspects of average lives

These lives were subsequently problematised and appreciated, using a photo-voice and/or brainstorming activity. Using polaroids, participants were asked to photograph “important things” from theirs or their characters’ lives. Sometimes, they created scenes like gang crime, but more often, photographs were of “things”, like boarded up houses. Each photographer then presented and discussed their images, deciding whether it was “good” or “bad²”. Photographs were grouped into “good” and “bad” lists, and less “visible” goods/bads, like tuition fees, were added to each list in a subsequent brainstorming activity.

The construction of these lists encouraged some deep deliberations. For example, one photograph showed a local ethnic market where cheap food and ‘*knock off trainers*’ were sold. The intent of this image, as described by the photographer, was to show the “good” market and the “good” multiculturalism in their area. However, discussions quickly turned to explore why their neighbourhood had one designated ethnic area, and if the poverty facing ethnic families had led to ghettoization. The photograph was then moved on to the bad list, and described as an image of ‘*ethnic divisions*’.

This phase took between one to three meetings.

3. Imagining, deliberating and deciding on policy solutions

Thirdly, participants brainstormed or used drama-based activities to imagine solutions to issues (or ideas to enhance “goods”). Long deliberations slowly sifted a myriad of suggestions in to a list of agreed upon ideas to address problems and enhance positive aspects. This became their final policy document.

At this stage, one group decided to add an additional process of consultation, working with around 100 young people via an existing youth forum. The group developed and delivered a shortened version of phase two and three, and then integrate this data into their policy and reported back to the forum.

² The phrase “not so good” was initially used to avoid negativity and stigma, but groups automatically switched to “bad”

To create the final policy, each list of ideas was transcribed, and through further deliberation, prioritised and edited to produce the final policy for each area. The end product of this phase, which was between two and eight meetings, was a finalised policy for each area, developed and written by young targets of official child poverty policy (see figure two).



Figure two: Examples policies.

4. Discussions around, and undertaking, local action

Groups were then invited to think about what, *if anything*, they would like to “do” with their new policies. Here, the research agenda was handed over to the young people, with all groups deciding to take some actions.

There was a common desire to communicate their policies to politicians, so 16 MPs and five local councillors were contacted, sometimes politely, sometimes bluntly, but always with follow-up meetings sought. The follow-up meeting with MPs was held communally at an entirely youth-led launch event in Parliament, chaired, hosted and

presented by participants. Adult voices were only “allowed” at the conclusion of this event, when participants held the audience of MPs and other policy-makers ‘hostage’. Here, each audience member had to commit to act on something that had been discussed to secure a ‘*hostage release certificate/ vote of confidence*’ or they were not allowed out of the room.

Beyond this collective national action, each group also took some localised actions, ranging from delivering direct services (e.g., running free lunch schemes over summer breaks) to lobbying (one group managed to get their policy included in a local regeneration strategy), to repeating the process in a peer-led fashion (one group ran a peer-led workshop for seven neighbouring youth groups to develop their own strategies). Some actions are still continuing.

Data analysis

The net result of this was a series of policies produced by young people, as well as rich transcripts and field-notes from the deliberations behind their production. Analysis of these was conducted concurrently with fieldwork where timing allowed, using Dedoose software, and was thematically focused. Themes emerging directly from the data became coding frames. Perhaps predictably given the subject-lead nature of the participatory methodology, it therefore bore some resemblances to grounded theory analysis and its constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

The problems identified

A number of issues were unique to each policy, but there was overlap around housing, crime, and education (figure three), and an almost complete silence around the role of personal agency. This article focuses on these overlapping issues for brevity, not to suggest that these are universal problematiques. (Indeed, as the discussion below highlights, a surface consensus often masks entirely different representations of the problem.)

Housing and neighbourhoods

Housing was identified as a common problem, involving two distinct issues. Firstly, these young people felt surrounded by run-down houses and neighbourhoods, which were problematised as making their '*ends*' (neighbourhoods) ugly. One group, for example, explained to their parliamentarian that boarded-up housing was a problem because their area '*looked terrible*', with litter and graffiti also contributing to unappealing neighbourhood aesthetics. This was a common representation of the problem of housing, and "ugliness" appeared time and time again when participants talked about the problems of poverty and their lives. As figure three highlights, other ugly local neighbourhood problems, like dog fouling, litter and graffiti were almost universally identified, echoing previous research (Elsley 2004).

Ugly housing and neighbourhoods produced a sense of architectural injustice. For example, in one area, while they applauded their city's regeneration efforts, they felt that these were too focused on the city centre, while the areas they lived in lack '*smart*' housing. They wanted the focus of regeneration to be on '*on the areas people live, not the city centre*'. This injustice left these young people feeling unimportant; '*they (the lack of clean-ups) say, they think of us as less important people*'.

Secondly, these young people wrote about problems with access to decent, family homes, which detracted from their quality of life. From calls for '*bigger, more affordable housing*' so families would no longer be '*crammed in*' to detailed calls for '*more affordable housing in the area*', a lack of warm, affordable, decent-sized housing was represented as a problem in all five areas.

These problems were talked about as greatly reducing their own quality of life. For example, Maeve described the poor quality of her flat during one of our meetings. She lived in a damp, partial basement flat, and talked about '*suffering*' because her flat was '*crap. Why do you think I went to (youth club) coughing and sneezing all the same time?*' She went on to describe a severe chest infection she suffered last winter, which her youth worker described as leaving her sounding; '*like an old man with TB*'. Another young woman said her mother '*struggles to pay the rent, so we hardly have any money left for ourselves*'.

	Cambus	Morton	Leighton	Shelton	Springville
Housing					
better housing needed	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
bigger housing needed		✓		✓	✓
cheaper housing needed		✓	✓	✓	
Education					
school costs too much	✓			✓	✓
better curriculum in schools needed	✓	✓	✓		
tuition fees too high					✓
payments/grants for low-income students needed	✓			✓	✓
financial literacy classes needed	✓		✓		
smaller class sizes needed		✓			
Crime					
general crime too prevalent	✓	✓	✓	✓	
harsher penalties for criminals needed	✓		✓		
gangs operate in their area		✓	✓	✓	✓
Better family incomes					
wages too low	✓	✓	✓		
benefits too low or complicated	✓		✓		✓
Health					
services inadequate			✓		
education about health needed					✓
food needs to be better & cheaper	✓	✓	✓		✓
Lack of activities, things to do	✓	✓		✓	✓
Racism too prevalent		✓	✓	✓	✓
Employment					
more job opportunities for young people needed	✓				✓
more jobs opportunities in general needed		✓	✓		
Cost of public transport		✓	✓	✓	✓
Local environment issues (litter, graffiti etc.)					
dog fouling			✓	✓	
noise				✓	
graffiti		✓			
litter		✓	✓		✓
cars/ traffic				✓	
Stereotypes of (some) youngsters	✓		✓		✓
Inequality too high	✓		✓	✓	
The "cuts"					
cuts to services			✓		
cuts to benefits				✓	✓
Alcohol and other drugs, lack of services			✓		✓
Local economy contracted			✓		✓
Politics					
voting age too high	✓	✓			✓
politicians not representative					✓
Low aspirations, schools need better advice	✓	✓			
Hunger	✓				
Bullying policies too lax			✓		

Figure three: Problems identified in policies.

Education

Two interconnected problems of education emerged within the young people's policies. Firstly, a problem of unaffordability was described, with the costs of purchasing uniforms, books, school lunches and other essentials noted. Many broad asks to '*tackle the costs of school and improve schools*' were made, with specific suggestions like '*School uniforms should be cheaper, ... a means-tested uniform grant of £100-200 (...and) a means-tested book grant as well.*' This problem appeared to mirror direct experiences. For example, where means-tested vouchers had failed a group – '*they gave us rubbish vouchers. You know, my mum didn't use any of them at all*' – they used this personal experience to come up with their own policy solutions; '*they should do something for like a uniform grant*'.

Not being able to meet these costs was discussed as presenting an unfair barrier to "making the most" of time at school; with personal stories of being hassled by teachers for missing ties or not being able to print homework discussed. They felt this was deeply '*unfair*' and, mirroring previous research (Sutton 2009), produced a sense of educational inequality.

Secondly, a number of young people problematised the purposes and intent of their education in their policies, calling for tweaks towards improving employability, financial literacy and tackling racism. For example, in one area, they wrote about how their education system created unemployable young people, arguing that schools were currently not doing enough to ensure young people '*get good jobs and ... do not become unemployed*'. Other groups called for financial literacy training in the classroom, a need for schools to address racism and for curriculum to raise aspirations. These were, however, framed as problems with the education system, rather than problems with individual young people's racism, aspirations or money management skills.

Crime

Crime was another issue that was mentioned across all policies, however there was a split diagnosis of the problem of crime and criminals. For example, some strong calls were made for harsher penalties by two groups:

Moderator: ...what do we want to do about drug dealers?

Mark: Kill them all.

Ellen: Mark!

Keila: Jesus Christ.

Mark: They break apart families.

Keila: So like the 14 year old kid who is dealing a tiny bit of...?

Justin: Exactly.

...

Ellen: And then the little kids end up going to prison for it.

Mark: And that's what it should be, give them 40 years.

Mark's views were tempered by the group however; rather than calling for the death penalty, the group decided to ask for a *'review (of) the way the prison service is run so that people don't go back, and don't want to go back'*. Likewise, another group called for *'harsher penalties'*, suggesting that, for these young people, the problem of crime was a lack of retributive justice.

Other groups, however, appeared more sympathetic. For example, one group asked to *'put people in prison for being bad, but make sure prison helps them'*. There was often a sense that structural factors may have influenced peoples' decision to turn to crime. One group stated that *'People join (gangs) because of peer pressure. ... People need more money to survive, and as the cuts bite, people are turning to crime'*, while another cited the indecency of inequalities: *'there's a big divide between rich people and poorer people. We think this makes people jealous of other people's stuff and leads to crime.'* Having sympathetically presented criminals as pressured and jealous humans, these groups did not call for retributive justice.

Despite this divergence, there was a consensus that crime was a central problem in their lives. For some young people, crime seemed so pervasive that even their breakfast cereals were under threat:

Sarah: Like, most people get burgled in Morton. Like I've been burgled once on Friday the 13th.

Lisa: I've been burgled as well. Some little kid jumped in through the window and grabbed my mum's TV... when I got home, my Nan had said I could stay there and I brought my box of Cheerios because I thought they would steal them!

Personal agency, and a different role for politics

The role of personal agency in these young people's own lives, so heavily emphasised by previous child-rights oriented research, barely emerged in these policies. This was despite many of the deliberations emphasising the role of young people's agency:

Moderator: How well people do in school, do you think that's up to them or do you think that's about their environment?

Salma: That's definitely up to them.

Basmah: That's up to them. Say if it's compulsory for you to go, then obviously you will go, but if you don't have that self-determination then you can't do what you want to do. Say if you want to mess about, then you mess up, you mess up your future.

...

Saba: For me, 50-50, innit?...

Salma: Because then again we depend on ourselves, then we depend on our parents, then we depend on the government, then we depend on our school... it's 50-50 yes...

Regardless of these sorts of discussions, strongly evident within transcripts and field-notes, the role of agency (for the non-criminal) was at most quiet, if not silent, within *their policies*. Even where "problems" of poverty traditionally associated with an individualised locus of responsibility emerged in their policies – such as lacking money management skills, or alcohol issues – they were very much framed as structural problems, from failings of the education system or the health care system. The role of others' agency in criminal activity was raised, but as discussed above, often in a muted or contested fashion. While criminals' agency might matter to some of these young people, their own agency appears downplayed in their policy terms.

It is possible that the process of involving young people in producing policy, where they specifically engaging with an ideal, imagined role for the government decision-makers, produces an overly structural analysis of the problem. Agency, then, just might not emerge through this process, as it is not seen as a "government" problem. However, this silence can potentially be understood as more than a methodological artefact. As Foucault (1972) would suggest, like any text, policy documents reflect

what it is possible to say and what forms of knowledge exist at a point in time. These policies, then, speak to an understanding about what problems these young people saw as conceptually logical to address (Bacchi 2009, p. 5). It is possible, then, that the young people in this research did not think it was meaningful, or conceptually coherent, to talk about the *problem* of their own personal agency in solving their problematique of poverty. For them, the problems of poverty that they want to speak – to make ‘manifest, nameable and describable’ (Foucault 1972, p. 41) – are structural, regardless of concurrent background understandings of the role of individual agency in their lives.

This research method appears to provide problematisations from young people’s standpoints with implicit (or often explicit) responsibilities attached. For example, where calls were made for more public sector jobs for young people, public sector employers are targeted as key agents of change. Given this, it is perhaps telling that the role of their own, (non-criminal) agency did not emerge in their policies. This may have been an implicit suggestion that they do not feel that *they* are responsible for their socio-economic conditions. They did not feel they were non-agentic and passive, as their deliberations highlighted, but neither did they feel “to blame”.

Lister (2004, p. 130) outlines two axes of agency that people living on low-incomes can express; personal and political (see figure four). As Redmond (2008, p. 8) notes, many previous qualitative studies extensively document personal forms of agency that young people engage in, especially ways of ‘getting by’ and navigating poverty. This seems to be what many previous studies refer to as young people’s agency – their coping and mediating tactics. Few, if any, studies document any political or collective responses, with almost none documenting young people ‘getting organised’ against poverty (Redmond 2008, p. 9). (Although some grey literature talks about young people setting up a youth group [Barnados 2005], and some document some attempts to ‘get back at’ society [Morrow 2001, p. 39]). It may be that research generated from a child rights model, derived from the New Sociology of Childhood which is so keen to emphasise young people’s personal agency, does not fully tap into young people’s understandings around the collective politics of poverty.

Personal	Political
Everyday 'getting by' –techniques and tactics to survive and mitigate poverty.	Everyday 'getting back at' – ways to resist or subvert the system, sometimes criminal.
Strategic 'getting out' –techniques to plan ways out of poverty.	Strategic 'getting organised' – ways to collectively act against poverty.

Figure four: Types of agency (Lister 2004, p. 130).

It is potentially curious, then, that in this research many of the solutions that these young people authored – and indeed attempted in their actions – were strategic, collectivist and political. The problems they identified through this process were structural, but rather than being passive victims to these, they felt collective agency could potentially remedy issues. For example, in this research three groups noted the disenfranchising voting age as important problems, stating, for example, *'we don't feel that politician represent us. They are too often liars and hypocrites'*. A number have organised against poverty in their areas (either through lobbying or direct service provision). The politics of poverty, both big P and little p, emerge strongly from this policy-oriented research. Through this research, then, these young people appeared to have “added in” critical roles for collective and political agency, alongside the many discussions around the personal, every day agency, as emphasised in previous research.

Conclusions and reflections

Three particular problems emerged as central to the lives of the young people involved in this research;

- Problems of housing; which were both symbolic and real. Living in ugly, run-down neighbourhoods left young people feeling unimportant and poor quality housing reduced their quality of life.
- Problems of education; which framed education as an “ill-fitting” institution for their lives. High costs mean they could unfairly not make the most of it and, it was not designed to do what they felt it should.
- Problems of crime; while rife, representation of criminals and what ought to be done appeared split.

Methodologically, this approach was potentially capable of generating subjective insights about the “problems” of child poverty that meaningfully reflect lived

experiences. Further, slightly different problematiques emerge from this approach than from 'child-rights' research; findings mirror, but not entirely. This suggests that new problematiques could emerge from this process, or at the very least, that different problems will be given different levels of prominence between methodologies.

However, a different type of agency (strategic and political rather than personal) and a different role for politics in shaping these young people experiences, as they see it, emerges from this approach. This research suggests that these young people privilege ideas around, and want to, get organised around problems emerging from low-incomes. While this may reflect the different methodology, influenced by the way this research was framed, it perhaps illuminates different, coterminous realities for these young people. That is, alternate visions of their agency are potentially drawn out through different framings and research methods.

This type of method may also lend itself well to an action research model, where the participants can actively address problems they identified. As this research demonstrates, localised actions are possible and some changes can be generated in the process. For example, in one area, the council increased local recycling targets for the young people's wards in response to their petition. Aside from, or perhaps more often in spite of, concrete changes, participants may also find the process empowering. As some participants outlined in a small magazine article they wrote:

We have already spoken to (our local parliamentarian) and presented our full manifesto in Parliament to important decision makers ... This made us liberated: like someone does want to listen, however we have more to say.

If part of the problem of poverty is a problem of powerlessness (Lister 2004), and young people are often doubly silenced by poverty and age (Ridge 2006, p. 23) potentially empowering research methods might be a worthwhile, additional approach.

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'Ends' effects; Neighbourhood effects as young people describe them

Many studies have explored the impacts of growing up in deprived neighbourhoods and housing on young people, and while no consensus has emerged around the nature nor extent of this impact, this body of literature is largely unified by the accentuation of adult voices in defining the outcomes and mechanisms that might matter. This article presents the findings from one study that may shed some light in to young people's *own* thoughts about, and experiences, growing up in deprived neighbourhoods. Working with five groups of young people around England, issues around run down housing and neighbourhoods were described as problematic. Both these problems reduced their quality of life and left them feeling angry about being abandoned to deteriorating neighbourhoods by those with power and authority. This suggests that, for these young people, 'neighbourhood effects' around the perceptions of physical surroundings, relative deprivation and institutional stigmatisation and discrimination punctuate their experiences growing up in deprived neighbourhoods.

'If you could see Springsville through our eyes

Only then would you realise

The conditions of our community

Please take this as a positive opportunity' A poem written by 15&16 year old women for politicians

Many studies have explored the impact of growing up in a deprived neighbourhood on children and young people's outcomes; from studies that document neighbourhood effects on health and development (Del Conte & Kling 2001, Duncan *et al.* 1994), school attainment (Aaronson 1997, Jencks & Mayer 1990, Brooks-Gunn *et al.* 1993, Wodtke *et al.* 2011, South *et al.* 2003, Entwisle *et al.* 2005), to involvement in crime (Case & Katz 1991, Kling *et al.* 2005). Although the extent and strength of such affects often contested, the vast body of literature exploring the relationships between neighbourhoods and children and young people's outcomes in general suggests that 'neighbourhood environment has an influence on important outcomes for children and adults' (Ellen & Turner 1997, p.833).

However, this previous literature raises two fundamental questions. Firstly, there has been less focus on, and even less consensus achieved around, *how* deprived neighbourhoods produce any outcomes for young residents. Over two decades ago, Jencks & Mayer (1990) propose five mechanisms by which neighbourhoods might affect young people; specific disadvantages posed by growing up 'poor' in disadvantaged areas, including harmful peer influences, negative collective socialisation and institutional discrimination; relative deprivations emerging from growing up 'poor' in an advantaged neighbourhood, and; the neutralising impact of rational-economic man type arguments. Two decades of debate later, Galster (2010) summarised 15 potential mechanisms which have since emerged as theoretical possibilities, under four broad rubrics; social interactive mechanisms (including social contagion, collective socialisation, competition, parental mediation, social networks, social cohesion and control, and relative deprivation); environmental mechanisms (such as exposure to violence and toxins and degraded physical surroundings); geographic mechanisms (such as spatial mismatches, lack of quality services), and; institutional mechanisms (such as stigmatisation, local market actors and a lack of resources). However, despite twenty years of theorisation, the mechanisms by which neighbourhoods impact upon residents remains somewhat of a "black box" (Ellen & Turner 1997, p.585, Rosenbaum *et al.* 2002).

This lack of understanding about the mechanisms by which neighbourhoods' affect young people's lived experiences and life chances diminishes the potential for evidenced based policy interventions. As Ludwig *et al.* (2012, p.1505) suggest 'an understanding of the mechanisms through which neighbourhood environments affect people's lives is a crucial issue for policy design'.

Secondly, much of this research has been adultist, which is perhaps curious if the aim has been to explore the impact of neighbourhoods on children and young people. For example, much of the focus has been developmental and explored outcomes that may be important for young people *in their adulthood*, such as educational attainment (Lauen & Gaddis 2013, Galster *et al.* 2007), labour market success (Galster *et al.* 2007, Holloway & Mulherin 2004) or other measures of socio-economic prosperity (such as Vartanian *et al.* 2007 or Islam 2013). This focus, in many ways, reflects the adultist status quo of current social policy thinking. For example, in Esping-Andersen (2003 p.26) prognosis for the welfare state, he called for a 'child-centred social investment strategy', elsewhere arguing that "the urgency of (policy) reform is so much greater because it's today's children who will be

tomorrow's productive base – or, if appropriate measures are not taken, tomorrow's expensive social problems' (Esping-Andersen 2000 p.3). Lister (2003, p.427) suggests that such an investment strategy is already being laid in place in many countries, especially liberal welfare states. The focus on adult-centric outcomes in neighbourhood research, then, conforms with much of the modern canon of policy related research.

However, children and young people are human beings as well as human becomings (Lee 2001), and this futuristic rhetoric draws the focus on to the potential impacts of neighbourhoods for future adults, rather than the impacts for children and young people in the present. Recognising that young people are rights bearing citizens of the present, as well as future adults, potentially problematises this focus (see for example, Fawcett *et al.* 2004).

This is not to suggest that all of previous literature has been developmental and futuristic; there are a vast number of studies which document effects that potentially matter to young people during their youth, such as those exploring health issues (Phung Do 2009), young parenthood (Crane 1991) or self-reported delinquency (Oberwittler 2007). However, I would contend that these are still adultist concerns; they are outcomes identified as important for young people *by* adult researchers. There has been little scope in previous neighbourhood-based research for children and young people themselves to speak about what the impacts of deprived neighbourhoods might be, and why these might be important to them. Recognising that children and young people are experts in their own lives (Crivello *et al.* 2009, p.53) might call for an additional, child-centred research agenda around neighbourhood effects.

Qualitative research with children and young people may be able to provide a partial remedy to address these twin concerns. Firstly, qualitative methods with residents of deprived areas may provide some insight into to black box of neighbourhood effects. As Ellen and Turner (1997, p.859) suggest 'by documenting how individuals are affected by aspects of their neighbourhood environment on a day-to-day basis, qualitative research... can cast new light on causal mechanism that might not be statistically discernable'. Secondly, providing the scope for children and young people to voice their own concerns may lead to research that highlights the outcomes and mechanisms that matter to them. It allows young people to present their own understanding of the impact of their '*ends*' (the youthful British slang for

neighbourhoods) on their own lives, which may be a valuable concern in and of its own right (see, for example, Prout and James 1997, p.8).

This article provide a case study of one piece of research that was potentially able to address these twin concerns – how might neighbourhoods affect young people, and why might neighbourhoods matter, as they see it – by presenting the findings of a qualitative study with young people¹ growing up in five economically deprived neighbourhoods in England.

In this research, young participants were asked what they felt was “good” or ‘bad” about growing up “around here”, how they felt about aspects of their neighbourhood they identified as problematic, and what this meant to them. The findings from this research suggest that these young people felt that their physical surroundings and the poor quality of their built environments mattered to them, such as dilapidated buildings and ugly houses. These appeared to both reduce their quality of life and have an inherent relational aspect; these young people felt it was deeply unfair that their physical surroundings were worse than other peoples. Such an injustice made them feel like they were regarded as unimportant in the eyes of those with power, reducing trust in authority. This sense of relative deprivation and abandonment by those with power appeared to wound these young people *as much as* the poor physical condition of their surroundings. However, this did not appear to reduce their belief in, or willingness to test out, their own political efficacy, as other research may suggest (Ross *et al.* 2001).

These findings reinforce findings from previous qualitative research with young people from low-income families, which emphasises the importance of neighbourhoods in their lives (Attree 2004, 2006, Ridge 2009, Redmond 2008). Previous research documents low-income young people describing their neighbourhoods negatively, as lacking accessible resources services (Wager *et al.* 2010, Morrow 2001), having youth-unfriendly or prohibitively expensive services (Ridge 2002, Morrow 2001), and being unwelcoming and unsafe (Morrow 2001, Ridge 2002, Backett-Milburn *et al.* 2003, Daly & Leonard 2002). Relatedly, the low quality of family housing available in deprived communities also emerged across a number of studies (Roker 1998, Ridge 2002, Rice 2006), and were described by

¹ While this research involved participants who could mostly be considered either/both children or young people, the language of young people is used, as this is how they self identified.

young people as causing health issues, anxiety and a general sense of unhappiness: *'every time I walk through the house I am not really happy'* (Rice 2006, p.43). While this research confirms the importance of neighbourhoods and housing for young people growing up in economically deprived areas, as described by young people themselves, it builds on this by exploring *why* this might matter, documenting young people's ideas around how policy makers should fix these problems, and explicitly connecting this to research around "neighbourhood effects".

This potentially has timely policy implications. In England, where this research is based, there has been a decade long policy focus on the role of neighbourhoods (Atkinson & Kintrea 2002, Power 2009), with the then Prime Minister arguing that 'no one should be seriously disadvantaged by where they live' (Social Exclusion Unit 2001, p.4). More recently, despite almost radically reconfiguring policy approaches to social exclusion and poverty (Grimshaw & Rubery 2011, Taylor-Gooby 2012), the new government has argued that 'no one should be prevented from fulfilling their potential by the circumstances of their birth' (HM Government 2012, p.4). Presumably, these 'circumstances' would include the postcode of their birth. The impact of deprived neighbourhoods on young residents, then, has policy implications within the UK. Outside of England, this research highlights the potential for a mismatch between the expertise of children and young people, and the expertise of policy makers. This 'expert-public gap' (Yankelovich 1991, p.91) has both the capacity to reduce faith in policy-making "experts" and, others would argue, produces systemically distorted policy decisions (deLeon 1994, Forester 1989, Fisher 2003). Closing this gap may require interactive, participatory approaches (Fisher 2009, p.6) involving the children and young people.

This research and its methodology

This research took place over 2012 and 2013, and was largely structured around the development of "imagined" local anti-poverty strategies by five groups of young people in England. The data that is discussed here is derived from focus group discussions, field notes, as well as the policy documents and actions undertaken by the young people in this process.

In total around 140 young people took part in this research, who were recruited directly from youth groups in four wards² with extremely high levels of child poverty (above 60 per cent at the time³), and one highly impoverished ward (above 45 per cent. For reference, the national average was around 20 per cent on the same measure). While wards were selected for high levels of child poverty, as children and young people were the focus of this research, each of these areas was deprived across a number of other measured dimensions. For example, three of the areas were in the top decile of deprivation, one just barely in the second, and one in the 3rd decile according to official English Indices of Deprivation data⁴ (DCLG 2011). Reflecting the distribution of deprivation in the UK, all wards were inner city neighbourhoods located in four large cities across England.

Youth groups were selected by convenience sampling within selected deprived wards – some wards only contained one youth group, while in others, a number were contacted with the most “enthused” group participating. The consequence of this was diverse sample of youth groups, including groups with different ages, genders, ethnicities and disability statuses (see table one). However, they appeared unified by their challenging socio-economic experiences. Discussions and personal narratives provided throughout the research suggested the vast majority of participants had direct personal experience of ‘*being skint*’ (British slang for being broke) as well as experience gathered from living in deprived communities.

Area	N	Gender	Age	Ethnic origins
Cambus	25	Mixed	11-19, median 15	White British
Leighton	100+	Mixed	10-19, core group 17-18	Mostly White British, some Black British & mixed race
Morton	7	Female	12-14	White British, mixed race and Black British
Springville	6	Female	15-16	British Bengali
Shelton	6	Mixed	16-21, median 17	White British, mixed race & British Arab

Table one: sample groups.

² The smallest geographic unit in the UK for statistical purposes. They comprise of around 5,500 residents (ONS, no date)

³ According to the UK’s child poverty measure, 60 per cent of median income equivalised household income (ECP 2011)

⁴ which measures deprivation across seven domains; Income Deprivation, Employment Deprivation, Health Deprivation and Disability, Education Skills and Training Deprivation, Barriers to Housing and Services, Living Environment Deprivation, and Crime (DCLG 2011)

Participants themselves were directly invited to participate and both their and their parent's consent sought.

The research involved a series of sequential investigations undertaken in focus groups, and is discussed in more detail elsewhere (Farthing, 2015). While participant input meant methods sometimes varied between groups, broadly four phases were undertaken:

- 1) Discussions around what it was like, on “average”, to grow up “around here”. Participants used arts and crafts to develop a set of characters that embodied “average young people” from their area. The lives and experiences of these characters were then unpacked, allowing participants to discuss potentially embarrassing or stigmatising experiences without necessarily self-identifying.
- 2) Problematizing and appreciating aspects of these characters' lives. In this phase, photo-voice activities and brainstorming were used to develop lists of “good” and “bad” aspects about growing up in their areas, as they and their characters experienced them.
- 3) Imagining, deliberating and deciding on policy solutions to issues identified, and ideas to enhance positive aspects. This generally involved using brainstorming and drama based activities to develop and agree on policy ideas to address all the “bad” aspects of growing up in their neighbourhoods, and enhances the “good” aspects. Deliberation and discussions narrowed down their list of ideas to a fully formed, deliberately produced, young people's policy strategy.
- 4) Discussion around, and undertaking youth-led action. Each group was asked what, if anything, they would like to “do” with their policy strategy. The research agenda was entirely handed over to the young people at this stage, and each group chose to take some action. Their actions included a strategy launch at Parliament, so they could lobby their elected representatives, directly filling service gaps they identified by setting up free lunch schemes and school uniform drives and peer-to-peer replication of the research, among many others.

Each four phases attempted to be at “youth-friendly” and participatory as possible.

The neighbourhoods these young people discussed did not perfectly coincide with the ward boundaries by which they were selected. Instead, the neighbourhoods

discussed in this research were organically operationalized in an ego-centric fashion. (Or perhaps more accurately, collecto-centric, as they were agreed upon by groups). They did not conform to any administrative territorial boundaries, rather appeared to make natural sense to each group with little debate. They included the spaces they used, frequented, lived within and (mostly) went to school within, perhaps then, capturing all of the 'the environmental conditions to which as individual is locally exposed' (Chaix *et al.* 2009 p.1306).

The net output of this process was five policy strategies produced by young people, transcripts and field notes from the deliberations behind their production, and data generated in the action phase, ranging from letters to politicians to presentations delivered to local councils. This data was then thematically coded, using Dedoose software.

Findings

Problems with local neighbourhoods emerged as prominent and pressing problems in these young people's policy documents, taking on two distinct forms; a problem of run down '*ends*', and; a problem with '*run down housing*'.

Run down neighbourhoods

Firstly, run down '*ends*' were noted as specific problem. There were a number of ingredients that defined a run down neighbourhood for these young people, including various combinations of litter, graffiti, dog fouling and boarded up housing – all very visual concerns. The issues these young people described mapped fairly closely to what Ross *et al.* (2001) and Ross & Mirowsky (2009) describe as signs of physical, neighbourhood "disorder"; abandoned buildings, graffiti, vandalism, and a lack of cared-for homes. However, these young people tended to frame this as an issue of ugliness rather than disorderliness. For four of the groups, boarded up housing was a prevalent and specific problem. As figure one – a picture a young person took of the street next to his own street – highlights, boarded up housing is a very visible, and potentially omnipresent, part of these young people's geographies. Similarly, litter, graffiti and dog fouling were noted as problems in most areas. Young people spoke of living among entire parks that had been '*trashed*', alleyways filled with rubbish and bus shelters that were regularly torched. While some positive visual aspects about their neighbourhoods were noted, normally newly regenerated parks or public art

instillations, they generally described the physical surroundings of their ends in fairly negative terms.



Figure one: an image of a street of boarded up housing taken by a young man, 16.

This problem came across as an important policy priority to these young people (three groups listed these issues as their number one concerns), and played out in a number of their subsequent actions. For example, in Cambus, where their top policy priority was neighbourhood '*restor(ation)*' and '*rebuild(ing)*', one of the first actions this group put forward was to develop a '*regeneration map*' of their area. This map was intended for their local council, in order to document the dilapidated and derelict buildings among which they live, so that something might be done about them.

While their policy strategies and local actions highlight the prevalence and importance of the issue for these young people, they do not necessarily outline why they felt run down neighbourhoods were a problem. In many discussions and

deliberations, it became apparent that run down neighbourhoods were a problem for these young people because they were ugly. For example, in Morton, when they presenting their strategy to their parliamentarian, they described the problem of boarded up housing and run down streets as a problem because their area '*looked terrible*'. This was a common representation of the problem across all groups; describing run down buildings, grafittied streets, footpaths covered in dog muck as '*ugly*' and '*gross*' and not looking posh:

Moderator: ... we're talking about living in Morton and where you'd live if you had a magic wand. You'd go for (neighbouring area), Lisa... Why (neighbouring area)?

Lisa, 12: Because it's more safer, more posher.

Moderator: What's posher?

Lisa: Posh people.

Sandy, 12: Not necessarily posh people but there's more attractive areas, like there's no rubbish out there on the floor.

As another 15 year old put it '*I hate mess. I don't like it because when you look at it you feel trash, your ends are trash*'.

This ugliness produced a sense of relative deprivation and injustice. The young people involved in this project were aware that, while their city centres were clean, if you walked a few streets out of the city centre, to '*where people lived*', it was '*dirty again*'. They were acutely aware that people "like them" lived in these dirty areas. For example, in Leighton, while they appreciated their cities' regeneration efforts, they felt that these were focused only on the very city centre, an area of expensive apartments and high-end workplaces. They wanted the focus of regeneration to be on '*on the areas people live, not the city centre*'. While people do indeed live in city centres, and participants were aware of this, their message was powerful and implicit; they wanted regeneration efforts to be refocused on areas where people *like them* lived.

They felt that they were not the targets of regeneration and clean up efforts because they were not seen as important enough. A discussion about the recent Olympic clean up of *other* parts of London highlights this:

- Basmah, 15: You know for the Olympics, they're so sly, they get all of these cleaners in that specific area...*
- Saba, 15: Exactly. So people are "oh, wow, London"...*
- Basmah: "London is so clean!"*
- Saba: But it's not clean at all.*
- Basmah: But come to (neighbouring area)*
- Saba: If you come to the more less-developed areas like here, like Springsville, like (neighbouring area), you see there's mess everywhere. (One distraction from a youth worker later...)*
- Basmah: (The Olympic clean up) was annoying because why don't they do it at a point when there's people that don't live here, we're going to make it look nice for them, but us, yes, you make it look like what, you make it look like it's a dust bin. That's up to everyone just littering, and then that's it, they've gone, they're not going to clean it any more, they make it look ugly for us, but people that don't even live in the country, they make it look nice for them.*
- Saba: Exactly. Rest my case. And it's not even that.*
- Moderator: So what...*
- Basmah: They say, they think of us as less important people.*

They wanted the clean up to continue, well beyond the Olympic village, to the whole of London, so their neighbourhoods too, could be 'maxi-developed'. That this had not happened, in London and the other cities involved in this research, reconfirmed to these young people that they were not taken seriously by those with power. They were aware that streets and neighbourhoods would be cleaned for other people, but not for them.

For these young people, the continuing ugliness and dilapidation of their neighbourhoods was understood as a slight against them – they felt that, in the eyes of those with authority and power, they were seen as worth less than other people. The prioritisation of regeneration efforts and clean ups for residents of richer areas and tourists was interpreted as an attempted assault on their self-worth, and this was the core of the problem of deprived 'ends', for these young people.

Run down housing

All five of the groups identified family housing as a key concern. Their policies calls for *'bigger, more affordable housing'* so families would no longer be *'crammed in'* pointing to a problem with small, overcrowded houses. Similarly, many groups asked for more insulation, or subsidies for winter fuel bills, pointing a problem of cold housing. For example, Shelton politely asked for:

- *'A lot of families live in small, cramped housing. If we could build bigger houses that would be great*
- *Some of the houses are also cold, if we could improve insulation that would make them nicer to grow up in'*

Access and affordability were also key housing concerns for these young people. Three groups also called for *'more affordable-housing in the area'* and to *'tackle the costs of housing'*, pointing to an affordability problem. Two other areas called for more council (subsidised) housing or free housing, pointing to a related issue of inadequate affordable-housing supply. Many also called for complex changes to council housing waiting lists to *'reduce the waiting times'*, suggesting an issue with the timely accessibility of affordable-housing.

The many conversations and discussions that took place in this project suggest participants had much first hand experience of poor quality, inaccessible housing, with a number of participants sharing rooms with up to five siblings, unable to dry clothing because of the constant damp in their apartments, *'hav(ing) to suffer'* because their heating never works, and being on the waiting list for council housing for their entire lives.

Perhaps reflecting the depth of this first-hand experience, or a lot of thought and reflection around this problem, their specific policy suggestions for improvement were impressively complex. In Springsville, for example, they outline a causal chain; *'the waiting list for houses is too long, there are not enough big family houses, and there are too many temporary houses. As a result, there is also too many homeless people in the area'*. They called for five quite complex and specific interventions to generate supply in the area, from the compulsory purchase of under-occupying houses so they could be *'share(d)'* with over-occupying households to a requirement for houses left empty for a year to be rented out, and for fried chicken shops be converted to homes

(to tackle the twin concerns of over abundant of fried chicken shops in their area and a lack of space for affordable housing).

Again, *why* housing was such an important and complex concern for these young people is not evident from their policy documents alone. However, their discussions and deliberations suggest that being left in poor quality housing raised two important concerns. Firstly, poor quality housing reduced their immediate quality of life. One young woman spoke of '*having no privacy*' because she shared her bedroom with three older brothers, another young man described the boredom and indignance of living in crisis accommodation his whole life, one young man described himself as a '*stressed boy*' who '*cried everyday*' because of overcrowding, while another suggested that if she had a magic wand and could do anything in the world it would be to sleep forever, because she can't sleep properly with her two-, six- and 15-year-old siblings in the same room. Poor quality housing made a decent youth difficult to experience.

Beyond this, secondly, there also appeared to be a relative deprivation aspect to the problem of housing. These young people were acutely aware that better housing existed, and that they lived in worse housing than most of their peers. Sometimes their peers went out of their way to make sure they were aware of this:

Benjamin, 11: Sometimes my friends start bragging on about where I live, like how "you live there, I live here, why can't you get a decent house like me, like you can't get your own room you can't get your own privacy"....

Pe, 11: When our friends come to our house, they never come back.

Benjamin: They'll be like, "when you get a new house, I'll have a sleep over there".

Adding to relative nature of their problem, they were also acutely aware that where there was competition for scarce housing resources, too often, already privileged people beat them:

Saba, 15: Yes, my mum's been on the waiting list for so long, "When you going to give me a house, mate?"

Basmah, 15: That's true, yes.

- Tasmin, 15: I think only some areas of Springsville are improving, but what I've realised with those areas, they're called the guppies, you know, guppies are like the white, young...*
- Basma:* *What's guppies?*
- Moderator:* *Yuppies? Young, up and coming is what it stood for, so people like, errmmm... me, white, young, middle class...*
- Tasmin:* *They end up getting those new houses more towards the central (City) side of Springsville like (street) and all of that, rather than your mum who's been on the waiting list for like 10 years. Do you get it?*
- Saba:* *My mother's been on it for 13 years actually.*

They did not seem to feel that resources (or the power to allocate them) was a zero-sum game between local residents (as described by Woolcock 1998), rather that they were currently always losing out to privileged outsiders. Put another way, for these young people, resources were actively diminishing, rather than being shuffled between residents.

Many of their discussions highlighted a belief that without some sort of radical change, their housing situations would not improve. They felt that they were not considered important enough to those in power for *their* housing situations to ever improve. This, combined with their perceptions of being a low priority for decision makers, produced a powerful belief that, if things continue as they are, there is no hope for them, and even less for the children they might have:

- Tilly, 17: Yeah, I think like, what's it gonna be like when our kids are 16? They will be living in mud huts in (local) Park.*
- Keila, 19: Yeah, I know! Seriously.*
- Mark, 17: (Tilly's forthcoming baby)'s got a bright future ahead of him.*

Political mistrust and anger

Far from producing a sense of *passive* embarrassment about their relatively poor housing and run down neighbourhoods – which may have also existed among these young people – the discussions held during this research demonstrated an *active* anger over their neighbourhoods and housing. If anger can be operationalized as the way you feel when you perceive someone has deliberately done wrong by you

(Smedslund 1993, p.14), then these young people appeared very angry with decision-makers and politicians about their neighbourhoods.

Their belief that their neighbourhood situations were unfair, and that things were on course to get worse, appeared to anger these young people enough for them to choose to actively engage with policy-makers and politicians. This was no light decision on behalf of these young people who, at various points, described politicians as *'too often, liars and hypocrites'*, *'racist'* and *'useless'*. Despite this lack of trust, as part of this research, 11 year old men wrote letter to their members of parliament inviting them to swap housing with them for a week, to *'see how stressful it is'*, 15 year old women were talking about holding *'sit ins, like Ghandi'* in the Houses of Parliament about their overcrowding⁵ and 15 year olds wrote evidence documenting personal testimonies to parliamentary committees. But they wanted to do much more, they wanted to meet the Prime Minister, so they could *'say this to his face'*. A number of groups are still working with politicians to promote change. The desire to be catalysts for change when it came to housing and neighbourhoods was broadly shared:

Keila, 19: Yeah, I could have a protest now. Honestly, it just really winds me up. At the end of the day, we are the people who live here. We are the people who put the money into the city. Our wages go back into the city.

The anger these young people felt about their neighbourhoods and housing, as Keila suggested above, was enhanced by a sense of abandonment by the political system, despite paying taxes. They were incensed that despite putting in to "the system", they got nothing back with regards to their housing and neighbourhoods. As one eleven-year-old young man put it *'at least we're helping the government, but the government is not helping us, but that's not fair'*.

If trust can be defined as 'a belief in the integrity of other people' (Ross *et al.* 2001, p.569), then these young people actively mistrusted people with power and authority over their neighbourhoods. Being thought of as *'less important people'*, being overlooked for yuppies, and the lack of *'helping'* from the government all indicate a mistrust in politicians and policy makers when it comes to their local areas. While

⁵ I perhaps overbearing dissuaded this group, concerned about being the severe criminal charges that can be laid against people protesting *in* parliament.

previous research may have documented a strong connection between physical decay and a sense of powerlessness (discussed below), these young people's mistrust of, and anger towards, those in power did not necessarily lead a sense of powerlessness or loss of perceived efficacy. As their attempts at generating actions demonstrate, these young people had enough conviction in their ability to generate change enough to get active. It is potentially worth noting that some of these young people were successful in generating change, from having the local recycling targets set by councils increased in their neighbourhoods, to having their policies reproduced in official policy documents. Others, however, were not. Regardless, these young people demonstrably believed that attempting to generate change was a worthwhile pursuit; they believed they had a sense of control over their neighbourhood's fate.

Implications for neighbourhood research and conclusions

While this research was limited – it only involved five small groups of young people, from one nation in Britain, in one similar methodology – it could perhaps still offer academic and policy relevant insights that might be of relevance beyond its small boundaries.

Academically, this article began by highlighting two potential weaknesses in previous literature exploring the impact of neighbourhoods on children and young people; that too little was known about the mechanisms by which deprived neighbourhoods affect children and young people, and; that children and young people have had little opportunity to voice their own concerns about how their neighbourhoods affect them.

Addressing these in reverse order, firstly, this particular research has highlighted some of the problems of deprived neighbourhoods that matter to these young people. Two key aspects of their neighbourhoods were repeatedly problematised:

- The run down, dilapidated nature of their immediate, surrounding areas. This was problematic for these young people because they felt it looked ugly, and because other people did not have to live in such ugly neighbourhoods. This produced a sense of relative deprivation and anger at this injustice. For these young people, they felt very much as if they had been deliberately abandoned to neighbourhoods that look like '*dust bin(s)*'. They were aware that neighbourhood could be easily cleaned and regenerated, but that no such

efforts were made for people like them. This made them feel as if those with authority and power thought of them 'as *less important people*'.

- The run down nature of their housing, which they felt was too often small, cold and too expensive, while affordable-housing was inaccessible to them. This detracted from their immediate quality of life, leaving them in ill-health, lacking privacy, stressed, tired and upset. They were also aware that they were relatively deprived when it came to housing – their peers had better accommodation, and where scarce housing resources did emerge, they were made available only to already advantaged families and individuals. They also felt as if they were not considered important enough in the eyes of those with authority and power for their housing situations to improve, so that their housing problems were intractable, and probably going to get worse.

However, despite the bleakness of the landscapes these young people described, they were not prepared to passively accept the 'physical disorder' (Ross & Mirowsky 2009, p.50) of their neighbourhoods. The anger and sense of injustice that emerged from the process of problematizing and appreciating their worlds was exercised actively. Despite a dislike of, and strong mistrust towards, politicians, the young people involved in this project all wanted to, and in small ways did, engage in existing political processes in an attempt to generate change. While they may have felt that those with authority and power to improve things did not take them seriously and did not prioritise their best interests, to them, this was unacceptable and needed to change. The government, both national and local, were identified as agents with change making powers, and these young people were prepared to attempt to work with them to catalyse change, in order to improve their situations.

This may suggest that, from the eyes of these young people, a focus on the political systems that structure their neighbourhoods might be a worthwhile avenue for future research. Recent discussions have suggested a need to redress the current 'neglect of social and political institutions' (Sutherland *et al.* 2013, p.1063) in neighbourhood and area studies (Allard & Small 2013). These young people appeared to concur; from their perspectives, political institutions mattered – they were the focus of their anger – when it came to shaping their neighbourhood experiences.

Their willingness to act politically and collectively is perhaps a curious finding, given previous research has found that visual signs of physical "disorder" increases the

sense of powerlessness and social mistrust (Ross *et al.* 2001, Ross & Mirowsky 2009). In areas with high levels of reported:

‘noise, litter, crime, vandalism, graffiti... run down and abandoned buildings ... these signs indicate that the people who live around them are not concerned with public order, that residents are not respectful of each other’s property, that local agents of social control are either unable or unwilling to cope with local problems, and that those in power have abandoned them, all of which undermines trust’ (Ross *et al.* 2001, p.571)

Ross *et al.* (2001), and Ross & Mirowsky (2009, p.51) go on to correlate these signs of physical disorder to a heightened sense of powerlessness, which they define as ‘the learned and generalised expectation that one has control over meaningful circumstances in one’s life’. While these young people may have mistrusted those with power – and certainly demonstrated Ross *et al.*’s (2001) belief in abandonment by those in power – they did not appear to feel powerless as a group to change this. They were prepared to actively try to generate change.

There are a number of possible interpretations of this. Firstly, this may purely be a methodological artefact of the action-based leaning of this research. Previous research documents a link between residents’ sense of powerlessness and physical dilapidation (Ross *et al.* 2001, Ross & Mirowsky 2009, Hill *et al.* 2005, Geis & Ross 1998); this research provided the scope for participants to act upon this link. If neighbourhood “disorder” causes distress, and distress can be expressed passively (through malaise and resignation) or actively (through anger) (Ross & Mirowsky 2009, p.50), these young people were very *active* about the way their neighbourhood’s physical “disorder” affected them. This shift to active anger may be the methodological artefact. If the social organisations and networks people engage with can shape the way they understand their own participation and involvement in community (McRoberts 2003, Putnam 2000), it is possible that this research, supported by a well-known University and a self-declared ‘yuppie’, functioned as a network to foster a belief in collective action, thus activating their distress.

Alternatively, or additionally, this may be because the participants were *young*. If ‘residents learn that is safer not to trust’ and develop a sense of powerlessness through continued experiences of run down neighbourhoods (Ross *et al.* 2001, p.584), younger residents might not have learned or developed such powerlessness,

yet. Previous experience shapes perceptions of efficacy (Sharkey 2006), so youthful exuberance, if you will, might mitigate some of sense of powerlessness deprived neighbourhoods can induce. This perhaps suggests a different vision of the relationship between the perception of efficacy and trust for young people. For these young people, their political cynicism, and mistrust of those in power, did not induce lowered senses of efficacy. In fact, quite the opposite – these young people wanted to be the harbingers of politically driven change for their neighbourhoods *to spite* their perceived political abandonment. This is not to dismiss their anger as youthful naivety. Some research is beginning to document the potential association between anger, powerlessness and neighbourhood issues (Schieman & Meersman 2004, Ross & Mirowski 2009), and these young people certainly demonstrated how their neighbourhood problems induced feelings of anger.

Secondly, this research may have highlighted a number of mechanisms at work when it comes to *how* neighbourhoods affect young people. This research potentially identified three mechanisms at play in these young people's lives, as they describe them:

- Physical surroundings, especially their 'ugliness' and physical decay, appear to matter to these young people. Previous research has documented the capacity of physical decay to affect residents (Ross *et al.* 2001, Ross & Mirowsky 2009, Hill *et al.* 2005, Geis & Ross 1998), and potentially perpetuate further decay via the "broken windows" effect (Wilson & Kelling 1982). As discussed above however, for these young people, physical decay left them feeling angry and wanted to exercise collective actions to make change.
- A sense of relative deprivation. These young people were acutely aware that their neighbourhoods and housing were worse than their better off peers, and that *other* young people grew up in big, comfy houses on clean streets. This is in keeping with previous research within Europe, that suggests that relatively well-off neighbours can be a source of some disamenity (McCulloch 2001, Duncan & Jones 1995, Oberwittler 2007). Again, this left these young people feeling angry and abandoned by those with power and authority. These young people did not appear to be affected by a sense of competition with neighbours *like them*, however. Indeed they wanted to generate positive changes for all young people like them. They perceived, however, that more privileged neighbours dominated resource and monopolised the priorities of those with power.

- Perceived stigmatisation and institutional discrimination. Firstly, these young people articulated a belief in public service differentials, for example, that their streets were not cleaned as thoroughly. Previous research within the UK has argued that the need for environmental services are not met specifically in deprived areas, and this is one way 'neighbourhood effects' might be generated (Hastings 2009). Other studies document some public service differentials (Atkinson & Kintrea 2001, Buck 2001), but the picture is definitely far from clear (Galster 2010, p.15). However, these young people suggest that the *perception* of service differentials matters to them. Secondly, these young people also articulated a strong belief that those with power and authority – especially local and national government – did not take their needs seriously. It would be exceedingly difficult for previous research to have document an objective “lowered priority” of young people from deprived neighbourhoods among those in power, in order to assess the validity of these young people’s inferences in this case study. However, it is perhaps helpful to note that a range of age-based discriminatory practices are arguably evident in Western democracies (Bessant 2004) alongside socioeconomic and class based discriminations (see, for example Gans 1996 or Jones 2012), which may both be important elements of the *perception* of institutional discrimination, as these young people describe it.

These young people did not suggest any epidemic mechanism were at play – in fact, they were quick to reject the idea that different sorts of people, or differently behaved people, lived in their neighbourhoods. This is not to dismiss their possibility, but to highlight that, from these young people’s perspectives, these were not important mechanisms.

Outside of academia, in policy terms, this research perhaps suggests that renewal and housing regeneration programmes might tackle what young residents care about, and highlights the symbolic importance neighbourhood policy can have on young people’s lives. Importantly, however, it suggests that young people can, and want to, engage in policy-making processes to ensure their perspectives are heard and account for by those with power and authority.

This small-scale case study has highlighted some of the issues that might matter to young people when it comes to shaping their experiences in deprived neighbourhoods. While this research has many limitations, it may have potential

implications for future research. These findings that young people can, and want to, work with academics to develop relevant and different forms of knowledge about their neighbourhoods and actively engage in policy debates that shape their *ends*.

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Writing in a role for structure: low-income young people's bilingualism when it comes to agency, choice and the welfare state

Young people, it is often argued, are more individualised and more free of older, class constraints than ever before. This has led some thinkers to debate the (positive) possibilities of 'choice biographies' and self-making among the young, alongside the (more sinister) possibilities of 'epistemological fallacies' blinding them to the limits of these self-making capacities. This article interrogates the idea of 'epistemological fallacies' for five groups of young people from low-income backgrounds in England. Comparing focus group discussions they had about their lives, with policies they wrote to address the problems of their lives, this article suggests that these young people were less blind to the limits of their own agency than individualisation theorists may predict, and were in fact acutely aware of 'how impossible the task of finding biographical solutions' (Beck 2007, p. 685) to social problems can be.

More often than not, control over life is the way in which the story of life is told, rather than the way in which life is lived (Bauman 2002, p. 69)

Much of the sociological thinking around the individualisation thesis predicts – and sometimes empirically alludes to – a strong sense of personal agency among the young. According to this line of thinking, a post-industrial 'surge of individualisation' (Beck 1992, p. 87) has rearranged people's fundamental life patterns, producing 'choice-biographies' among the young (du Bois-Reymond 1998, Chisholm *et. al.* 1990, Giddens 1991¹). Under these conditions, partially freed from the older constraints like totalising gender norms and impassable class divides, modern individuals become 'compelled to assume the role of makers of their own livelihood' and biography (Kelly 2001, p. 26). Here, every individual's biography, it is argued, is partly liberated 'from given determinations and placed in his or her own hands, open and dependent on decisions' (Beck 1992, p. 135). More liberated than any other cohort (Furlong and Cartmel 1997, Kelly 2001, du Bois-Reymond 1998), individual choice and agency has arguably become 'a dominant feature' (Dwyer & Wyn 2001, p. 87) in the lives of the young. Although often contested (Tulloch & Lupton 2003, Lehmann 2004, Roberts 2003, Ball *et al.* 2000), some empirical evidence supports

¹ Giddens refers to 'reflectively constructed selves', rather than 'choice biographies'.

this thesis. Youth researchers have documented more protracted, fragmented and 'Yo Yo' trajectories towards adulthood (Jones & Wallace 1990, Walther 2006, EGRIS 2001), more individualistic professional biographies among the young (Wyn & Dwyer 1999), more fractured educational pathways (Chisholm 1997) and double-lives as students and workers (du Bois Reymond 1998).

Parallellising this debate, sociological studies of people living on low-incomes have increasingly sought to document the role of agency in shaping their lives, as they saw it. Embedded within the 'new paradigm of welfare' (Williams *et. al.* 1999), much sociological literature of "the poor" over the last decade has aimed to understand the agency of individuals experiencing poverty, and their ability to negotiate and mediate their own experiences of low-income (Lister 2004, p. 125, Williams *et. al.* 1999). Challenging the notion that people living on low-incomes are *passive* victims, research has outlined how those living in poverty shape their life-pathways, given the constraints they face (see, for example, Chamberlayne & Rustin 1999). Research with young people living on low incomes, specifically, has gone to great lengths to emphasise their agency and creativity, highlighting the extent to which they author their own lives despite their low incomes (see, for example Ridge 2002, Attree 2006, Redmond 2008). Combined, this body of literature, with young and old, created a sharp focus on role for agency and individual choice in shaping the lives of those on low incomes, as they see it.

However, it has been argued that this focus on individualisation and agency obscures the role of structure and, particularly, the state, from the subjective view of individuals attempting to cobble together their choice biographies, especially if they are "poor". 'In an individualised society, people may not be as aware of the existence of constraints as they are of their attempts at personal intervention' (Furlong & Cartmel 1997, p. 7), leading to a subjective exaggeration of the capacities of individual agency. (Indeed a similar question asked by poverty researchers is to what extent people are able to author their own biographies, given limited financial means [Lister 2004, p. 126]). Empirical work often documents this perceived exaggeration of agency among the self-conceptualisations of young (du Bois Reymond 1998, Rudd & Evans 1998, p. 53), alongside highly individualised subjective explanations of social and economic changes (MacDonald & Marsh 2004, Gunter & Watts 2009). Studies suggest, for example, that young people *tell* stories about their lives permeated by agency (Brennan & Nilsen 2005, p. 423); 'a young person will typically be optimistic and will say that he/she is in control of his/her life course and that occupational

success is largely based on individual effort, while there may be a whole mass of data and theory (that suggests otherwise)' (Evans 2002, p. 252). Bauman (2001, p. 9) hypothesises that under current modern conditions, people struggle to understand the structural constraints that operate on them, this is reflected (and, potentially, subsequently reinforced) by articulating a discourse of choice and agency.

This blind spot around structure is theorised as a form of attribution error. That is, the *belief* in agency and choice may mask from an individual's view the influence of structural forces in producing both the opportunities and constraints that shape their own biography (Rudd & Evans 1998, Evans 2002). This result is, arguably, a subjective 'epistemological fallacy' (Furlong & Cartmel 1997), where for young people, agency becomes the central narrative of their lives despite acute external limitations.² This false perception, where young people *feel* they are able to take control of their lives, it is suggested, had lead to a sort of youthful amaurosis around the impact of structure on their lives; young people have, it is said, become 'blind to the existence of powerful chains of interdependency' that link them to social forces (Furlong & Cartmel 1997, p. 114).

This 'epistemological fallacy' is, arguably, especially pronounced among young people who lack resources to draw upon in shaping their biographies, such as those living in poverty (Furlong & Cartmel 1997, c.f du Bois Reymond 1998). These young people, unequipped with the resources to do so, become compelled to embark on the high-risk project of making their DIY selves (Giddens 1991, Beck 1992, p. 135, Beck 2007). This incongruity, between the sheer inability of the "poor" (often *vis-à-vis* the working class) to shape their biographies and the continuation of structural forces and inequalities in shaping their life pathways, has led to a heated debate between individualisation theorist and class theorist (see for example, Beck 2007 & Atkinson 2007a, 2007b) and flowed over into the domain of youth studies (e.g. Woodman 2009 & 2010, Roberts 2010). Here, there is some suspicion that the idea of a 'choice-biography' is a far-fetched and unhelpful analytic tool, that it has produced a *theoretical* epistemological fallacy of its own. The role of other social scientific theorem in explaining continuing large-scale inequalities is, it is argued, undermined by the current focus on individualisation. For example, it has been suggested that class analysis has been 'rendered invisible' (France 2007, p. 71) by the focus on

² Wyn and White (2000, pp.166) perhaps less pejoratively refer to this relationship between young people's positive perceived choice and agency, despite structural conditions, as the 'paradox of youth'.

individualisation. Or as Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2001 p. 25) simply put it, 'many of the main concepts of sociology are on a war footing with the basic idea of individualisation'. This article does not attempt to address this debate directly, however; it is more concerned with the possibilities of *subjective* epistemological fallacies than *theoretical* fallacies. While the two are connected, interrogating this nexus is beyond the scope of this article. Rather, this article aims to offer a modest, constructivist account of some young people's subjectivities, aiming to explore how they understand, if at all, the disjuncture between the objective and subjective accounts of their lives (as per Furlong 2013, p. 44). In doing so, this article highlights the ambiguities around these young people's perceptions of the role of structure in their highly agentic lives and is, perhaps then, suited to the task of exploring the possibility of *subjective* epistemological fallacies.

Using data derived from a potentially novel research method, undertaken with young people living in low-income neighbourhoods across England, this article presents an exploration of the dis/juncture between young people's sense of agency and their perceived structural limitations. It aims to explore two related questions:

- 1) Is a subjective epistemological fallacy evidenced in these young people accounts of their own lives? That is, do rhetorics of agency dominate their subjective life narratives, and is this at the expense of structural narration?
- 2) Have these young people embraced individualisation, is it 'taken-for-granted' or problematised?

After outlining the policy writing method engaged in this research, this article turns to address the above research questions. It does so by outlining, firstly, the types of narratives and discourses these young people engaged when discussing their own life-pathways in focus groups. These, with few reservations, document an overarching sense of agency and self-authorship in constructing their own (and other young people's) lives.

Secondly, it goes on to discuss the curious subsequent silence around agency when these same young people wrote policy to improve their own lives. Here, these young people demonstrated a dual linguistic ability to write in strong role for structure – particularly of the welfare state – when writing about the forces that shape their lives. This, I suggest, reflects a simultaneous belief that while they feel agentic, they do not believe their agency alone can 'action' themselves out of poverty.

Thirdly, by exploring these young people's understandings of the welfare state, their ambivalence towards individualisation emerges. These young people were acutely aware of the role of the state in their worlds, deeply problematising the perceived barriers it created for them and their peers. This demonstrates an explicit awareness of the possibility of structural limitations to their life-pathways, *alongside* perceived agentic opportunities.

Methods

This research engaged a policy-writing methodology, where five groups of young people, living in some of the most financially deprived neighbourhoods in England, were supported to deliberate upon and develop local anti-poverty policies. The findings presented here are derived from thematic analysis of focus group discussions undertaken while writing their policies, field notes, as well as the policy documents developed by these young people.

A series of sequential investigations were undertaken – in six -17 meetings per group – and while a participatory methodology meant that the exact process often varied between groups, four common research encounters were completed:

- 1) Discussions around what it was like, on average, to grow up “around here” for young people “like them”, using arts and crafts to develop a set of characters that embodied “average young people”. The lives and experiences of these characters were then unpacked, allowing participants to discuss potentially stigmatising topics through a depersonalised medium. It is perhaps worth noting that these characters were helpful research tools. As an unintended consequence, they allowed conversations bridging the individual and the social to emerge. Conversations often shifted from ‘*me*’, ‘*my story*’ or ‘*for my family*’ to a character’s experiences sometimes within the same sentence, depending on the calculations of the narrator.
- 2) Problematising and appreciating aspects of these individual and “average” lives, using photo-voice and brainstorming. Here, lists of “good” and “bad” aspects about their lives, as they and their characters experienced them, were developed and discussed.
- 3) Imagining, deliberating and deciding on policy solutions. Using brainstorming or drama, the groups discussed, wrote and re-wrote all their policy ideas to

address all the “bad” issues they identified, and enhances the “good” aspects. This became their policy documents.

- 4) Discussion around, and undertaking, youth-led actions. Each group was invited, should they want to, to take some actions around their policies and the research agenda then handed over to groups. Actions included a launch event at Parliament, directly fixing “problems” they identified and peer-to-peer replication of the research, among many others (more detail about these methods can be found in Farthing 2014).

In total around 140 young people took part in this research, recruited from youth groups in four wards³ with extremely high levels of child poverty (above 60 per cent at the time⁴), and one highly impoverished ward (above 45 per cent. For reference, the national average was 20 per cent on the same measure [ECP 2011]). This focus, on young people experiencing financial disadvantage, perhaps makes this research unique. While some studies documented affluent and privileged young people’s sense of agency, arguing that they may be ‘trend-setters’ of choice-biographies (du Bois Reymond 1998, p. 64), this research explicitly explores young people from low-income background’s sense of choice and control.

Youth groups were selected by convenience sampling within these impoverished wards; some wards only contained one youth group while in others, two or three were contacted with the most enthused group participating. The consequence of this was diverse sample of youth groups, including groups with different ages, groups of young people who had been in care, different genders and ethnicities (see figure one). However, they appeared unified by challenging economic experiences. Discussions and personal narratives offered across the research encounters suggested the vast majority of participants had direct personal experience of *‘being skint’* as well as experience gathered from living in financially deprived communities.

Participants were directly invited to participate and both personal and parental consent sought.

³ The UK’s smallest statistical geographical unit, around 5,500 residents (ONS 2012)

⁴ According to the UK’s child poverty measure, 60 per cent of median income equivalised household income (ECP 2011)

Area	N	Gender	Age	Ethnic origins
Cambus	25	Mixed	11-19, median 15	White British
Leighton	100+	Mixed	10-19, core group 17-18	Mostly White British, some Black British & mixed race
Morton	7	Female	12-14	White British, mixed race and Black British
Springville	6	Female	15-16	British Bengali
Shelton	6	Mixed	16-21, median 17	White British, mixed race & British Arab

Figure one: sample groups.

Findings

Agency in these young people's life-pathways

In keeping with previous literature (Evans 2002, du Bois Reymond 1998, Brannen and Nelsen 2005), particularly research involving young people on low incomes (Ridge 2002, Attree 2006), all of the groups of young people involved in this research were acutely aware of their agency and ability to chose. Phrases like *'make yourself'*, *'your own fault'* and *'responsible'* turned up time and time again when these young people were talking about how they lived their lives. For example, during a discussion about who was "in charge" of their lives, one young woman stated *'we're responsible for everything because it's us and if we're doing it so we're responsible, you can't just blame it on someone else, all right?'* At the extreme end, for example, participants talked about how agency matters most when it came to explaining serious decisions, like suicide:

Tammy: ... It says like, I saved it on my phone, the thing (a newspaper article that outlined how people who live in Leighton had a significantly shorter life expectancy than people from richer neighbourhoods). It says like how poor we are and like how we grow up like...

Keila: Like little feral kids.

Tammy: Like we've got nothing, like, lost in our own. But like every kid in care makes their own decisions. Like if Keila decides to commit suicide 'cause of her life in care, like in 10 years. That

does not affect me, like, doing what I wanna do. She just chooses to be, like wallow in self-pity, isn't it?

Keila: Exactly. Basically.

Eckersley (1998) argues that rising youth suicide reflects the coupling of fragmented and complex social structures with the individualisation of risk and responsibility, so those unable to navigate individualise their failure with extreme consequences (see also Wyn & White 2000, p. 177). This tendency was replicated in this research, discussions around who was responsible for suicide appeared a number of times and always with the same consensus – it was a personal choice made entirely by the individual in question.

Some participants went so far as to actively discount the epistemological possibility of non-agentic understandings of their lives. Beck (1992) argues that processes of late-modernity, which moved socially determined outcomes beyond probabilistic logic into possibilistic logics (Lash 2001, p. x), opens up ambiguities between what may be deemed calculable or incalculable. Woodman (2010, p. 251) suggests that this ambiguity potentially weakens 'even the possibility of thinking probabilistically about events, that makes (informed) choice possible'. These young people appeared to have internalised this ambiguity. For them, the impact of their marginalised status – as "children" from deprived neighbourhoods, as care leavers, as ethnic minorities or disabled and so on – was often described as too incalculable to warrant reflection. For example, at one stage, a young woman outlined how what would often be referred to as a disadvantage in life – in this case a family crisis requiring social service intervention – could potentially be an advantage:

Social services, would say, I'd come in, and they would say, 'do this!' (in a positive and supportive tone). And everyone's like 'yeah, you do that!'... Whereas at home you might not get that. Do you know what I mean like, people might give you. Your mum could like, 'you can be a hairdresser or something, but you can't be like, a police officer. She can't be this, she can't be that'...

Lehmann (2004, p. 388) noted something similar with the young women in his research – who had reinterpreted their gender as an actual advantage in the labour market, or an issue that could be negated agentially – arguing that they were socially constructing a narrative of agency. The understanding that non-agentic

forces were somewhat unknowable was equally a common feature of conversations in this research. For these young people, either the lack of certainty around how their life biographies were *actually* shaped by non-agentic limitations (the unbearable lightness of being, if you will), or perhaps the psychological stress involved in reflecting on the uncontrollable influence of non-agentic factors, meant that they often actively refused to engage in discussions around the impact of structure on their lives. In this sense, the most coherent and psychologically possible explanations for these young people's lives appeared to be punctuated by agency.

Specifically, for four of the five groups involved, any suggestion that non-agentic factors might shape their life-pathways appeared to be an affront to their autonomy. The narrative developed time and time again was that it was *their* choices, actions and decisions that matter in *their* lives; every time I quizzed these groups about the role of structural or fatalistic elements in their lives, I was left with the impression that I was being firmly "corrected".

Moderator: Like the cards that you are dealt, you choose how to play your hand in life, but the cards you are dealt can be pretty bad, no?

Ellen: The odds are harder, but you still chose them.

This focus on agency was, perhaps paradoxically, institutionally reinforced within these four groups. Their low incomes and highly deprived geographic contexts, almost by definition, saw these four groups labelled as 'at risk' by youth and social services (see also, Kelly 2000, Sharland 2006). For the most part, then, they had some quite extensive involvement with human-services workers. Passing discussions with social and youth workers repeatedly suggests that their professional emphasis tended towards focusing on what these young people could do, rather than the disadvantages they were experiencing. Discussions around, for example, "working" these groups to get participants to be '*foxes*' rather than '*pandas*' – that is, adaptive and resilient to new and potentially hostile environments rather than becoming "endangered" – echoed Beck's (2001, p. 23) thoughts around institutionalised individualisation. A strong professional praxis emphasising empowerment and realising individual capacities (BASW 2012, NYA 2002, p. 7) potentially 'enforced the rule that people should organise more and more of their own lives' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001, p. 23).

This is not to suggest that every institution affecting these young people's lives sought to emphasise their agency, there was some institutional ambivalence at play. For example, the newspaper article about life expectancy in Leighton – which raised the ire of Keila and Tammy above – was inspired by a press release from their local Poverty Commission. The article outlined the powerful, structural impact of poverty in curtailing lives, but was actively and angrily rejected by these young people, who felt too in control of their life-pathways for this to be the case.

On the other end of the spectrum, however, there was an “outlier” group. One of the groups frequently articulated a mediating role for agency, *and* structure and fate in shaping life-pathways. For example, the abridged conversation below highlight the groups belief in “responsibility” for self vis-à-vis academic achievement and career progression:

Moderator: What about how well people do in school, do you think that's up to them or do you think that's about their environment?

Salma: That's definitely up to them.

Basmah: That's up to them.

...

Moderator: What about your career? Do you guys feel that you are going to be able to choose what you want to be in the future?

Saba: No, there's no jobs about now, so if there ain't none now, then they won't even have it a few years later. Unless the government actually made plans.

Alongside the role of agency and structure (or ‘government’ as they articulate it here), this also group discussed a fatalistic role for God in determining life-pathways at other points. They suggested that ‘*God's responsible for actions and everything*’, and that religion may be able to explain disability related poverty, ‘*So if somebody's born some way, then God has a plan for them, that's why they're like this... Then who are you to judge!*’

The idea that offering up agentic explanations for life pathways had the potential to ‘judge’ – to view people as responsible for their life-outcomes – was not lost on this outlying group. This group, the only group comprised entirely of ethnic minority young people who did not have regular youth/social workers, appeared to offer the broadest array of explanations for life-pathways, encompassing agentic, structural

and fatalistic understandings. The willingness of this group to *also* utilise fatalistic and structural explanations may be partly due to what Hunt (1996) describes as ‘dual consciousness’; that as ethnic minorities, their experience or expectation of discrimination may have led them to question individualised ‘judgements’ around poverty. Alternatively, or in conjunction, this may reflect their limited interactions with youth/social workers, or their religious backgrounds.

They were, however, the outliers in this regard. The dominant narrative used to explain life-pathways, in all other groups and in this group too, were individualised and agentic. The only difference for the “outlier” group was their ability to *also* discuss a role for structure and fate in shaping life-pathways. This is perhaps in keeping with the subjective ‘epistemological fallacy’ (Furlong and Cartmel 1997) predicted by Beck (1992) and others (Kelly 2001); all of the participants told stories of their lives that featured themselves as, first and foremost, the key authors of their pathways.

While narrative discourses of agency and autonomy dominated their discussions, as Brannen and Nilsen (2005, p. 418) put it, to listen to only the discourses vocalised is to risk ‘ignoring the silences’. They suggest that the *absence* of a particular discourses ought to be taken as seriously by researchers as the *presence* of a particular discourse, and, predicting a subjective epistemological fallacy, outline that:

‘silence about the structural side of the (agency/structure) dynamic does not mean it is unimportant in people’s lives. Rather, structure and context form part of the taken for granted aspects of lives that are omitted from people’s narratives and accounts provided in the research encounter’ (Brannen & Nilsen 2005, p. 418)

The silence around structure however, was broken when these young people shifted from talking about their lives, to writing policy about their lives.

The role of agency in the policy documents that they produced

The particular methodology of this research engaged an additional – and, as far as I am aware, novel – method for young people to tell the stories of their lives, by following discussions about their lives with a process of authoring ideal policy solutions. Any silences within their policies are, perhaps, especially loaded because they document their “taken for granted” problems. This is because policy writing is,

essentially, a constructivist problematizing activity, where authors represent particular aspects of their realities as problems needing to be fixed (Bacchi 2009). In designing a policy solution, policy authors must first imagine and make manifest a “problem” to address (see also, Dean 1999). Creating a particular problem via policy writing – or, in the equal case, leaving a silence around a particular problem in a written policy – is, therefore, loaded with meaning.

It is, perhaps then, curious to note that despite the emphasis on agency and self-authorship that emerged in the many discussions and deliberations in this research, the content of the final policies they wrote was remarkably *silent* around the role of agency. It seems that, despite the central role of individual agency and action in their narration of their lives, their ideal solutions for the problems of their lives did not focus on this at all. There was a silence around the role of structure in the *narratives* these young people spoke about their own lives, and an equal silence about the role of agency in the *problematizations* these young people wrote in policy about their lives.

For example, the most commonly cited ideal policy solutions, as authored by these young people, were ideas for better housing, better schooling (both cheaper and better curriculums), and to tackle crime. Very few policies that addressed individuals “actions” or agency were suggested. And even where policies were suggested that may have implied individuals were personally responsible for identified problems, such as suggestions around improving money management, or drug or alcohol addiction, they were presented as problems with the education or health care systems. For example, tackling addiction in one area required both ‘*more help for people who are addicted*’ and to ‘*make anti-smoking kits more anonymous, so they don’t have to be posted to your house*’. Theirs’, and other’s, individual agency appears curiously downplayed in their policy terms.

Reinforcing this prominence of structural issues, as these young people see it, a number of the policy documents produced suggested that the problem of their lives, as they wrote them in policy terms, were partly to do with their structurally frustrated political agency. Three groups listed their age-based inability to vote, and lack of political representation as minorities and from low-income backgrounds, as central to their problems. For example, in one area their second most important policy ask began with a statement that ‘*politicians (don’t) represent us. They are too often liars and hypocrites. Some are also racist*’ before calling for lower voting ages and young

politicians in parliament. Far from being blind to the individual limits of their power, they wrote clearly and succinctly about this in the political domain.

Here, perhaps, these young people partly reject the idea that modern living is 'full of risks which need to be confronted and fought alone' (Bauman 2002, p. xvii). Bauman (1998) suggests that under the modern conditions of individualisation and personal choice, the relationship between citizens and states is radically reconfigured. The processes of individualisation open up what were previously collective struggles aiming for state-based solutions, and passes them down to individuals to negotiate their own, personal solutions (see also Beck 2007). Under these conditions, Bauman (1998) suggests that citizenship itself becomes understood and exercised in terms of individual consumption at the expense of political rights and citizenship. It is curious to note then, that these young people, born long in to the "historic trend" towards individualisation⁵ are in fact protesting their lack of political rights and citizenship. They appear aware of, and able to articulate, a fundamental paradox of individualisation; they are able to write in a role for themselves as authors of their actions and decisions, and aware that their lives are still shaped and limited by structural and state-based factors, over which they perceive limited control.

Perhaps one way of attempting to understand the apparent contradictions that these young people narrated is by interpreting the (modest) task they undertook in writing policy within the canon of the intellectual challenge C. Wright Mills (1959) set himself, in attempting to reconcile the concepts of the individual and society (see also, Brennan & Nilsen 2005). (Although for the young people, the task of reconciliation was described in idealised rather than theorised terms). In doing so, Mills (1959) focussed on connecting 'the personal troubles of milieu (to) the public issues of social structure' (Mills 1959, p. 8), effectively tying the *biographies* of individuals to the *history* of society. In this sense, the policies these young people wrote, which methodologically connected their private troubles to social problems, can be seen as their way of *talking* about how they see themselves as (problematically) embedded within society, and their place in contemporary British history. While they indeed felt they were authors of their own biographies, when they were asked to describe their place in history, stories of structural barriers and inequality re-emerged as a dominant discourse. This methodology, perhaps then, contextualized these young

⁵ Which Beck (2007, pp.682) suggests began with political enfranchisement and then the establishment, expansion and, ultimately, dismantling of the welfare state.

people's understandings of individualization and structure, and allowed a glimpse at their biographies *and* histories, as they saw them.

Agency in life-pathways under the welfare state

Understanding the nuanced impacts of individualisation on young people, arguably, requires paying special attention to the welfare state and its relationship with individuals. Often, the welfare state plays an active role in bridging young people's individual biographies to collective, social histories; a relationship that is arguable being rapidly reshaped by individualisation (Beck 2007, Bauman 1998).

Understanding these young people's experiences of the welfare state, then, could potentially go some way towards a micro-sociological exploration of broader macro-sociological dynamic.

And it is, perhaps, an interesting micro-view. Just as this methodology peculiarly provide the scope for young people to author in a role for structure and agency, it also failed to replicate the taken-for-granted-ness of the welfare state that previous research with young people found (Brannen & Nilsen 2005). Indeed, all of these young people were acutely aware of the *presence* of the welfare state in their worlds. So much so, that they often appeared keen to critique the over-abundance of support it appeared to offer people experiencing hardship, including their own families.

This current "over-presence" of the welfare state as they saw it, when combined with their understandings of the agency of those on low-incomes, often led to what, on the surface, read as scathing attacks on people who were financially dependent on the state. For example, there were often suggestions that '*lazy*' people could get '*sucked in*' and '*sit on their bums*' living on benefits as a '*way of life*'. For these young people, the idea that being reliant on benefits was sometimes a consequence of a lack of, or misplaced, agency was evident.

This focus on agency, and use of agentic narratives to critique the welfare state, reflects, in many ways, broader popular beliefs about unemployment, benefits and the welfare state in Britain. People's 'view(s) of the poor and the reasons for poverty ... provide important insights into the legitimization of social and economic inequality, as well as into the legitimacy of collective responses to it in the forms of institutionalised welfare systems and anti-poverty policies' (Van Oorschot & Halman 2000, p. 3). Many researchers (Bullock 1999, Feagin 1972, Applebaum 2001, Van

Oorschot and Halman 2000) found that agentic understandings about the causes of poverty correspond to a hardening of attitudes about the generosity of social security systems, or more specifically, that agentic understandings correlate with lower levels of support for spending on benefits.

However, for these young people, there appeared to be many life pathways that legitimately included stints on benefits, whose actions did not warrant wholesale reductions to the welfare state. *'People born with a disability'*, students and pregnant women, for example, were discussed as agentic people dependent on the welfare state, but whose choices and actions had not justified their current life-outcome. For example, despite the strong feelings about her family being unemployed – *'(my mum) done it herself, it's her own problem. She would not be sick if she wasn't a smack head. ... People lead themselves into their way of life'* – Liz was keen to immediately point out that her situation was different. She fell pregnant just before her 18th birthday, and has been unsuccessfully trying to claim Income Support ever since:

... It's so confusing. Like, when we are claiming benefits, it's not that you don't want to work. But obviously you can't work when you are pregnant. I go to college still, for my income support. I'm pregnant, for my income support. But I'm still doing something.

Liz is keen to point out that despite her current life-outcome – relying on benefits – she was still agentic and was not fatalistic about her trajectory in life. She was actively doing things *in exchange for* her benefits. Her, and the young people's more broadly, highly agentic understandings of those living on low incomes and in receipt of benefits did not lead to harsh judgements about the unemployed or the sorts of social policies required to help *per se*. Despite their understanding of the agency of those on low-income, these young people did not demonstrate this hardening of attitudes about those on benefits having universally personally failing, or social security as overly generous as studies with adults found (Bullock 1999, Feagin 1972, Applebaum 2001). (In fact, despite their strong criticisms of the welfare state, many called for increases to benefits and supports in the policy documents they authored). These young people appeared to subscribe to something more nuanced. For them, a belief that people on low-incomes, like themselves, their families and/or peers, had much agency to exercise did not necessarily mean they viewed "poor" people as having personally failed, and therefore favoured punitive social policies. Instead, they

appeared to understand that the sum consequences of individual agency did not necessarily lead to employment or a life free of poverty.

These young people's belief in agency appeared to be a belief in the ability to choose and take actions that *may* affect life-pathways; they did not seem to feel that 'each person's biography (was) removed from given determinations and placed in his or her own hands, open and dependent on decisions' as Beck (1992, p. 135) suggests. Rather, they seemed to be articulating something slightly more subtle – that each person's actions were placed in her or his own hands, but that that outcomes and life-pathways this led to were not necessarily guaranteed. In fact, the exact same point in two pathways could be met, *despite* mammoth discrepancies in actions. This focus on the *actions* of those on low incomes perhaps challenges some of the thinking around the internalisation of epistemological fallacies. These young people did not seem to have internalised a subjective epistemological fallacy such that they were unaware of the impact of the structure and the welfare state – in fact, they were acutely aware of how it shaped their and their peers lives – nor did they seem to project this fallacy forward in to calls for punitive social policy. They appeared to believe that they, and others, have agency and control over the actions they undertook, but *not* that this necessarily meant people could control their life-pathways and economic fate in its entirety. An appreciation of the impossibility of 'finding biographical solutions to systemic contradictions' (Beck 2007, p. 685) was present among these young people, and they were aware that the state had a large role to play in this.

Discussion and conclusions

This article began by posing two connected research questions; firstly, if a subjective epistemological fallacy was evident in these young people's narration of their lives, and; secondly, if they have embraced this individualisation. The answer to these questions is, perhaps predictably, yes *and* no, and possibly presents some interesting reflections around potential pitfalls of methodological individualism and collectivism.

Firstly, these young people engaged a highly agentic rhetoric when discussing their lives, and the lives of young people like them. They spun a tale of choice, responsibility and self-making. For four of the five groups of involved, so much as utterances around non-agentic factors – like fate or structure – were rebuked as

unknowable or inconsequential. This is, perhaps, in keeping with other research which has documented young people's, and people's in general, preference for agentic language in biographical reflections (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005, Bauman 2001, Thompson *et al.* 2002). Herein lies the conundrum, however. While these young people were almost hyper-agentic when it came to narrating their life stories, they were *also* able to write in powerful roles for structure and the welfare state when the mode of language shifted from discussions to writing policy. When these young people were encouraged to engage in a different discourse, as it were, a different subjective understanding about their lives emerged. This offer mixed support, then, for the concept of a subjective epistemological fallacy.

Brennan and Nilsen (2005, p. 423), building on Mills (1959) suggest the narratives young people tell about their lives will be dominated by agency, and that this reflects a difficulty in comprehending the contextual forces that shape their lives (see also, Bauman 2001). When looking at the stories these young people told about their lives, this conceptual disjuncture and the hegemony of agency was clearly evident. The impact of non-agentic forces was potentially unknowable, and often refuted when they spoke about their, and other's, lives. However, in this research not all young people were silent on the role of fate and structure, *and* all of these young people demonstrated a consistent bi-lingualism when it came to writing in a role for non-agentic forces via policy. They wrote extensively and eloquently about the need to address structural problems that affected young people "like themselves". They talked about critical roles for housing, education and crime in shaping their collective life experiences. Furlong and Cartmel (1997, p. 144) surmise that the emergent epistemological fallacy 'means that crises are perceived as individual shortcomings rather than the outcome of processes which are largely beyond the control of individuals'. While these young people certainly perceived themselves as highly agentic, they were also deeply aware of the chains of interdependence within which their agency was exercised (as per Furlong 2013, p. 44).

These findings, that these young people can and did write in strong roles for structure and the welfare state, may differ from previous analysis and existing theory for a number of reasons. Firstly, it may be because the young people involved in this study were from low-income backgrounds. Given this, they may have experienced, or legitimately expect to experience, more constraints to their agency than other research subjects (cf. Du Bois Reymond 1998). Alternatively, it may be a methodological artefact, born of unpacking life narratives within a policy writing

discourse, rather than a discussive discourse. Regardless, it is perhaps important to reflect on these differences and their methodological implications. Often, this conceptual challenge in youth studies is framed as such; while young people *talk* about agency (often embedded in theorisations around individualisation), research *shows* the importance of structure (often embedded in class theorisations). Attempts to bridge this conceptual disjuncture are often postulated, via bounded agency (Evans 2002), structured individualisation (Roberts 1995) or other middle way approaches (often involving Bourdieu, such as Threadgold 2011, Farrugia 2013), or sometimes fought out in debates between class theorists and individualisation theorists (Woodman 2009 & 2010, Roberts 2010). While these are, no doubt, valuable debates and important ways of conceptualising the realities contemporary young people operate within, a modest contribution to this bridge might also emerge from exploring young people's understandings derived from different discourses and methodologies.

The answer to the second question, then, becomes perhaps more interesting. These young people's fluency in both the language of agency and the language of structure allows interesting insights in to the extent that they have both embraced *and* problematised their individualisation. Structural factors, especially those of the welfare state, were not necessarily taken-for-granted, or an assumed context in which they operate, but nor were they foregrounded in their reflective subjectivities. They appear to have a quite sophisticated conceptualisation of their individualisation, and an ability to connect the agentic narratives of their lived biographies to their socially structured histories. From their perspective, theirs is a biography written in a language of choice, but punctuated by structure and the welfare state. They narrate plot-lines of control throughout their lives, but faulty structural factors, like education, housing or political systems, set the stage on which they perform. Like most thinkers then, who have been debating ways of conceptualising this agency / structure debate for young people, these young people have sophisticated coetaneous conceptualisation, but that are perhaps under-explored depending on the method researchers engage in their encounters.

In sum, this suggests that these young people appear to be fluent in the 'space of ambivalence' that individualisation opens up (Beck 2007, p. 683), and are perhaps more aware of 'how impossible the task of finding biographical solutions to the systematic contradictions' (Beck 2007, p. 685) can be. This potentially challenges the idea that these young people are suffering from a subjective epistemological fallacy;

rather, they appear to be acutely aware of the structural limitations affecting their lives.

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Choosing not to choose: Performances aimed at, and rejections of, individualisation by low-income young people in England

There is much debate within youth studies regarding whether or not, or to what extent, young people subjectively experience individualised life-pathways. This article suggests that alongside these debates, it might be fruitful to also explore if young people are being *institutionally* individualised “from above”. Using the current UK government’s child poverty policy as a case study, it explores the extent to which this policy individualises low-income young people, arguing that it strongly pushes them towards the project of self-making and choice-biographies. This is regardless whether or not they subjectively see themselves as self-makers, or whether or not they are equipped for the task. Working with 38 young people around England, who were some of the young people this policy targets, this article then goes on to document how this individualisation “from above” was actively rejected. Given the opportunity write their own, ideal child poverty policy, created as part of this research, these young people instead underscored the importance of structural inequalities in shaping the problems of poverty as they saw them. Their policy highlighted a desire for collective, universalistic interventions to correct for these inequalities, rather than individualised solutions imposed “from above”.

Central to the contemporary governance of “youth” and “childhood”, arguably, lies a tendency for states to individualise their relationship with young citizens. This state-led individualisation is an inevitable bi-product of the processes of ‘late modernity’, according to authors such as Beck (1992) and Beck and Beck Gernsheim (2006) (and, similarly Beck, Giddens & Lash (1994), Giddens (1991) and Bauman (2001)). Punctuated by intensifications of globalisation, de-structuring of social classes and the re-structuring of inequalities around risk, the late modern condition, they argue, requires increased reflexivity and responsibility from individuals – and contemporary governance serves to reinforce such personalised self-making. The steep demands of biographical management become passed on to individuals, with institutions shifting the process of governance on to the ‘self’, requiring people to develop personalised tactics of risk management. Individuals, it is argued, now have ‘no choice but to choose’ (Giddens 1991, p. 81) how to make up themselves, and states insists citizens assume the role of makers of every element of their biographies, from career pathways to health regimes. Beck (2007) suggests that this process is now so

entrenched that the late modern relationship between the state and the individual has become defined by this *institutionalised* individualisation.

Much research, particularly in the domain of youth studies, has explored the consequences of individualisation as a subjective and individual phenomenon, evidencing or debating if young biographies are marked by choice and risk management (du Bois-Reymond 1998, Chisholm *et. al.* 1990, EGRIS 2001, Evans 2002, Tulloch & Lupton 2003, Lehmann 2004, Roberts 2003). However, Beck (2007, p. 681) suggests that individualisation is largely misunderstood if it is seen as solely a process of subjective preference or choice. The phenomenon of individualisation, as *imposed* by late-modern institutions, has so far been relatively under explored within youth studies. I am contending, here, that previous suggestions that individuals have to live a 'life of one's own' (Beck 2006, p. 22) perhaps needs to be explored more so as a *compulsion* rather than subjective choice. That is, individualisation could be understood as as a(nother) tool of governmentality (Foucault 1991), as one of the multiple and overlapping logics that underpin the on going management of "youth" and of young people. Kelly (2006, p. 18), for example, suggests that solutions to late-modern problems of governing youth – from collapsing youth labour market to increased personal risks – are being re-imagined

'as residing in the capacity of various authorities to develop in individuals a particular ethics of self – a form of personhood we can describe as the entrepreneurial Self, a form of personhood that sees individuals as being responsible for conducting themselves, in the business of life, as an enterprise, a project, a work in progress'.

Young people, it appears, have limited choices but to choose, in this regard.

Policies aimed at young people potentially form a particularly insightful domain of analysis for this task. They facilitate an exploration of the top down compulsions towards individualisation that may mirror, or contest, the bottom up expressions often explored within youth studies. Such expressions of, or as Brodie (2007, p. 168) refers to them 'performances' of, individualisation in policy taken on a very distinct and particular form; the discourse of individualisation is often deployed to justify policies that call for *individual* level solutions to what were previously seen as *social* inequalities (Thompson 2011, p. 788). This push towards individualised policies can be evidenced across many domains of social policy, however, for Beck (2007, p. 681), the more revealing performance lies in the 'social semantics' of welfare and

labour market reforms. Where labour market and welfare reforms overlap, such as in poverty or youth-transition policy, performances may be especially telling.

Beck (2007) suggests that policy performances of individualisation take on three core formats; a focus on improving human capital, often through education; a focus on individual responsibility and avoiding behaviours and characteristics that carry risk, and; integration and inclusion in the labour market. These formats bear all the markers of late-modern welfare “activation” policies, which resonate across a range of national settings. Indeed, it is arguable that activation is so hegemonic in policy discourses that it is increasingly cosmopolitan in reach. As Brodie (2006, p. 160) suggests:

‘During the past decade, social policy regimes in virtually all Western democracies have turned from a rights-based and redistributive model of social governance toward so-called “active” welfare policies that place priority on the development of human capital, individual self-sufficiency, and labor force participation. These reforms are represented as offering the poor a “hand up” rather than “a hand out.”’

Activation policies have not just been directed at “the poor”, but are increasingly directed at youth transitions as well. Traditionally, youth policies have attempted to support standard transitions in to adulthood, but as youth transitions fracture and yo-yo (Jones & Wallace 1990, Cohen & Ainsley 2000, Walther 2006, EGRIS 2001) transition policies have – in parallel – increasingly turned towards “activating” individual young people (Walther 2006). For youth policy, ‘this means self-responsibility for individuals in attaining success or failure in transitions to work through the creation of – positive or negative – incentives for active transition behaviour’ (Walther 2006, p. 122). Such performances, on the surface, are now commonplace in much youth policy, from a fervour for services that develop young people’s human capital (via, for example, formalising informal education) to a focus on increasing *individual* young people’s resilience to *social* risks.

Echoing other social policy thinkers who note a declining focus on collective policy (Ellison 1991, p. 57, Le Grand 1982, 1989, Rose 1996), Brodie (2007) argued that the shifting focusing toward individual activation reflects an ideological move away from two previous assumptions underpinning post-war social policy. Namely, that that structural inequalities exist, so that social structures in one way or another advantage and disadvantage some groups of (young) people, and; secondly, that social policy and state interventions *ought* to correct these systemic inequalities and equalize outcomes. Where such assumptions belie social policy, attempts at ending

poverty or supporting youth transitions become far more focused on correcting for structural barriers and reducing inequalities, for example, via affirmative action. However, an individualised approach to social policy, by default, erases such discourses from policy-makers lexicons; 'Active welfarism is just one example of the incessant production and reproduction of the contemporary individualised person that masks the ongoing relevance of systemic contradictions in determining vulnerabilities to poverty as well as capacities to achieve self-sufficiency' (Brodie 2007, p. 160). In short, policy-makers pass the responsibility of navigating pathways out of poverty, and in to adulthood, on to individual young people.

While the broader processes of individualisation are, it is argued, globally transformative, in many ways youth occupies the vanguard of these radicalisations. Born long in to the trends towards individualisation, more than any other cohort, arguably, their biographies' are punctuated by these institutionalised risky and reflexive demands. So, while welfare and labour market policy are key sites where tendencies towards the institutionalisation of individualisation are evidenced (Beck 2007), young people are especially telling "critical cases" within this.

This article aims to document some specific performances of individualisation, and attempts at imposing choice and self-making, focussed on low-income children and young people in England. Low-income children and young people are, potentially, doubly-affected by institutional performances of individualisation. Firstly, children and young people are often already defined as "at-risk" of failures to transition "correctly" in to adulthood (see Dwyer & Wyn 2004), so institutions aim to restrict and tame their risk-taking behaviours (Kelly 1999). Secondly, as members of the "poor", institutions often aim to "activate" them to minimise their personal risks of poverty (Brodie 2007).

To explore this unique positioning, this article critically examines the current UK government's policy aimed at explicitly "ending" child poverty; *Child Poverty Strategy 2014-17* (HM Government 2014). It explores this policy arguing that evidence of individualisation abounds. Discursively, *Child Poverty Strategy 2014-17* (HM Government 2014) points to an idealised 'primacy of the decontextualized individual as the iconic subject of contemporary social relations' (Brodie 2007, p. 155), powerfully twinning the management of children and young people to notions of their own responsibility.

This article then turns to explore what some low-income youngsters, themselves targets of these performances, alternatively imagine to be the solutions to their dual “risks”, by analysing an England wide anti child poverty policy they developed (included in appendix one). The same analytic lens is applied to these young people’s policy, however, despite embodying the theoretical zeitgeist of modern individualisation, these young people’s (imagined) policy discourse did not express an idealisation of individualisation. Rather, for these young people, collectivist policy aims, like universal services, took primacy of place, problematizing their enforced individualisation.

For the young people involved in this research, then, while they are highly individualised *by* official policy and policy-makers, this does not form a taken-for-granted discourse of governmentality for them. Instead, these young people were able to express a preference for discourses of collective solutions and “older” welfare-state policy, despite the continuing performances of individualised policy addressed at them. This is perhaps especially curious, given that none of the participants would have been the targets of exclusively collectivist (“older”) policy constructions. For these young people, then, their counter policy performance may represent an active desire not to choose themselves, a borrowed nostalgia for an unknown golden age of policy, and/or some other form of resistance. Regardless, it represents a curious anti-individualised performance by young people *in spite* of official policy discourses.

Methods and Data

Official Policy

The “official” child poverty policy analysed in this article is *Child Poverty Strategy 2014-17* (HM Government 2014). It was authored by the Child Poverty Unit jointly hosted by the Department for Education, the Department for Work and Pensions and HM Treasury, to meet a legislative requirement to produce a policy outlining measures to ensure as far as possible, children in the UK do not experience socio-economic disadvantage (*Child Poverty Act 2010*, UK, Art. 9.2.b). It is perhaps worth noting that it was not an un-contentious policy document, and received some criticism from third sector organisations, academics and public bodies (around 10 per cent of respondents to its consultation process supported none of the actions,

compared to less than 5 per cent that supported all of its actions [HM Government 2014, p. 104]). Regardless, *Child Poverty Strategy* (HM Government 2014) is not intended here to represent the monolithic views of the UK policy community, rather as an example evidencing an official performance of individualisation directed towards low-income young people and their families.

Particular attention is paid to the ministerial forewords offered within this document. While forewords may often seem a trivial component of policy documents, I content that here that they are particularly rich spaces to explore policy performances, as they speak to the unhindered intent of top-level policy-makers. In many ways, they are more suited to the task undertaken in this article. As these forewords reflect the politicised intent of a policy, more unencumbered by pragmatic practicalities or civil-service moderation than the “postword” policy text, they are perhaps more comparable to the policy text prepared by these young people, who were likewise not hindered by practical concerns about implementation and without influence from public administrators.

Young people’s policy

The official policy is compared and contrasted to a “young people’s policy”, which was created as part of this research process. To develop this policy, five groups of young people from financially deprived areas around England were supported to work together to develop a national anti child poverty policy (building on earlier work on local child poverty policies, Farthing 2015).

Their previous work involved four phases; discussing what an average youth was like; problematizing and appreciating aspects of this youth; brainstorming and deliberating solutions to problems, and; youth-led localised actions around the anti child poverty policies they produced through these phases. Building on over a year worth of this localised work undertaken by 140 young people, 38 young people who had taken part in this process attended a two-day and a three-day residential to deliberate over, and agree on, a national anti child poverty policy.

The residentials started with presentations of each of the five area’s earlier local policies, with representatives from each area outlining their thoughts and ideas to their peers. As a collective, the group then deliberated upon what issues of poverty were universal, particular or overlooked on a national scale. Activities encouraging

problem identification were also engaged, to support the group to again think critically about the problems of poverty they wanted to address.

After five days of discussion and deliberation, the group agreed upon a six point anti child poverty policy, which included many (but not all) of the local policy ideas that were universal across all regions, some particular ones and some entirely new policy ideas.

While their six point policy may appear simple, it was not developed simplistically. Over five days of group work, 138 different policy suggestions were offered up by and deliberated upon the young people. These ranged from as specific as decentralising and diversifying public sector employment opportunities across low-income areas, to as broad as regenerating social housing. Hours of discussion narrowed these 138 suggestions to a working draft of 12 over the first residential, which was then re-examined and reshaped in to the six point policy, presented in appendix one, by the conclusion of the second residential.

Guided deliberations assisted in this task, with young people encouraged to articulate if (and how) each suggestion would help an “average young person” living on a low-income from their area, and then anywhere in England. They were also encouraged to reflect upon whether it would address one of the problems, or improve one of the strengths, they had identified about growing up on a low-income. The group themselves decided that they wanted their policy document to emerge from the ‘*grass-roots*’ of their cumulative experiences, and throughout its production were constantly interrogating if their suggestions matched this ambition.

For example, one initial suggestion offered up on day one of the first residential was to ‘*crack down*’ on drugs, as one group of youngsters from North West England had identified drugs as a problem in their area. While this bore similarities with multiple suggestions offered, it contradicted others, such as to ‘*tax drugs so the money goes back in to the local economy*’. Here, the group had generated two oppositional suggestions. They discussed and deliberated around the nature of their problem with drugs – was it that some people used drugs or did that not matter, was criminalisation or decriminalisation more helpful for young people from low-income backgrounds, or was the core issue that drugs related *crime* made them feel unsafe in their areas? In a sort of Habermasian strive for consensus, they agreed that what was actually important, what would help all young people living on low incomes, was

if young people felt safe in their 'ends'. This appeared in the first 12 point policy, but subsequent discussions around difficulties with perceptions of *feeling* safe, meant it was amended to '*young people feeling and being safe in their communities*', in the final six point policy. Much thoughtful deliberation underpins each of the apparently simple points these young people offered up.

The problems they presented, then, were a novel and considered vision of the problems of child poverty in England, developed collaboratively from the thinkings of 38 young people from some of the most financially deprived wards, representing the voices of the 140 young people who took part in the earlier, localised work.

Initial participants were drawn from four wards around England where child poverty rates were extremely high (above 60 per cent) and one moderately high (above 45 per cent) compared to average (20 per cent). They had a diverse range of experiences, including young people affected by disability and looked after children (see table one). The 38 young people who took part in the residentials were a stratified convenience sample of the initial 140 young people; a budget constrained number of representatives from each area were invited to participate, and these places filled by young people who were interested and available over the selected dates (see table two)

Area	N	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Disability
Cambus	25	Mixed	11-19, median 15	White British	One learning disability
Leighton	100 +	Mixed	10-19, core group 17-18	Very diverse	Mixed
Morton	7	Female	12-14	Mostly White British, some mixed race	One learning disability
Springville	6	Female	15-16	All British Asian	None
Shelton	6	Mixed	16-21, median 17	Mostly White British, some mixed race and British Arab	Many learning and physical disabilities
Total	144 +	Mixed, more female	11-21, median 16	Diverse	Mixed

Table 1: Participants in the earlier local work

Gender	22 girls, 16 boys
Age	13-19 years (median 16)
Ethnicity	White British, British Bengali, Mixed Race and Black British

Table 2: Participants in producing the national anti-poverty strategy

The data analysed in this paper is their child poverty policy, and the context of both the young people's and the official policies is summarised in table three.

	Young People's	Official
Year of Authorship	2014 for national work 2012/13 for underpinning local work	2014
Geography	England	UK, although mostly England (HM Government 2014, p. 5)

Table 3: Context for both policies.

Findings

Institutionalised performances of individualisation

Beck (2007, p. 685) suggests that there are three policy tendencies which demonstrate logics of individualisation at play in social policy; a focus on improving individual's human capital, often through education and belying tendencies towards establishing a social investment welfare state (see also Giddens 1998); a focus on individual responsibility and avoiding behaviours and characteristics that carry risk, and; integration and individual inclusion in the labour market. *Child Poverty Strategy 2014-2017* (HM Government 2014) discursively demonstrates all three tendencies.

Firstly, investment in human capital is centralised within this policy discourse. For example, in the framing foreword prepared by two ministers, one minister outlines that the task of tackling poverty at the 'source' must start at in early years education and in schools (HM Government 2014, p. 6), while the other suggests that schools are the critical tool needed to end poverty and dedicates the vast majority of his introductory text to outlining reforms to the education system (HM Government 2014, p. 9). However, the most indicative performance of the human-capital investment approach lays in the third chapter of the strategy, aptly titled 'Prevention poor children from becoming poor adults' (HM Government 2014, p. 36). Here, echoing older British policy discourse which framed poverty as transmitted inter-generationally (Welshman 2007), poverty is described as a cycle which needs to be broken; poor children must not be allowed to become poor adults anymore, and boosting their human capital early on is framed as the key to breaking this "cycle". It is important to note that, in effect, this is an expression of a very individualised

desire. Just as Beck (1992, p. 91) theorises, this is a government stating that it intends to entirely free this generation of youngsters and take them ‘beyond class and status’; it wishes to free them of older, industrial constraints and enable them to become makers of their own destiny – to facilitate choice-biographies (du Bois Reymond 1998), if you will.

To achieve this mammoth task, education is described as crucial, it is ‘one of the main routes out of poverty and how well children do at school has the biggest impact on their future incomes’ (HM Government 2014, p. 36). Measures to improve schooling, reduce risky transitions by prolonging education and measures to remove “barriers” to education some young people experience (such as supporting young carers and reducing post-natal depression) are proposed in this section of the policy. Uniting this diverse set of measures lies a central commitment to investing in the human capital of poor children and young people, so that they are enabled to ultimately free their future biography from poverty. Investment in poor young people’s capacities is framed as a means to end their individual poverty in the future.

Secondly, a focus on individual responsibility and avoiding behaviours and characteristics deemed to be “risky” is also evidenced throughout the policy strategy. For example, again in the foreword, a minister lists the ‘sources’ of poverty as ‘family breakdown, educational failure, addiction, debt, (and) worklessness’ (HM Government 2014, p. 6). Echoing an early diagnosis, outlined in the previous child poverty strategy (HM Government 2011) and earlier still by the catholic think-tank Centre for Social Justice (2006), the problem of poverty is here portrayed as a set of problems residing *within* poor families and poor people themselves. Their lack of stability, lack of qualifications, addictions and vices, indebtedness or lack of work are represented as the embodied epicentres of low-income. If the words and metaphors ‘employed in social policy invite individuals to locate themselves, society and the government within the landscape of... social imaginaries’ (Brodie 2007, p. 162) then the social imaginary the minister paints here is one where poverty is a problem of individuals. It is one where individual sovereignty and personal responsibility reign supreme; individuals’ deficits and lacks are the cause of their socio-economic situations.

The compulsion for self-management is laced throughout *Child Poverty Strategy* (HM Government 2014), evidencing the new politics of individualisation that seeks to reimagine responsible citizenship as the self-management of risk via self-surveillance

and self-help (Petersen 1997, p. 204). One of the most indicative performances involves the reiterated claim that six key family characteristics prevent poor children doing well at school (HM Government 2014, p. 14, 36 & 42). While almost tautologically one of these is low family income, the other five include parents having low qualifications, poor home environments, under-developed “character” skills and ill parents or child ill health. Ill health aside¹, all of these point to risky individual behaviours that the *Strategy* seeks to minimise. “Character” deficits is a particularly telling framing of the problems of poverty, and its associated poor academic performance. Here, “character” is defined as ‘non-cognitive skills such as social skills, self-esteem, resilience and self control’ (HM Government 2014, p. 43). The three proposed solutions to poor children’s lack of these non-cognitive skills include:

- Funding more military cadet programmes in school
- Removing red tape to enable expeditions and work experience
- Allowing school days to be longer, so children from low-incomes can take drama, debating, chess and sport (HM Government 2014, p. 43).

With that, junior army traineeships, expeditions and chess are represented the solution to low-income children’s lack of character, which is fundamental to their individual inability to do well at school. Exactly how a militarised training, or understanding the algorithms of chess are intended to end poverty remains unclear, but these suggestions imply that individual young people’s deficiency with these disparate knowledges are part and parcel of the cause of their low attainment and future poverty.

Thirdly, the push towards welfare activation is also emphasised throughout *Child Poverty Strategy* (HM Government 2014). Work is described as the ‘focus of (the Government’s) vision for tackling child poverty’ (HM Government 2014, p. 6), and worklessness as one of the root causes of poverty. Welfare reforms are, therefore, flagged as a key way to tackle child poverty. One of the central theorist diagnosing the changes individualisation was unleashing on society, Giddens (1998, p. 122), prognosed that, as part of the project of reshaping society to respond to these new risks, the ‘benefit systems should be reformed where they induce moral hazards’, such as encouraging individuals *not* to work. Instead, he argued, it should be reformed to encourage ‘a more risk-taking attitude... where possible through incentives, but where necessary by legal obligations’ (Giddens 1998, p. 122). *Child*

¹ Although *Child Poverty Strategy* (HM Government 2014) also speaks of substance misused as a risky health affecting behaviour.

Poverty Strategy (HM Government 2014) certainly delivered on this front, substantively focussing on welfare reforms designed to encourage work and oblige non-workers. It outlined measures designed to:

- Provide “intensive”, individual support for those who are out of work, such as work readiness programme and increase conditionality
- Reform in and out of work benefits, to encourage parents to work, or to work more. Specific measures targeting one parent, larger and ill families are proposed
- Improve qualifications to encourage work and job progression. Again, one parent, larger and ill families are specifically targeted.

Here, welfare activation is represented to be a key part of the project of ending child poverty. This belies two central assumptions. Firstly, that part of the problem of poverty in the UK is a problem with individual people’s – especially single parents’, parents of large families’ and ill families’ – benefit-induced unwillingness to work. Secondly, it infers that part of the problem is also individual people’s lack of qualifications and work readiness. Again, individuals are diagnosed as the vectors of low-income. The “curative” emphasis on activation and encouraging labour force participation, then, reinforces and reflect governmentalities that focus on the governance of *individuals*, in this case, their professional pursuits.

However, *Child Poverty Strategy* (HM Government 2014) was not a myopic document, and resting alongside these discursive performances of individualisation were performances that represent the problems of poverty as part of broader, social inequalities. For example, alongside prolific sections documenting the key role of welfare activation were (much shorter) sections highlighting the role of job creation policies and structural measures to tackle low-pay. Further, a whole chapter of the document is dedicated to ‘supporting families living standards’ (HM Government 2014, pp. 29-34) which outlines measures to be taken to reduce financial burdens on families, from regulating utility markets to investing in home building programmes. Such measures challenge laissez-faire logics, and suggest a partial rejection of neo-liberal governmentality which should see families left to buffer market forces alone. While neo-liberal and individualised logics are often intertwined (Brodie 2007, Sharland 2006, Beck 2007) – as both privilege the norm of self-regulation, thereby justifying market freedom from government interference – *Child Poverty Strategy* (HM Government 2014) perhaps reflects a curious de-coupling of these logics in part. While ‘encouraging’ water companies to reduce bills specifically for low-income

families (HM Government 2014, p. 31), rather than re-distributing incomes so that low-income families can pay bills normally, may still reflect an allegiance to the doctrine of a minimal state, it is not necessarily laissez-faire economic mentalities at work. There is an expression of a desire to influence and regulate the market. This is, possibly, a performance of a partially wavering commitment to individualisation and laissez-faire neoliberalism.

This perhaps reflects the co-existence of rights-based and redistributive models of social governance alongside individualised models. Performances of these older forms of governance have not, it appears, been entirely silenced within *Child Poverty Strategy* (HM Government 2014). Rather, an individualised governmentality has been layered *alongside* a redistributive governmentality. The potential philosophical contradictions underpinning both performances do not appear to have been resolved in the policy-making process, rather this document reflects an (albeit uneven) dual governmentality. The problem of poverty is reflected as both a problem with individuals, who need to be activated, developed and made self-sufficient and as, in part, a social problem requiring collective solutions. My argument here is not, however, that either performance need or ought to necessarily dominate, rather simply to document the prevalence of individualised performances within *Child Poverty Strategy* (HM Government 2014), to facilitate comparisons with the young people's counter-performance. As table four suggests, the telling comparison lies between the abundance of performances of individualisation in the official document, and its complete absence in the young people's – which I shall now outline.

	Individualised performances	Collectivist performances
Official policy	Abundant	Some
Young people's	Absent	Abundant

Table 4: a summary of the performances within both documents

Young people's counter performances of collectivisation

If, as I suggested earlier, performances of individualisation can be understood as one manifestation of governmentality (Foucault 1991), then the generative role of experts in designing the norm of individualisation, and its regulative reinforcement, needs to be critically explored. In policy studies the 'society creating' function of social policy (Fink, Lewis & Clarke 2001, p. 3), and ability of policy-makers to both generate and reinforce the governmental imaginaries has been extensively discussed (see also, Dean 1999 & Rose 1999). However, human-service workers are also implicated, and

this has not gone unnoticed; discussions around the co-options of social workers into the 'tutelary bureaucracy' (Pease & Fook 1999, Jordan 2004, Sharland 2006) abound, while for youth workers, claims that they 'side with the state's agenda' (IDYW 2009) exist. In the terrain of youth studies, the role of expertise in taming young people's wild zones has been discussed, with Kelly (1999, p. 208) suggesting, for example, the "risks" facing young people are made visible (and therefore made up) by expert identification. And, as discussed above, *Child Poverty Strategy* (HM Government 2014) sits within this broader context of persistent institutional performances of individualisation directed at low-income young people. The young people involved in this research project have been, therefore, potentially subject to a whole host of individualising discourses, from youth workers to legislative requirements and the *Child Poverty Strategy* (HM Government 2014). Against this backdrop, these young people's counter performance was, perhaps, unexpected.

The policy developed by these young people provided a powerful counter performance of policy collectivism. For example, their framing foreword simply read that they intend their document to 'be relevant to *all* children and young people'. Contrasts between this, and the forewords prepared by two ministers – who spoke of welfare activation, investment in human capital and personal responsibility – are stark. These young people were not attempting to attribute personal responsibility or individualised solutions, rather they emphasised the need for collective, shared experiences.

In their short policy, the phrases '*for all*', '*for everyone*' or '*every young person*' turned up repeatedly. This was a statement, I suggest, that their policy objectives were universalistic in orientation. They wanted '*all*' young people housed properly, '*everyone*' to feel safe in their areas, and '*all*' to have a decent standard of living, for example. Only two of their suggestions even mentioned specific interventions targeted to those on low incomes; to make sure that low-income young people were not '*stranded*' by transport costs, and; to ensure an '*equal experience*' to young people already receiving (often stigmatised) free school meals. It would be difficult to interpret these as specific performances of individualisation; rather, they are more plausibly read as interventions targeted at structural inequalities.

Theirs was a policy performance of universalism and collectivism, then, and quite in contrast to the thrust of the official policy it intended to mimick. It did not mention any call for activation, of either families or young people specifically, did not decree

personal responsibility nor did it purely argue for investment in their own, futuristic human capital. If the universalistic impulse was, in effect, 'the normative basis' (Ellison 1991, p. 57) uniting post-war social policy theorists, from Titmuss (1963) to Townsend (1979), then these young people's 2014 performance could be understood as especially contrarian. The ideas underpinning postwar welfare collectivism 'stand as evidence of an abiding conviction that social inequality was a realizable goal and that the central (nation) state was the most appropriate vehicle to guide society towards this objective' (Ellison 1991, p. 57). These young people appear to be channeling this 'social' (Rose 1996, p. 48) conviction half a century later, long after the political and academic consensus around an equalizing welfare state has dissolved. (This is not to suggest that they were simply attempting to recreate post-war collectivist policy, rather that they were performing something new that bore resemblance to older, collectivist ideals).

Their policy suggestions around education are, perhaps, an interesting allegory for this argument because they are one of the few areas of direct "issue" overlap between the young people's and official policies. These young people made one clear policy suggestion involving education, arguing for an equal school experience for all young people, predicated on the need for schools to be affordable, especially uniform, meal and excursion costs. They also note that some existing provisions for lower income students, like free school meals, are poorly delivered and therefore stigmatising. Here, they represent the problem to be the cost of education, and poor-quality existing provision. Neither of these are especially futuristic suggestions, oriented solely towards improving young people's human capital and therefore future incomes. In contrast to the official discourse, they appear as ends unto themselves, as policy goals for their own sake. These goals are not painted as part of a picture of breaking any cycle of poverty, rather they call for levelling and lifting the playing field for all. I would suggest that, here, they are offering a strong counter-performance of universalism and collectivism.

This would suggest that, for these young people, they have not internalised and accepted the education policy performances of individualisation directed at them. In fact, quite the opposite. In discussing the lasting impact of individualism in the British education system, in 1985 Cohen (1997) suggested that individualism was played out by curriculums and policies aimed at encouraging 'self-possession' among the young, and encouraging them to see their education as part of the enterprise of the

self. He suggested that by encouraging young people to focus on their own self-possession, they were:

‘supposed to conjure individual victories out of collective defeats... Instead of being helped to confront their shared predicaments within a wider framework of knowledge and action, they were offered a purely personal tactic of disavowal’ (Cohen 1997, p. 307).

However, the young people involved in this research, almost 30 years later, were confronting their shared predicaments, and were displaying performances committed to universalism and collectivism in education policy. It appears that these young people, in the domain of education, as elsewhere throughout their policy, were actively rejecting top-down individualising and individualistic forces at play.

Conclusions

This article began by suggesting that exploring *institutionalised* individualisation might be a fruitful terrain for youth studies, and provide new insights in to the debates occurring between authors who either evidence or reject subjective experiences of individualisation (see, for example, du Bois Reymond 1998 and Lehmann 2004). It then turned to explore the capacities of this alternate theoretical lens by analysing two youthful anti-poverty policies, one produced by a government (HM Government 2014) and one produced by young people.

Performances of individualisation abound and dominate the official Government policy analysed here. *Child Poverty Strategy* (HM Government 2014) expresses the quintessential thrusts of individualisation and strongly pushes British young people towards the project of self-making and choice-biographies. Whether or not they currently, subjectively experience such choice and opportunity – an area of much debate in youth studies – is not necessarily important under this analytic lens; what becomes clear is that they are institutionally driven towards choosing themselves. Policy, it appears, is pushing this way regardless of whether or not young people are equipped for the task.

Alternatively, however, when some of the young people this same policy targets were given the opportunity to act out their own policy performance, they did not harmonise with this official rhetoric. Instead, their performance underscored the importance of structural inequalities in shaping the problems of poverty as they saw them, and

spoke to the need for state-based, universalistic interventions to correct for these inequalities.

These young people's lack of obeisance for performances of individualisation is perhaps especially loaded. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1996, p. 40) put it:

'individualisation takes sides in political debate in two ways: first, it elaborates a frame of reference which allows the subject area – the conflicts between individuals and society – to be analysed from the stand-point of individuals. Secondly, the theory shows how, as modern society develops further, it is becoming questionable to assume that collective units of meaning and action exist'.

These young people's discursive rejection of imposed individualisation is, then, potentially a political act in itself. Their failure to replicate official performances, and indeed their preference towards expressing universalistic governmentalities, represents a rejection of the disembedding and atomising attempts of contemporary British anti-poverty policy. It is, perhaps, a statement (writ small) about the value they still place on collective actions and collective identities.

This is made all the more curious by the cohort they inhabit. Born between the mid '90s and very early '00s, these young people were born long in to the historic trend towards individualisation. However, they do not appear to take official performances of individualisation as taken-for-granted or inevitable. Instead, they are actively able to re-imagine an alternative performance that runs counter to the sum of their experiences. Potentially then, this is quite a rejection on their part.

So, while youth studies remains keen on debating young people's subjective experiences of individualisation (or not), explorations of institutionalised performances of individualisation perhaps shed a different light on this debate. While some young people may or may not be adopting individualised biographies, they may also be individualised from above and be capable of resisting and discursively challenging such compulsions (or indeed, perhaps as further study may find, embracing them).

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Legislation

Child Poverty Act 2010, UK

Appendix: The young people's policy document

This manifesto and all actions should be relevant to *all* young people living in Britain

1. Every family in Britain should meet a minimum standard of living, not just surviving. Because everyone should have enough money to live comfortably, but right now too many of our friends worry about the essentials.

- Improve wages, look at a living wage
- Improve benefits, including those for workers and with children
- Reduce zero hour contracts
- Protect people from payday lenders
- Where young people want to work to help out their family, change laws to enable them to do so

2. An equal schools experience for all. Because everyone has a right to education and it should be equal for everyone, but right now not everyone can afford uniforms or school trips, and everyone deserves a school meal.

- No attainment gap between poor and non poor young people
- The same opportunities for all students
- Uniform assistance so poor kids can afford them
- School should pay for trips, so everyone can go
- No one should know if you get Free School Meals
- Teach governors and heads about poverty

3. Affordable, decent homes for everyone. *Because it's Britain, no one should live in crappy housing.* This is a fully developed country, but right now so many of us live in crappy houses.

- Improve houses so they are:
 - Not overcrowded, house should fit family size and accommodate children by gender/age
 - Warm
 - Energy efficient
 - Not damp
 - Safe
 - Hygienic
- Rent should match income – not force families in to debt

- Rent you pay should reflect what you can afford to pay

4. Every young person should have access to three affordable, healthy meals a day. Because its essential and every young person needs good food to develop fully, but right now a lot of our friends go hungry.

- Every young person should have access to 3 affordable healthy meals a day
- School dinners should be available outside of school, NO HOLIDAY HUNGER!
- No malnutrition
- Free School Meals for all
- Make breakfast clubs affordable

5. For all to feel and be safe within their communities and at homes. Because it wouldn't be home if it's not safe, and we all need a home. Right now a lot of young people live in places we don't feel safe.

- All young people should feel safe in the areas they live, and in the houses they live in
- Make areas look safe and welcoming
- Reduce crime, so young people are safe
- Increase awareness of how to stay safe
- More youth clubs, so there is safe places to go

6. Make sure all young people have affordable transport everywhere. Because no young person should be stranded because of the price of travel, but right now it's too expensive, even for an emergency.

- Free school meals (as we have them now) should mean free school travel
- There should be discount cards for learners
- If you don't get an adult wage, you shouldn't pay adult fares
- National fixed price for travel costs for all providers

(This document was accurate as of September 2014. As this is part of an on-going project, led by the young authors, it may subsequently change)

Conclusions

Overarching argument

This research locates these young people's policy imaginaries, and life-narratives, within a discourse of individualisation. It demonstrates and explores the ambiguities and complexities of these young people's thinkings; they narrate and talk about their lives as if they are 'biographical engineers' (Ball *et al.* 2000), able and willing to craft their own choice-biographies (du Bois Reymond 1998), but when they engage in policy discourses, they are keen to document the constraints affecting themselves and other young people like them.

The first article presented, 'What's wrong with being poor?', outlines the policy problems that these young people documented. They spoke about issues associated with poor housing and run down neighbourhoods, educational structures that are ill-suited to their lives and the pervasive nature of crime, which often targeted, and involved, their family and peers¹. Many of these issues have been documented previously within youth research (see, for example, McDonald & Marsh's (2005) exploration of the impact of growing up in poor neighbourhoods, which also outlined a lack of fit between schools and students' expectations, and Sweeney (2008) who documented the impact of real and perceived crime on young people's experiences of poverty). They have also been documented within research exploring children's subjective experiences of poverty (Attree 2004, 2006, Ridge 2002, Willow 2001). However, this particular research also offers a view into the connections between these subjective experiences and these young people's understandings about what *ought* to be done about these oft-documented issues.

¹ While crime was noted as pervasive in 'What's wrong with being poor?', and the group's responses towards criminals as mixed, the word count did not allow an exploration of which groups were most sympathetic or harsh towards criminals, and why this might have been. While the criminality of participant's family and friends, and their own criminality, was not explicitly explored – as this was a group based methodology so such disclosures were "shut down" rather than probed – many fleeting discussion and comments suggested family, friends and occasionally participants were involved in illegal activities to varying degrees. The two groups where crime and criminality seemed "closest to home", that is where family and friends were both targets of crime *and* criminally involved, appeared more likely to call for harsher policy responses to crime. This may be because they, and their loved ones, were still more likely to be victims of crime, or it might have been an attempt to distance and demarcate themselves from the stigma of criminality. For example, Dean and Melrose (1998) note that people living on the lowest incomes tend to make the harshest attributions for poverty, as a way of demarcating and distinguishing themselves from the (very close) "poor". Analogously, it may be that these young people's calls for harsh responses to crime were a way of distancing and demarcating themselves from the "criminal".

Through this lens, it is the silence around young people's everyday and individual agency that becomes telling. If, as Bacchi (2009) argues, silences within policy documents are as important for analysis as articulated discourse, then this silence is, I would argue, especially meaningful. That these young people were able to talk about their lives and recollect their life-pathways to date in highly agentic ways, suggests that they are all too aware of their own capacity to act as independent social agents. That they *then* chose not to discuss their own agentic capacities when writing policy suggests that they did not want to represent the policy problems of their lives as issues within their agentic control. In short, they do not feel that the problems of their lives are within the scope of individual remedies.

It is perhaps important to reflect on this, given that much research with low-income children and young people in the UK to date has gone out of its way to emphasise the individual agency that young people, such as the young people in this research, have (Redmond 2008, Attree 2006). This research does not seek to contest this; it is not claiming that these research participants were passive victims of poverty. Rather, it seeks to clarify that while these young people feel individually agentic and have a sophisticated range of coping and mediating tactics at their disposal, they feel that ultimately a different sort of agency is necessary to end their poverty. They do not, for example, think that the best solutions to their poverty come from being taught complex saving-strategies or supported to develop "resilience" against risk, or any other individualising forms of assistance. Instead, they suggest that – to overcome what could broadly be regarded as systemic, structural problems (the most important in their eyes) – collective and political agency is needed.

Secondly, 'Ends effects' goes on to unpack this within a pair of related problem identified by these young people; neighbourhoods and housing. It suggests that for these young people, the problems of neighbourhoods and housing that they wish to make manifest and describable are problems around derelict buildings, poor quality houses and dilapidated spaces. Their experience of these issues are relative, they understand that they are living in "worse" areas than their better-off peers, and this leaves them feeling angry and undervalued by those with authority and power.

Again, it is the silences here that are powerful. Some of the literature around neighbourhood effects proposes so-called 'epidemic' mechanisms (Crane 1991,

Buck 2001), where social interactive phenomena, such as social contagion and negative collective socialisation (Galster 2010), are said to be the causes of neighbourhood deprivations. These young people, however, did not suggest any epidemic mechanism were at play; in fact, they were quick to reject the idea that different sorts of people, or differently-behaved people, lived in their neighbourhoods. These young people did not think that the 'young people in poor neighbourhoods *are* the problem to be fixed' (as per MacDonald & Marsh 2005, p. 26). In fact, the young people in this research were often very positive about their communities and the people in their areas, such as peer, friends, families and neighbours. They spoke about their communities being supportive and helpful, but *collectively* struggling within the physical environment. This physical environment was described in strongly negative terms, correlating to the "signs of physical distress" other authors have described (Ross & Mirowsky 2009). It is possible that their positive understandings of people in their areas reinforced the anger that they felt towards decision-makers, who left the "good" people of their community living in ugly, dilapidated '*ends*'. This greatly challenges the account presented by epidemic theorist.

However, this is not to dismiss the possibility of epidemic effects – indeed, some analysis suggests that it is a plausible theory (Crane 1991) – but to highlight that, from these young people's perspectives, these were not important mechanisms. Again, they did not see themselves, nor young people like them, nor indeed their neighbours nor community, as the problem in their lives.

Thirdly, 'Writing in a role for structure' suggests that the participants in this research, while able to articulate highly agentic narratives around their lives and life-pathways, were acutely aware of the limits to their own agency. There is much theoretical discussion around 'epistemological fallacies' (Furlong & Cartmel 1997) and the inability of modern individuals – especially the young – to easily comprehend the structural constraints that operate upon them (Evans 2002, Bauman 2001). Set within a governmentality that individualises responsibility, where the project of life, of being and self-making, is said to be increasingly passed down to the level of the individual (Kelly 2006), this inability to conceptualise structural limitations is troublesome. It is often said to be creating the conditions where individuals become compelled to craft their own biographical solutions for structural issues (Beck 2007, p. 685), blind to the sheer contradiction of the task they have just been set.

However, this research would suggest that, in 2014, these particular young people might be wiser to the opportunity structures and limitations they face than many individualisation theorists predict. These young people were able to coherently write in a role for structure in shaping their lives, while still engaging in highly agentic discourses of life-narration. This particular methodology takes the “taken for granted” background status of the opportunities structures and choices available to these young people, which other research has failed to subjectively foreground (Evans 2002), and articulates how these young people see this as shaping life-pathways. It demonstrates that young people are aware of the background structures affecting their lives, but navigate on regardless. Perhaps, then, this method allowed these young people to describe and write about the road-maps they saw available for, and applicable to, their lives, within which they were then able to narrate stories of pathways and navigation. Regardless of the metaphor engaged, it demonstrates that young people were acutely aware of the limitations to their agency, and were very clear about the multiplicity of ways low-income affected their lives.

To be clear, what this research documented was a potentially contradictory and complex understanding about the role of structure and agency in these young people’s subjective understandings. They were clearly able to talk about the choices and opportunities that were available to them, and in many cases, seemed almost hyper-agentic when they spoke about their lives and life-chances. They spoke about, and demonstrated, the importance of their own agency, from the desire to get active and work towards change, which belies a sense of agency and self efficacy, outlined in ‘What’s wrong with being poor?’ and “*Ends*’ effects’, to their strong desire to discount structural explanations for their individual lives, as highlighted in ‘Writing in a role for structure’. However, they were at the same time very keen on highlighting the structural forces that shaped and limited their lives. As all of the articles note, the problems of poverty that these young people wanted to make manifest and describe were problems of structure, and often of the ways that structures frustrated their attempts at agency. While this may seem contradictory, and indeed often “contradiction” seemed to be the best analytic concept available to interpret the data, I less pejoratively suggests that this demonstrates a consistent *coetaneous* understand among these young people. They appeared to understand and demonstrate overarching roles for agency *and* structure in shaping their lives and life-chances. In this sense, what appears to be contradictory (and possibly, like all human beings, could represent a deeply held set of contradictory beliefs) can also be

described as complex coetaneous conceptualisations. These young people described lives that were largely dictated by structure or agency, in equally important ways, that often appeared to differ depending on the research methods engaged.

Fourthly, 'Choosing not to choose', suggests that these young people's subjective understandings around their own agency, especially its limits and the importance of structural factors in limiting their ability to craft their own lives, is at odds with official policy discourses aimed at them. It argues that *Child Poverty Strategy* (HM Government 2014) embodies a powerful performance of individualisation directed towards low-income children, young people and families. It does this by documenting a focus on improving human capital, "improving" individual's behaviours and risk-taking and integration into the labour market, all factors that Beck (2007, p. 685) describes as the hallmarks of individualised policy. While *Child poverty strategy* (HM Government 2014) also, I suggest, engaged in some performances of collectivism, by focusing on, for example, reducing utility bills and creating jobs, what is telling is the stark contrast in the prioritisation of approaches when contrasted to the young people's comparable strategy. *Child poverty strategy* (HM Government 2014) abounds in performances of individualisation, where the young people's *Manifesto so Poverty Ends Now* is marked by a complete absence of these, and is instead loaded with performances of collectivism and universalism.

Documenting this policy focus mismatch, perhaps, adds an extra layer of meaning to the findings discussed in all the articles presented here. In its own way, each of these articles has documented these young people's subjective understandings around their own agency, and its limits. Where, as this final article outlines, young people are being *institutionally* individualised, then, there is going to be a mismatch between the forces act on them "from above", such as policy, and their own subjective understandings about how they are able to navigate their own life-pathways. If *Child poverty strategy* (HM Government 2014) flags a broader policy trend towards institutional individualisation (as documented by authors, such as Beck 2007, Brodie 2007 & Walther 2006), then, I would suggest, there is the capacity for an emergent systemic mismatch between policy and these young people's subjective understandings. Child poverty policy, I suggest, with its prominent focus on individualisation, runs counter to the subjective experiences and desires of the young people it aims to help. This is, I would posit, an example of the potential for un-

participatory policy processes to produce systemically distorted policy documents (as per Fischer 1998).

This mismatch, perhaps, speaks to the original intentions of this research and gets to the “so what?” of my argument. This research set out with the explicit intent to explore what might emerge, and what might matter, if child poverty policy was made in participatory ways (albeit only with participation from young people). It emerges, then, that, for example, the dominant discourse of individualisation in official policy domains could be subsumed to a counter discourse of collectivisation and universalisation, if other people’s voices are included in the process. On a more fundamental level, it suggests that substantially different approaches to policy could emerge. This “matters” in so far as the democratic ideals of research and policy-making matter.

If the democratisation of policy-making is important, then an awareness of this mismatch, and of young people’s potential desire for an alternative policy discourse, is important. It has been suggested that policy-making can achieve ‘democratic legitimacy’ by including ‘those affected by a collective decision (in) deliberate in the production of that decision’ (Reinstra & Hook, 2006, p. 315). Reflecting on young people’s subjective understandings, and allowing them to deliberate around these, I would argue, is an essential process in democratising policy-making. As much of the thinking around participatory policy analysis argues, participation in policy is part of a broader project of generating a revived, fuller democracy (Dryzek 1990, see also Habermas 1973). Understanding and including the subjective experiences and deliberations of these young people, then, is an important process in democratising policy-making.

Secondly, if “democratising” research is important – here conceived of as developing a more nuanced canon of knowledge about the understandings of research subjects themselves – this research perhaps sheds light on what some young people from low-income backgrounds in 2012-2014 thought about their lives. Specifically, it casts light on what these young people thought about the broader structure versus agency debate, in its many nuanced forms, that rages around them. It suggests that firstly, they have a firm grasp of a different sort of agency, a political and strategic agency, that might be needed for them not just to navigate their individual life courses through poverty, but for their poverty to end. Previous research did not

necessarily highlight this. Secondly, it highlights that these young people feel that issues affecting their neighbourhoods and housing are structural, and this creates a sense of anger and frustration with those in power because such structural issues are allowed to dominate their immediate localities. Previous research has also proposed such neighbourhood-based mechanisms, but has also suggested that other, more individual and agentic factors are at play. This research did not support this, in so far as subjective experiences are concerned. Thirdly, it suggests that young people are more aware of the structural limitations acting on their life-pathways than previous research has suggested. As Wyn and Dwyer (1999, p. 16) posited over a decade ago, if '*for the young people involved* (in research), the structural determinants are no longer being read as taken-for-granted truth, we need to develop ways of investigating what this shift in their understanding – and sense of agency – implies with regard to *our own* understandings and predetermined agendas regarding their transitions'. This research has investigated young people's shifting understandings, and suggests that the epistemological fallacy is not as pronounced as other research might infer. This could, potentially, re-shape debates around transitions and pathways. Fourthly, it suggests that while policy-making may increasingly fall on the agency side of the structure versus agency debate, these young people reject this prioritisation, and instead prefer policy that focuses on the structural issues.

In sum, this research explored the understandings of some young people from low-income backgrounds about their lives and life-pathways, coupled with (and often viewed through the lens of) what they felt *ought* to happen to improve them. In doing so, it generated a different vision of young people's agency and self-making capacities, and highlighted the subjective role of structural issues, more so than previous research perhaps illuminated.

Addressing research questions

The research began by posing three, interconnected research questions;

- What might child poverty policy look like if young people participated in developing it?
- What, if anything, could this "youth developed" policy tell the policy-making and academic community?

- What, if anything, does this “youth developed” policy tell us about young people’s subjective understanding about their life-pathways and individualised policy?

These questions were explored through a novel, policy-writing research method, where young people’s policy imaginaries and understandings about their lives and life-pathways were unpacked in focus groups. Working with five groups of young people from low-income backgrounds, and meeting with each group between six and 17 times, local “youth developed” child poverty policies were developed for each group. Further, unexpectedly, a national policy was also developed together. During this process, four sequential research encounters were designed and delivered; starting with discussions around what it was like “on average” to grow up “around here”, for young people like the participants; secondly, by problematising and appreciating aspects of these average lives; thirdly, by brainstorming what should happen to address issues identified and reinforce good aspects, and finally; taking some small actions around their prepared policies. These four encounters were repeated to develop the national policy subsequently. These methods produced a range of research outputs, from hours of focus group transcripts, to illustrations and photographs, and importantly, five local and one national “youth developed” anti child poverty strategy.

Each article presented uses this data to address the research questions that initially drove this analysis. Firstly, these findings potentially describe what child poverty policy might look like if some of the young people it targets participated in its development. It describes the issues or problems that policy may increasingly focus on – housing and neighbourhoods, education and crime – and also the issues it would focus less on, including those that imply that young people’s individual agency can be activated to leverage them out of poverty.

Secondly, this research presents a range of potential learnings for academics and policy-makers. For example, it suggests that a different type of agency – strategic and political, rather than individual and everyday– is foregrounded when young people’s policy imaginaries are investigated. Further, it has contributions to those working on neighbourhood and housing studies, but outlining which neighbourhood effects mattered to these young people. Here, research surrounding epidemic effects was not reinforced, rather newer research exploring the role of discrimination,

efficacy and anger appeared to be, subjectively, the most relevant to these young people's lives. Beyond this, it also suggests that different research methods might be useful in exploring young people's understandings of structure and agency, and that this might help youth studies develop a more nuanced understanding of the lived experience for young people in late-modernity.

Finally, this research suggests that the "youth-developed" policies these young people produced, and the policy imaginaries they speak to, provide potentially new insights into young people's subjective understandings about their life-pathways and individualised policy. Firstly, it suggests that different research encounters potentially encourage young people to emphasise different aspects of their worlds, emphasising either structural limitations or agentic opportunities. Where previous research has consistently demonstrated a focus on one or the other, engaging young people in different types of research encounters may open up alternative foci for research participants. Secondly, this research suggests that, for the young involved, a policy focus premised on collective and universalistic ideals would better match their understandings. It suggests that individualised policy does not necessarily address the problems of low-incomes as they perceive them and a more universalistic approach would be desirable.

In this sense, this research, and the methods underpinning it, has hopefully addressed its initial research questions and aims.

Some limitations of this research

These small claims aside, there are clearly a number of limitations within this research.

Firstly, and most importantly, this was a small and geographically-distinct exploration, which potentially limits the ability to challenge broader theories or support wide-reaching claims. In short, a non-representative sample of 144 young people, from a population of around 3.7 million children below the poverty line (HBAI 2014), does not support extrapolation well. I hope not to have over-claimed in these findings and have qualified most of my suggestions accordingly. Given the limitations of this process however, as a DPhil piece of research, I do not feel it would have been possible to undertake or support much more fieldwork.

The young people involved in this research were not intended to be representative and enable extrapolation of findings. For example, all of the young people in this research worked within youth clubs so, to borrow a phrase, were the more 'clubbable' (Roberts 2004) young people from their areas. Clubbable young people may be different from 'un-clubbable' young people, in that they are more '(predisposed) towards being involved in the more formal atmosphere of clubs and associations corresponding with organised forms of leisure activity' (Roberts 2004, p.91). Green (2010, p. 94) suggests that youngsters who *avoid* formalised clubs may be the young people who are embracing a more individualised lifestyle, who prefer their recreation time less structured and less determined by adults. The young people engaged in this research were, however, more or less, only clubbable young people. (It should be noted, however, that some were first time attenders, many have 'dropped out' since the research ended, and the Springville group's first and only interaction with a youth club was for this research, suggesting a sort of mid-range level of clubbability).

It is curious then, that this collective of clubbable young people, who by theoretical accounts (Green 2010), should be at the lower ends of 'biographical engineering' (Ball *et al.* 2000), still spoke almost hyper-agentically about their own lives, and were very keen on narrating their experiences as if they were 'biographical engineers' embracing individualised lifestyles to the fullest. Should this research have been undertaken with un-clubbable young people, it is possible that a more extreme narrative of hyper-agency about life may have emerged, and indeed a different tempering role for structure could have been written through their policies. However, as this methodology was group based and sequential, it would have been challenging and potentially unethical to undertake with young people disinclined from meeting regularly in structured groups. 'Clubbable' young people were the only practicable available sample to engage for such a small-scale research project, which again limits the generalisability of these findings.

In this sense, while this research was sparked by a curiosity around what child poverty policy might look like if it were developed participatorily, it is not claiming to be a participatory "mirror" or more correct alternative to official policy. It is not broad enough, large enough or comparable in scope to come close to this task. Instead, it

presents simply a small investigation around the sorts of differences, or even the capacity for difference, that might emerge if policy were made participatorily.

Secondly, I have compared and contrasted my findings with previous research with children and young people throughout the first three of the articles presented here. In these, I argue that my findings differ, in one way or another, along the structure/collective versus agency/individual debate. My methodology – involving PPA and focus groups – was arguably inherently more inclined to unpack collective and structural ideas than research conducted through individual methods (such as cognitive interviews or surveys). In short, the findings presented here may suffer from a “methodological collectivism” that affects these findings. Different methodologies will inevitably produce different findings, partly as artefacts of their approach. What I hope I have suggested, however, is not that either vision of young people’s agency, which inevitably emerges refracted through the prism of either individual or collective/PPA methodologies, is more correct than the other. Rather, I am suggesting that it is possible that different, but equally meaningful, understandings of young people’s reality can emerge from both approaches to research. In that sense, if this research suffers from “methodological collectivism”, I would argue that this needs to be viewed in the light of the potential for “methodological individualism” within previous research. The aim of these findings is to present different visions that emerge from this alternate method, not to argue for its correctness.

Thirdly, this policy writing method appears to produce somewhat reductive insights about young people’s life experiences. The policy imaginaries of the young people involved in this research did not appear to highlight the diversity of experiences, and intersectionality of disadvantage, that previous research has highlighted. It is plausible that this is a direct result of the methods, where young people were asked to imagine an “average life” and work from their *collective* set of unique and diverse experiences, to agree upon what was most important to improve. By default, this would have erased some of the nuanced differences, such as the experience of a 13 year old versus a 15 year old, or boys and girls, which might have existed within each group. By contrast, sociological research, based on one-to-one interviewing, would provide ample scope for individual young people to describe their unique experiences. Working in a group setting, where young people were explicitly encouraged to think about “average” and “common” experiences could have had the entirely opposite effect.

In many ways, this mimics the policy making process, where analysts think collectively about “average” problems that need addressing. For example, anti-poverty policy is often informed by large-scale survey data, which outlines broad trends in experiences rather than accounting for nuanced and complex experiences². Indeed, one of the common criticisms of poverty and welfare policies is that they are often too blunt, and not nuanced enough to respond to the needs and experiences of many complex family lives (see, for example, Work & Pensions Select Committee 2014). In a sense then, this policy writing methodology could have accurately replicated this flaw in the policy-making process.

Alternatively, the lack of diversity may have come from the low-sample size. While a great number of young people were involved in this project, as this was a group-based methodology, the unit of analysis was the group. It made little sense to analyse what one young black woman aged 12 was saying and individually compare that to the comments of a young white man aged 17, when they were directly talking to, and informing, each other’s words. In this sense, this research only explored five discreet units for analysis, which is not necessarily a powerful sample size to explore diversity and intersectionality. It was only when an *entire group* was marked by diversity, and did not attempt to “average out” their uniqueness, that any data allowing an exploration of diversity arose. The only instance that reached this requirement was in Springville, where the group was all of ‘*Bengali extraction*’ and thought that everyone affected by their imagined policy would be the same. The potential differences this generated are, for example, discussed in the third article ‘Writing in a role for structure’, where the effect of their ‘dual consciousness’ (Hunt 1996) in ascribing “blame” for poverty is unpacked. However, few other differences between the Springville group and other groups were discernable. While these conditions might have also been met in the two girls groups engaged, in so far as they might have generated a different understanding than the three mixed gender groups involved, this did not appear to be the case. Despite sensitive analysis, no discernable differences could be noted. This might be because in the process of imagining the “average” experience, these groups factored in the experience of young men as well.

² A key example of this can be found in the US, where Bane and Ellwood’s (1986) exploration of poverty dynamics, using panel data, was influential in shaping the current anti-poverty policy, especially the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (O’Connor 2004 p.195).

Thirdly, this research worked with young people aged 11-21. Child poverty policy in the UK targets all youngsters under 20, and is increasingly focused on early years interventions. This research did not explore the thoughts and ideas of those under 11, whom much of this policy debate targets. The decision to do this was in part pragmatic. I have some experience working with young people and youth is where my own academic interests lay. It was also, in part, an emergent disjuncture. This research was proposed and conceptualised in 2010 and 2011, before either *Child poverty strategy 2011-2014* or *2014-2017* were released. In some sense, the policy focus shifted increasingly on to younger children, and this research did not follow. However, this is not to suggest that the child poverty policy debate in the UK is now not targeting 11-20 year olds. They are still part of the head counts of poverty underpinning the *Child Poverty Act 2010*, which policy strategies must report under, and many measures explicitly targeting young people are still present in the policy debate. From measures to raise the education participation age to measures to reduce teen pregnancies, many of the policy levers that form part of the broader policy debate still target 11-20 year olds. Again however, this research did not intend to provide a fully comparable, participatory child poverty strategy that matched official discourse. Instead, it merely aimed to explore what could be different if such policy was developed in a participatory process, in this case, with 11-21 year-olds.

Fourthly, there are geographic mismatches present in this research. The strategies that each of the groups of young people prepared, at first, were local. This was an unintended consequence of avoiding the word “poverty” and its potential stigma as much as possible. In this sense, asking young people what life was like for young people “like them” from “around here” – done to engage the geographic proxy for low-incomes – inevitably meant policy produced would be locally focused. I avoided, therefore, comparing these local youth-led policies to any official policy discourse, as the geographies would not match.

However, this research initially set out to explore what child poverty policy might look like if young people developed it, what this could tell academics and policy-makers, and subsequently, what this might be able to tell us about these young people’s subjective experiences of individualisation. I believe it was able to provide some answers to these research questions, even if its application is limited outside of this thesis.

Reflections

While it is customary to conclude most research by calling for further research building on initial findings presented, this does not necessarily fit well with my reflections around undertaking this research. While it may seem counter-intuitive, I do not suspect that this research highlights a need for further research along identical methodological lines, nor would I recommend any one attempt to undertake such a task; these are learnings offered in themselves. However, in terms of suggesting avenues for *reflection* around planning further research, my experience may offer some ideas for future studies.

To explain, firstly, I present an academic reflection. I believe the methods engaged here were too long and cumbersome – consuming too much of young people's and researcher's time – for the academic insights derived. The amount of time spent with each group was inordinate. In one case, for example, I spent a full weekend with the group undertaking phases one through three, and then met the group subsequently 11 times to plan and undertake local actions. This excludes any discussions or work the group undertook in my absence. A quick comparison with the depth of findings derived from interview or non-sequential focus group research suggests that these are just as meaningful, and appeared to be much faster to obtain. Participation in research is not a cost-free exercise, for participants nor researchers, so I suspect the *academic* pareto optimum lay elsewhere.

In this particular research, the action components were supported and, in some way, offered back to the young people in exchange for their generosity of time. I have been told that participants included this work on CVs and UCAS statements, and used this research as a springboard to connect with a range of other activities and opportunities that, ethically, helps me to justify their input. For example, I have had calls from employers asking for references, some participants joined council scrutiny bodies as young members, one participant secured work experience from their MP at the launch event while another secured funding to start a youth-led theatre group to turn this work into a play. I have known many of the participants for almost three years now, and this relationship has been, I like to imagine, of benefit to them. I have, for example, taken two groups on university tours, as they had never been to a campus and were curious to see what it was like; accompanied others as volunteers

on excursions when they were short staffed and connected some to advice services when they contacted me in moments of personal crisis. And they appeared to have fun along the way. Evaluation forms all suggested they found the activities and focus groups entertaining, the launch event exciting and I watched friendships (and even a teenage romance) form and strengthen along the way. While, in the case of this research, I have tried my hardest to reciprocate the commitment these young people offered, it is not perhaps a strong methodology that requires such long-term commitments in order for it to be mutually beneficial.

However, there are elements of this methodology, or perhaps ways of shortening this, that would be potentially helpful to repeat. If it is capable of generating different subjective insights, and is potentially not an entirely disempowering process for participants, some elements may be salvageable. In particular, the idea of exploring young people's policy imaginaries appears to offer alternative insights. If there is a less lengthy way of exploring these imaginaries, say for example, by skipping the first 'what's it like?' phase and the final action phase, this could have merit. Incidentally, this was what both of the groups who undertook some peer-to-peer replication of this process did. In its entirety however, I would not recommend replicating all of these methods.

Secondly, this sort of research can be difficult to align with standard university ethics procedures³. For example, the ethical guidelines governing this research state that 'is not appropriate to give children financial rewards for taking part in research, though they may be given certificates or stickers' (Curec 2008, art. 7), presumably to avoid swaying young people into taking part against their better judgement (as per Hill 2005, p. 71). However, this is not the same guideline offered for working with adults, where vouchers or other rewards are seen as just recompense for their time and participation. There is an ethical argument that suggests that compensating children and young people for their time in the same way as adults shows an equality of respect, and that it is paternalistic to assume the young people will be unduly swayed by the prospect of vouchers more so than adults (Scott 2000). Much of this research began from an ethical concern about equality and redressing the marginalisation of children and young people, out of a respect for their autonomy and humanity. Having

³ Although I have subsequently found the Department's ethical committee extremely amenable to request for variations in research practice, as a student engaging with the process for the first time, the guidelines and rules are presented as "fixed" and "determinative". Further, it was only during the research process that the extent of these limitations became apparent.

to work within an ethical guideline that dictated that my “research subjects” be “less fairly compensated” and regarded as “less logical” from the outset did not sit well with me. It seemed steeped in an overbearing sense of welfare paternalism, which, perhaps, presented a real life example of Hammersley’s (2006, p. 6) warning about the capacity of research committees to disable researchers from acting ‘in ways that they regard as ethically appropriate because of constraints laid down by the committee’. Even if not so extreme as to be unethical, the capacity of research ethical committees to be hyper-regulatory and detract from the intent of the research (Hammersley 2006, Reynold *et al.* 2008, Halse & Honey 2007) was definitely felt throughout this process.

For example, while vouchers were not problematic in this research process, as they were prohibited from the outset, other issues were made difficult by formalised guidelines. Issues around anonymity, for example, were pervasive. The university’s guidelines outline that ‘each child should be given a pseudonym or code number, and this, rather than the name, is used to label all data from the study’ (Curec 2008, art. 12). For a participatory project, where young people are encouraged to take ownership of the research agenda and use it for their own action-oriented ends, such anonymity seems disempowering. While names and locations have been changed in this thesis, and for all academic publications stemming from this work, without much conflict⁴, the actions and dissemination of this research raised the possibility of conflict. Was I to instruct young people to use a pseudonym and fake place name when they spoke to their parliamentarians or penned articles for local papers? Was I to ask them not to be proud of their work and sign it before they showed “powerful” people they wished to influence? Was their work able to generate any change if we weren’t allowed to tell decision-makers the actual geographic areas we were talking about? Formalised ethical guidelines were not of much help in deliberating upon these matters, and from our collective reading of their requirements, appeared to push towards disempowering the research participants.

⁴ There was a conversation about the place name for Springville, however. The group initially wanted to pseudonym for their area to be Springfield, from the Simpsons. I asked them to consider if this reference might reduce the gravitas of the body of work; that is, as a “powerful” researcher, I suggested that their idea might render their thoughts and ideas “less respectable” to their desired audience. They subsequently changed their place name to Springville. Was it unethical of me to note my concern that led to their subsequent change of heart, or was it supportive, as they wanted to be taken seriously and generate serious change? I am still unsure.

Instead, what was helpful was best described as ethics of 'reflexive praxis' (Reynold *et al.* 2008). Rather than working from an external set of static ethical guidelines, it was more helpful to reflect on the dynamic micro-ethics (Guillemim & Gillam 2004) of this research process in actuality. Reynold *et. al* (2008, p. 430) described ethical reflexive practice as:

- Situated; that is negotiated continuously with each individual within research encounters
- Dialogic; or embedded in intersubjectivities which 'acknowledge' rather than deny personal aspects and
- Political; that is, informed by each individual's and our collective small political aims

Each question around authorship or anonymity was negotiated as part of an emerging 'reflexive praxis'. Deciding if it was ethical to require a young person to use a 'fake name' (as participants referred to them) on a letter to an MP, for example, required conversation with the young person in question, acknowledging and appreciating their personal preferences and expectations, and understanding why they wanted (or not) to sign a letter to an MP. This required a balance and respect for their best-interests, as discussed again with the participants. Most young people wrote to their MPs as themselves (which is private correspondence so will not be published), but some chose to use pseudonyms⁵. I'm not sure these decisions were the source of much anguish for the participants, but for myself, as a researcher attempting to not fall foul of a pre-established set of guidelines that appeared to be heavily steeped in welfare paternalism, the anguish was on-going.

Halse and Honey (2007, p. 336) powerfully suggest that formalised ethical guidelines be reconceptualised as an 'institutional discourse', to enable the research community to imagine and articulate counter-discourses that centralise relational ethics and reflexivity. This is the reflection offered for future researchers; reconceptualise ethical protocols as *one* potential discourse, rather than immutable and definite.

Participatory and action-based research can be a cause of much conflict with formalised ethics protocols (see also Martin 2007) and that it might be best to

⁵ Use of pseudonyms and non-identifying address proved to be a fundamental barrier to engaging politicians. For example, one MP refused to correspond with the group unless they could have their home addresses, which the young people did not want to provide. It took many, many hours of phone conversations and emails to encourage the MP's office to engage with the young people while using pseudonyms and at a youth club that was geographically based within their constituency.

imagine them less as fixed and determinative, and seek variations and exemptions that better suit your reflexive praxis from them from the outset.

Thirdly, I offer a change-making reflection. I suspect that supporting young people to engage in their own policy debates, and then presenting these to decision-makers, misses some of the important elements of dialogue and discussion that could occur during the policy-development process. In that sense, borrowing a metaphor from Hart's (1992) ladder of youth participation, the top rung of sharing decision-making power with young people is better than supporting young people to lead their own decision-making process at the lower rungs. For a DPhil research project, it was not possible to include decision-makers in the deliberation process, while it was possible to support young people to engage with them after the fact. Further, I did not assume from the outset that young people would want to engage with decision-makers, rather that was an action they decided after they had already written their strategies.

As Tisdall and Davis (2004) point out, much youth participation work happens outside, and distinct from, relatively closed policy-making communities and networks. If the teleological orientation of a research project is to facilitate real and meaningful participation, and redress the systemic distortion of the policy-making community, creating forums for debate and dialogue between policy makers and young people from the outset might be more fruitful. As the experiences of the Springsville group suggest – the group whose local youth services told them they did not feel it was appropriate to engage with them around 'these sorts of issues' – buy-in from the decision-making community might be necessary from the outset. One MP I spoke to at the end of the project, in an email exchange after the research, outlined this succinctly:

'(in future) I think if you could plan what you might call, sort of brief encounters (with decision-makers and young people), as it goes through, turning points, crucial moments when you draw them (decision-makers) in through the development process, and then with the expectation and promise that there will be a big engagement at the end with them. But, I would have thought waiting until the very end to tell them it's happening at all, and giving them a sense of what it is, is going to be less likely to have an impact on them, than a sense that they've been following it and following it and following it' (K. Green, personal communication, February 6th, 2013).

In this sense, Habermas (1993), with his steep requirements for achieving ideal speech – especially the conditions of generality to foster rational communication – might be right.

Fourthly, this research offers a point of reflection around the impact of methodology on current thinking about young people’s agency and individualisation. As most of my findings highlighted, this research pointed to a subtly different understanding about young people’s subjective agency than other research. While it is possible that the nature of the young people I spoke to, either their low-income backgrounds, their geography, their generation or simply their personalities, might have induced this, it also points to the capacity for this different method to elucidate different findings. Reflections on how group-based work, and inherently action-oriented work, might influence findings is perhaps worthwhile. For example, it would not be beyond imagination for an interview that simply asks a young person to describe their own place in the world to generate a highly individualised set of answers, whereas a group based discussion where the opportunities to take action are also present, might produce a more collectivist answer set.

Fifthly, it potentially points to a complementary, fruitful avenue for analysis within youth studies. While much literature within youth studies documents subjective experiences of individualisation, there is possibly merit in exploring institutionalised individualisation. If a core aim of youth studies is to highlight that young people are problematised and othered (Edwards 2010, p. 17), then alongside exploring and documenting young people’s subjectivities, there may be merit in exploring the ways that official policy discourses problematise young people’s lives and life-pathways and how these might be at odds with young people’s desires and wishes. That is, alongside exploring if or how young people experience individualisation, exploring how they are institutionally individualised and sites of resistance or internalisation, might contribute to the broader narrative around “problematism” that youth studies is constructing. This research, using the *Child poverty strategy* (HM Government 2014) and academic debates about neighbourhood effects, has documented that young people’s policy imaginaries often resist official discourses that institutionally individualise the issues they experience.

In this sense, this line of analysis perhaps returns to a phenomenon identified by Goffman over 60 years ago. Back in 1952, Goffman write about a phenomenon

called 'cooling out', where, in this case, people who were victims of con artists were 'cooled out' afterwards by tricksters so their anger did not attract official attention or "rock the boat". Goffman talked about 'cooling out' involving victims being reassured that their losses were their fault, so that they were understood as inevitable, to minimise the risk of their anger affecting the con artist's business. Biggart & Walther (2006) suggests that this bears some resemblance to the situations of young people in late-modernity, where, having been encouraged to aim high and sold a story of self-making and self-control, their aspirations rub up against the limits of entrenched privilege and the scarcity of social positions this creates. Biggart & Walther (2006) suggested that where this happened, where young people had been encouraged to work hard and make something (or everything) of themselves but had failed, either family resources minimised these failings, or institutional gatekeepers were deployed to insist that such failures were due to individual deficits. What I am suggesting here is that late-modern policy-makers are deployed as the 'coolers' of aspirations for low-income young people; simultaneously encouraging incessant self-making and high aspirations (in 2014 policy speak, for example, "social mobility") and implying that self-regulation and improvement is the route to financial inclusion (Sharland 2006, p. 250), so that poverty simply requires more individual effort to overcome. The effect for young people, then, is a policy discourse that encourages them to be upwardly-mobile but places the onus on them as individuals to get mobile. If they fail, by remaining in poverty, it is their own fault. This, I suggest, is one way in which policy-makers may have become gate-keepers who 'cool out' low-income young people's aspirations. Unpacking late-modern attempts at 'cooling out' such aspirations might be an interesting focus for future investigation.

Conclusions

The research presented here explores and unpacks the subjective narratives some young people from low-income backgrounds within England crafted around their lives, and life-pathways. Using a policy-writing method, these young people discussed and explored elements of their lives that were relevant to both policy and academic theory. These young people outlined how, when asked to write about the problems of their lives, they talked about housing and neighbourhoods, education and crime as key issues and how they saw a different type of agency – political and collective – as critical in improving the pathways open to them. This type of agency is not what other research necessarily highlighted. They also talked about the issues of

their neighbourhoods and housing as structural and leaving them feeling angry and resentful about those in authority. This perhaps challenges some previous research which argues that the problems of neighbourhoods are problems of individual deficit. They were also fluent in discussing and demonstrating the impact of structure, as they perceive it, on their lives. This challenges previous research which has often drawn a “blank” around structure when asking young people about their lives. They also described their ideal policy as requiring focus on structural issues, which contrasts with much of the official policy discourse that emphasises individual issues. In short, it paints an alternative vision of these young people’s subjective understandings of their agency. While they indeed feel agentic, and do not perceive themselves as victims of their low-income backgrounds, they are acutely aware of the barriers this status may present in navigating their life pathways. Theirs’ is not necessarily a life they feel able to construct as they wish.

This matters in so far as the democratisation of policy and research does. If policy ought to be democratised, then these young people’s subjective understanding about the continuing role of structure in shaping their lives needs to form part of the communication and discussion in policy-making arenas. Including these sorts of understandings has the potential to challenging the systemic distortion in policy-making communities, which at the moment appears to be too focused on individual issues and agency for these young people’s liking. Secondly, if the democratisation of research matters, then reflecting on these young people’s subjective understandings in academia about neighbourhood effects, epistemological fallacies and individualisation could influence and subtly alter these debates in ways that might be more palatable for these young people.

However, this is (hopefully) not to over-claim, and this research has some limitations. The relevance of these findings is limited by the breadth and depth of this study, which was small and idiosyncratic. It is also unclear from this study how much these findings were a methodological artefact or if this matters. Thirdly, the geography and age range were slightly out of kilter to make it completely applicable to child poverty policy debates.

However, some potentially useful reflections were generated. Firstly, while these methods generated possibly interesting findings, in their entirety they were probably too cumbersome and lengthy to be worthy of repeating. Secondly, it perhaps bears

testimony to Habermas' pragmatic presuppositions of ideal speech, especially with regards to generality. Not being able to include decision-makers in the entire deliberation process limited the ability for discussions and debates to co-ordinate consensual change. Thirdly, it suggests that methodology may matter in terms of the insights research in to individualisation and young people. While this research may be marked by a methodological collectivism, it may, in turn, point out the possibility of methodological individualism in previous research. Finally, it may point to avenues of research potentially of interest to youth studies, namely the ways in which institutionalised individualisation acts on the young and ways through which they may resist or internalise these pressures.

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Legislation

Child Poverty Act 2010 UK

Appendix one: Descriptions of each group and area

Cambus

Cambus is a medium sized city in the North of England. Like many Northern cities, it has experienced a degree of post-industrial decline, with both its former manufacturing and coal-mining industries largely closed by the 1990s. Currently, the main industries appear to be within the service sector, especially public administration, education and health (NOMIS 2013). Unemployment is above both the national and regional average in the city (NOMIS 2013), and where people do work, workers earn less than the national average (NOMIS 2013).

Twenty five young people took part in this research from Cambus. They were members of the region's "youth assembly", a group of young people who were independent from the official "youth council" but were supported alongside the formal youth council as a more inclusive, larger group. The group were of mixed genders, with about equal numbers of boys and girls participating, and aged between 11 and 19, with a median age of 15. They were all of white British descent, which largely matched the regions demographics (80 per cent of Cambus are white (Nomis 2013)).

Leighton

Leighton is a city in North England that has been experiencing both a population and wealth decline over the last century. The feeling of passed grandeur was omnipresent in the ward the youth club was located in; the centre itself was previously a splendid hall and a number of consultations and meetings were held in gold gilded, chandeliered ballrooms. The city's previous trading sector had largely declined and given way to a service sector, especially public admin, business and tourism (NOMIS 2013). Unemployment in the city is well above the national and regional averages however (NOMIS 2013), and where people from Leighton were employed, they earned well below the national and regional averages (NOMIS 2013).

A diverse group of young people in Leighton worked on this project, with over 100 young people aged between ten and 19 engaged in some way or another. The initial, core group of seven young people – who oversaw the research process – all had experiences in the care system, either currently or previously. This was apparently a reflection of the location of the city's social services. The ward that was selected for

this research contained Leighton's social services, which meant that existing youth clubs in the neighbourhood were largely tailored to young people in or out of the care system. However, this core group of seven young people, who were aged 17 and 18, expanded out the research process and involved an estimated 100 other young people aged 10 to 18. Using Leighton's school's parliament, young people from primary and secondary schools were asked to identify their key concerns and policy solutions for inclusion in the development of the young people's policy – ensuring that Leighton's policy included ideas from around the whole region, from young people of different ages, ethnicities and abilities.

Morton

Morton is a city in North England, that, again, has fallen victim to decades of industrial decline. Both its manufacturing and ports – two key industries underpinning Morton economic prime in the 19th century – have disappeared. The economy is now a service based one (NOMIS 2013) and unemployment is higher than the UK average (NOMIS 2013). Uniquely, it has a higher job density than average – meaning there is more jobs per person in Morton than the English average (NOMIS 2013) – and has higher average levels of pay than England as a whole (NOMIS 2013). This leaves Morton as a particularly unique Northern case study within this research; the city itself appears to be not particularly deprived, however the ward within which these young people lived was highly deprived.

The Morton group was a group of seven young women, aged 12 – 14 when the research commenced. This gender bias emerged organically; it was the young women's group at youth club who expressed a strong interest in taking part in this research.

Springsville

Springsville is a borough in London, which has a long history of deprivation and has a reputation for being one of the poorest parts of town. The economic difficulties of the borough are largely due to its history as a home for multiple waves of economically deprived migrants. The current industries are largely the service and financial sectors (NOMIS 2013). It has an above national and regional average unemployment rate (NOMIS 2013), and a significantly higher prevalence of unqualified residents (NOMIS 2013). Where people do work however, their wages

are substantially larger than both the national and regional average (NOMIS 2013), perhaps highlighting the inequalities in the area.

The Springsville group was a women's group, but again, this was not necessarily by design. Most of the youth services in the Springsville region are gender segregated, and again, it was the young women's group at the youth centre who expressed interest in the project. The group consisted of six young women aged 15 when the research commenced, who all attended the same school and were of Bengali origins.

Shelton

Shelton is also located in London, but unlike Springsville, is a borough that is relatively prosperous. The borough has a lower than average unemployment rate (NOMIS 2013), and where people do work, their wages are some of the highest in the country (NOMIS 2013).

Despite this overall rosy picture, the ward that the youth club was housed in within Shelton was marked by extreme inequality. Multi-million pound houses surrounded these young people's ward, which was a collection of run down council estates. Economic inequalities were extremely visible, the youth club we worked in – located in the basement of a 1950s council tower – faced out on a row of million pound plus terraces, which often had Rolls Royces and Jaguars parked out front.

The group of young people from Shelton who participated all attended an 'inclusive' youth club; a service for young people with disabilities and their peers. The majority of this group were affected by disability, including their own deafness or visual impairments and/or were affected by family disability. The group were a cohesive collection of friends, aged 16 to 21. While this is slightly above the target age of *Child Poverty Policy* (HM Government 2014), the definition of a child in much UK legislation extends to 21 for young people with disabilities and care leavers – hence the youth club had an older age range. Most of the participants were under 18, however their 19 and 20 year old friends were not excluded to make the research process as undistruptive as is could be to the workings of the youth group. Much of the methodology became slightly altered to match different abilities, as discussed below, and with some visual elements reduced and some conversations held in basic sign to facilitate communication.

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Appendix two: Description of the methods engaged

To explore the capacities of, and findings that can emerge from, a participatory approach to child poverty policy in the UK, this research used a series of repeated focus groups with youth groups in each area. As the research process was designed to be flexible and responsive to participant's capacities and desires, each group was engaged in a slightly different research process. However, five common phases were undertaken, preceded by a similar recruitment method.

0. Recruitment and explanations

Once five wards around England had been selected for their high levels of child poverty, existing youth clubs serving young people under 16, or 16-19 in full time education, were identified as gatekeepers. With the approval of a youth club, I introduced myself to participants and *directly* invite them to participate. The invitation was normally offered a week or two before a proposed starting date, usually while attending a drop-in session or residential. This allowed some relationship building and trust to develop before the young people had to decide whether or not participate or not. This gap, between invitation and the start of the research, allowed consent forms to be distributed and, importantly, allowed the young people to think carefully, and have some say in shaping the proposed research process itself. Some of the activities, and most of the timescales for the project, were negotiated with the young people at these initial meetings.

Working with existing youth clubs presented a number of conveniences. Firstly, it eased the process of recruitment, and secondly, using existing clubs allowed for some additional support for both the research process (for example, having a second staff member in the room with a large group of young people) and to support the later action components of the project.

At these initial meetings, the research was described as a project to see what young people like themselves, who are often the targets of attempts to improve their lives, would actually like to happen. Participants were described as "experts in their own lives" and the research as a way for them to share this expertise. While initial discussions were not couched in the language of poverty, due to potential stigma (see Sutton 2009, p. 279), the research was framed as a sort of "response to" policy-

makers, including those writing poverty policy about their areas/lives. Once groups agreed to participate, both individual young people and their parent's consent was sought and obtained.

1. Discussions around what it was like, “on average”, to grow up “like me”, “around here”

Previous research with both adults and children highlights the stigma and shame associated with poverty (Lister 2004, Willow 2001), and also the risk of labelling young people as poor during the research process (Ridge 2002). While focus groups were necessary to facilitate the type of analytic fora and collaborate inquiry this research was oriented towards, they also ran the risk of 'leaving a child painfully exposed in the shared environment of a group interview' (Ridge 2002, p. 9). To avoid this, rather than talking about young people's personal experiences and their own low-income background, each group was engaged in a sort of “depersonalised” process, where discussion centred on “average” lives and life-pathways, from their perspectives.

To do this, a number of typical young characters were constructed in the first phase of the research. Coloured posters with silhouettes of teenage men, women and androgynous figures were produced at the start of each the first session, (see, for example, figure one), as well as marker pens, paints and magazines to cut up. From this, the group tasked with developing “average young people”. Initially the focus was always on the superficial – for example in Leighton the first thing added was a particular type of trainer and a regional eyelash fashion – but the focus more quickly moved on to discussions about the type of person this poster was becoming, what life-pathways they might navigate, and why this might be the case.

A range of characters – male and female – were developed in each group, each personified and named, allowing the group to constantly refer back to the ‘*Zarinas*’ or ‘*Viviennes*’ (their named characters) in later discussions when stigmatising topics were broached. Constructing a range of characters allowed the group to reflect both the heterogeneity of life-pathways they identified with, for example in Springsville the group developed a ‘*devout*’ Muslim, a ‘*hypocrite*’ Muslim and a ‘*not-too-bothered-about-it*’ Muslim, introducing a degree of deliberation about available pathways in the process.



Figure one: A blank silhouette and a completed one.

A range of “youth friendly” statistics were also provided at this stage (see, for example, figure two) to facilitate informed deliberation about the nature of their areas average young person. The statistics were all derived from the *Child Poverty Basket of Indicators*, then provided by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF 2010). The idea behind this was to provide young people with the same sorts of information available to professional policy makers, to “tool them up” in comparative ways, to facilitate comparisons in analysis. Proponents of participatory policy analysis suggest that providing evidence and inputs is one way policy analysts can engage in the project of participatory democracy (Durning 1993, p. 305), or one way of addressing the lacuna between participation and policy that this research set out to address.

Conversations around these statistics allowed the group to focus on generating a character set that they felt was representative of the life-pathways open to them, and that they felt happy working with going forward. For example, in Morton, they decided that of 100 young people “like them”, 25 would leave school and go to university, 5 would go on to benefits, 25-30 would get apprenticeships, one would start a family and the rest would go straight in to work. This discussion was precipitated by

statistics about how many young people on low incomes went on to Higher Education (see figure two), and questions raised about what happened to the rest of the school leavers. The prevalence of each pathway and its self-purported odds, were then matched to the spread of their characters.

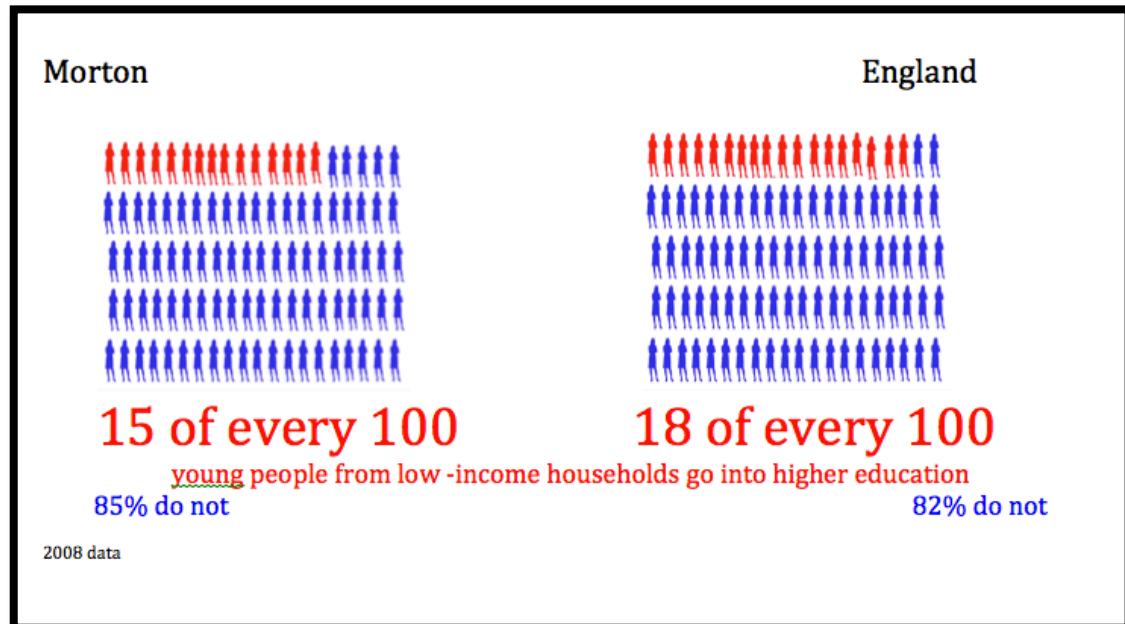


Figure two: an example of the youth-friendly statistical data sheets distributed in phase one of the research.

Beyond generating a deliberative tool for the later research process, this first stage also provided useful insights in to the nature of these young people's worlds. That is, the discussions the young people were having while crafting their Zarinas and Viviennes were filled with tales of the everyday, from their perspective. In itself, these conversations formed a rich data source about the day-to-day world from these young people's perspectives.

In two areas, a few members of the group undertook slightly different, concurrent activities. In Leighton, Mark asked if he could produce a rap about growing up in his neighbourhood instead. This rap was performed and refined a number of times while the rest of the group crafted their Viviennes and Zarinas, which provided both necessary comic relief breaks, and a sense of camaraderie in the project. In Cambus, a humorous response to an Australian idiom used while introducing the task led to the development of a similarly musical activity:

Moderator: Tell me if you think this is a dumb idea, but I thought we could...

Andrew: IT'S A DUMB IDEA! (shouting)

All: Laughs (Including Andrew and the Moderator)

Moderator: Alrighty, well then you're coming up with a better idea then!

All: Laughs (Including Andrew and the Moderator)

Moderator: As soon as I make my suggestion. So, just so, you've got a few minutes to think about it, but I thought we could (Explains the silhouette poster task) ... So, Andrew, come up with anything else?

Andrew: OK, so I thought, how, you know like that New York song by Alicia Keys, that one? Why don't we write one like that, but about Cambus?

Andrew didn't subsequently write a version of 'New York State of Mind', but three of his colleagues thought it was such a good idea that they gave it a go (see figure three). Again, the performance of this was the collegial conclusion to the first session.

Original song lyrics	<i>Adapted song lyrics</i>
Even if ain't all it seems	<i>Even if 14 ain't all it seems</i>
I got a pocket full of dreams	<i>I got pocket full of green</i>
Baby I'm from New York!	<i>Baby I'm from Cambus!</i>
Concrete jungle where dreams are made of	<i>Tower blocks where babies are made in There's nobody you can't do</i>
There's nothing you can't do	<i>Now you're in Cambus</i>
Now you're in New York!	<i>These babies will make you feel brand</i>
These streets will make you feel brand new	<i>new, Big bumps will inspire you</i>
Big lights will inspire you	<i>Lets have it for Cambus, Cambus,</i>
Hear it for New York!	<i>Cambus</i>
(New York, New York, New York)	

Figure three: The song written about teen pregnancy and marijuana for Cambus, modelled on Alicia Key's New York State of Mind.

The net outcome of this phase of the research – which was generally one or two meetings – was a range of deliberately produced characters to discuss in later research, two raps about neighbourhoods, a rich discussion around what constitutes

“an average life and life-pathway” from these young people’s perspectives and a tool to depersonalise the potentially stigmatising nature of the later process.

2. Problematising and appreciating aspects of these young people’s lives

After generating rich, deliberative discussions about the experiences and life-pathways of young people “like them”, the second phase of the research moved on to attempt to both problematise and appreciate aspects of these worlds. The aim of the second phase of the research process was to end up with a firm understanding about what these young people felt was good about their lives, and what they felt was bad about their lives. (The phrase “not so good” was initially used to avoid overt negativity about their lived worlds, but all groups immediately switched to the language of ‘good’ and ‘bad’).

This session began with a recap of the Zarinas and Viviennes each group constructed, and – partly to keep the research engaging and youth-friendly – moved on to photographic walking tour of the neighbourhood. The introduction of a photo-voice component was intended to be more than just fun however. As a research technique, using photo-voice with young people has been described as ‘promoting critical dialogue and knowledge about community issues through group discussion’, and able to reach policy makers (Wang 2006, p. 147), two key teleological aims of this research.

Each young person was given a polaroid camera (or in Cambus, one between two), and asked to photograph 12 scenes from Zarina’s and Vivienne’s life. Sometimes this involved constructing elaborate scenes the group tried to capture, where, for example, Vivienne would be sitting on a park bench longingly staring at the apartment block her estranged parents lived in, or Zariana was part of a gang and setting fire to a trash can. More often, photographs were of things Zarina and Vivienne would see on her way to school, like boarded up houses and rubbish, were taken (see, for example, figure four).

Once the photographic tour of the neighbourhood was completed, the group returned to the youth club to sort out their images into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ lists. This involved each young photographer explaining their photograph to the group, outlining what aspects of Zarina’s life they were trying to capture and then discussing with their colleague whether they thought this was good or bad. Occasionally, photographs

were placed in a 'good and bad' pile, or sometime in a 'just funny' section. Once the group had completed their good and bad piles, these were stuck on to two sheets of coloured card, to make 'good' and 'bad' posters of Zarina and Vivienne's lives (see for example figure five).



Figure four: an image of boarded up houses

Once we had constructed a "visible" list of good and bad issues using the photography element, additional, less "visible" issues were added to each list using post it notes. Additions were added based on reflections on the first phase of the research, as well as discussions and deliberations over photographs. For example, where a photo was intended to capture an issue but couldn't, or where non-visual issues like the loss of the EMA were identified, they were simply added to the list in text.

In Shelton, visual impairments made the photographic project difficult for some participants. To avoid excluding them, the good and bad list was generated by brainstorming in the group, with visually able and willing young people given disposable cameras to take home to capture images described on the list for a later date (see figure six).

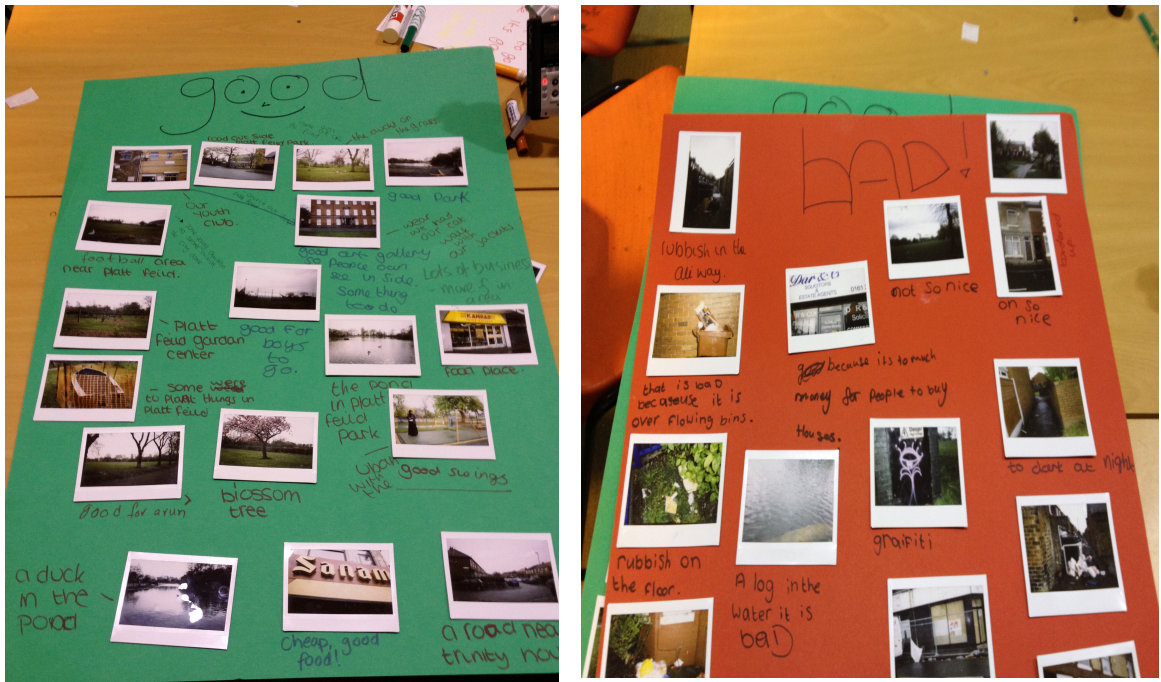


Figure five: A photo-voice good and bad list.



Figure six: Shelton's good and bad list.

The final outcome of this phase, which took one or two meetings, was a deliberately produced, visual list of what the participant's problematised or appreciated about Zarina and Vivienne's lives and potential life-pathways.

3. Imagining, deliberating and deciding on policy solutions

Once we had established a working list of problems and assets, as these young people saw it, the third phase of research moved on to identify solutions to the issues and ways to enhance the 'good' aspects of their lives.

To do this, each group was invited to brainstorm solutions to address the lists developed in phase two. In between sessions, the visual lists were transcribed in to typed, golden A1 posters, which were given to the group at the start of phase three along with post-it notes. The group were encouraged to brainstorm ideas to address each issue/asset, write them on the post it notes, and cover their list of issues and assets with ideas to address or enhance them.

At this stage, the deliberative process around the brainstorming tended to split depending on the group's age. Morton and Springsville, the younger and disabled group, deliberated through a drama based activity. Once the brainstorming activity was completed, these groups worked on drawing these ideas together, prioritising and simplifying options through a process of developing and delivering "the best speech ever that the Prime Minister / Dr Who could make". That is, I suggested that the group take their list of ideas, and attempt to work with them to write what they thought would be the best speech they imagined the Prime Minister could make for Zarina and Vivienne. One group did this, the other suggested Dr Who could help better. Through the preparation of a speech, Springsville and Morton clustered similar policy ideas together, prioritised which they felt was the most important, discussed the merits of some options, discarded controversial or 'silly' suggestions, harmonised competing suggestions and were left, ultimately, with a list of policy options they thought would delight Zarina or Vivienne. This became the first working draft of their policy. In these groups, they then dressed up as the Prime Minister or Dr Who and delivered their speeches. Both groups invited the youth centre management to hear these performances, potentially signifying a sense of pride and ownership in the speeches and policies they had prepared.

In the three older groups, the drama component was not suggested, as conversations and deliberations appeared to organically emerge from the brainstorming activity. These groups appeared to instantaneously shift from developing post-it-note ideas, to critically analysing, grouping, harmonising and

discarding them. Through group discussion, these groups shifted from a post-it-note “mess” of ideas, in to a working draft of a comprehensive policy. Both processes left each group with a collaboratively developed, deliberately decided “golden list of ideas” (see figure seven).

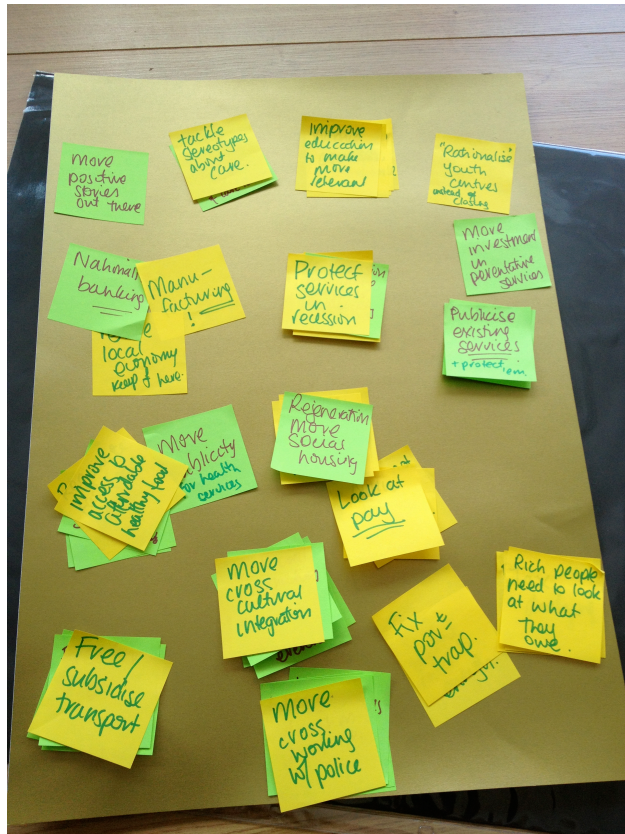


Figure 7: A final golden list of idea.

At this stage, the Leighton group added an additional, extensive process of consultation. They decided that before they finalise their list of policy ideas, they wanted to consult with other young people via Leighton’s School’s Parliament. Leighton’s School’s Parliament is an existing youth representative structure, that provides a forum for primary school students and secondary school students to both engage in the council decision making processes and voice their concerns around wider issues. Around 100 young people participate in the forum. This introduced an element of youth-led, peer-to-peer research to this project, as it was the core Leighton group who suggested and undertook this activity.

The core Leighton group developed and delivered a shortened version of phase two and three for the School’s Parliament. They asked School’s Parliament participants, working in small groups, to brainstorm good and bad aspects of growing up in

Leighton, especially if you were 'skint', and asked them to brainstorm solutions on post-it notes during two, three-hour sessions (see figure eight). These issues / assets and solutions were transcribed, and through a half day deliberative discussion with the core group plus two additional young people who had become interested in participating in the project, integrated in to the group's policy. This meant their final policy included the thoughts of over 100 young people from right across the Leighton region. The core group subsequently presented the findings and final policy back to the School's Parliament, to ensure feedback was provided.

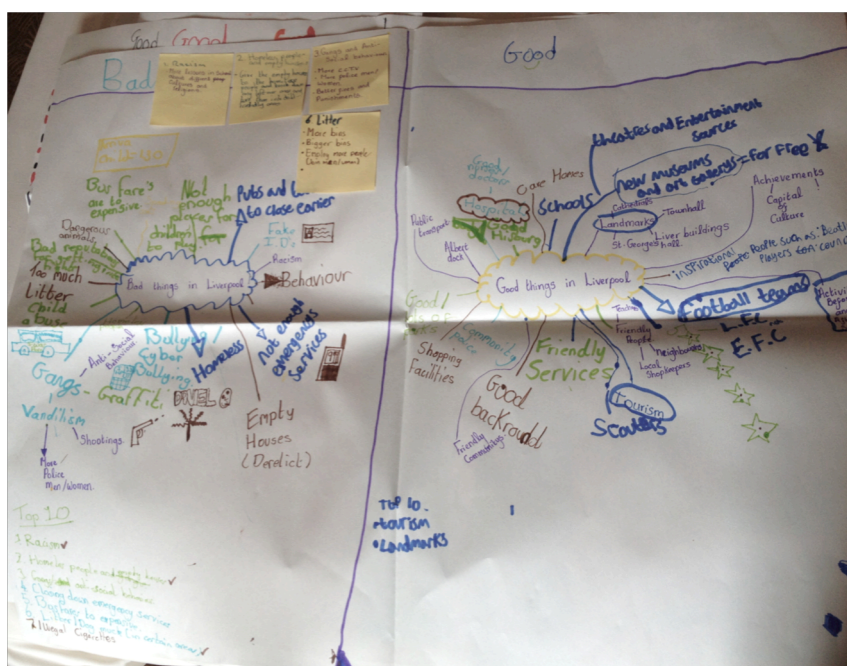


Figure 8: An example of one School's Parliament's table's work.

The bulk of each policy was, generally, developed by the conclusion of stage three. However, the golden lists were not the finished product. Each list was transcribed, and through further deliberation and discussion, prioritised, edited and laid-out to produce the final policy for each area.

The layouts of the policy were intended to enable each group to develop an A1 poster for display. The request to produce a poster was made initially by the first group engaged in this research, and this offer was repeated and accepted in all subsequent groups. The first group specifically asked for a poster so that their MP and council could pin it up on their walls, so that 'it would always be looking over them'. Each layout was devised by the group, digitised by a designer under their instruction, and involved several iterations between the designer and the group

before they were finalised. Such deliberations and editing continued in small parts through the fourth stage of the research as well, these were very much considered living documents, even after they were printed.

The end product of this phase of research, which was between two and three meetings, was a finalised child poverty policy for each region.

It is perhaps worth noting that this process appears to have been well understood, and been coherent, to participants themselves. One young person described the process in a report they wrote for their council:

We took part in a full day workshop to explore our own experiences of growing up in Leighton, using the help of “fictional characters” Matt and Vivienne. Using our experience to personalise Matt and Vivienne, we then went out in to the community to capture what their lives would look like using Polaroid cameras. From this, we then met again to developed a list of what was good about growing up in Leighton, what was not so good, and importantly, what they wanted done about the not so good parts.

4. Discussion around, preparation for and executing a localised action based component

Once a policy had been prepared, each of the groups was invited to think about what, if anything, they would like to “do” with them. Each group decided that they would like to take some actions around them, which was largely localised to each area.

There was, however, a common desire to communicate their policy to decision makers at local and national levels. To achieve this, each group wrote to their local council and MPs (and in Springsville, MEPs). The letters were written, signed and posted by the group, in a dedicated letter writing session. Many letters followed a similar structure however, as two of the groups asked to see previous groups letters to help structure their own. In total, 16 MPs, five councillors and three MEPs were made aware of the group’s strategies, with follow up meetings sought.

The follow up meeting with the MPs was, generally, held as a communal meeting. The All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty agreed to host a “workshop” in the House of Commons where all of the groups could present their strategies and meet with their local MPs, as well as national-level decision makers at the same time. For

this youth-led workshop, held in December 2012, each group worked extensively to prepared a 5-7-minute power point presentation, which they then delivered. They also introduced and concluded the workshop; the only adult voices were heard at the discussion phase, held in the final 30 minutes. This perhaps maximised youth-led voices, but limited deliberation. It was, however, the choice of the young participants.

For these final, deliberative 30 minutes, the young people held the audience “hostage”. Two particularly tall boys from Cambus blocked the door, and adult participants were not allowed out until they had secured a “commitment card” which functioned as a hostage release certificate (see figure nine). The idea behind this, which came from participants, was to ensure that each audience member made a commitment to taking action about an issue discussed by the young people. The card was designed by a young person, specifically so that – as they described it – ‘*an old, crusty person might pin it to their fridge*’. This perhaps speaks to their perception of official policy makers.

The audience of “official policy makers” was comprised of 13 local MPs, representatives from three councils, the APPG MP who was hosting the event, representatives from the Child Poverty Unit, the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commissioner and staff from children’s charities. Each young participant had a “commitment card” to offer, and commitments secured on the day ranged from an increase in the local council recycling targets to a place on a local public transport costs scrutiny committee. Beyond this, more broadly, the discussion between the young people and the audience appeared deliberative, and it allowed the audience to deliver their policy posters in person. In total 60 people were present at this workshop.

Alongside this collective action, which was made possible *because* of the distribution of groups, each group also took some localised actions.

In Cambus, the group decided to take direct action around a number of issues they identified in the research process. Rather than lobbying for change, they decided to deliver a number of programmes aimed at tackling food poverty and uniform costs. To address food poverty, the group identified a gap in the provision of free school meals over the school holidays as potentially problematic in their neighbourhood. They secured training around food safety from their local council, and funding from both local businesses and fund raising to run a “free lunch scheme” over the Easter

vacation in 2013. Working with two youth clubs in deprived wards, which had access to kitchens, they prepared hot lunches and fun activities for two weeks at the start of April 2013. They also decided to address uniform costs, by encouraging schools to run second hand uniform shops and organise a second hand uniform drive. They contacted every school in their area to ask about their second hand uniform scheme and were working on undertaking a uniform drive, when they became aware of a local charity looking at similar problems. They are now working with them, and have become “second hand uniform volunteers” at their own schools, collecting and delivering donated uniforms to the charity.



Figure 9: The “commitment card” that audience members needed to secure from young people.

Further, they ran a one-day workshop in 2014 to repeat this research with neighbouring areas, to encourage other youth groups to develop anti-poverty policy to suit their needs. A function room and catering were donated to them, and seven other youth groups, around 50 young people in total, attended the workshop. The group themselves organised, and co-ordinated the entire workshop, however I attended and gave a 5 minute “welcome speech”. The workshop included a version of phase two (what’s good and what’s bad) using photos participants took, phase

three (structured brainstorming around solutions and improvements), and some action planning (a shortened version of phase four).

In Leighton, the group were more concerned with embedding all of these young people's ideas into local council strategies. They secured meetings with the local mayor, and presented their policy at a number of local council cabinet meetings, with some success. At the time of writing, these young people's policy was being embedded in its entirety in to the Mayors 10 year economic regeneration plan for Leighton. The only modification as such was the name, the group agreed to change the name to match the corporate motto for the council.

In Morton, the group held a local launch of their policy, attended by their local MP, deputy leader of the Council, local press, parents and community centre manager.

In Springsville, like Leighton, the group were very keen to connect with and lobby their local authority. However, resistance from their local authority – who felt that they should only be speaking to Springsville's young mayor about these sort of things¹ – meant they were unable to secure any local meetings.

In Shelton, they met with their local MP and councillor at their youth club, delivering a rap they prepared for them and handed over their policy. For these young people however, the idea of voicing concerns and developing their own solutions appears to have spilled over in to a number of different terrains, so that the *process* of this research is continuing in different parts of their lives. For example, the local police pay this group a bi-monthly visit to talk to them about "keeping safe". The focus of these meetings – I am told – is normally a one-way information flow from community support officers to the young people, for example, warnings about increases in phone thefts in particular areas, and how not to have your phone stolen. I was told by both the young people (and the group's youth worker) though, that at a police meeting in early 2013, Maeve and 'HC' decided to turn the tables and ask instead what the police were doing to make their community safer, so they wouldn't be at risk of being mugged. The "action" that seems to be happening in Shelton appears to be mini-replications of the deliberative processes that formed the methodology for this research.

¹ I'm not entirely sure what was meant by "these sort of things". Their communication was via email and they were not amendable to follow up conversation. I suspect they meant "political" issues.

All of these actions have been in part supported by myself, in part existing youth clubs and, where necessary, new relationships with other supporting organisations forged. This was very much the intention of this methodology, to allow the action aspects to continue beyond the duration of this limited research, should the participants want.

The outcome of this phase of the research, which took anywhere between 3 and 15 meetings, was a national meeting with policy decision makers, letter to MPs and councillors, a series of local meetings with local decision makers and a set of localised actions.

5. A subsequent (unexpected) national policy

After most of this research was completed, and many of the local actions undertaken, the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty (APPG) – who had hosted the launch event for the local strategies – approached me in late 2013 to see if it would be possible to develop a national policy, as part of their programme of work running up to the national election in 2015. I passed on the invite to the original participants, who accepted, and connected with a charity capable of co-ordinating the logistics and safeguarding of such a venture.

The national manifesto was written over two residential held in 2014, a two day event in January held in London and a three day event in August in the Lakes district. These residential were organised and safeguarded by the partner charity.

In total, 38 participants, representing all five local areas attended. The 38 were selected via convenience sampling. Each local area was invited to send representatives of their group who were able to come – in some areas, all of the initial participants came, in others, especially the larger groups, only some attended. Most participants attended both residential, however there was some dynamics based on personal availability and interest.

The activities undertaken at these residential were a repeated version of the local methodologies. For example, we began by replicating phase one, where we constructed average “English lives” for young people “like them”. The Zarinas and Viviennes developed in the local projects were all re-presented, (bar a handful of

characters that had been left on the walls at one youth club and had subsequently been lost). We used these as food for thought to deliberate over common life-pathways and experiences for low-income young people around England. We also replicated phase two, where we brainstormed the problems of their lives as they saw them, and the good aspects. Here too, we leveraged off their early work. Each group, for example, presented the ideas they outlined in their own local policy, and then they discussed and deliberated around if these were common, unique or important to the English Zarinas and Viviennes.

From this process, the group deliberated and developed a national child-poverty policy, which they called their '*Manifesto so Poverty Ends Now*'. This manifesto is much shorter than their local manifestos. I am unsure whether this was based on their strive to reach a Habermasian style consensus across all five areas, or their desire to communicate a simple powerful message, informed by their experiences of working with longer documents in the local phases. Regardless, the brevity does not reflect a lack of thought.

For example, one initial suggestion offered up on day one of the first residential was to '*crack down*' on drugs, as one group of youngsters from North England had identified drugs as a problem in their area. While this bore similarities with multiple suggestions offered, it contradicted others, such as to '*tax drugs so the money goes back in to the local economy*', which was proffered by another group. Here, the national group had generated two oppositional suggestions. They discussed and deliberated around the nature of their problem with drugs – was it that some people used drugs or did that not matter, was criminalisation or decriminalisation more helpful, or was the core issue that drugs related *crime* made them feel unsafe in their areas? In a sort of Habermasian strive for consensus, they agreed that what was actually important, what would help Zarina and Vivienne, was if young people felt safe in their '*ends*'. This appeared in the first draft of their policy, but subsequent discussions around difficulties with perceptions of *feeling* safe, meant it was amended to '*young people feeling and being safe in their communities*', in the final policy. Much thoughtful deliberation underpins each of the apparently simple points these young people offered up.

The national group are being funded and supported to take some actions, both local and national, around this manifesto. These include communicating with MPs and Select Committees, writing Parliamentary Questions and holding an event in

parliament. None of these, however, were organic suggestions emerging from the group themselves, instead they were opportunities offered to them by the APPG. However, on top of this, they are all undertaking some local actions which appear to be more youth-led, including making Vines about why they feel unsafe in their areas, and documenting issues with litter through a Facebook 'Trash Bucket Challenge', among others.

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