A Video Testimony on Rural Poverty and Social Exclusion

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Abstract

In this paper, we seek to illustrate the potential theoretical and methodological contributions that video research methods can make in advancing social-scientific understanding and informing public debates on social problems. We do so by presenting findings on the experience and impacts of poverty and exclusion based upon the video 'testimony' with 33 people experiencing low income in one relatively remote rural area, the County of Herefordshire. Based on these data and subsequent follow-up qualitative work, this study highlights the personal impacts of disadvantage associated with a denial of rights, assault on dignity, and processes of stigmatisation and disempowerment. In doing so it demonstrates the potential of video data both as an emerging social research practice in its own right and as a vehicle for giving voice to marginalised groups within wider public debates and policy development.

Keywords: Video Research; Visual Methods; Rural Poverty; Social Exclusion

Researching rural poverty and social exclusion

1.1 Empirical research into poverty and social exclusion in the UK and elsewhere has for the most part focused on the applications of survey methods and quantitative approaches in estimating the extent, dynamics and social distribution of vulnerability to poverty and social exclusion. However, recent decades have witnessed a growing appreciation of the potential of qualitative methods in documenting the experience and impacts of poverty and social exclusion. Increasing recognition of the importance of involving low-income citizens as active participants in research on poverty and social exclusion has also considerably advanced understanding of the material, social and psychological consequences of poverty, and of the

meaning and subjective significance of poverty, on the basis of broadly participatory research designs which foreground the perspectives of people experiencing poverty and exclusion as the 'real experts' (Beresford et al., 1999; Lister and Beresford, 2000; Lister, 2007). In this paper, we argue that the adoption of video research methods opens up new opportunities to better understand the 'lived reality' of poverty in ways which challenge the discursive marginalisation of people experiencing disadvantage within public debates on poverty, and specifically in challenging the invisibility of poverty in otherwise affluent rural communities.

1.2 In this section, we begin by summarizing existing evidence on the experience of poverty before going on to consider the ways in which video research methods can contribute to advancing this research agenda and informing policy and debate in this area. A preference for quantitative measurement in poverty research has long been associated with an emphasis upon the investigation of poverty as a material condition characterised by deprivation of basic needs. Estimating the extent, distribution and dynamics of disadvantage on the basis of objective measurement within social surveys has long been a key research objective within empirical poverty research. However, as Lister (2004) powerfully argues, poverty should be understood both as a material condition characterized by deprivation of basic needs and as a social relationship characterized by a denial or withdrawal of citizenship rights. Drawing upon the work of social theorists such as Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser (e.g. Honneth, 1996; Fraser and Honneth, 2003) such a perspective emphasises the centrality of questions of recognition and representation alongside consideration of distributional questions in the pursuit of social justice.

1.3 Fraser's account of 'symbolic injustices' seeks to challenge the discursive marginalisation of the poor themselves within public debates on poverty, and in the development of related social and public policies. Such an agenda is in many respects consistent with Bourdieu's (e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron, 1991) earlier understanding of 'symbolic violence' as denoting a system of ideas and perceptions which serve to legitimate the dominance of powerful social groups and the perpetuation of social relations based upon inequalities of wealth and power. For Lister (2004), understanding poverty as a social relationship therefore requires us to consider the ways in which social representations of poverty constitute 'the poor' as Other and different from 'mainstream' society, in the process delegitimizing the perspectives and beliefs of people experiencing poverty in public debates on this topic. The views of people experiencing poverty are therefore silenced within debates on poverty and in the development of policies to tackle poverty. As Pickering (2001) observes, the stereotyping and stigmatization of marginalized groups serves both as a vehicle for affirming the identities and perceived entitlements of dominant groups and, by reducing the Other to a passive caricature, provides a narrative for blaming the victims for wider societal problems.

1.4 At the same time, the discursive marginalisation of poor people in such debates is reproduced in everyday symbolic interactions in ways which constantly define and demarcate the social distinctions through which 'the poor' are constituted as Other and blamed for their own exclusion (Lister, 2004; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996). In recent years, qualitative studies have begun to document the ways in which pejorative constructions of 'the poor' are reproduced in everyday interactions resulting in the further marginalisation of people experiencing poverty. A central theme within these accounts has focused on examination of the detrimental psycho-social effects of everyday processes of Othering, for example associated with experiences of shame, stigmatisation, humiliation, powerlessness, assault on self-esteem and human dignity, and diminished citizenship (e.g. Kempson, 1996; Beresford et al., 1999; Ridge, 2011; Daly and Leonard, 2002; Hooper et al., 2007). The stigmatising consequences of

poverty are clearly documented within these studies. Their overall conclusions describe the dehumanising effects of poverty by which people are treated differently in everyday interactions and prevented from fulfilling normative expectations, for example, in their roles as parents, workers, citizens, as a result of low income. The internalisation of stigma as shame, embarrassment, and guilt is a central feature within these accounts. Participants describe the degrading effects of poverty in stripping people of their dignity and sense of personal esteem and autonomy, resulting in concomitant feelings of anxiety, powerlessness, and lack of voice. A sense of diminished citizenship and denial of rights (including to equal respect) is one consequence of social practices and interactions in which people experiencing poverty are made to feel worthlessness, denied recognition, and viewed with suspicion.

1.5 We contend that these ideas have an especial resonance in rural communities. Deprivation in rural areas tends to be hidden rather than absent due to the geographical dispersion of rural communities and differences in the ways rural poverty manifests itself in comparison urban areas. A range of research studies over the last twenty years have documented the hidden extent of rural poverty, belying the 'picture postcard image' prevalent within public discourses of rurality (CRC, 2006a; Milbourne, 2004, 2006; Shucksmith et al., 1996). However, the invisibility of rural poverty reflects not simply the physical isolation of the rural 'poor', but also a lack of recognition for the experience of rural poverty, and the cultural/political marginalisation of people experiencing poverty both within rural communities and in wider public constructions of the 'rural idyll'. Several authors have cited the reconfiguration of the countryside as a sphere of consumption as a potential driver of the further marginalisation of people experiencing poverty, for example, in undermining the viability of already over-stretched local services, and by closing down the countryside as a site of production and economic activity as a result of processes of social recomposition and gentrification (Cloke et al., 1994, 1997; Milbourne, 1997, 2008). In this study we seek to document the subjective impacts of processes of exclusion in rural communities from the perspective of the 'real experts', people experiencing low income and exclusion in rural areas. In doing so we go on to argue that video research methods have an important contribution to make in the development of more participatory and inclusive research practices.

1.6 However, these and other studies also highlight the sensitivities of research on the experience of poverty in the context of the social labelling of people experiencing poverty, and potential participants' understandable reluctance to identify themselves as 'poor' (see also Corden, 1996; Dean and Melrose, 1999; Novak, 2001). This observation highlights the dilemmas involved in challenging the invisibility of poverty in public debates. A central concern with challenging rather than contributing to the further objectification of 'the poor' within poverty research has therefore prompted the advocacy of more participatory methods in this field (Lister and Beresford, 2000; Beresford and Croft, 1993; Lister, 2004). As we shall see below, giving voice to participants has been a central concern in participatory studies which seek to challenge the objectification of research subjects on the basis of a redressing of power relations in social research. It is surprising therefore that video research methods have received little attention in the development of more participatory and reflexive approaches to researching poverty. Nevertheless, in this article we suggest that video research methods have much to offer in the development of participatory approaches to understanding and addressing the subjective impacts of poverty, as well as in many other areas of social research practice concerned with the investigation of experiences of disadvantage and exclusion.

Using video research methods in poverty research

2.1 Despite the promising origins and early application of visual methods in anthropological

and sociological research, visual methods have until recently remained very much the 'poor relation' in social research (Noyes, 2004). Ambiguities in the interpretation of visual data, and in the contribution such data can make in advancing scientific understanding, have meant that for the most part visual images have been considered as essentially illustrative and supplementary to supposedly more 'rigorous' numbers-based and word-based accounts (Prosser, 1998; Prosser and Loxley, 2008). However, perhaps as a reflection of the ubiquity of visual imagery and practices in the 'digital age', recent years have witnessed a growing interest across disciplinary divides in the applications of visual approaches as a source of research data in its own right, and specifically in the applications of researcher- and participant-generated visual research data.

2.2 In this paper, we argue that video methods can make an important methodological, theoretical, and substantive contribution to contemporary social science. Firstly, visual methods have important applications in the development of more collaborative and participatory research designs which seek to give voice to subjects whose perspectives and views are frequently overlooked both in everyday interactions, and discounted within wider public discourse. Moving beyond text-based and numbers-based accounts offers the potential to at least partially redress inequalities of power within the research process itself and in doing so can promote greater reflexivity in research practice. The potential, for example, of participatory film making approaches in documenting personal experiences and perspectives partly reflects the pervasiveness of visual images in contemporary culture and the ease with which research subjects are therefore able to engage with, appropriate, and direct the visual representations of their lives. Similarly, it is argued that narratives generated using video diary methods provide a more direct representation of subjectivities by offering participants the opportunity to assume greater control over the representation of self within research data (Noyes, 2004). Visual methods offer also one important means of overcoming the objectification of research subjects as disembodied textual and numeric data within the interpretation and subsequent dissemination of findings. The visual representation of subjects' perspectives within their natural setting can provide for more holistic interpretations thereby enhancing the ecological validity of findings.

2.3 In problematising the question of *whose* perspective is represented, visual research methods can also encourage greater reflexivity on the part of researchers in understanding their role within the research process and how we should interpret subsequent evidence. For example, do relatively unmediated participant accounts constitute a more faithful representation of a singular social reality than those generated using more traditional researcher-centric approaches? Contemporary interest in visual research approaches has spawned a proliferation of visual methods spanning a familiar epistemological divide between positivist, realist, and narrative-interpretative positions. In this paper we adopt a narrative perspective in which the role of the researcher in the generation and analysis of video evidence is to provide a narrative structure to participants' accounts through the selective organisation of coded clips. As Derry et al. (2000: 11) argue, based on 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) narrative video research seeks to develop a story which helps us understand participants' accounts in ways which acknowledge the co-presence of participants and research users:

> The aim is to make the complex understandable. This is accomplished though a process of selectively organizing a research presentation (a story) into "digestible" chunks and then contextualizing them within a narrative thread that not only makes consumers of the research (viewers as well as readers) feel they were present but may also include participants as partners in telling the stories.

2.4 To some extent limited application of video research methods reflects the absence of accepted standards governing the design, implementation and analysis of visual research methods, as well as in the specification of accepted ethical standards for the conduct of video research methods arising from uncertainty about the conceptual basis for making such judgments (Prosser, 2000). As Wiles et al. (2008) note, in promoting a collaborative understanding of research much visual research assume an ethic of care based on principles of beneficence which protect the dignity, privacy and well-being of research participants. However, researcher-generated visual data produce visually identifiable data which raise potentially difficult ethical issues in the conduct of video research with regard to the safeguarding of confidentiality and anonymity, for example in managing participant self-disclosure during data collection, and in relation to the ownership and dissemination of research outputs based on visual data.

2.5 Underpinning these ethical issues are concerns about the very limited potential for anonymisation within video research. Whilst anonymity is a well-established principle of social research upheld by regulatory bodies, the advantages of video methods arise directly from the potential of visual images in generating richer data through the incorporation of nonverbal cues and contextual information, and through the holistic representation of participants in ways which respect their identities and challenge the objectification of research subjects in social research (Wiles et al., 2008). At the same time, it is important for researchers to acknowledge participants' 'right to be visible' especially where research seeks to challenge wider social processes of disempowerment. In general therefore, video researchers have tended to oppose attempts to anonymise visual data, for example by redacting still images where there is no foreseeable risk of harm to participants or others as a result of disclosure and where participants have consented to this (see e.g. Pink, 2007; Banks, 2001; BSA, 2006).

2.6 As a collaborative exercise, consent refers not simply to the production of visual data, but also to the subsequent interpretation, organisation, and presentation of findings. As Pink (2007) argues, in view of the difficulties of anonymising participants in video research studies, there is a strong case for negotiating these issues separately with participants in order to provide participants with an opportunity to comment upon and consent to researcher's representations of their accounts and the contexts within which this will be subsequently used. Safeguarding participants' dignity and wellbeing raises similar issues in contexts where participants can become desensitized to the presence of visual recording equipment resulting in a degree of self-disclosure which may be viewed subsequently as personally compromising within the context of wider public dissemination. Again, these observations emphasise the importance of informing participants of the purposes of data collection and the contexts within which visually identifiable data will be disseminated, as well as offering participants an opportunity to retract evidence at the post-data collection stage.

The study setting and project design

3.1 The findings described here involved a research collaboration between the authors and the Rural Media Company, a charitable organisation promoting digital media advocacy work with marginalised groups in rural England. Our specific interest here concerned the impacts of poverty and exclusion in rural areas and fieldwork was conducted in the County of Herefordshire. In many respects Herefordshire is fairly typical of the wider challenges facing more remote rural areas, for example, with regard to access to services, ageing population, and housing affordability. The absence of a sufficient infrastructure of services to meet the specific needs of rural communities, the inflationary impact of second home ownership upon the rural housing market, and the migration of young people from these areas to find work and

affordable housing elsewhere are all characteristics which make Herefordshire an interesting case study with insights that are more generally applicable to other more remote rural communities in England and Wales.

3.2 Project fieldwork involved the gathering of video testimony from 33 people experiencing low income in rural Herefordshire with subsequent follow-up qualitative interviews with participants. Participant recruitment sought to reflect the profile of vulnerability to rural poverty. On the basis of strong existing organisational links, participants were recruited amongst older people, families with children, young people, carers and disabled people, unemployed people, and gypsies and travellers, all of whom were in contact with local community and voluntary sector organisations in the locality. Eligibility for inclusion within the study was based upon participants' perceptions of their own material and financial circumstances based on subjective indicators of 'difficulties in getting by on a low income' and 'struggling to make ends meet'. The support and co-operation of professionals and volunteer 'gate-keepers' working within already stretched local agencies is central to the successful implementation of designs of this type, especially in dealing with personally sensitive issues which have the potential to damage delicate relationships between agencies, their staff, and their clients.

3.3 Our initial intention had been to generate video evidence based on structured conversation with participants in front of camera, and the use of participant-generated video data including both video diary methods and behind-the-camera participant documentary. In practice, participant documentary proved impractical in view of the skills and competencies required of participants and the intensive support required from project fieldworkers and research partners. The complexity of the subject matter necessitated a more structured approach based upon a combination of guided conversations with participants and participant-directed video diaries. Following preliminary analysis of the video data, semi-structured audio-recorded interviews were conducted with participants in order to review video footage for potential inclusion within the DVD report, and to enable participants to reflect on their experience of participation in the study. This also provided an opportunity for participants to comment on the wider issues involved in tackling poverty, and to provide additional information or add further interpretations of the views and experiences portrayed in the existing video footage.

3.4 A common problem with the analysis of video data is difficulties arising in capturing the complexities and nuances of the data itself. As noted above the interpretation of video data involves fundamental questions concerning the status of truth claims embedded within video data. The objective of our analysis is to understand and faithfully represent what we as researchers take to be the narrative thread underpinning participants' stories, their own accounts of the impacts of poverty on their lives. Whilst ethnographic and case study-based approaches have sought to represent rural deprivation on the basis of observation of everyday experiences, our objective here is to give voice to participants' own perspectives by collecting 'testimony' in which participants act as 'expert witnesses' in giving evidence on the subjective impacts of their circumstances. As Derry et al. (2010) note, this involves a lengthy process of selective organisation of research material through systematic encoding, categorisation, editing and annotation in order to render the complexity of meanings understandable within the research 'product' or video report.

3.5 The increasing availability of CAQDAS packages capable of simultaneously analysing textual and visual data has undoubtedly been a major factor in the growth of video research methods. However, such software cannot 'bypass' important analysis decisions, for example concerning the extent to which we seek to apply a pre-determined conceptual framework to the

data, or alternatively to derive theoretical conclusions 'ground up'. Our analytic strategy involves a directed, or 'deductive', approach in which existing theory and evidence inform the development of a thematic framework which we apply to the data in order to develop new insights. Whilst our primary concern is with the 'relational' dimensions of poverty, this also requires an investigation of the material and social contexts in which such phenomena arise. Our subject matter therefore comprises both experiences of disadvantage associated with deprivation of basic necessities including local services, as well as the psycho-social impacts and processes of subjective internalisation such episodes give rise to in relation to isolation, powerlessness and denial of rights.

3.6 However, given the exploratory nature of this project and the ambiguities of meaning inherent within the subjective, relational vocabulary of poverty, it is also important not to be too prescriptive in determining a framework of analysis. In the findings presented below, we therefore analyse, organise and present findings based upon video media under five broad themes: the necessities of life; accessing services and opportunities; isolation and powerlessness; denial of rights, and; aspirations and opinions. Whilst our intention had been to include behind-camera testimony (see above), the raw data described here primarily comprised video interviews conducted in the presence of a researcher, supplemented with additional participant-directed in-front-of-camera video diary testimony from some participants, and resulting in a total of 29 hours of video footage.

3.7 These data were then coded thematically directly from the video files using proprietary ATLASti software. Based upon the above framework, an initial selection of promising material was made comprising 7 hours of footage and 639 individual coded segments. In collaboration with our research partners, these initial selections were then subject to a process of further selection, editing and refinement in order to produce a 20 minute DVD film for wider dissemination. In arranging the data in this way, our objective was not simply to document experiences but also to engage research users as co-present in the narration of participants' accounts. Dissemination events were organised in the locality and region to screen the footage and were attended by many research participants, as well as by local and regional research users including service providers, practitioners, and policy makers. In the next section we go on to briefly outline our main substantive findings before going on to consider the methodological issues arising in the conduct of this research.

Video testimony on rural poverty and social exclusion

The Necessities of Life

4.1 All participants went without many items and activities taken for granted by most people in Britain today including basic material necessities such as a healthy diet, decent housing, affordable warmth, basic services and utilities, new clothes, going out socially, and providing for children's activities. Participants frequently referred to 'making do', 'going without', 'tightening their belt' and struggling to 'make ends meet' on low incomes. The pressures of getting by were acutely felt by participants, particularly when they were unable to meet customary expectations associated with social roles, such as being a parent, a sibling, or a son/daughter, or as carers, employees and citizens. A number of respondents reported the challenges of meeting responsibilities as parents to be, at times, a source of anxiety, shame, and guilt and many participants went without so that they could provide for their children's development.

4.2 Many participants felt that the general public and policy makers underestimate the

difficulties involved in getting by on a low income, have little idea of how very little some people have to live on, and the impossible choices people are forced to make in budgeting on very low incomes as a result. Participants also emphasised the importance of forward-planning and the precarious nature of household budgeting on a low income. Many described the measures and strategies they deploy in order to remain within these small budgets. Despite this resourcefulness, a number of participants suggested that their low household income left no room for spontaneity or for even small savings to tide them over in unanticipated crisis situations such as the need for car repairs, or replacement of household goods. Others referred to how their situation limited their opportunities for social contact, for maintaining relationships with friends and family, and therefore of being able to meet societal expectations associated with performance of roles, for example, as parents, carers, workers, and citizens.

4.3 These accounts also demonstrate the importance of normative social expectations in defining perceptions of the necessities of life in the UK today and the salience of social distinctions based upon self-presentation, patterns of consumption, and lifestyle, as signifiers of exclusion from these customary living patterns. They also illustrate the artificiality of rigid distinctions between the material and social dimensions of deprivation. The social significance of diet for example lies not simply in satisfying physiological needs but in meeting wider social norms concerning a 'good' diet. Within the context of contemporary lifestyles, exclusion from material necessities represents a form of social and cultural exclusion as well as a material deprivation.

Accessing Services and Opportunities

4.4 The spatial dimension of rural exclusion arising from settlement sparsity is reinforced by

inequalities of access to services including welfare support which seriously undermine the capacity of low income households to access entitlements as citizens and restrict opportunities for wider participation in society. A lack of affordable and accessible transport for low income households in rural areas is a key factor in constraining opportunities, necessitating extra spending pressures and often complex arrangements in order to fulfil social roles for example as job seekers, employees, or as parents, and in order to access healthcare, educational, social and cultural provision which is widely taken for granted in the UK today.

4.5 The inadequacies of public transport provision both in terms of availability and cost was a major factor in constraining participant's ability to maintain strong social ties and contacts, and in accessing the support and services they need. In some cases the health impacts of the unavailability or inaccessibility of services to meet basic needs were severe. For a number of participants, educational, training and suitable work opportunities were restricted by inadequacies of public transport in their areas. The absence of employment opportunities in more remote rural settlements providing rewarding and fulfilling work was identified as a key factor in restricting the capacity of people living on low incomes for forms of economic participation which promotes esteem, autonomy, and independence. Consequently, for many low income households in rural areas maintaining a car is a necessity but places an additional burden on already stretched budgets resulting in precarious and difficult juggling of spending to 'make ends meet'.

Isolation and Powerlessness

4.6 A further consequence of low income was the reported loss of autonomy in enabling participants' to realise their aspirations for the future. Participants' material circumstances

seriously restricted their ability to act on the life decisions they made, ultimately resulting in a sense of powerlessness. A lack of control and ownership over decisions affecting people's lives is a persistent theme both with regard to the subjective impacts of constraint on spending itself and as a result of perceptions of administrative and bureaucratic procedures which define public notions of 'dependency' including between household members.

4.7 A lack of income requires participants' to make difficult choices for example between fulfilling social expectations and roles, and meeting basic costs which can result in feelings of guilt and shame. Participants emphasised the importance of strong social networks and sense of community as key practical and emotional resources in rural areas in dealing with their situation. Others referred to the vital role of service provision in rural areas in helping them to maintain social networks and to participate in society.

4.8 Nevertheless, such resources are not available to everyone experiencing low income and exclusion in rural areas, and for many participants their physical isolation as a result of rural sparsity, and their social isolation arising from their inability to participate in society and maintain social networks contributed to their exclusion. The personal effects of isolation as an assault on personal esteem and confidence are clearly illustrated in one participant account. In the context of participants' lack of resources, the choices and freedoms presented by contemporary consumer society can have an especially debilitating impact for those who cannot afford to enjoy them. At the same time for those whose lifestyles or appearance does not conform to the normative expectations of the wider consumer society, a lack of recognition further undermines well-being and access to rights.

Denial of Rights

4.9 Many participants identified significant barriers and obstacles in claiming the services and benefits to which they were entitled, for example, as a result of a lack of accessible information, the complexity of forms, and the inflexibility of the benefits system in understanding and responding to the diverse living circumstances of participants. A sense of 'diminished citizenship' is reflected in the way many participants were made to feel by others as a result of their situation. Many participants reported feeling degraded by their experiences as welfare claimants within a hostile system of administration in which social welfare is experienced more as a discretionary act of charity and instrument of disciplinary power than as a basic right of citizenship. Participants referred to feelings of worthlessness and a lack of recognition arising from the way they were made to feel by administrative agencies and service providers, for example being 'treated differently', viewed with indifference or suspicion, looked down on, or 'processed' without real recognition of their situation and views.

4.10 Some participants reported feeling a sense of guilt and shame because they were unable to meet normative expectations, for example as parents able to fully provide for their family, or as independent citizens as a result of perceived but involuntary 'dependency' upon local services and friends and family for whom such care may be perceived as a 'burden'. Others referred to feelings of embarrassment and shame associated with the stigma of poverty experienced in everyday social interactions as a result of social distinctions and the labelling of people as, for example, 'unemployed' or 'low-income'. Participants' accounts also draw attention to the way in which their circumstances restrict lifestyles in ways which can cause social embarrassment within family and friendship circles and the wider community, for example in not being able to afford quality brands, consumer goods, adequate home decoration, or to pay one's way socially.

Aspirations and Opinions

4.11 The construction of people experiencing poverty as Other within public discourses on poverty at least partly reflects pejorative moral judgements about the causes of poverty based upon individualised 'deficit' models, for example associated with limited aspirations, idleness, chaotic or dissolute lifestyles, which blame the poor for their own predicament. However, it is clear from these video testimonies, as well as the follow-up interviews reviewed below, that the hopes, aspirations and attitudes of participants mirror those of the wider society of which they are part.

4.12 For many, low income was seen as a temporary situation. Many participants' long term aspirations for themselves, and above all for their children, focused on educational achievement and work as a route out of poverty, for example through more effective job search, improving their skills, and educational and training participation. However, alongside paid work these accounts also emphasise the importance of an ethic of care within communities and families as a source of well-being not least for those for whom paid work may not be an appropriate option as a result of old age, illness, disability, caring responsibilities, or inaccessibility of employment markets.

4.13 At the same time, participants were acutely aware of the negative portrayal of people experiencing poverty. Many participants viewed policy makers and politicians as simply out of touch with the lived reality of poverty, especially with regard to their wholly unrealistic estimates of the difficulties involved in coping on an inadequate income. Many participants were quite clear in their view that existing social security payments did not provide for what most people would consider to be a minimally adequate standard of living.

4.14 Participants' wider views on the extent and nature of poverty in the UK today reflected different 'images of society' and explanations of its causes. For some, poverty was explained largely in individual terms, and the role of the state in tackling poverty was therefore seen as limited with the emphasis placed instead on individual initiative (e.g. upgrading personal skills, motivation and 'marketability'). For other participants, poverty was viewed as reflecting deeper social inequalities and solutions were framed in terms of state action to tackle the 'poverty gap', though many participants were far from optimistic that such action would in fact be taken. However, for many participants their views were complex and often reflected both individual and social explanations for poverty and how to tackle it.

Reflecting on the research process

5.1 Following the collection of video testimony, all participants had an opportunity to review any video footage selected for possible inclusion in the DVD report through follow-up, semi-structured interviews. The interviews provided participants with the opportunity to discuss their experiences of taking part in the project, and provided useful further insights enabling us to better understand the benefits and limitations of video testimony in poverty research. In this section we consider some of the wider issues raised by this research in challenging the disempowering effects of poverty and in researching personally sensitive topics around the experience of poverty.

5.2 The video testimonies presented above document the experience of social isolation as a central feature of poverty for many people living on low incomes in rural areas. However, in many rural areas this social isolation is reinforced by a wider discursive marginalisation of the experience of rural poverty. The relative invisibility of rural poverty in comparison with concentrations of urban deprivation, means that life on a low income in rural areas can be an especially isolating experience due to the fact that those living in close proximity may be unlikely to share (or even understand) the daily challenges and experiences involved in getting by on a low income. Challenging the disempowering individualization of personal experiences of low income is rightly seen as a key objective in participatory poverty research (Beresford et al, 1998; Lister and Beresford, 2000; Lister, 2007). In this context, our data suggest that for many participants, taking part in this project encouraged a greater awareness of a wider constituency of people or 'collectivity' sharing similar experiences and views about life on a low income:

> *I have actually been there and been through it myself, I can actually understand how other people are trying to cope on a low income, as before, I didn't know, it has made me realise [Andrea]*

> *It has made me more conscious that other people live in the same situation as I do [Emma]*

> *I think I am probably more aware that there are people with similar views to myself, I am not alone...I think that it is not just me...there are many people in the same or worse situation [Sue]*

5.3 For many participants, the project therefore offered a rare opportunity to talk about and share their experiences of life on a low income, experiences which are widely discounted within a broader public culture focused on consumption, wealth, and the celebration of status. Where poverty is represented in public debates, it is often on the basis of stereotypes which serve to denigrate the experiences of people living on low income and ultimately to silence them by blaming the poor for their circumstances (McKendrick et al., 2008). In contrast, a recurrent

theme amongst participants was the value they placed in having their voices heard through the video testimony, not least in promoting greater confidence and positivity of outlook. Indeed, detailing the reality of life on a low income appears to have been a positive and empowering experience for participants:

> ...having to think seriously, having to put your thoughts into a voice, it just makes you more positive that what you said is what you feel. [Jude]

> It was just nice to be asked what was my opinion, on a subject that obviously very much relates to my situation, so I was grateful to have the opportunity to talk about it...it was a good thing, because it is at least getting things out there, that need to be talked about. [Craig]

> Actually participating in this has been a joyous occasion actually for me. It has been a way of voicing opinion...It has been actually a very positive and hopeful experience for me. [Lucy]

5.4 The existing literature emphasises the sensitivities involved in asking research participants to discuss the 'p' word and the dilemmas associated with qualitative research on the experience of poverty which may unintentionally reinforce the othering of people experiencing poverty (e.g. Corden, 1996; Dean and Melrose, 1999; Novak, 2001). One might have anticipated that this would have been a significant issue for the project, not least given that the video testimony method rendered participant anonymity impossible. However, when probed about these issues in follow-up interviews, a common narrative emerged which emphasised the importance of speaking the 'truth' about their lives in order to challenge the invisibility of the experience of poverty within wider society. Whilst the difficulties of researching such potentially 'intrusive' and 'personal' issues were recognized by participants, this was considered justified in promoting greater public understanding and discussion of the problems faced by people experiencing poverty:

> ...You can't expect people to help if they do not know the whole truth [Joyce]

> If you don't ask them, then you are not going to know the truth [Val]

> No, because unless you get personal and intrusive, you are not going to get the answers you need, the real answers, not the plastered over ones. It is necessary [Jude]

> ...Being directly asked for responses on certain areas can be a little bit upsetting, but it is necessary to be candid about the situation to enable other people to have some understanding [Lucy]

5.5 In some respects, our participants may be considered to be 'self selecting' in that they agreed to participate both because they were convinced of its merits, and also felt that they had the confidence, skills, and vocabularies, needed to communicate their experiences and feelings to a much wider public. Using video methods, especially within a video diary context, clearly places significant demands upon participants requiring a high degree of support from researchers. In view of the disempowering effects of poverty in depriving people of the confidence to vocalise their perspectives within the wider context of generally pejorative wider constructions of 'the poor', it is likely that our findings under-estimate the true psycho-social impacts of poverty. Indeed, many participants were acutely conscious that they may expose themselves to the critique of 'mainstream society'. Participants demonstrated a clear awareness

of the pervasiveness of negative images of 'the poor' within media coverage which serves to construct people experiencing poverty as 'other' and, consequently, therefore of how their circumstances may be perceived on the basis of the video testimony:

> When you are talking about your finances it could be embarrassing for some people, I am pretty open about that kind of thing...people may feel that they are being judged because they are on a low income, or not coping, or living off the state, seen as a scrounger. *Colin*

> I do struggle to find the right words, because you can be seen to be lazy and out for free money. It is hard to put it across how it is. Who to talk to about it? Who would want to listen? Who would actually do anything about it? Is there any point talking about it? *Laura*

5.6 The anticipated response of an unseen 'audience' thus served to shape participants' representations of their lives in order to avoid the negative stereotyping often associated with poverty. The extent to which participants are able to direct the representation of self within visual research therefore raises important questions about the nature of truth claims generated on the basis of participant narratives. As with other qualitative approaches, it is never possible to disentangle participant accounts from the wider social discourses which help to structure them. Within the context of the highly contested societal narratives and meanings surrounding poverty, our goal here has been to faithfully represent participants' stories rather than to identify an objective social reality based upon a 'perfect' speech situation where wider social relations can be somehow removed from the research setting.

Conclusions

6.1 In this paper we have explored some of the substantive, methodological and ethical challenges in conducting research on the experience of poverty based upon the collection of primary video data. In recent years considerable research attention has focused on the way in which poverty and social exclusion are represented in the media, and how the perspectives and views of people experiencing poverty can better inform both public debates and policy making in this area. McKendrick et al. (2008) note the way in which 'the conspicuous absence' of the voices of the poor themselves within mainstream media commentary has the effect of representing poverty as an abstract (and arbitrary) phenomenon rather than as a result of systematic structural inequalities in the distribution of resources, in the process undermining collective responses. Facilitating people who have experienced poverty to have a greater voice in communicating their views within public debate and policy deliberation has been a central focus of recent interest including through the applications of new digital media and methodologies in producing and disseminating material which challenges misconceptions about the nature, causes and consequences of poverty (Robinson et al., 2009; UKCAP, 2008).

6.2 As a result, video research methods are increasingly being used to capture the experience of poverty including in rural areas (e.g. CRC, 2006; Robinson et al., 2009; Spectacle, 2010), and in this paper we have argued that such methods have important wider applications in understanding the perspectives and experiences of socially marginalized groups in several key respects. Video research methods can promote a more collaborative research style which gives voice to the perspectives and experiences of subjects who are frequently marginalized in wider public discourse, not least as a result of the ease with which research subjects are able to appropriate and direct their visual narratives. Visual methods provide one means of addressing the objectification of research subjects as disembodied textual and numeric data within

research outputs. As such, video methods are potentially a more powerful means of conveying the lived reality of disadvantage than textual and numeric accounts alone which disembody these experiences and treat them out of context. In doing so, they can offer opportunities to challenge the dehumanisation of experiences of disadvantage, oppression and exploitation.

6.3 However, as we have seen, the development of new digital media and methods of visual data collection raise important ethical and methodological challenges concerning the interpretation and dissemination of visual research results. Ensuring respect for the dignity, wellbeing and privacy of participants is an especial issue in the use and dissemination of potentially personally sensitive video data where anonymisation is not possible (Wiles et al., 2012). However, this raises a key dilemma in relation to challenging the invisibility of people experiencing poverty within wider debate and policy in this area which is vital if we are to effectively tackle 'povertyism' in everyday life and policy formulation (Lister, 2004; Killeen, 2008). It is vital in this context that research does not further stigmatise participants, for example, by avoiding the attribution of labels which participants may not recognize or accept, by emphasizing the commonalities of experiences and perspectives which participants and audiences share, and by emphasizing the capacity for agency of people experiencing poverty in dealing with as well as challenging their situation. Our research suggests that video research methods offer one fruitful means of promoting this agenda through the development of a more participatory research style which enables participants to convey their stories in ways that break down the barriers between research subjects and research users which constitute people experiencing poverty as 'other' and separate from mainstream society. Addressing this *relational* agenda and challenging the discursive marginalisation of the experience of poverty is essential if we are to more effectively address systematic structural inequalities of *material* resources in the UK and elsewhere.

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