

Every Penny Counts: Family Life on a Low Income

Mary Daly and Grace Kelly



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Focus and Design

Two Main Research Questions:

What is the significance of family in the context of poverty?

What is it like to be in this family situation?

51 families on low income in Northern Ireland

Interview covered 6/7 main themes:

resources/capacities, family support, family patterns, culture, nature and meaning of familial ties



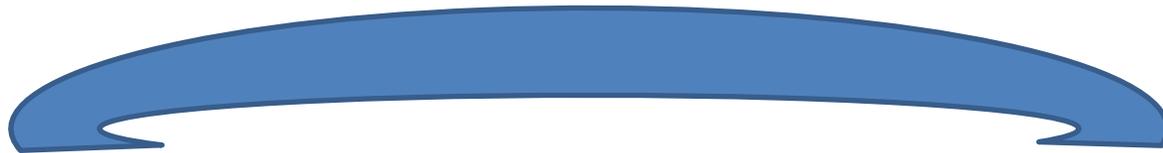
Theorising Family and Poverty

Family as structural/organisational unit

Family as a set of relations

Family as culture and value

Family as object of public representation



All of these affect access to and
use of resources

Family as Structural Unit

Family structures effect a lower level of resources

A family/familial economy – a unit of budgeting

Strong sense of resources as collective

However family economy is neither undifferentiated nor completely rational

Generational divisions (also gender)

Children come first

Almost two economies: a rational one and a moral one



I would rather sit with a jumper on when the kids are at school than turn my heating on 'cos that's just wasting it. It's different if the kids are in, I need it on then. But me and him can put jumpers on and layer up. I wouldn't have it blasting now if it was just us two in the house.



Family as a (Potential) Source of Resources

A complex array of money, goods, tasks, emotional support – micro finance and care-related favours/services are the most common
Stretches over time and generation but it's very carefully negotiated

Mainly between children, parents, siblings and in-laws – and quite gendered

But it is tricky to negotiate and sustain



Yeah, so I'd go down to my mammy's about 3 in the afternoon and then we'd sit and have a wee cup of tea and a wee chat and then she'd say 'Do you want to stay for dinner' and I'd be 'yeah sure [starts to laugh and puts on a funny voice] 'that's what I'm here for, I'm not going to tell you that's what I'm here for but it is, you think I'm here to see you but I'm not at all, I'm down to raid your fridge' [laughs again].



Family as Set of Relations

Discourses of love and affection but also of constraint especially around the parent role

Normative underpinnings are of duty and obligation

Creating 'oases' for building and sustaining family relationships/togetherness – 'in here/out there'

Broader chains of relationships as well

Many examples of binding children to family



Family as Culture and Value

There are no cultural deficits here – family is very evocative for people

Strong narratives of ‘this family’ (not necessarily positive)

Family is a major way in which people achieve meaning – the parent role and relationship especially important (a source of skill)

Also an ideal or myth to which they aspired



I'm not ashamed.. I'd be embarrassed because I don't go nowhere, the kids don't go anywhere really. But I'm not ashamed because still inside my four walls we are all happy. Do you know what I mean? We're happy with ourselves.... And we are not starving you know.



Representing Self and Family

Embarrassment and shame are widespread

Among the responses: accommodation, resistance, rejection

Quite continuous and local and may involve a form of theatre

One way of resisting is concealing

Another is for people to construct situations where they are givers

People engage in 'othering' also

Children also mobilised – mini ambassadors



My kids can go anywhere ... and they're the most polite kids you'll ever meet and everyone comments on it. ... I can take them and leave them anywhere and they'll not let me down.



Conclusions

Not just 'making do' but 'making family'

Several alternative 'economies' but none that straightforward (have to be contextualised)

One way in which they have to be contextualised is through the availability and meaning of family

Family is significant but it's differentiated, riven with contradictions and ambivalences

Family life and ties may be strengthened by situations of poverty but they are also placed under pressure

