

All of these changes not only appear to be producing better outcomes for parents and their children but are also encouraging a new model of practice in the Family Court of Western Australia.

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## REVIEW

# Sociology of childhood research

Wendy Stone

Australian approaches to poverty-related research typically focus on the relationships of adults to labour market and/or welfare systems. In these analyses, family relationships feature prominently, often as factors that help to explain an individual's relationship either to work or to income support.

Where children are included, the research usually maintains its adult perspective, discussing children as, for example, a barrier to paid work, or, say, as future adults. Most Australian research concerning children adopts a psychology framework, focusing on children's attributes, resilience and vulnerability rather than on the *culture* of childhood and the ways this is mediated by poverty. With some few but significant exceptions (notably, the Brotherhood of St Laurence's *Life Chances* study), very little is heard from people themselves as they experience poverty, least of all the views or experiences of children.

*Enter Childhood Poverty and Social Exclusion: From a Child's Perspective*, authored by Dr Tess Ridge, from the Department of Social and Policy Sciences at the University of Bath in the United Kingdom.

By example, this book lays down the gauntlet to policy makers, researchers, educators and service providers to change the way they do business, by asking them to take a child-centred approach and seeing where they end up. Specifically, it encourages readers to look through the eyes of children to see how well the needs of children, as *defined* by children, are being met. Ridge's work complements psychological studies of children at risk, but marks a point of departure from them, by delivering a policy analysis grounded in sociology of childhood research to respond to children's needs.

Beginning with an historical overview of policies targeting poor children and their families in the United Kingdom, Ridge frames her work in terms of the current Blair Government's commitment to alleviate child poverty. Recent estimates by Bradbury and Jantí (2001) rank Britain as having the third highest percentage of children in poverty in the "developed" world (based on 50 per cent of overall median income).

To put the size of the problem into perspective, these estimates indicate that more than one-fifth of British children are in poverty at any given time. (Australia, ranked fifth, with 17 per cent of all Australian children estimated to be in poverty, is not far behind.)



Using what she calls “child-centred” research, Ridge then sets out to determine how well current policies are meeting the needs of poor children, and how these children are experiencing poverty. Reporting on in-depth interviews conducted with 40 children aged between 10 and 17 years whose parent/s were in receipt of benefit (income support payments), Ridge explores how children view and experience their everyday lives, including their family relationships, their friendships, and their school and work – in an attempt to place children centre-stage. These qualitative data are supplemented by analysis of large scale survey data collected from young people aged 11 to 15 years.

Central among the findings, the book shows that poor children are suffering from insufficient access to the economic and material resources necessary for adequate social participation and academic parity.

Contrary to arguments espousing the development and transmission of dependency culture, such as adopted by Murray (1994) in the United States, Ridge argues that children are in fact active, responsive and adaptive to the circumstances in which they live.

For example, while previous research has shown that parents act to protect their children from the direct and indirect impacts of poverty, Ridge argues that children, too, act to protect their parents. This includes school-aged children seeking employment of their own, not expecting material goods and, perhaps of most concern, excluding themselves from “expensive” aspects of life, including school excursions and extra curricula activities – some of the very activities that can lead to friendships that can protect children from adversities associated with being poor, or act to increase children’s otherwise limited opportunities.

Related to this, Ridge also points to the fact that children’s experiences in the here and now are important – in contrast with approaches that focus primarily upon children as “the adults of the future”. Her findings highlight the very real concerns children have about their schooling, their friendships, their families and

their neighbourhoods, and the way they manage their relationships and environments.

While the study comes out of a specifically British and European tradition of research around poverty and, more recently, social exclusion, it has strong resonance for the Australian context – perhaps all the stronger as it draws attention to issues and methodologies that are not yet central to the Australian research focus on poverty.

*Childhood Poverty and Social Exclusion* reminds us of the importance of first-hand accounts of children’s experiences. The book reinforces the idea that understanding the social and cultural context in which poverty takes place, in addition to material and financial factors, is critical to a full understanding of poverty. It emphasises that there is a place in policy research for qualitative as well as quantitative research, and that this can add meaning to what we already “know”.

Ridge’s work enters a previously underdeveloped field of poverty-related research, and in doing so makes substantive, theoretical and methodological contributions.

This book will be of interest to those involved in the development and evaluation of public policy, researchers concerned with policy and poverty, and those involved in education – as well as to anyone wanting to move toward a rich, contextual understanding of how the world is experienced and negotiated by children.

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