Welfare babies: poor children’s experiences informing healthy peer relationships in Canada

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SUMMARY
Positive peer relationships among children living in poverty are important for their well-being, resiliency and mental and physical health. This paper explicates the ‘felt experience’ of children living in poverty, and the implications of these experiences for healthy peer relationships, from a re-analysis of two qualitative research studies in Canada examining children living in food insecure circumstances. Poor children feel deprived, part of the ‘poor group’, embarrassed, hurt, picked on, inadequate and responsible. Poor children internalize their own lack of social resources in feelings of deprivation. They experience negative feelings relative to their peers—inadequacy, embarrassment and hurt. Children do identify group membership but it is not used as a social resource, as it could be, but rather as a symbol of social segregation. Children also feel responsible for ameliorating some of the effects of their poverty and this seems to strengthen their relationship with their mothers. This could equally be translated into peer-related support, such as standing up to poor bashing, or engaging constructively with higher social class peers. Health promotion strategies that seek to foster positive peer relationships and enhance children’s sense of belonging should offer novel social environments in which poor children can engage a variety of peers.

Key words: children; poverty; relationships

INTRODUCTION
It has been argued that poverty is the most profound determinant of ill-health (Ecob and Davy Smith, 1999), and the most significant risk factor for multiple disadvantages (Marmot, 1999). Poverty is particularly noxious to children (Ruxton and Kirk, 1996; Lynch et al., 2000; Willms, 2002). There is increasing acceptance that it is not poverty per se that is most conducive to ill-health, but rather how poverty is expressed through the socioeconomic gradient (i.e. the size of the social status gap between the wealthiest and poorest members of a population) (Robertson, 1998; Keating and Hertzman, 1999; Wilkinson, 1999).

Social capital incorporates resources and interactions at the family, neighbourhood and community levels (Putnam, 2000). Social capital theory would contextualize social status differences between poor children and their more well-off peers as influencing the availability of resources (physical, human, cultural, material) to them (Coleman, 1988; Morrow, 1999). As individuals and as members of a disadvantaged group, poor children can be characterized as having reduced access to shared assets and reduced participation in social networks (Portes, 1998; Morrow, 2001; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004). Critics of social capital theory, especially as
applied to children, argue that it does not apply well to non-Western or non-mainstream family cultures (Orr, 1999; Bassani, 2003) and that it disguises genuine material deprivation and the need for structural solutions (Hawe and Shiell, 2000). Critics suggest that other theories of social competence (Ladd, 1999; Chawla and Heft, 2002), social acceptance (Gifford-Smith and Brownell, 2003), and peer networks (Gest et al., 2001; Gifford-Smith and Brownell, 2003), better inform an understanding of the social distance between children in poverty and their better-off peers.

Peer relationships are important for children’s well-being (Rubin et al., 1999; Catalano et al., 2002) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Evidence strongly suggests that poor children have fewer opportunities to experience supportive peer relationships and develop social competence than well-off classmates. Qualitative research suggests that poor children do not feel they can be friends with middle-class children, and vice versa (Weinger, 2000). While research indicates differences in the nature of peer relationships across cultural groups, there is substantial evidence from large-scale quantitative studies that a number of important correlates of peer relationships exist across ethnic groups [e.g. (Henry et al., 2001)] and that low socioeconomic status (SES) is associated with social isolation, regardless of ethnicity. Patterson and colleagues, in large-scale quantitative research, found children ‘from low-income homes experienced less peer companionship overall, and were isolated from peers in more out of school activities’ (Patterson et al., 1991, p. 447) and that this was unrelated to ethnicity. Similarly, research with adolescents found that ‘differences in quality of peer relationships were explained by variations in socioeconomic status but not ethnicity per se’ (Kuperminc et al., 2004, p. 23) and that low SES adolescents had less positive peer relationships. If it is the socioeconomic gradient that is most associated with health, then ethnic differences might be expected to be larger in societies where ethnicity and SES are strongly correlated and smaller where this is less the case.

How do social status differences affect peer relationships of children living in poverty? Three pathways are proposed. First, social status may directly influence the availability of social resources leading to social exclusion (Harris, 1998; Marmot, 1999; Morrow, 2001). For example, adolescents who do not have the money to purchase the latest fashions or participate in activities may feel isolated from peers (McLoyd et al., 1994).

Secondly, Conger and colleagues (Conger et al., 1994) have suggested that economic stress diminishes parents’ psychosocial resources for parenting, thus impairing children’s development of adequate personal relationships. One large-scale, longitudinal study revealed that parents under economic stress were less likely to show support and more likely to show conflict towards their children. In turn, parental supportiveness or conflict predicted the child’s similar behavior towards a friend 4 years later, putting the child at risk for poorer quality friendships (Cui et al., 2002).

Thirdly, impoverished children experiencing social distance may seek out relationships with deviant peers (Chassin et al., 1996; Barrera et al., 2002). Barrera and colleagues (Barrera et al., 2002) hypothesize that adolescents seek restoration of self-esteem or protection from potential aggression through these associations. Thus, children in the lowest socioeconomic stratum may face triple jeopardy: exposure to the most severe material stressors of poverty while having the least access to social resources; reduced access to family and community supports that may mitigate the lack of social resources; and a higher proclivity to seek deviant associations.

Peer relationships in childhood may affect relationships in adulthood. The stress of childhood poverty is associated with less positive beliefs about relationships and less success in romantic relationships in adulthood (Bryant et al., 2002). Ryff and Singer (Ryff and Singer, 2000), reviewing decades of research, concluded that positive relationships are central to well-being and that strong evidence links them to emotional and physical health and to resilience.

While the peer relationship literature is vast [e.g. (Rubin et al., 1999)] and includes substantial research on developing social competencies for individual children [for reviews, see (Ladd, 1999; Catalano et al., 2002)], little attention has been paid to promoting healthy peer relationships for impoverished children by reducing the social distance between peers of differing social status.

In Canada, 10.2% of children lived below the low-income cut-off in 2002, with the figure rising to 39% for children living in lone, mother-led families (Statistics Canada, 2002). Poverty is highest in the Atlantic region of Canada (Raven and Frank, 2004), where we study hunger and food insecurity among poor children and their families. Our work has provoked us to consider
the larger experiences of the children and, in particular, how their peer relationships could be enhanced.

This paper presents a de novo analysis of qualitative data collected as part of two studies involving poor families. Qualitative heuristics encourages researchers to change preconceptions and the topic of research as they engage with the data, as well as emphasizing the value of diverse voices (Patton, 2002). Thus, our original data were re-analysed to explore the ‘felt experience’ (McIntyre et al., 2003b), conveyed by the children, and as recounted by their mothers and child-serving professionals, of the social resources available to them. The purpose of the re-analysis was to inform health promoting strategies that could support healthy peer relationships for poor children.

METHODOLOGY

Data were derived from three data sets that have been compiled by McIntyre and colleagues over the past several years from residents of the provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador (i.e. Atlantic Canada). Table 1 illustrates the studies, data collection methods and years of study.

The Children’s Feeding Programs in Atlantic Canada study included approximately month-long participant observations of nine children’s nutrition programs (McIntyre et al., 1999; Dayle et al., 2000; Dayle and McIntyre, 2003). The study examined six breakfast and three lunch programs that were operated by community-based groups to provide food to children with perceived poverty-related deprivation. Programs were located in distinctly poor neighbourhoods or mixed neighbourhoods where poor families resided. These programs operated using a charitable model of delivery that included volunteers and diverse sources of funding, including food donations. At the conclusion of each observation period, interviews were conducted with program administrators and operators, staff and volunteers (both senior students and community members), school personnel and parents. Participating children in grades one through to six were also interviewed in focus group sessions from seven of the nine case study sites. All interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim leading to over 1000 pages of transcripts.

The Hungry Mothers of Barely Fed Children study was conducted in Atlantic Canada with low-income lone mothers and their children (McIntyre et al., 2002; McIntyre et al., 2003a). Its purpose was to determine whether poor mothers deprived themselves of essential food in order to feed their children. Mothers were recruited if they resided alone with at least two children under 14 years of age and had an income below the Statistics Canada low-income cut-off (poverty line) for their community. Weekly for 1 month, mothers completed both a 24-h dietary recall for all family members and a food insecurity measure. There was a 98.6% completion rate, with 139 of 141 mothers replying on behalf of themselves and their 333 children. This study provided two data sets. First, a sub-group of 24 mothers was recruited from the overall sample to participate in an ethnographic face-to-face

Table 1: Contributing data sets for welfare babies re-analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study title (funding source)</th>
<th>Methods (sample size)</th>
<th>Data sources</th>
<th>Years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Feeding Programs in Atlantic Canada [National Health Research Development Program (NHRDP) No. 6603-1461-201]</td>
<td>1. Case studies (n = 9 sites)</td>
<td>Participant observation, focus groups, interviews including seven interviews with children, grades 1–6, in groups of 2–5.</td>
<td>1994/1995</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hungry Mothers of Barely Fed Children [NHRDP No. 6603-1550-002]</td>
<td>2. Ethnographic interviews (n = 24 participants, lone mothers of children 0–14 years)</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>1999/2000</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Returning results sessions (n = 12 community locations)</td>
<td>Community meetings</td>
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interview that explored food-provisioning strategies stimulated by food-related pictorials such as preparing a meal from cans. Respondents were chosen purposively to represent the diversity of the study participants, ensuring maximum variation sampling based upon: ethnicity, age, education level, location (rural versus urban), number of children and income sources. The interviews were conducted by one of two trained research staff, followed a semi-structured format and were audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim. Secondly, comments were compiled from attendees at ‘returning results’ meetings at 12 community sites where the principal investigator presented the main results. Participants were encouraged to ask questions and make comments which were recorded. Thus, poverty, for this study, is defined as either participating in a children’s feeding program and/or being below the low-income cut-off for a lone-parent family.

In the re-analysis, the raw data from each of these sources were reviewed for statements that described social, emotional, physical or psychological effects of poverty, where they particularly reflected upon relationships. Data were then sorted initially using a content analysis approach into thematically similar or ‘like’ statements. Further examination of the grouped data led to categorization into several sub-themes or domains (Patton, 2002). Most of the narratives were collected from mothers because they were considered to be the best informants on the experiences of their children. Minimal useful data were collected from young children. We also include impressions from child-serving professionals such as teachers.

RESULTS

We identified seven domains of children’s felt experiences of ‘social poverty’: feeling deprived, part of the ‘poor group’, embarrassed, hurt, picked on, inadequate and responsible. Children and other informants saw poor children as separated from their more well-off peers. The data also revealed strengths in children struggling with poverty.

Feeling deprived

Children experienced ‘feeling deprived’, most often in terms of tangible items that they lacked: food, clothing, recreational opportunities and participation in school activities. Mothers compromised to accommodate their children when possible but often the refrain was ‘no’. A 5-year-old wanted to play organized hockey: ‘Can I join, can I join, can I join? No, you can’t, no you can’t. It’s the food or you can join that club’. Food was a common source of deprivation: “I mean the kids look at the [grocery] bag, and [say], ‘That’s all you got this week, Mom?’”, “She gets tired of the same meals. She don’t even want to eat. She says, ‘Mommy, I ain’t eating Kraft Dinner again today’”, and [commenting on a pictorial of a mother handing her child a plate] ‘Look at that child’s face. I mean, I guess maybe the child wanted something for supper, and his mother didn’t have it and so he is kind of disappointed’.

Other mothers lamented the constant comparisons their children made between their circumstances and those of their better off classmates: “Daughter cries … ‘No one loves me’… She wants leather pants—but she can’t have them and Christmas is coming”. Children experienced ‘feeling deprived’ at every juncture of their day: ‘… it’s the way that they dress, it’s what they have for lunches, they have show and tell and [child] brings a Dinky, someone else will bring a Pokemon doll’.

Feeling part of the poor group

We were told that poor children at a young age recognize that they are different. We called this ‘feeling part of the poor group’. A seasoned teacher indicated: ‘They know, though I think most of the kids can almost point out themselves. I mean they know at quite an early stage the reality of their own situations’. One mother reflected with guilt that: “It’s an awful smack in the face when your child goes in the fridge and says ‘we’re poor’”. Another related how a child threw out his lunch sandwich on the way to school and later explained: “Well, Mommy, you know kids that take peanut butter and jam to school, they’re called ‘welfare babies’. Well, make sure you don’t run out of lunches anymore”. While children from low-income homes identified with others in their economic group, they were not always supportive as one school principal noted: ‘It’s kind of funny because 90% of them are on welfare and yet they call each other welfare brats’. Members of devalued groups sometimes protect self-esteem by disidentifying with the group...
However, this may leave children with less sense of belonging to any group and, again, diminish their sense of peer support.

### Negative feelings about the self

We found themes suggesting emotional bullying and adverse effects on self-esteem. Children had ‘feelings of inadequacy’ that seemed to be particularly reinforced by the school system, which made recurring requests for money for school trips, book sales and other activities, and the provision of items for fund-raising events. Mothers expressed the deleterious effects these difficult-to-meet requests had upon their children: ‘It lowers their self-esteem if they don’t have items to take to the bake sale’, ‘I can’t go [to a school trip], I have to stay back because Mommy couldn’t afford it’ and ‘I like school and try to support them but they have 25 book fairs a year and they all cost money’.

Children also felt inadequate because of pressure to conform to peers’ dress code. As recounted by a mother: ‘You can’t see if someone is hungry but you can see if they don’t have the latest style in jeans and sneakers or whatever, there’s a lot of peer pressure, even at a young age’. Many mothers recounted the hardship experienced by their children because limited incomes meant second-hand clothes or non-brand name clothing: ‘You go to school and you see … you know everything new or brand name … like dripping with money, and here’s my child going to the Salvation Army’.

Poor children experienced peer pressure during nutrition breaks related to the types and quantities of food they brought, reinforcing ‘feelings of inadequacy’. Some children craved the pre-packed recess and lunch items brought by other children, and mothers in turn provided these items at the expense of the total grocery purchases. One mother stated: ‘I think it’s the fitting in, the being like everybody. I think that parents think ‘oh this is what all the other kids are eating …’. This pattern has been observed among other poor children (Poppendieck, 2000).

Teacher attitudes coupled with ‘middle class’ curricula added to an already difficult situation: ‘I felt like boy, this [class project] is a real middle class society, they are not thinking of you know … going to your favorite restaurant, going to the movies, going on the buses’ and ‘I was embarrassed when the teacher asked to look at the snacks and my child only had candy because that is all I had to send with him. In the curriculum the teachers are taught to judge the snacks’.

Children expressed ‘feeling embarrassed’ and ‘feeling hurt’. Student volunteers explained:

Student volunteers: We thought it was embarrassing at first …
Interviewer: Why would it be embarrassing?
Student volunteers: People in the school would say to them [the children], ‘Ha, ha you’re in the breakfast program, you’re a bum’ …
Interviewer: So it’s like you must be poor to go there?
Student volunteers: Yeah, yeah.

Other children reported that they had difficult experiences when they began attending the breakfast program and were made fun of. These feelings were noticed by mothers and other child-serving professionals:

We still have a little bit of this people calling people names who go to it [breakfast program] … oh you’re going to the breakfast program, you’re on welfare (School Principal).

Many poor children reported ‘feeling picked on’. This was manifested through teasing, name-calling and rejection, mostly by other children with statements such as: ‘Your mother can’t afford to feed you’, ‘I wouldn’t go there [to a feeding program]’ and ‘You must be on welfare ‘cos you go to the breakfast’. Another child whose mother had saved diligently for a stylish jacket, was teased that her jacket was an imitation, not the real designer label. One mother stated bluntly: ‘The teachers treat you different if you are poor. You are bullied and put down more often’.

Other child-serving professionals expressed the view that even with supportive personal resources, poor children had much to deal with in their daily lives: ‘Poor kids are always looked down on’, ‘Kids are hurting inside’, ‘Every day is torment for some kids’.

### Social assets

During the returning results sessions, we asked mothers if they tried to protect their children from ‘poor-bashing’. Some mothers provided their children with tactics, including talking with their children about their circumstances and, telling them to walk away from teasing. Most mothers reported that their child did not share
these events with them, or even protected them from knowing about them: ‘Son hides stuff [that happens at school]. He tries to make me feel good’. Mothers reported that some children refrained from asking for treats or money for clothing because they knew it would stretch a taut budget: ‘Mommy I don’t have to buy nothin’ [with reference to a shopping trip]’, and ‘well, Mom, when I stop growing, will you buy me Nike sneakers when you can?’ We refer to this domain as children ‘feeling responsible’. Children tried to earn income for the household, and they encouraged their mothers to eat: ‘At supper the kids are tricking me into eating’. These behaviors show empathy, industriousness, coping skills, helpfulness, family cohesion and the capacity to offer support to others—all positive traits.

DISCUSSION

Impoverished children struggle with a sense of not belonging, but this offers a health promotion opportunity through increasing peer support. Our findings provide a richer sense of children’s ‘felt experience’ of the socioeconomic gradient described by Wilkinson (Wilkinson, 1999) and others. The findings help us to more fully understand how the gap between rich and poor creates negative outcomes. Our findings are based on one distinctive Canadian region, where child poverty is particularly high (Raven and Frank, 2004), and therefore implications must be limited. However, the evidence for the effect of the socioeconomic gradient on children’s well-being, as well as evidence from North America that SES effects on peer relationships override ethnic differences, suggests the importance of exploring children’s experience of that gap in other countries or communities.

Our data underscore the overriding theme that poor children do not perceive themselves as belonging, nor do others. All informants saw poor children as different: deprived, stigmatized as ‘welfare babies’, and marginalized. Poor children experienced negative feelings relative to others—inadequacy, embarrassment and hurt. Wilkinson argues that ‘processes of social comparison and fears of inferiority and inadequacy in relation to others’ (Wilkinson, 1999, p. 58) are central to the association between the socioeconomic gradient and health. It is precisely the feelings associated with these processes that children in this study report.

Poor children also experienced social conflict. They were picked on about their clothes, food and lack of participation in activities—inadequacies all too apparent to the children and to those around them. Taylor and Seeman cite ‘increased risks for depression, headaches and stomachaches, and increased risk of mortality’ with social conflict (Taylor and Seeman, 1999, p. 216), and suggest that the balance between social conflict and social support is important for the relationship between social status and health outcomes. If peer relationships diminish, rather than enhance, differences within a peer network they may reduce social conflict. It is interesting that our interviewees did not report deviant behavior despite experiences associated with a risk of involvement with deviant peers (Barrera et al., 2002).

Significant attention has been paid to the self-esteem of impoverished children as a key focus for promoting their well-being [e.g. (Masten and Coatsworth, 1998)]. We suggest it is equally vital to go beyond the traditional focus on improving social competency and truly integrate children into their communities.

Social relationships are a key element of well-being in schools (Konu and Rimpela, 2002). Schools endeavor to assist all children in attaining equality of education, socialization and play opportunities. However, by their very nature these attempts often result in identification of differences based on socioeconomic disadvantage, eliciting negative feelings and social conflict. School programs that attempt to mitigate material effects of poverty may actually have negative effects if they emphasize social status or diminish recipients’ access to social resources.

Schools can modify their environments, including pedagogical practices, to teach children and parents how to manage relationship conflict and to become interdependent with others (Jenkins and Keating, 1998; Barrera and Prelow, 2000). Schools can also offer novel opportunities for peers from different social classes to work together in order to reduce alienation from each other (Weinger, 2000).

Communities can advocate for increased access to after-school activities for children from all social strata. These activities could be used to promote good peer relationships for poor children by changing group configuration, expectations and opportunities to succeed. Weinger’s (2000) work is again key: middle- and low-income children hold stereotypical views of
each other and of themselves but each group seems open to friendships with the other (Weinger, 2000).

Belonging is also about seeing the self reflected in the socio-cultural milieu. Poor children identify distinct advantages to an imagined poor family, including ‘empathy, family cohesion … industriousness … strong coping skills and helpfulness’ (Weinger, 2000, p. 140, italics original). Brown notes that self-esteem is strongly connected to group membership and that emphasizing strengths in a group that have not been noticed by the larger community can restore a sense of value for low-status groups (Brown, 2000). Practitioners can advocate for more visible representations of the strengths of families living in poverty. Most characters in television programs and movies are relatively wealthy. Schools should actively seek out and make available reading and audio-visual materials that emphasize the strengths of impoverished individuals, much like recent attempts to ensure that children from different cultural backgrounds are represented. Working with both mothers and children is probably important, given research on parental effects on children in poverty (Cui et al., 2002) and on how mothers experience their own poverty (McIntyre et al., 2003b). We further suggest that parents might benefit from training specifically on how to help their children nurture supportive relationships, including how parents can model this.

While healthy peer relationships are not a panacea for the challenges of childhood poverty, they are essential for healthy child development and are a critical pathway towards establishing quality friendships (Gifford-Smith and Brownell, 2003) and meaningful social participation. Remarkably little has been written about flattening the socioeconomic gradient for social relationships. Our dual suggestions of both valuing strengths of impoverished families and offering novel social environments in which the SES divide is bridged seem reasonable but remain untested.

Limitations

Our original studies were conducted in one region of Canada. We cannot know how our findings apply to other jurisdictions, particularly those with differing cultures. Even within Canada, our small numbers cannot represent the experience of all Canadian children living in poverty and we have relatively few reports from children themselves. Further, reports were generated in the context of a larger research program on food insecurity and may not be generalizable to the broader context of poverty.

Policy and practice implications

Health promotion efforts aimed at building healthy peer relationships among poor children should be directed towards building a sense of belonging among these children, as well as harnessing their inclinations to behave responsibly in support of others who are coping with poverty. Schools, communities and practitioners can develop and implement policies that promote children’s healthy peer relationships.

Research implications

We need more research exploring impoverished children’s actual experiences of relationships, described in their own words, as well as evaluations of interventions intending to foster strong and positive peer relationships among children of different social classes. This also implies the necessity of evaluating programs intended to ameliorate the effects of poverty in terms of whether they promote a sense of social belongingness (Seeman, 1996; Taylor and Seeman, 1999; Wilkinson, 1999).

The role of parents—particularly mothers, schools, and community after-school activities, in helping poor children cope with social poverty and establish social resources with peers, also requires further research.

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