

**Innocenti Working Paper**  
**2005-06**

**THROUGH CHILDREN'S EYES**  
**AN INITIAL STUDY OF CHILDREN'S PERSONAL**  
**EXPERIENCES AND COPING STRATEGIES GROWING**  
**UP POOR IN AN AFFLUENT NETHERLANDS**

**Tamara van der Hoek**

**June 2005**



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**For every child**  
**Health, Education, Equality, Protection**  
**ADVANCE HUMANITY**



## Innocenti Working Papers

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## Innocenti Working Paper 2005-06

### An initial study of children's personal experiences and coping strategies growing up poor in an affluent Netherlands

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**Summary:** Current research on child poverty in rich countries is most quantitative in nature and mainly concentrated on determining its extent and future outcomes. Notwithstanding the valuable results this kind of research has yielded, little is known about what poverty is experienced in the 'world of children', i.e., in their daily lives. To consider poverty from a child's perspective is still rare (e.g. Ridge 2002). The current study of children growing up poor in an affluent Netherlands is an initial effort and adds to the focus on the children's perspectives and their coping mechanisms. This way, it enables us to see children's agency in their own environment.

The study seeks also to promote children's visibility and their voices within the scope of research on child poverty in rich countries through both a theoretical and empirical exploration. It discusses how recent sociological approaches to the study of childhood can further advance attempts to consider poverty from the perspective of the child. Additionally, to further understand children's own responses to growing up in poverty, current literature on coping mechanisms among children is also considered. Subsequently, this study seeks to give children's perspectives, on the basis of qualitative in-depth interviews conducted in the Netherlands among six-to-sixteen-year-old children (and their parents) of 65 families living at the national minimum benefit level.

First analyses show that poverty may affect children's lives in various ways (materially, socially as well as emotionally), but also that they develop their own solutions to deal with it: children are not just passive victims of the situation they grow up in. Clear individual differences emerge among the children interviewed: both to the extent they are actually confronted with poverty and to the degree they succeed in coping with it. It seems that poor children are not equally affected by poverty. It is therefore important not to consider poor children as a homogeneous group, but rather to emphasise the individual differences within the group of poor children and to identify the mediating factors that may aggravate or diminish the adverse impact of poverty on children's everyday lives. Further clarifying the mediating factors and subsequently classifying protective and risk factors may give some clear underpinnings for policy makers: factors that prove to be protective should be strengthened, whereas factors that seem to exacerbate a negative influence of poverty on children should be addressed. Listening to children also reveals the issues that they consider important and identifies the areas in which they experience growing up in poverty to be most severely. Such an insight helps to develop policy interventions that attend to their own need and that make a difference to the daily lives of poor children

**Keywords:** child poverty, children's perspectives, coping strategies, the Netherlands.

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## INTRODUCTION

Policy attention to and research on child poverty in rich countries is clearly on the increase.<sup>1</sup> Yet little is known about what poverty might mean in the ‘world of children’, i.e., in their daily lives. Most research on child poverty in rich countries is quantitative in nature and concentrated on determining its extent or future outcomes. Hence, although the child evidently has come into view, the perspective is primarily directed upon the child, whereas little notice is taken of the perspective of the child. It tends to result in children being depicted as playing only a passive role in the situation they live in. They are presented as if the situation of poverty just overtakes them, as if they do not reflect and act on that situation themselves. Consequently, children’s personal experiences and own ways of dealing with it remain largely unexplored.

Inattention to children’s perspectives on their own current situation is not restricted to child-poverty research. Studies within the field of the ‘new sociology of childhood’ have recently illuminated the ways in which traditional approaches (dominated by developmental psychology and socialization theories) generally tend to consider children merely in terms of their future status as adults: as ‘human becomings’ instead of ‘human beings’, thereby placing them into a primarily inactive position. As defined in Corsaro’s *The Sociology of Childhood*:

Adults most often view children in a forward-looking way, that is, with an eye to what they will become – future adults. Rarely are they viewed in a way that appreciates what they are – children with ongoing lives, needs and desires. [Whereas] children are active, creative social agents who produce their own unique children’s cultures while simultaneously contributing to the production of adult societies. (Corsaro 1997:4-7)

The above quotation makes explicit how a mere focus on the future, on what children will become, obstructs us from focussing on the present-day experiences and actions of children living in the social world ‘as a child’ (James et al. 1998, Corsaro 1997). The main objective of this study therefore is to consider child poverty from the perspective of children living in poverty and, to capture their personal experiences and ways of dealing with it. More in general, this study aims to promote children’s visibility and their voices within the scope of research on child poverty in rich countries.

To that end, this study first starts to outline current research on child poverty in rich countries, in order to consider its relevance to the present analysis. Next it discusses how the current approaches of the sociological study of childhood may deepen our understanding of child poverty and further advance attempts to bring to light poor children’s perspectives on their own situation. The two main components of the new sociology of childhood are the recognition of the child as an integrated structural form in society (instead of a perspective on childhood as just a temporary phase in individual development) and of children as social actors (instead of passive subjects). Moreover, by conceptualizing the child as ‘being’ (as opposed to ‘becoming’) and focus on the present world of children (rather than their future status as adults), the new sociology of childhood offers a useful conceptual framework for studying the personal experiences and actions of children. Equally important, the new social

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<sup>1</sup> At the EU Council in March 2000, member states were requested to set ‘adequate targets’ for the reduction of poverty, in addition to which it was for the first recommended that children should be one of the specific groups singled out for concern. Moreover, in particular, the Innocenti Research Centre’s Report Cards have brought about more international concern with child poverty throughout the industrialized world.

study of childhood brings useful methodological considerations to the field of child-poverty research, especially pertaining to considering children as ‘participants in’ instead of ‘subjects of’ research. This implies that they should be treated as ‘knowledgeable’ and that it ought to be respected. Furthermore, it is encouraged to study the child in his/her own right. It is this shift towards studying ‘real children’ and ‘the experiences of being a child’ that represents the essential break from traditional approaches.

Additionally, to further understand children’s own responses (or ‘coping strategies’) to growing up in poverty, this study also considers current literature on coping processes among children. It evaluates whether the theoretical concepts provide a useful framework for studying the particular coping strategies of children in poverty. Despite the fact that literature on children’s coping is highly concerned with children’s outcomes, several of its concepts seem relevant to research on poverty from a child’s perspective. These include the acknowledgement that not all children show problematic outcomes in the presence of stressful situations, and the efforts that have been made to comprehend this variability in children’s outcomes. The latter has led to the search for so-called ‘risk’ and ‘protective’ factors, i.e., factors that either increase or decrease the probability of negative outcomes from stressful situations. Understanding what enables some children to do well in the face of stressful situations, while other children show social-emotional or behavioural problems, provides essential information on the mechanisms through which stressful situations affect children.

After these theoretical considerations, this study seeks to give poor children’s perspectives on the basis of the results of qualitative research on child poverty in the Netherlands. The main objective has been to explore children’s personal experiences and coping strategies in response to growing up in limited financial circumstances while living in a rich country, such as the Netherlands. Therefore, qualitative in-depth interviews have been conducted among six-to-sixteen-year-old children in the Netherlands who grow up in families with an income at the national minimum benefit level. In addition, their parents were interviewed to more fully understand children’s answers against the background of the specific family financial circumstances. Interviews were conducted among children and parents of 65 families from different ethnic backgrounds in various larger and smaller Dutch cities. Figures are employed to demonstrate the diversity within the research group and to portray the many-sided impact of poverty on children’s lives and are not intended to be statistically representative.

The empirical part first seeks to illuminate whether the Dutch minimum benefit level at least assures that children’s most basic life necessities are met. It shows that in a quarter of all families interviewed children do not receive a hot meal on a daily basis due to lack of money. Daily fresh vegetables and fruit appear to be even less common and for one third of the families are considered to be too expensive for daily consumption. Within almost half of families interviewed, parents feel unable to sufficiently clothe their children. Finally, within fifteen of the 65 families, parents claim that their children’s access to medical care has been limited due to lack of money: not all medical care is (completely) covered by the basic health service package, and own contributions or supplementary insurance cannot always be afforded. Next, the interviews with children make clear that it is especially through social contacts with peers that the limited financial circumstances they live in acquire significance in their lives. Through comparison with other children they may feel materially and socially deprived. In addition, children may be pressured emotionally by the difficult financial

situation of the family they grow up in; in more than half of the families interviewed, parental worries about money were confided to children.

The present study also shows that it is not within all families interviewed that children's basic needs are unmet or that their access to social activities is limited in a similar sense; neither are all children interviewed emotionally burdened with financial family problems. Initial analysis of the interview material shows that different mediating factors emerge that may be responsible for the existing variety in children's personal experiences with poverty: the family's actual free space of expenditure, parental coping and creativity, parent-child communication, the family's social support network, children's age and communication with peers.

Subsequently, this study turns to the question of how children, who are confronted with challenging experiences related to poverty, try to deal or 'cope' with these experiences. Living in poverty elicits a wide range of coping strategies from children which vary across the various situations they encounter. It seems that in meeting their own needs, children may feel they possess some personal control to actively improve their situation. Although they cannot change the fact that they grow up in a poor family, they may attempt to satisfy their needs by means of a spare time job, saving up pocket money or positive reappraisal of the situation they live in. However, as regards experiences that involve direct confrontations or discussions with peers and parents, it appears that avoidance-oriented coping is more often employed. Children may try avoid situations in which they feel excluded or different from their peers. Or they try to avoid money-related discussions with their parents as much as possible. They keep their wishes to themselves because they already know that the answer or because they do not want to make it any harder on their parents.

In some cases, children just express their emotions related to the experiences they have been facing due to poverty, without reporting any further actions on them. They may feel overwhelmed by the poverty situation they are in, without being able to offer an adequate answer to it. They relate to feelings of shame, jealousy or exclusion when their friends or classmates can have and do so much more than they themselves can or report to become sad or angry when the things they would like to have so much are refused over and over again by their parents. Some children are worried about their family's financial situation, which is mostly a reaction to the financial problems and worries their parents have entrusted them with. They seem to adopt these worries. Seeing that the literature on children's coping shows that the more passive and avoidance-oriented coping strategies are the least effective and related to higher mental health problems in children, those who principally employ strategies as such should be of our greatest concern.

## **1. CURRENT RESEARCH ON CHILD POVERTY IN RICH COUNTRIES**

### **1.1 Child poverty from a comparative cross-national perspective**

The aforementioned rising receptiveness to child poverty especially finds expression in the fact that children are made much more visible within both national and international poverty statistics; by making children the unit of observation – as opposed to the more customary practice to subsume them to the family unit – new essential information on children's conditions is emerging. This section briefly outlines the main results arising from these 'child-sensitive' poverty statistics, as they have been worked out in recent studies within the

scope of comparative child poverty research, i.e., a range of research that aims to display the extent of child poverty across rich countries as well as to analyse the trends and characteristics that can be derived from these figures. In these comparative studies, calculations on the extent of child poverty are most commonly based on a relative poverty line that is fixed at 50 per cent of the median national income, i.e., the resulting figures demonstrating the percentage of children living in households with an income below 50 per cent of the median national income.

In comparing relative child-poverty rates throughout the industrialized world, it is the wide cross-country variation that is generally considered to be its most striking characteristic (Bradbury and Jäntti 2001/1999, Vleminckx and Smeeding 2001, UNICEF-IRC 2000, Cornia and Danziger 1997). Most recently, the Innocenti Report Card Child Poverty in Rich Nations 2005 (UNICEF IRC), for instance, shows how even within the former European Union (EU-15), relative child-poverty rates vary from below three to over fifteen percent. The Netherlands takes an average position with a relative child-poverty rate of 9.8 per cent.

**Table 1.1: Relative child-poverty rates\*, as offered by offered by the Innocenti Report Card Child Poverty in Rich Nations 2005, confined to EU-15 countries**

Country	Year	%	Rank
Denmark	2000	2.4	1
Finland	2000	2.8	2
Sweden	2000	4.2	3
France	2001	7.5	4
Belgium	1997	7.7	5
Luxembourg	2000	9.1	6
Netherlands	1999	9.8	7
Germany	2001	10.2	8
Austria	1997	10.2	8
Greece	1999	12.4	9
Spain	1995	13.3	10
United Kingdom	1999	15.4	11
Portugal	2000	15.6	12
Ireland	2000	15.7	13
Italy	2000	16.6	14

*Note:* Poverty line: 50 per cent of median national income.

Being able to establish and illustrate the wide cross-country variation in child-poverty rates is one achievement, capturing why is a further step, as it might offer valuable keystones to reduce child-poverty rates. In attempts already undertaken to explain the wide variation in child-poverty rates, the following factors are most often considered: labour-marked conditions (unemployment rates and low-end wages), demographic changes (rise of one-parent families) and public policy (social expenditures and structure of welfare state institutions). However, although all these areas are relevant from the literature, as it has been stated that there remain many unresolved questions concerning the relative importance and

interaction of these areas, further research is much needed (Bradbury and Jäntti 2001/1999, UNICEF IRC 2000, Cornia and Danziger 1997).

Another significant finding is an increase in relative child-poverty rates in several rich countries (Bradbury and Jäntti 2001/ 1999, Vleminckx and Smeeding 2001, Micklewright and Stewart 2000, Bradshaw 1999, Cornia and Danziger 1997). In 1999, Bradbury and Jäntti already state that across rich nations, ‘the dominant trend is one of increasing relative child poverty’. In 2005, the Innocenti Report Card, again calls attention to the fact that the proportion of children living in poverty has risen in a majority of the world’s developed countries since early 1990s. As regards the Netherlands, the report shows that it belongs to the 17 out of 24 OECD-countries in which child poverty rates have grown.

Besides the observed increase in child-poverty rates in various rich countries, it appears that, in the 1990s, child-poverty rates also tend to exceed general poverty rates (i.e., poverty rates across all age groups) in several rich countries (Oxley et al. 2001, Bradbury and Jäntti 1999). This means that in those countries, considered all age groups, children run the highest risk of living in poverty. Whereas, opposite to this tendency, in the mid- to late 1980s child-poverty rates appeared to be still lower than overall poverty rates (Oxley et al. 2001). The ‘changing composition of the poor’ is referred to in various cross-national studies on child poverty and generally further explained by a comparison with trends in poverty rates for the elderly. For the elderly, another traditionally vulnerable age group, poverty rates appear to have been improved in many countries (Bradbury and Jäntti 1999, Bradshaw 1999, Cornia 1997, Cornia and Danziger 1997). The latter has been related to the ‘ageing society’ – i.e., the share of children in the total population continues to decline, while, at the same time, the share of the elderly is increasing – and combined with the fact that children have no political power to stand up for themselves: after all, they are not allowed to vote.

### *Discussion*

To summarise, when comparing relative child-poverty rates across rich countries it appears that the following characteristics and trends most commonly come to the fore: relative child-poverty rates (1) vary widely across rich countries; (2) have increased in a number of rich countries; and (3) exceed general poverty rates in several rich countries. Hence, by making children the unit of observation within poverty statistics, an important step forward has been made in illuminating their position. For such ‘child sensitive’ poverty statistics yield information that tends to get lost if children are subordinated to the family collective in such a way that they disappear as individuals, thus obstructing the social visibility of children as a separate entity (Qvortrup et al. 1994).

The identification of children in poverty statistics seems to fit together with the more general trend to treat the individual as the basic unit: “Legal rights and responsibilities, taxation, and the allocation of social welfare benefits are, to an increasing extent, applied to the individual, not the household (...) to ensure that everyone has the same rights and obligations and to make control and support more efficient” (Frønes 1994:147). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is considered to be a clear example of this ‘individualization process’, since in this Convention predominates the idea of the child as a separate individual with rights of her/his own. However, it should be noted that stressing the importance of children’s individual rights, is not the same as saying that children operate individually. They operate within their families and other social contexts by which they are influenced and bounded. One of the benefits of emphasising children’s individual rights is to loosen the strict linkages between parents’ situation and children’s conditions, which may

lead to increased equality for children and a decrease in the influence of class boundaries on children (Näsman 1994).

The identification of children in poverty statistics and the information this has yielded on children's conditions, has brought about more political concern with child poverty in rich countries and has laid a solid foundation for the much-needed further research on this matter. At the same time, notwithstanding the valuable results that have been yielded through the 'child-sensitive' poverty statistics, they still do not speak of the experiences and actions of the 'real' children behind the statistics. Hence, we learn a great deal about the extent, trends and characteristics of child poverty in rich countries, but we learn relatively little about its impact on children's daily lives.

It is widely questioned that relative income poverty measures should be the only way to capture child poverty and that they should be complemented by measurements of material and social deprivation. One can observe a growing dissatisfaction with the reduction of the broad definition of relative poverty to 'relative income poverty'. The European Union employs a definition of relative poverty, in which the 'poor' are defined as those whose 'resources (material, cultural and social) are so limited as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life in the member states in which they live'. This definition includes social and cultural domains, domains that disappear when poverty is reduced to income poverty. Hence, it is increasingly recognised that material resources, or rather the lack of it, reflect just one, albeit very important dimension of poverty (Vleminckx and Smeeding 2001).

Moreover, it is suggested that the use of household incomes to measure child poverty has its limitations as regards to the identification of poor children. For the assumption that the household should be treated as a single unit in which resources are shared equally, is increasingly challenged. Therefore, it is suggested not to stop at the level of the household, but rather to consider direct child specific outcome measures of children's well-being. In this respect, the following domains are relevant from the literature: (1) material well-being; (2) health and survival; (3) education and personal development; and (4) social inclusion or participation. However, as yet, "there is no consensus about the best set of indicators to use in an international comparison of child well-being in the industrialised world" (Micklewright and Stewart 2000:6, cf.: Bradbury and Jäntti 1999). While insisting that relative income should be a key indicator of poverty, the latest Innocenti Report Card (UNICEF 2005) also stresses the need for additional measures to capture other aspects of child poverty. The present study adds to this discussion by bringing in poor children's worlds of experience.

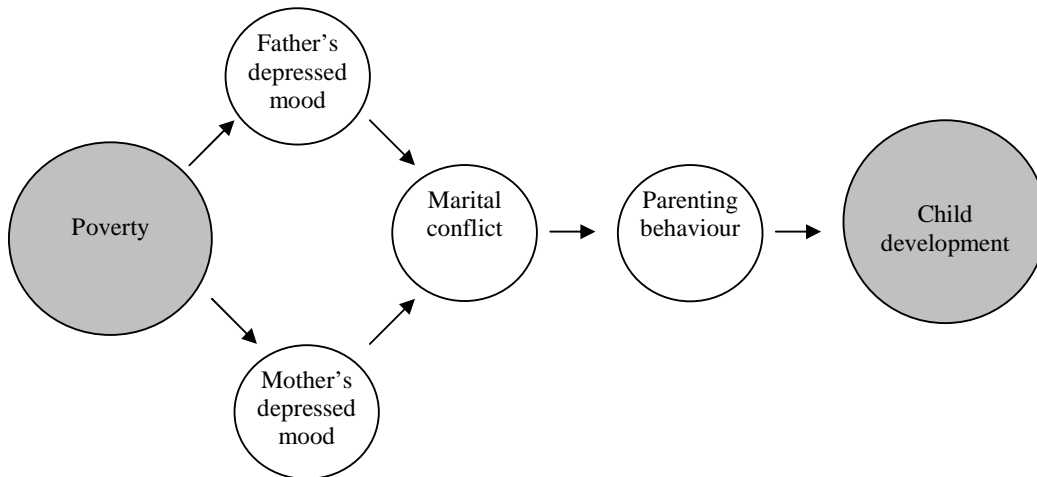
## **1.2 Child poverty from a perspective of children's outcomes**

It is noteworthy that beside the recent attention to child poverty in a comparative perspective, the United States is known for an already extensive tradition of child-poverty research, whose central focus has been on poor children's 'outcomes', i.e., on determining the effects of childhood poverty. This section summarises its main findings and discusses its recent developments

Studies within this tradition of child-poverty research were principally concerned with the cognitive ability and school performance of poor children. Afterwards, attention broadened to their socio-emotional development (McLoyd 1998, Huston, McLoyd and Garcia Coll 1994). Researchers have shown that poverty correlates with lower scores on tests of cognitive functioning, lower levels of school achievement and a higher prevalence of socio-emotional problems such as depression, social withdrawal, low self-esteem and behavioural problems at home and school, i.e., in comparison to nonpoor children (e.g.: McLoyd 1998,

McLeod and Edwards 1995, Felner et al. 1995, Duncan, Brooks-Gunn and Klebanov 1994, Huston et al. 1994, McLeod and Shanahan 1993, DuBois et al. 1992, McLoyd 1990). It should be noted that poverty has been considered more powerful in accounting for differences in children’s cognitive ability and school performance than for differences in socio-emotional development (Duncan et al. 1998, McLoyd 1998, Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997).

More recently, the centre of attention has shifted from descriptions to analyses of the processes by which the above-mentioned effects of poverty on children come about (McLoyd 1998, Huston et al. 1994). Processes within the family context have received particular attention in the literature. In the analytical models developed to examine these processes, ‘parenting behaviour’ is identified as a key factor on the assumptions that (a) poverty causes psychological distress in parents; (b) this distress is related to marital conflict and a decrease in the capacity for skilful parenting; and (c) disrupted parenting has adverse consequences for child development (e.g. McLoyd 1990, McLoyd et al. 1994, Conger et al. 1994). Hence, it is assumed that rather than affecting children directly, poverty influences children indirectly through its impact on parents’ behaviour toward children. In the main, such analytical models resemble the following:

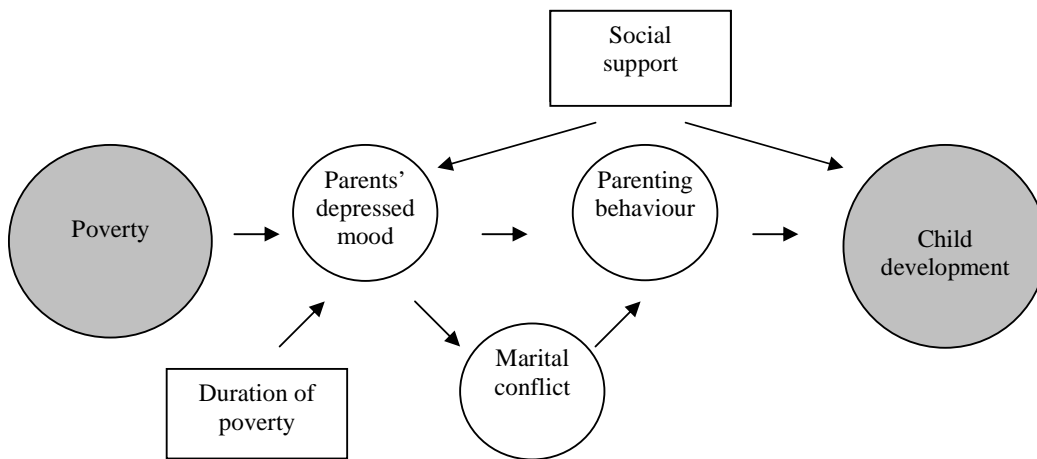


Connected with the shift away from description, researchers have become aware that the impact of poverty on children may vary: they have found individual differences in poor children’s outcomes (Huston et al. 1994). Researchers have started to consider which could be the issues that may diminish or worsen the negative impact on children. In this context, particularly the influence of ‘social support’ and ‘duration of poverty’ have been offered further attention. Social support can have a “buffering effect” on the negative consequences of poverty for children: directly as well as indirectly. DuBois et al. (1994), for example, have found that when children received direct support from school personnel, this was associated with a variety of positive academic and socio-emotional outcomes. In addition, McLoyd (1998) has stated that nonparental adults might foster resilience in poor children by providing support directly to children. When social support is given to parents, poor children may be indirectly protected through its tempering effect on parent’s psychological distress, which in turn lessens harsh parenting behaviour (McLoyd 1998, Hashima and Amato 1994, McLoyd et al. 1994): “Family members and extra-familial adults living outside the home may indirectly contribute to resilience in poor children by providing emotional and parenting support (...). Because parental depression is a risk factor for difficulties in parenting, factors that protect

against depression (e.g., companionship, availability of a confident, and assistance in child rearing) are likely to enhance parenting, facilitate positive parent-child relations, and in turn foster adaptive resilience in the children” (McLoyd 1998: p.197).

As to duration of poverty, recent research consistently reports that persistent poverty has stronger negative effects on children than short-lived poverty, with children experiencing both types of poverty generally doing less well than never-poor children (McLoyd 1998, McLeod and Shanahan 1996, Korenman et al. 1995, Duncan et al. 1994, Huston et al. 1994, Conger et al. 1994). McLeod and Shanahan (1996) propose that, here again, parenting behaviour may play a crucial intervening role in the occurrence of such results. Parents who face persistent poverty are under greater stress than those who face temporary poverty and it may be exactly this continual stress that leads to harsh parenting practices.

Hence, when the possible influence of social support and duration of poverty is taken into account, the previously demonstrated analytical model is usually elaborated as follows:



Additionally, Conger and colleagues have considered the possible influence of gender (again within the family context). In their study of 1992 among 205 seventh-grade boys aged twelve to fourteen, no direct association was found between parents' depressed mood and the boys' development (they only found an indirect relationship through parenting behaviour). In their 1993-study among 220 seventh-grade girls, however, they expected that parental depression might have direct as well as indirect effects for girls:

For example, Hops, Sherman, and Biglan (1990) found that maternal depression was directly related to the problematic development of early adolescent girls but not boys. Moreover, compared with adolescent boys, adolescent girls appear to be more sensitive and empathetic to the emotional states of those around them, and they also are more likely to provide emotional support in such situations (Belle, 1990). Because of these previous gender differences, we expected that the girls in the present investigation might be at greater risk for adjustment problems as a result of parental negative mood than the seventh-grade boys in the previous analyses. (Conger et al. 1993: p.208)

They indeed found support for these hypotheses. In their study both parents' depressed mood and disrupted parenting directly effected the development of girls. Moreover, they found that mothers' depressed mood in particular appeared to be disruptive to the social development of their daughters.

In analyzing the processes by which the effects of poverty on children occur, several studies have gone beyond the family to consider such contextual influences as school and neighbourhood. *Neighbourhood Poverty: context and consequences for children* (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan and Aber (eds.) 1997), for example, offers a comprehensive collection of surveys regarding the question whether neighbourhood poverty affects children's well being and development. On the basis of this volume, it is maintained that "residence in less economically advantaged neighbourhoods (...) independently predicts lower scores on tests of intelligence and cognitive functioning, lower levels of school achievement, and increased levels of socio-emotional problems" (McLoyd 1998:198).

### *Discussion*

In contrast with the study of child poverty in a comparative cross-national perspective – which is focused on the extent, trends and characteristics of child-poverty rates (see section 1.1) – a focus on poor children's outcomes certainly sheds more light on the impact poverty may have on children's daily lives. Studies within this tradition have shown that poverty correlates with lower scores on tests of cognitive functioning, lower levels of school achievement and higher prevalence of socio-emotional problems such as depression, social withdrawal, low self-esteem and behavioural problems at home and school.

Furthermore, efforts have been made to illuminate the processes through which such outcomes occur. Unfortunately, the analytical models evolved to examine these processes appear to be rather static depicting children as passive participants; as if they themselves do not reflect and act on the situation they live in. Children's perspectives on their own poverty are not considered, although it may be argued that the way in which children personally experience and act on their situation influences the impact it has on their lives.

Nonetheless, relevant to the present study is that together with the attention-shift to underlying processes of poor children's outcomes, researchers have become aware that the impact of poverty on children varies and have started to consider factors that may mitigate or accentuate the impact of poverty on children, including 'parenting behaviour', 'social support', 'duration of poverty', 'gender' and 'neighbourhood'. It is also relevant to consider whether these factors also have an influence on the way poverty is experienced and coped with by children and whether they may play a part in any differences in their experiences and coping strategies.

### **1.3 Child poverty from a child's perspective: limited though rising attention**

Within the scope of current research on child poverty in rich countries, up until now, little attention has been paid to the question what poverty might mean to children themselves. Children's perspectives on their own poverty – i.e., the subject matter of the present study – have been largely disregarded. Still, one can recently observe a growing interest in addressing child poverty from a child's perspective, within research but also within politics.

#### *Growing political attention to take account of children's perspectives*

The rising political attention to children's perspectives on their own poverty revealed itself, for instance, in the Euronet<sup>2</sup>-conference at the European Parliament in January 2002: 'Including children? Developing a coherent approach to child poverty and social exclusion across Europe'. At this conference, Euronet launched its synonymously titled report, written by Ruxton and Bennet (2002) and financed with the support of the European Commission

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<sup>2</sup> The European Children's Network

(DG Employment and Social Affairs). This report explored how to change our perspective on child poverty and social exclusion by looking through children's eyes.

The conference promoted the importance of children's participation and self-expression about poverty and social exclusion in Europe. Acknowledged as a disadvantage of the traditional view to poverty was the fact that it addresses poverty solely through the eyes of adults, whereas the impact of poverty on children should also be seen through children's eyes. It was also stressed that children are excluded from other children, not just from general or adult society. Hence, it was recognised that in order to identify the indicators that adequately represent and are important to children, they should participate in the development of policy. Accordingly, it was stated that children's perspectives should be included in the National Action Plans (NAPs) against poverty and social exclusion that EU member states are committed to prepare.

In the closing session of the conference an appeal was made to "broaden our perspective of listening" and to hear children's voices regarding poverty and social exclusion and to include children and their ideas within policy making, in order to combat their poverty and social exclusion. This already has had a concrete follow-up by the launching of the European Children's Debate on the Euronet website ([www.europeanchildrensnetwork.org](http://www.europeanchildrensnetwork.org)), a digital discussion forum where children can express their ideas and opinions on several topics, including poverty, with the objective that their views will influence discussions on the future of Europe. The project is part of Euronet's campaign 'Children are citizens too', which is aimed at the recognition of children as European citizens.

#### *Growing research attention to address child poverty from a child's perspective*

In a recent study, 'Childhood Poverty and Social Exclusion: From a Child's Perspective' (2002) Ridge observes that although we know an increasing amount about the degree to which children experience poverty and about the possible consequences for them of experiencing poverty in their childhood, we know far less about how the experience of poverty and social exclusion impacts on children's own perceptions of their lives. She therefore places children at the centre of the inquiry and presents empirical findings from in-depth interviews with forty children living in poverty in the United Kingdom (UK). The children's own accounts provide us with an opportunity to understand some of the issues and concerns that poor children themselves identify as important.

In the UK, the issue of childhood poverty has moved from the margin to the centre of the policy agenda, following Tony Blair's 1999 announcement of the government's commitment to eradicate child poverty by the year 2020. Ridge notes that without a deeper understanding of the lives and experiences of children in poverty, policies targeted at eradicating child poverty may fail:

Despite the much needed and welcome increase in policy attention and additional resources, ensuring that the needs and concerns of low income children themselves are acknowledged and addressed presents a significant challenge for policy makers and professionals working with children. (...) An important facet of that process must be an acknowledgement and understanding of the issues that concern children. Without an informed awareness of the economic and social pressures that disadvantaged children experience in the immediacy of their everyday lives, policies directed towards the alleviation of child poverty and social exclusion run the risk of failing to respond adequately to those children's needs (Ridge 2002:2).

She continues by stating that developing a more ‘child-centred approach’ to understand the experience of poverty and social exclusion in childhood will entail ‘a radical rethink about the conceptual frameworks with which poverty has been traditionally analysed and understood’ (Ridge 2002:6). Similarly to the discussion that took place at the above-mentioned Euronet conference on ‘Including Children’, Ridge points out that much of our analysis of poverty has been framed within an adult discourse and that the defining of characteristics have always been predominantly adult centric. Yet children experience poverty and social exclusion within the immediacy of childhood, among their peers: “social exclusion for children could signify much more than exclusion from society as conceived by adults, it may also mean exclusion from the norms and customs of children’s society” (Ridge op. cit.). She therefore states that any conceptual framework concerning poverty and social exclusion in childhood, must be contextualised within the state of childhood itself.

As she further notes, in the main, only three preceding childhood-poverty studies in the UK employed such a child-centred approach, ‘Family Fortunes’ by Middleton and colleagues (1994) and two studies by the Children’s Society: ‘Same Scenery, Different Lifestyle’ (Davis and Ridge 1997) and ‘Worth More Than This’ (Roker 1998). In our view, the work by Middleton and colleagues clearly illustrates how parents’ perceptions of their children may differ from the views of the children themselves, which underlines the importance of studying children’s own narratives:

“Poorer parents attempt to teach their children about the limitations of the family budget from an early age. They believe that their children learn not to ask for things and, because of this, that they genuinely understand and accept that they cannot have and do the same things as their wealthier peers. However, this is clearly half of the story. Children say that, while they limit their demands on parents when they know money is particularly tight, they continue to want the same things, whatever the financial circumstances of their families. (...) What is clear is that many poorer children experience daily frustration of their economic aspirations (Middleton et al. 1994:150).

Furthermore, ‘Family Fortunes’ provides an insight into the pressures experienced by poor children to conform to peer group norms concerning the things they should have and do in order to avoid social exclusion, and it shows how poor children therefore experience being ‘different’ from an early age (Middleton et al. 1994). These issues are further elaborated on in ‘Same Scenery, Different Lifestyle and Worth More Than This’ (Ridge 2002). The empirical findings presented in the work by Ridge (2002) then, offer a valuable and further view into poor children’s everyday experiences and the issues that concern them. The in-depth interviews with children in poverty explore their experiences at school, at home and among their peers, and focus on their economic and material resources, their social relationships and their own perceptions of the impact of poverty on their lives.

Listening to children, for example, reveals how pocket money is considered a vital resource, as it enables them to sustain social interaction with friends and share in the everyday culture of their peers. Children without pocket money highlight how the lack of it is a severe disadvantage in their social lives. For these children, paid work appears to be experienced as a necessary objective, playing an essential role in providing a measure of autonomy and security. Ridge shows how the money earned is employed to “participate with other children, to share in social events and to save and purchase important signifiers of childhood social status, such as clothes” (Ridge 2002:57).

Regarding children’s social relationships and their capacity to ‘fit in’ with their peers, Ridge recognises bullying as a significant issue for the children interviewed as is being able

to wear ‘the right clothes’: “Their accounts reveal a high sensitivity to the nuances of fashion and the implications of being seen as not conforming to current fashion. Wearing the right clothes gave them the capability to sustain themselves within the clothing expectations of their peers and to avoid stigma, bullying and exclusion that could follow from ‘inappropriate’ clothing. However, the cost of getting the right clothes was prohibitive, and children’s accounts reveal some of the pressures they experienced in their endeavours to ensure that they were socially included” (Ridge 2002:84). Furthermore, children’s accounts reveal school life to be experienced as a source of anxiety, fraught with problems of bullying, material disadvantage and structural exclusion from shared social activities through financial hardship (Ridge 2002).

Moreover, it appears that one of the most important areas where children feel vulnerable from poverty is in relation to their friends and their opportunities to participate in the same things as their friends. The latter especially reveals itself in relation to holidays. Many of the children interviewed had not had a holiday for some time and in some cases the children had never had a holiday away with their families. “For them the impact was felt not just in the lack of a holiday itself, but also by social comparison with their peers, who were able to go away during school holidays. This engenders feelings of difference and of being left behind” (Ridge 2002:109). In general, fears of the social repercussions of being seen as different, or in any way standing out, appear to prevail.

Ridge concludes by stating that these findings should challenge us to explore how we should respond to children’s concerns and how we can ensure that welfare targeted at poor children reaches them and addresses their needs:

Child-centred, non-stigmatising welfare provision which is targeted directly at children, and informed by their own perceptions of need, may have a valuable role in facilitating children’s social inclusion and integration with their peers (Ridge 2002:146).

### *Discussion*

On the whole, the work by Ridge offers an invaluable insight into poor children’s everyday experiences and the issues that concern them; such as friendship, school inclusion and shared peer group participation. However, less elaborated are children’s own strategies to deal with poverty (their ‘coping strategies’). In this way, children’s strength and own agency is easily overlooked, whereas their own actions may well influence the way in which they experience poverty to have an impact on their lives. At the same time, she emphasises that in spite of the fact that she acknowledges that it is important to address children as reflexive social agents who construct and make sense of their lives and experiences, we cannot and should not deny that their childhoods are also organised by the constraints of poverty. The present study adds to the focus on the everyday experiences of children in poverty, but supplements it with an analysis of poor children’s coping strategies placing poor children’s agency in the context of their restricted social, material and structural environment.

## 2. COMPLEMENTARY APPROACHES THE STUDY OF CHILD POVERTY

### 2.1 Child poverty and the new sociology of childhood

As has been described, within the scope of current research on child poverty in rich countries, until now, children's perspectives on their own poverty have been mainly disregarded. We now examine how the currently emerging approaches of the sociological study of childhood may deepen our understanding of child poverty and further advance attempts to consider child poverty from the perspective of the children themselves.

#### *Former blind spots and novel viewpoints*

Studies within the field of the so-called 'new sociology of childhood' (James et al. 1998, Corsaro 1997, James and Prout 1997, Qvortrup et al. 1994) lay bare the blind spots and pitfalls of traditional views of children and childhood, and subsequently, they offer alternative directions to the sociological study of childhood. They state that the study of childhood, in general, has been dominated by developmental-psychology theories, which focus on children as individuals and are highly concerned with the endpoint of development (as is also reflected in the United States' tradition of child-poverty research). The early sociological study of childhood has been strongly influenced by developmental psychology as well. Up to the present, socialization theories have been predominant in the sociological understanding of childhood; they are concerned with defining processes through which children learn to conform to social norms and internalise social values. Socialization theories appear to find close parallels in developmental psychology, in its focus on the socially developing child (who is to be shaped and guided by external forces in order to become a fully integrated member of society) and its primary concern with the endpoint of individual development, i.e., adulthood (James et al. 1998, Corsaro 1997, James and Prout 1997, Qvortrup et al. 1994).

Among the consequences of this concentration on children's future status as adults have been that childhood has long been viewed solely as a period of preparation for entry into society, and that children have been commonly regarded as 'not-yet adults', as 'becoming' instead of 'being'. This perspective places children and childhood apart from society, into a passive position 'at the mercy of external stimuli', while the everyday world of children, their present-day experiences, actions and skills are left unattended. It is therefore argued that socialization theories overlook the point that children already are part of society from birth, as childhood is part of society and, furthermore, that children do not just internalize the society they are born into, as they act on and can bring about changes in society (James et al. 1998, Corsaro 1997, James and Prout 1997, Qvortrup et al. 1994).

Hence, the two main components for a new sociology of childhood are considered to be the recognition of childhood as a full part of society and of children as social actors. Even if children themselves change continuously, childhood itself never disappears but is interrelated with other structural forms in society and they are mutually influencing each other. Viewing children as social actors acknowledges that children are not only future members of society or outcomes of social processes; they are also necessarily participating in it. Therefore, it is argued that children must be seen as actively involved in the construction of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and the society in which they live:

Such view of how structure and agency complement each other seems to be an essential component in any new sociology of childhood. It is important to recover children as social actors (and their activity as a source of social change). We need also, however, to grasp childhood as a social institution that exists beyond the activity of any particular child or adult. There must be theoretical space for both the construction of childhood as an institution and the activity of children within and upon the constraints and possibilities that the institutional level creates (James and Prout 1997:27)

Conceptualizing childhood as an integrated structural form and children as social actors extends into research. First, in order to increase children's visibility, childhood should be the unit of analysis and children the unit of observation (James and Prout 1997, Saporiti 1994, Qvortrup 1994). Second, children ought to be considered as 'participants in' instead of 'subjects of' research (James and Prout 1997). Children are to be treated as 'knowledgeable' and that their knowledge ought to be respected (Alanan 1994). Finally, as the new discourses of childhood understand the child as 'being' instead of 'becoming', it is encouraged to study the child in his/her own right. According to James and colleagues (1998), this shift toward studying 'real children' and 'the experiences of being a child' represents the essential break from traditional to new approaches of childhood, leading to a focus on the present-day experiences and actions of children actually living in the social world 'as a child' (James et al. 1998).

### *Discussion*

The theory and methods of the new sociology of childhood further advance the attempts to reinforce children's visibility and their voices within the scope of research on child poverty in rich countries. Conceptualizing of the child as 'being' instead of 'becoming' enables us to open our eyes to the personal experiences and own actions of children actually living in poverty. Moreover, child-poverty research can successfully integrate the new sociology of childhood's call for studies which highlight children's agency, in order to understand how they deal with their circumstances (Hoek, van der 2005).

## **2.2 Child poverty and the literature on children's coping**

This section briefly outlines current literature on coping processes among children, in order to evaluate whether its theoretical concepts might provide a useful framework for studying the particular coping strategies of children in poverty.

### *Children's resilience*

When exploring the literature on children's coping, a striking notion that persists to emerge is the 'variability in children's outcomes': not all children show problematic outcomes in the presence of stressful situations. Interest has grown in what has been labelled as 'children's resilience' – "as shown by the young people who do well, in spite of having experienced a form of stress which in the population as a whole is known to carry a substantial risk of an adverse outcome" (Rutter 1988:2; cf.: Lindström 2001, Luthar et al. 2000). An increasing body of research has been devoted to the critical question "why some children 'sink' and others 'swim' when faced with stressors" (Wolchik and Sandler 1997:xi, cf.: Griffith et al. 2000, Cowan et al. 1996, Hetherington and Blechman 1996, Mellins et al. 1996, Rutter 1993/1988, Garnezy 1988, Compas et al. 1988).

### *Children's personal perceptions and choice of coping strategies*

The abovementioned research reveals that at least two questions should be taken into consideration when studying children in stressful situations. Firstly, when the children under study are confronted with a particular stressful situation, do they themselves truly appraise this situation as stressful? The same outwardly challenging situations may not be equally distressing to the individuals who are confronted by it. Hence, the literature on coping highlights the importance of paying attention to children's personal interpretation of stressful events (Shaw-Sorensen 1993, cf.: Lazarus 2000, Sandler et al. 1997, Rutter 1988, Folkman et al. 1986). Secondly, when children appraise a particular situation as stressful, what coping strategies do they employ? For it has become evident that coping may operate in a positive as well as a negative manner: "some coping strategies may serve protective functions, whereas others may exacerbate the effects of stress" (Seiffge-Krenke and Klessinger 2000: 618, cf.: Compas et al. 1988, Rutter 1988). Sandler and colleagues (1997) state:

There is consistent evidence that dimensions of active coping that include problem solving and positive cognition about a stressful situation are related to lower mental health problems [and] that use of avoidance coping strategies (e.g., trying not to think about or avoiding dealing with a stressful event) is related to higher mental health problems in children (Sandler et al., 1997:13).

### *Well adjusted or well protected?*

There appears to be a further question that should be taken into account when attempting to understand the variability in children's outcomes: Are the children under study really confronted with the stressful experiences that tend to be associated with a particular stressful situation? For Richters and Weintraub (1990 in: Cowan et al. 1996:15) note that "researchers can define a risk group, but individuals in a risk category may not have experienced many of the stressful experiences that tend to be associated with the risk". It may be the case that children who show no negative outcomes in the presence of a particular stressful situation are well shielded against it (by means of effective protection mechanisms) instead of well adjusted to it.

### *Mediating factors in children's coping*

In trying not only to comprehend how but also why children's coping processes may differ, efforts have been made to identify the factors that might influence these processes. This has led to the search for so-called 'risk' and 'protective' factors, i.e., factors that either increase or decrease the probability of negative outcomes in the presence of stressful situations (Lindström 2001, Slap 2001, Luthar et al. 2000, Roosa 2000, Sandler et al. 1997, Cowan et al. 1996, Rutter 1993/1988, Garnezy 1988). Early efforts were primarily focussed on children's personal characteristics (e.g.: age, gender and ethnicity). However, researchers increasingly acknowledged that the variety in children's outcomes might also derive from factors external to the child, i.e., factors operating in its social context (Luthar et al. 2000). Accordingly, the family context has been examined most closely, as it is commonly understood to be of central importance to children's coping. Nevertheless, it has also been recognised that the child's wider social environments (such as peer group, school life and neighbourhood) may affect children's coping as well. Hence, the question that is attempted to answer is: "What is it about some children, their families or their larger environments that allows them to maintain a positive developmental trajectory when many of their peers in similar circumstances are not able to do so?" (Roosa, 2000:568).

### *Age*

Age is considered important to allow for ‘children’s ability to understand certain stressful events’ (Greca et al., 1992). As Maccoby (1988) argues:

We cannot be upset by events whose power to harm we do not understand. So young children are buffered against many phenomena that would produce distress in older people. The onset of being able to perceive certain kinds of threat may be part of a very specific development. [With increasing of age] children become more and more aware of possible risks, with the result that many older children experience increasing anxieties about events which they can now foresee (Maccoby 1988:219 and 229).

This implies that older children might be more vulnerable to stress than younger ones. At the same time there also appears to be considerable agreement on the assumption that, compared to younger children, older children generally exhibit a larger repertoire of coping strategies and have the ability to view dilemma from multiple perspectives. Thus older children may actually favoured over the younger ones, i.e., being the case that maturing children become increasingly aware that there may be a range of solutions to a certain problem (Griffith et al. 2000, Copeland and Hess 1995).

### *Gender*

Some authors have drawn attention to evidence that girls are more likely than boys to provide active support to their parents to cope with stressful family circumstances and, consequently, that they might become more vulnerable to these circumstances (Klimes-Dougan and Bolger 1998, Shaw-Sorensen 1993). In their study on children’s coping with maternal depression, Klimes-Dougan and Bolger (1998) for instance reported:

Relative to males, females were more likely to respond to maternal depression by providing active support to their mothers. Females’ active support may have been motivated by heightened feelings of responsibility for their mother’s depression. Often providing active support was combined with other strategies and also frequently involved some role reversal (e.g., “Try to leave her alone and then comfort and give her a hug”; “Sometimes I try to avoid her so she doesn’t get angry at me. Other times I offer to help her, like making dinner or something.”). While perhaps adaptive within the current context, care-taking may have long-term costs (Klimes-Dougan and Bolger 1998:11-12).

### *Ethnicity*

Copeland and Hess (1995:205) cite various studies indicating that ethnicity affects an individual’s perception of stress and choice of coping strategies. Some authors have reported ethnic differences in children’s tendency to employ social support to cope with problems (Chapman and Mullis 2000, Copeland and Hess 1995, Jose et al. 1994). Yet it is also observed that despite some slight differences, overall, no significant differences are found in the way children of different ethnic groups cope with stress: most often, they employ the same coping strategies (Copeland and Hess 1995, Jose et al. 1994). Furthermore, it has been suggested that some ethnic-minority children are less vulnerable to psychological distress because of ethnic-specific coping mechanisms that protect them from the negative effects of stress (Chapman and Mullis 2000, Jose et al. 1994, Barbarin 1993). In their work on Stress and coping in an ethnic minority context, Gonzales and Kim (1997) note many references to protective factors for ethnic minority children, particularly the stress-buffering qualities of ethnic minority families (e.g.; strong family bonds and support of extended kin networks).

However, they also observe that there is as yet little empirical evidence that these variables actually operate as moderators of stress for minority children.

#### *Family context*

It is commonly stated that family members (especially parents) affect children's perception of stressful circumstances. Children's perceptions of stressful events are influenced by the way their parents view the world and, subsequently, how they communicate it to them (Hardy et al. 1993). This implies that parental perceptions may function as a protective as well a risk factor. If parents are able to put stressful family circumstances in a somewhat less negative light, children, in turn, may appraise these circumstances as less hard. On the contrary, if parents are overwhelmed by the stressful circumstances and express their feelings of anxiety to their children, they may adopt such feelings and, consequently, develop negative perceptions on the present circumstances. It is found that the coping strategies children employ are modelled on the coping strategies that are employed by their parents (Lohman and Jarvis 2000, Klimes-Dougan and Bolger 1998, Sandler et al. 1997, Compas et al. 1992).

#### *Situational characteristics*

Some authors claim that the demands of a certain stressful situation influence the use of specific coping strategies (Griffith et al. 2000). Studies indeed have shown that children vary their coping strategies across various situations (Griffith et al. 2000, Mellins et al. 1996, Brotman-Band and Weisz 1988). For example, family stressors appear to elicit more avoidance than approach strategies and school stressors appear to elicit more approach than avoidance strategies (Griffith et al. 2000). Griffith and colleagues (2000:200) attempt to explain these results by arguing that "perhaps because of inherent power differential between parents and children, family stressors may be perceived as less responsive to active coping efforts".

#### *Discussion*

Despite the fact that literature on children's coping again is highly concerned with children's outcomes, several of its concepts are relevant to research on child poverty. These include the acknowledgement that not all children show problematic outcomes in the presence of stressful situations, and the efforts that have been made to comprehend this variability in their outcomes. Understanding what enables some children to do well in the face of stressful situations, while others show social-emotional or behavioural problems, may provide essential information on the mechanisms through which stressful situations, such as growing up in poverty, affect children.

### **2.3 Implications for research**

As has been stated in section 2.1, the two central concepts for a new sociology of childhood are the recognition of childhood as an integrated structural form in society (instead of a perspective on childhood as just a temporary phase in individual development) and of children as social actors (instead of passive subjects). Moreover, by its conceptualizing of the child as 'being' (as opposed to 'becoming') and its focus on the present world of children (rather than their future status as adults), the new sociology of childhood offers a useful conceptual framework for studying the personal experiences and actions of children living in poverty. Equally important, the new approach brings some useful methodological considerations to the field of child-poverty research. Childhood should be the unit of analysis and children the unit of observation. Children should be considered as 'participants in'

instead of ‘subjects of’ research, which implies that they should be treated as ‘knowledgeable’ and that their knowledge should be respected. One important step has already been taken toward illuminating the position of children in poverty. By making children the unit of observation in poverty statistics – as opposed to the more customary practice to subsume them within the family unit – new essential information on their conditions is emerging. Nevertheless, the ‘child-sensitive’ poverty statistics offer yet little information on the personal experiences and own actions of real children. The next step should therefore be to do research with instead of about children in poverty, to reveal their perspectives on their own poverty.

The literature on children’s coping acknowledges that not all children show problematic outcomes in the presence of stressful situations and has examined what enables some children to do well whereas others show problematic outcomes when faced with a particular stressful situation. This perspective is relevant to the study of child poverty in rich countries, for a further understanding on the variability in children’s outcomes (as put forward in the United States’ tradition of child-poverty research) provides essential information on the mechanisms through which stressful situations, such as growing up in poverty, affect them. From the literature on children’s coping, we can identify five specifically relevant questions: (1) What stressful experiences are associated with growing up in poverty?; (2) To what extent are the children under study confronted with these stressful experiences?; (3) When children are confronted with such experiences, do they themselves appraise these experiences as stressful?; (4) When the experiences are appraised as stressful, what kind of coping strategies do children employ (effective or ineffective strategies)?; and (5) What mediating factors affect these processes?. Moreover, from both the literature on children’s coping and the United States’ tradition of child-poverty research, we can identify the following relevant mediating factors:

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Personal characteristics of the child</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Age</li><li>- Gender</li><li>- Ethnicity</li></ul> <p><b>Factors within the family context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Parenting behaviour</li><li>- Family’s social support network</li><li>- Duration of poverty</li><li>- Parents’ perceptions on poverty</li><li>- Parent – child communication on poverty</li><li>- Parents’ ways of coping with poverty</li></ul> <p><b>Factors within the broader social context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- School</li><li>- Peers</li><li>- Neighbourhood</li></ul> |
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### **3. PUTTING IT TO PRACTICE: HEARING CHILDREN'S VOICES**

#### **3.1 Method's issues**

##### *Child poverty in The Netherlands*

In 1997, the Dutch 'Annual Report on Poverty and Social Exclusion' (Engbersen et al. 1997) called attention to the fact that 250,000 children were living in poverty in the Netherlands, according to a politically defined poverty line of 105 per cent of the minimum benefit level that is prevailing in the Netherlands. This statement has caused more political and research concern with the issue of child poverty in The Netherlands and has also been the reason for selecting The Netherlands for analysis in the present study.

##### *Main objective of the present study*

The main objective of the present study has been to explore children's personal experiences and coping strategies that follow upon the fact that they grow up in limited financial circumstances while living in a rich country, such as the Netherlands. Therefore, qualitative in-depth interviews have been conducted among six-to-sixteen-year-old children in the Netherlands who grow up in families with an income at the national minimum benefit level. In addition, children's parents have been interviewed to be able to more fully understand children's answers against the background of the specific family financial circumstances they grow up in. Altogether, interviews have been conducted among children and parents of 65 families from different ethnic backgrounds in some larger and smaller Dutch cities.

##### *Strengths and limitations*

Generally, qualitative research is not so much concerned with statistical representativeness, but rather to understand the diversity and complexity of a certain phenomenon. Hence, figures that are mentioned as resulting from the research only concern the present research group and cannot be generalised to Dutch society. These figures are only employed to demonstrate the diversity within the research group and to portray the many-sided impact of poverty on children's lives.

Individual interviews have been favoured above children's group interviews. Although group interviews certainly hold the advantage that the power relationship evoked between an adult researcher and a child informant can be reduced – as the 'social mismatch' between adult interviewer and child interviewee may be lessened when children have support from their peers (James et al. 1998) – the sensitive subject of the present study does not easily lend itself to group interviews. Individual interviews make it easier to ensure confidentiality and privacy and provide a safer and more intimate environment for disclosure and exploration of sensitive issues related to poverty. These are issues that, as Ridge (2002:9) claims, "could be obscured or leave a child painfully exposed in the shared environment of a group interview".

The children's parents have been interviewed to more fully understand children's answers against the background of the family context. However, the question how the wider social environment (e.g. school-life, peer group and neighbourhood) might be of influence on the way in which children experience poverty has been worked out less well in the present study. Although the children have been asked about their experiences at school, with their peers and in their neighbourhood, they have not been observed in these specific contexts nor have certain key persons (such as school teachers or social workers in community centres) been consulted.

### *Ethical considerations*

Research on children inevitably involves a discussion on ethics and methods. James and colleagues (1998) discuss some of the dilemmas which may be faced in any research with children. For, as they claim, notwithstanding the professional codes of conduct to which any researcher should adhere, researching children does raise a number of particular issues, e.g., issues of power and control, of gaining access to children, and of the contradictory need both to protect and involve children in research processes. These issues have implications for gaining access to children to participate in research, which normally requires gaining permission from adult's "gate-keepers" such as parents and teachers. This is a challenging procedure both due to the fact that adults have the power to refuse the permission even when children wish to participate, and that it can be hard for children to withdraw from an arrangement made by key adults who have power in their lives, which may lead to rational obedience through the fear of sanction (Ridge 2002, James et al. 1998). Hence, permission for children to participate in research must be sought from the children as well as their caretakers.

### *Enlisting of families*

It is difficult to find children and parents who are willing to talk about financial family circumstances and its consequences in daily life. It means an effort has to be made in earning these families' confidence. They have been approached by means of intermediaries whom they already trusted (such as social workers). Subsequently, parents have been asked permission to be interviewed themselves as well as one of their children. Next, before actually starting the children's interview, the interviewer had to require a reconfirmation of willingness to participate in the research from the child.

To participate, first of all, at the time of interview, families had to live on an income of no more than 105 per cent of the Dutch minimum benefit level. Only families living on a social assistance benefit were included as well as families with other sources of income (i.e., other benefit forms or paid labour) which at the height does not surpass the national minimum benefit level. Second, in these families had to live at least one child between the age of six and sixteen. Moreover, it has been strived for to conduct interviews among approximately as many of the younger as the older children and as many boys as girls. Third, as poverty in The Netherlands is highly concentrated among non-western ethnic minorities, this study has aimed to include both native-Dutch and non-western families in the study.

Altogether, interviews have been conducted among children and parents of 65 families from different ethnic backgrounds in various larger and smaller Dutch cities. In 60 families both one parent and one child have been interviewed. In case of five families, it appeared that, in the end, it was not possible to interview one of the children. In four out of these five cases, it was due to the fact that the interviewer did not get the necessary reconfirmation of the willingness to participate in the research from the child itself. And in one case both parent and interviewer were of the opinion that the interview would be too burdensome to the child concerned, due to specific family circumstances. In three other cases, two children per families have been interviewed. All in all, 63 children and 65 parents have been interviewed.

### *The children's interviews*

The children's interviews began with the explanation that the interview was not a test that they could pass or fail, but that the interviewer was sincerely interested in how they thought about certain topics. Next, they were ensured that their names were not going to be used in any written account of the interview, that the interviewer would not talk about it with their

parents or others without their consent and that they were free to stop the interview at any time and/or not to answer specific questions. In the end, most children became enthusiastic informants, feeling proud of the attention and value that was attached to their words.

The age of the children ranged from six to sixteen years old, therefore the questionnaires were designed to correspond to the age of the child that was being interviewed. The children interviewed had to be able to keep up with the length of the interview and to comprehend the words utilised. Therefore, test interviews were carried out, which resulted in the decision to employ three levels of questionnaires: one for the children aged six to nine; one for the children aged ten to twelve; and one for the children aged twelve to sixteen (i.e., the children in secondary school). All three questionnaires contained the same topics, but they differed in length (i.e., respectively 20, 30 and 45 minutes) and choice of terms.

The children's interviews were part-structured and started with relatively easy and straightforward (structured) questions about their free time: what do they like best in their free time and are they satisfied with the things they are able to do. More specifically, are they able to have a hobby of their own, to do sports, to go to the cinema, on vacation etc. Next, more personal and sensitive questions were asked about how they liked their family life, school life and social contacts with their peers (e.g., about the atmosphere at home and whether they experienced to fit in or be excluded from school life and peer group activities).

Many questions functioned as 'side-paths' to understand the impact of poverty on children's lives. Children were also asked in a more direct manner about the financial situation of their family unit. Still, they were never asked if they thought they were 'poor' or 'living in poverty'. It was important that they come up with such words themselves. First of all, because one cannot rule out the possibility that children may not be aware of their family's financial hardship and it is not the interviewer's place or intention to tell them and, subsequently, let them start thinking and worrying about it. Hence, this concerns an ethical consideration. Second, the methodological motivation for this is that the interviewer should not want to put such words into the children's mouths, since this study is about children's personal perspectives. Nevertheless, the interviewer did ask the children questions such as: Do your parents ever talk to you about money (and, if yes, in what way)? Do you ever feel that your father and/or mother has less money than other parents you know (and, if yes, how do you notice this)? If the children were indeed aware of their parents' financial hardship, often many personal stories came up at this point

#### *The parents' interviews*

The children's parents were interviewed in order to be able to more fully understand children's answers against the background of the specific family financial circumstances they grow up in. Hence, their parents were first asked in detail about their financial situation and, subsequently, they were asked about their social network, their ways of dealing with the current financial circumstances and how they themselves thought their financial circumstances affected the daily lives of their children. In order to obtain such diverse information, the parents' interviews – similar to the children's interviews – were part-structured as well: containing both closed questions (to obtain structured information) and open questions (to obtain parents' personal opinions).

### **3.2 Main characteristics of the children and their families interviewed**

This section offers some background information on the study group of 65 families with children with some main characteristics of the children interviewed and the families they

grow up in, and compares these characteristics to general statistics on poor families in the Netherlands.

#### *The children's characteristics*

As shown in the table below, the children's group included 28 younger children (i.e., from six through eleven years old) and 35 older children (i.e., from twelve through sixteen years old) and consisted of approximately as many boys (totalling 30) and girls (totalling 33). Furthermore, interviews were conducted among approximately as many children attending primary school (totalling 33) and secondary school (totalling 30).

**Table 3.1: Main characteristics of the 63 children interviewed**

	<b>N = 63</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Age</b>		
6 – 11	28	45%
12 – 16	35	55%
<b>Gender</b>		
Boy	30	48%
Girl	33	52%
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Native-Dutch children	37	59%
Migrant children, including/from:	26	41%
<i>Morocco</i>	10	16%
<i>Antilles</i>	5	8%
<i>Surinam</i>	6	9%
<i>Cape Verde</i>	5	8%
<b>Currently attended education level</b>		
Primary school, including	33	52%
Secondary school, including	30	48%
<i>Denominational education</i>	8	13%
<i>Lower vocational education</i>	8	13%
<i>Medium vocational/General secondary education</i>	10	16%
Other	4	6%

#### *The families' characteristics*

##### *Income*

The majority of families interviewed lived on the social assistance benefit. However, in case of fourteen families the main source of income was paid labour, implying that their wages were too low to rise above the minimum benefit level (the so-called 'working poor'). Other income sources were disability pension, unemployment benefit and widow(er)/orphans pension. Furthermore, within a minority of families interviewed, parents gained additional income through informal, non-registered labour. Related income sources appeared to be diverse and ranged from cleaning and baby-sitting to cutting other people's hair and repairing cars. The additional income arising out of these jobs varies from 10 to 100 euros per month.

### *Debts*

44 out of 65, i.e., 68 per cent of families interviewed had debts. The percentage is high compared to general Dutch statistics on poverty, which shows that the percentage of poor families with debts has varied between seven and ten for years. It mostly involved formal debts at banks, shops, mail-order businesses, telephone companies, housing associations and electricity companies. In several cases, however, there were informally negotiated debts with relatives or friends. The size of debts varied from 150 euros to about 10,000 euros, with an average of 2,500. The amount of related payments varied from zero to 180 euros per month, with an average of 60. This implies that those families who monthly pay off a considerable amount of money live in fact below the minimum benefit level.

### *Feeling able to make ends meet?*

The majority of parents interviewed (62%) said that they found it (very) difficult to make ends meet, especially among families with debts and among migrant families. Compared to general Dutch statistics – showing that, in 2000, 25 per cent of low-income families in The Netherlands found it (very) difficult to make ends meet – the percentage is high within the present research group.

### *Ethnicity*

The aim was to include both native-Dutch and non-western families in the research group. Eventually, interviews were conducted among 37 native-Dutch and 28 non-western families. Most parents in the ethnic minority families belong to the "first-generation" migrants and are (former) migrant workers. Most of their children are 'second-generation' migrants, i.e., they were either born in the Netherlands or arrived in the country before the age of six.

### *Family type*

Most families involved are one-parent families (50 out of 65), mainly single-mother families, except for two single-father families. The research group contains twelve two-parent families, which are to be found especially among the Moroccan families. This picture coheres with general Dutch statistics on poverty, which show poverty as far more prevailing among one-parent families.

### *Number of children*

The average number of children per family interviewed was 2.5. Among the 37 native-Dutch families the number of children was below the research group's average (i.e., 2 children per family), whereas among the 28 migrant families the number of children was above this average (i.e., 3 children per family). Among the Moroccan families interviewed, the number of children per family was most high (i.e., 3.6).

### *Education level of parents*

Dutch statistics show that it is especially the less well educated who have low income. Consistent with these statistics, the education level of the parents in the study was low: 37 parents completed no more than lower vocational education and only three parents have higher education. Moreover, the education level of migrant parents appeared to be generally lower compared to native-Dutch parents and was especially low among the participating Moroccan families.

Hence, the present research group deviated from general Dutch statistics on poor families as far as the high percentages of families with debts and of families who find difficulty in making end meet were concerned.

**Table 3.2: Main characteristics of the 65 families involved in the present research**

	N = 65	%
<b>Main source of family income</b>		
Social security	43	66%
Paid job, including:	14	22%
<i>subsidised jobs</i>	7	11%
Disability pension	5	8%
Unemployment benefit	2	3%
Widow(er)/Orphans pension	1	1%
<b>Informal family income</b>		
Yes	12	18%
No	50	77%
Non information	3	5%
<b>Debts</b>		
Yes	44	68%
No	19	29%
No information	2	3%
<b>Parents feeling able to make ends meet?</b>		
I can make ends meet (very) well	13	20%
Sometimes I can, sometime I cannot	12	18%
I find it (very) difficult to make ends meet	40	62%
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Native-Dutch families	37	57%
Migrant families, including/from	28	43%
<i>Morocco</i>	12	19%
<i>Antilles</i>	6	9%
<i>Surinam</i>	6	9%
<i>Cape Verde</i>	4	6%
<b>Family type</b>		
One-parent families	50	77%
Two-parent families	12	18%
Other types of families	3	5%
<b>Number of resident children (aged below 21) per family</b>		
1	15	23%
2	22	34%
3	13	20%
> 3	15	23%
<b>Parents' level of education</b>		
None	7	11%
Primary education	13	20%
Lower vocational education	17	26%
Medium vocational/General secondary education	24	37%
Higher vocational/University education	3	5%

## 4. POOR CHILDREN'S EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES

### 4.1 Family poverty and children's conditions

As discussed earlier, the majority of parents involved in the present research found it (very) difficult to make ends meet. What does this mean to the conditions of their children? This section seeks to illuminate whether the Dutch minimum benefit level at least assures that children's most basic life necessities are met. All parents interviewed were asked whether they were able to provide their children a hot meal and fresh vegetables or fruit on a daily basis, whether they were able to obtain for their children sufficient clothing and whether they were able to acquire medical help for their children whenever needed.

#### *Healthy nourishment*

Against what might have been expected in a rich welfare state, the present study shows that in a quarter of all families interviewed children did not receive a hot meal on a daily basis due to lack of money in the household.

“No, we don't have a hot meal every day. Saturdays we eat bread and often Wednesdays as well. And sometimes it's bread once more. Because I have to pay my bills. So I have to choose. But I try to [prepare a hot meal] as much as possible. The thing is, when there isn't a hot meal, then we may eat pancakes or bread and soup. So, not always only just bread.” (Dutch single mother, one child)

“Well, no, not always. Sometimes we have to eat bread. Look, really, I always try to manage it, but like the last couple of days... For example, last Monday, I didn't have bread to give along with my children. So I had to arrange that during the day and bring it to school in the afternoon. Well, at a day like that, I can't realise a hot meal either.” (Dutch single father, three children)

Daily fresh vegetables and fruit appeared to be even less common. For one third of all families interviewed, these were considered to be too expensive for daily consumption. For these families, fruit was obtained only very rarely and vegetables were bought mainly in cans or jars.

“It's mostly from the freezer or jars. A cauliflower is four guilders at the moment. So, I just walk past that one. Although they [her children] very much love it. And chicory, they are lovers of that too. But that I also have to pass. I think we've fresh vegetables once a week. At least, that's what I try to do, when it's priced a bit reasonably.” (Dutch single mother, two children)

“Well, not always, you know. Because there're periods... Okay, now [during spring] it's not so bad. Vegetables are a bit cheaper now. But there're periods that they're more expensive and that you can't buy them. I really try to as much as possible, but it's not always working out. And I'm not ashamed to say so. Sometimes I just don't manage.” (Surinamese single mother, three children.)

#### *Sufficient clothing*

Almost half of the parents stated that they were not able to obtain sufficient clothing for their children. This means these children had to wear clothes and/or shoes that were either too small or worn-out, since there was no money to immediately replace these items.

“My son, he got a coat from his nephew. And, well, he’s a bit grown out of it now and the pockets are in holes and the zipper is broken. Then you think, actually he needs a new coat, but it has to do for another while. So often he has to wait.” (Dutch mother, lat-relationship, one child)

“Actually, no, they don’t have enough. Last week my son said to me ‘mom, I need new cloths’. I said ‘I have no money, no money at all’. The boy said, ‘mom I have to’. I said ‘yes, I know you have to, but I can’t do anything about it’. His shoes are totally worn-out. I bought those shoes only last year, but now he needs new shoes again. And a new pair of trousers. His trousers are all too small. Children grow up. His trousers don’t fit any more.” (Moroccan single mother, four children).

### *Adequate housing*

All interviewed families were able to rent a house. Still, on their own accord, various parents interviewed pointed out that their children suffered from an insufficiently heated house and/or an inadequate place to sleep.

“No, actually we don’t have sufficient heating. We sleep in the living room for the whole winter, since there our only heater burns. Upstairs, icicles hang on the blankets. I used to have an electric heater, but then I had to pay so much extra on my energy bill.” (Dutch single mother, one child)

“Two of my children now sleep with their mattress on the ground, my twelve-year-old boy and my daughter of seventeen. Their beds have gone to pieces. They were that old. I’ve no money to buy new beds. And my little girl of five, she still sleeps in a childbed, while actually it’s too small for her. She can’t lie straight in it any more.” (Moroccan single mother, five children).

### *Access to medical care*

Finally, although all families interviewed were entitled to National Health Service (NHS) benefits, fifteen of the 65 families claim that their children’s access to medical care were limited due to lack of money. The limited access showed itself when needed medical care was not (completely) covered by the basic NHS package: certain medicines or medical treatments require own contributions or supplementary insurance or are excluded from the NHS altogether and therefore unaffordable.

“My daughter needs new glasses. But it’s been only a short while ago that she’s had new ones. Last year. But her eyes have declined so much again, that she needs new glasses again. And I don’t have to apply to the municipality again, because it’s once in every two years that you can get new glasses. But she needs those glasses now. So I have to get the money from somewhere somehow. So I’ve decided that I’m going to use the holiday pay for it. So she has to wait for a little while until the holiday pay comes in.” (Dutch single mother, two children)

“Nowadays it has improved somewhat, but my children have always needed a lot of medicines and special diets, because of diabetes and asthma. So quite some medicines have been pumped into them. But not all medicines they needed are in the National Health Service and my purse really felt that. So, honestly, every now and then it happened that I’d to halve the dosage, so as to make it just to the end of the week, when there was money again. Otherwise I couldn’t give them their medicines at all for about two or three days.” (Dutch mother, two-parent family, three children).

**Table 4.1: Children’s access to satisfying basic needs: parents’ responses**

	N = 65			%		
	Often applies	Sometimes applies	Never applies	Often applies	Sometimes applies	Never applies
Due to lack of money...						
1) ...my child does not receive a hot meal on a daily basis	6	11	48	9%	17%	74%
2) ...my child does not obtain fresh vegetables or fruit on an daily basis	12	10	43	19%	15%	66%
3) ...my child does not possess sufficient clothing	11	17	37	17%	26%	57%
4) ...my child does not receive medical care at any time needed	2	13	46	3%	20%	71%

*Children’s narratives on meeting their basic needs*

Although children may not express themselves in terms of ‘healthy’ food or ‘sufficient’ clothing, the children’s interviews made clear that they may come to realise that buying food and clothes is somehow problematic. Some, for example, claimed to know that money ran out at the end of the month, for they noticed that ‘just bread or soup’ was eaten these days or that ‘the refrigerator is empty’. Others related to the fact that they mostly ‘have to wait’ for new clothes or obtain them only second-hand.

“To us, it’s a celebration when money comes in. Money came in today. So now at least our refrigerator is full. Or well, full... Anyway, we’ve normal food again and we don’t have to pay attention so much and go easy on it. About a week before a month’s money comes in, then it starts. We’ve to go easy on everything. I can’t do anything then and there’s only what’s strictly needed, bread and something to eat in the evening. Sometimes it’s just soup. Or we borrow money to have a hot meal.” (15-year-old Dutch girl)

“If we want something mom mostly says ‘it’s not possible’. If your shoes are worn out and there’s no money, you’ve to wait. Food always comes first with our mom.” (15-year-old Dutch girl)

“I would like to have new clothes. I don’t think I’ve had any new clothes this year. Only through other people. I think it’s been a long time that I’ve had truly new clothes.” (10-year-old Dutch girl).

**4.2 Associating with peers**

Children, however, do not only act and function within their own family. They go to school, play in the street and visit their friends’ homes. The interviews with children made clear that it was especially through social contacts with peers that the limited financial circumstances they lived in acquire significance (something that is in line with the study by Ridge (2002); see section 1.3). By comparing themselves with other children they might notice they possessed fewer (and in their eyes often less attractive) material goods or did not have the latest toys and other products that are ‘in’. Possessing clothes with certain brands or clothes

that are in fashion were not possible. Because of that, some of the children interviewed experienced bullying by other children.

“Those other families have very modern, new things in their houses. And we don’t. Our TV broke down. Now we’ve one of someone else. Or for example our couch. That too is second-hand.” (13-year-old Dutch girl)

“They always have more expensive bikes. Some guys have a mobile phone and all.” (13-year-old Dutch boy)

“I don’t think I have nice clothes. I want those clothes that are in fashion. At school there is often said something about it: ‘you dress out of fashion’ and ‘you look stupid’. It’s not nice to hear such things.” (13-year-old Dutch girl)

Besides these material characteristics of poverty, living in poverty often encompasses less access to social activities as well. This is labelled ‘social exclusion’, which means that due to lack of money it is not possible to participate in the ordinary social life of society. For the children interviewed, this might imply that they did not have the possibility to become a member of a sports club, that they could not always celebrate their birthday party or participate in school excursions or that they could not go on holidays every year or even never had been on holiday.

**Table 4.2: Children’s access to social activities: parents’ responses**

	N = 65			%		
	Often applies	Sometimes applies	Never applies	Often applies	Sometimes applies	Never applies
Due to lack of money...						
1) ... my child cannot go on holidays	24	27	10	37%	42%	15%
2) ... my child is not able to become a member of a (sports) club	19	11	35	29%	17%	54%
3) ... my child cannot celebrate a birthday party	12	18	35	18%	28%	54%
4) ... my child does not participate in school excursions	2	7	56	3%	11%	86%

In the experience of children, the absence of holidays appeared to be perceived as a special problem. Here again, it is in particular through comparisons with peers, that children felt excluded.

“I’ve never been on holidays. My whole live, never. At school, they talk about Spain, France. I’ve never been there. Truly, I don’t like that. I too would like to go abroad once. Even if it is only once.” (15-year-old Dutch girl).

### 4.3 Emotional pressure

Children may be pressured emotionally by the difficult financial situation of the family they grow up in. It appears that, in more than half of the families interviewed, parental worries about money were confided to children. Parents, especially, share with their children those

financial worries that were related to unexpected expenditures, such as unexpected bills. It seems that, already hard-pressed, parents could not conceal their disappointment over sudden extra expenditures and worries that went along with it. Discussions as such might vary from sometimes making a remark to very frequent and/or detailed conversation.

“Do your parents ever talk to you when they are troubled about something? Mostly they talk to each other, but sometimes I’m involved in it too. What is it about then? About all kind of things, but mostly about money. About our cooker for example, when it suddenly broke down. Then my mother said: ‘We have to buy a new cooker, but I’m not made of money’.” (15-year-old Moroccan boy)

“Does your mother ever talk to you about money? Yes she does. Pretty often actually. About something she needs. Or she says ‘actually I need money for this or that’ or ‘I can’t pay that pay that bill’.” (14-year-old Dutch boy)

“Does your mother ever talk to you about money? Oh yes, just over breakfast. For example, that time with Social Services. She said she would have herself dragged away by the police. And she said that she’d wanted to throw a plant trough their windows, but that it was screwed down. So your mom was really mad with Social Services? Yes, because she had to pay for something and Social Services promised to pay her back in two days, but two months later she still didn’t get that money. She really hates it, that she always has to go to Social Services.” (11-year-old Dutch girl)

In addition, several parents borrowed money from their children, thus a rather direct manner, facing their children with the fact that they had problems making ends meet. Hence, for example, children might be asked to lend money from their birthday, pocket money or money they earned with a sideline job.

“Does your mother ever talk to you about money? Yes, sometimes. That we haven’t got it. That the housing association is giving her a hard time. That she didn’t have the money to pay for my schoolbooks. That sort of things. The money for those schoolbooks, I had to advance. She borrowed that money from me, but I will get it back.” (16-year-old Dutch girl)

“Does your mother ever talk to you about money? Yes, sometimes she says we haven’t got enough. Or she may still owe me some money and then she tells me that she can’t pay me back yet. But really, I don’t mind. I do get it back. Although it may take some time. Like now, I’ve lend a 100 guilders to her. Well, that takes a while before I get that back again. Do you know why she needs it then? Groceries, mostly.” (15-year-old Dutch boy)

Finally, if there were worries and tensions over money within the family, children might also notice these themselves. They said this could be observed from the way their parents behave (i.e., their non-verbal communication):

“Sometimes, when Social Services don’t pay in time, she’s in a bad mood.” (11-year-old Dutch girl)

#### **4.4 Variability in children’s experiences**

Notwithstanding the aforementioned difficult circumstances which poor children in the Netherlands may encounter, it should be noted the figures as shown in the Tables 4.1 and 4.2 also elucidate the fact that it is not within all families interviewed that children’s basic needs were not met or that their access to social activities was limited in a similar sense; neither were all children interviewed emotionally burdened with financial family problems. It

appeared that children were not equally affected by poverty. Initial analysis shows that when the experiences of children are considered within their broader social context, different factors emerge that may influence the diversity in children's experiences with poverty.

#### *Actual free space of expenditure*

Though all of the children interviewed were living in families living at the minimum subsistence level, the actual free space of expenditure appeared to diverge significantly. For example, although quite a few families were weighed down by debts, there were also families that did not have debts. Moreover, in some families extra informal income was generated, while in other families there was no such additional income (see also section 3.2). Therefore, understandably, differences arose in the actual amount of money that could be spent on children.

#### *Parental creativity and the family's material and financial social support network*

A number of parents appeared to be very creative in inventing effective solutions or inexpensive but satisfying alternatives for their children, whereas other parents succeed in this much less. Moreover, several families were supported by others (e.g., friends, relatives, ex-partners, neighbours, acquaintances) in a material and financial way, while other families did not receive this support. For example, in terms of meeting the children's basic needs, quite a few of the supported parents relied on their social network, especially as far as a hot meal and clothing were concerned. In some cases the ex-partner still made a contribution toward his children's needs. Other parents related that they could always go and dine with relatives for a hot meal for their children. Other parents claimed that their children could only be sufficiently dressed because they received second-hand clothes from friends and acquaintances. Children, too, reported when their parents thought of solutions and successful alternatives or when they received support from others. For example, they related to inexpensive but still successful holidays or talked about the times that they were taken out by a friend's parents, went to the cinema with their older brother or received presents from their father living away from home. For these children, the sharpest consequences of poverty seemed to be diminished to some extent.

#### *Parental coping and the family's emotional social support network*

The way in which poverty has left its mark on the families interviewed was not only a financial matter, but was also influenced by the way in which parents handled the poverty situation, which in turn might be influenced by the emotional social support parents receive. The interviews with parents showed that poverty was not equally constraining: not every parent worried about this situation and not every parent who did worry discussed it with their children. A number of parents reported that they attempted not to discuss their worries with their children, because they wanted 'their children to be able to be a child' and they did not want to burden them with their own financial problems. They tried to keep their worries to themselves or seek emotional support from friends or relatives. In this way, the emotional support network of parents provided protection for children: if parents are able to share their worries with others, fewer burdens are laid on the child's shoulders. In fact, in the opposite case, further analysis shows that parents, who were dissatisfied with their social network, all shared their worries with their children.

### *Age*

Age seemed to have an influence as well. It appeared that below the age of nine, none of the children interviewed had experienced their parents sharing their financial worries with them. Apparently, parents considered them too young. Whereas the 15 and 16-year-old children of the sample were all entrusted with parental financial worries.

### *Communication with peers*

As we have seen in section 4.2, it is especially through social contacts with peers that the limited financial family circumstances acquire significance in children's lives. However, it appears that in the daily contacts and communication with these peers, the poverty situation can be of major or minor importance. As has been mentioned, some children, for example, are bullied by other children, because of their low-priced clothes. In this way, these children are again reminded that their parents do not have much money. Nonetheless, there were children who report that they 'actually never talk about money-related matters' with peers; that it was 'not so much an issue'.

### *Summary*

Initial analysis of the interview material shows that different mediating factors emerge that may be responsible for the existing variety in children's personal experiences with poverty: the family's actual free space of expenditure (i.e., the actual amount of money that can be spent on children), parental coping (i.e., the manner in which parents handle the poverty situation), parental creativity (i.e., parents' ability to invent effective solutions or inexpensive but satisfying alternatives for their children), parent-child communication (i.e., the extent to which parents and children communicate about poverty), the family's social support network (i.e., the amount of financial, material and/or emotional social support that is received by the family), children's age and communication with peers (i.e., the importance of money-related matters in the interaction with peers). Some of these factors clearly resemble the mediating factors that have also been identified within the US literature on child poverty and the literature on children's coping processes (see chapter two, section 2.3).

## **5. POOR CHILDREN'S COPING STRATEGIES**

### **5.1 Problem solving and positive reappraisal**

The description of poor children's everyday experiences foreshadows the question of how children, who are confronted with the various challenging experiences related to poverty, try to deal or 'cope' with these experiences. It appears that the majority of the children interviewed demonstrated reactions that involved active steps with the intention to change the difficult situation. Hence, these children clearly were not just passive victims of the poverty situation they grow up in. Quite the contrary, they actively try to do something about it. Many of the younger children, for example, reported that they bought their own toys by saving up their pocket or birthday money. They also tried to earn additional money by means of little jobs like washing cars or doing chores around the house. Among the older children, several earned additional money through spare time jobs, mostly a newspaper round. Moreover, some children searched for very creative solutions in order to fulfil their wishes. As one ten-year-old boy, who had set his hopes on a television programme and one fifteen-year-old girl, who has arranged her own dance club:

“I’m gonna write to ‘The Chance of Your Life’. I still have to go to my aunt and there I’ll type everything on a note. This I’ll send to Ron Brandsteder [the ringmaster of the programme] and then, maybe, I’ll get into ‘The Chance of Your Life’ and receive everything I want.” (10-year-old Dutch boy)

“My hobbies are street-dance and dancing. I like that a lot. Mostly, me and other children make up a club of our own and then we ho play and dance here at the market square. My father, then, takes care of the music. But I’m not a member of a [official] club, only my own club.” (12-year-old Dutch girl)

Within the literature on children’s coping such abovementioned active responses have been labelled as ‘problem-focused’ or ‘approach-oriented’ coping (see chapter two, section 2.2). However, despite these active solutions poor children appear to develop, they often are not in a position to change their situation in a substantial way: they cannot change the fact that they grow up in a poor family. Nevertheless, as stated in the literature on children’s coping, children may approach such a challenging situation in a more cognitive manner as well, i.e., by means of ‘positive reappraisal’ (see page 24). It appears that several children interviewed indeed did develop coping strategies that enabled them to appraise their situation in a more positive light. They actively tried to manipulate or reframe their perception of the situation, by providing it with a positive label. In this context, children might express themselves in a rather grown-up manner and made remarks such as: ‘at least we have a house’ and ‘other things are more important’. Or, as an eleven-year-old boy said:

“Sometimes I think: well, it’s better to have food than a Play Station, cause you can’t eat a Play Station.” (11-year-old Dutch boy)

## **5.2 Problem avoidance and resignation**

The children interviewed did not always react in such positive ways to the experiences they encountered due to poverty. Sometimes they simply tried to distance themselves from it. In the literature on children’s coping have been labelled as ‘avoidance-oriented’ coping (see section 2.2). For example, several children reported how they just tried not to think too much about their situation. They seemed to resign themselves to the situation and made rather fatalistic remarks such as ‘I’m already used to it’ or ‘there isn’t any thing to do about it anyway’.

“I used to think it was actually a bit mean. Now I think... I can live with it now. I’ve accepted it. I can hardly go whining every night, like ‘I can do nothing, never can I do anything’. It is like it is.” (13-year-old Dutch girl)

“For example, school activities. Other kids do attend them. I think that is... Maybe it has become sort of normal. I’ve become used to it.” (14-year-old Surinamese girl)

“I want to do more, but I also know that it isn’t possible. So than it isn’t possible. That just isn’t that complicated. I resign myself to that. Although I would rather not to, resigning myself to it.” (15-year-old Dutch girl)

Other children explained how they tried to avoid particular confrontations with their peers, e.g., by avoiding to invite other children to their homes, by running away from school in order to avoid being bullied or by concealing it was their birthday in order to avoid having to admit that there were no money to have a birthday party.

“When I’m here at home with someone, I could offer that one something to drink, but only apple juice. Never a coke or such a thing. I feel like I look a fool then. So I just don’t ask. I try to go to someone else as soon as possible, not to stay with us.” (15-year-old Dutch girl)

“I could invite my friends, but, well, I don’t feel like receiving them in this house. I don’t think it’s real tidy here. I want to do something about it, but when I want to throw something away, she [his mother] says ‘no, you cant’. And then she again buys stuff that really costs nothing. I just think it’s a mess. I think all looks poor around here.” (15-year-old Dutch boy)

“I don’t like going to school when I don’t have nice clothes. Then I don’t want to go. They bully me because of my clothes. They say things like ‘did you get them from the dustbin again?’ Last year I was bullied a lot. I couldn’t keep up with it. Then I ran away from school a lot and I went to the shopping-centre to think about it or I went home. Then my father used to send me back and went talking to the headmaster.” (12-year-old Dutch girl)

“When it’s my birthday, I keep quiet. At school, I tell nobody that it’s my birthday. I’m not going excited like ‘it’s my birthday, it’s my birthday’. Because, well, then they’re going to say ‘are you going to invite me, are you going to invite me’, and then I have to keep saying ‘no man, I can’t invite you’.” (10-year-old Surinamese boy)

Moreover, various children interviewed tried to avoid money-related discussions with their parents as much as possible, by keeping their wishes to themselves. This was either because they already knew the answer or because they did not want to make it any harder on their parents. It appeared that as much as some parents might try to protect their children from their financial worries (as discussed in section 4.4), children try to protect their parents well. Here we touch upon the phenomenon of ‘role reversal’, i.e., children who, to some extent, feel they have to take care of their parents.

### **5.3 Role-reversal: children protecting their parents**

In this context, several children explained how they did their utmost to conceal their disappointment or not to complain about the things they could not have or do, as they did not want to burden their parents with additional worries over money.

“When I know I can’t have it, I don’t ask. Because then she [her mother] starts thinking, ‘my children want this and that, but I can’t give it to them’.” (12-year-old Cape Verdant girl)

“Mostly, when I want something and I already know that I won’t get it, I just don’t talk about it. Could you explain why you don’t talk about it? Well, I just know that I won’t get it and then still asking and asking for it.. Suppose she [his mother] goes spending money on it and that next month she, for example, really hasn’t got any money left for food, just because I had to have that thing so bad.” (15-year-old Dutch boy)

One eleven-year-old boy attempted to stop his mother from worrying altogether. As became clear from his mother’s interview, he tried to reassure her by telling her there was no need to worry.

“When I’m short of money, I want to stay to myself a little. And he notices. He says: ‘Mommy, do you have problems with your sister?’ I say: ‘No, leave me alone’. ‘Mommy, do you have problems with uncle...?’ ‘No’. ‘Then why you’re moody?’ I say: ‘Well, I think about money. I have to buy something.’ And then he says: ‘We have food, you don’t have think’. Yes, he’s a sweet boy.” (Cape Verdant single mother, talking about her 11-year-old son)

Moreover, some other children tried to relieve their parents' financial worries by offering them their own money. Either they actually offered a considerable amount of money to their parents (i.e., their saved-up pocket money or money they earned with a spare time job), or in their wish to solve their parents' problems and stop them from worrying, they just wanted to make a gesture toward their parents, while in the end they did not have the required financial means.

"Does your mother ever talk to you about money? Yes, a lot. That she's having financial problems. That she's having a hard time. She just tells me. Do you ever worry about your mother's financial problems? I do give her some money for her birthday that she can use to buy or do something big. It still makes a contribution. That I give away then. That isn't that little then too." (15-year-old Dutch girl)

"Do you ever share your financial difficulties with your children? Yes, I've had plenty of threatening letters [from bailiffs]; that they would come to sell my household goods. Really. And then, sometimes, I talk about it with my children. For then my son says: 'Mommy, why are you sad?' And then I say: 'They want to come and sell this or sell that, because I haven't got the money for it and I really don't know where to get it from'. And he is so sweet you know, because then he says: 'Well, why don't you just take it from my account?' He doesn't have any money on his account. But that's his idea then, like, well, I'll help you." (Surinamese single mother, talking about her 9-year-old son)

#### **5.4 Emotional distress**

Some children expressed their emotions related to the experiences they had been facing due to poverty, without reporting any further actions on them. They related to feelings of shame, jealousy or exclusion when their friends or classmates could have and do so much more than they themselves could or reported to become sad or angry when the things they would like to have so much were refused over and over again by their parents.

"I'm jealous at my best friend. She does horseback-riding, karate and street dance. So I'm very jealous at that." (12-year-old Dutch girl)

"Sometimes I think, 'why not me for once'." (13-year-old Dutch boy)

"You feel so unlike. Everyone has nice clothes and I don't. And, still, there you are, in the middle of them." (13-year-old Dutch girl)

Moreover, some children reported to be really worried about their family's financial situation, which mostly was a reaction to the financial problems and worries their parents had entrusted them with (see section 4.3). They seemed to adopt these worries.

"Sometimes I worry. At times that we still have to pay this and that and then we haven't got so much money and than everything is out of the ordinary. That's quite difficult sometimes. A few years ago, when she [her mother] told me something I myself got a stomach-ache out of it." (16-year-old Dutch girl)

"I worry sometimes, because sometimes she [his mother] says that money is too little and that half of it goes straight to the rent. Then she only has left a few hundred guilders and she has to do with that for a month. But she's finished with it in two, three weeks. She hasn't got more. Then all she has left is a tenner, for a whole week, or something like that." (13-year-old Dutch boy)

## **5.5 Variation in children's coping strategies**

The preceding sections make clear that living in poverty elicits a wide range of coping strategies from children. Further analysis shows that the variety in children's coping strategies especially arises from the variety in the challenging experiences children are faced with due to poverty. As presented in section four, children have to deal with poverty at home, school and in their daily contacts with their peers. Hence, in accordance with the literature on children's coping (see section 2.2), children seemed to vary their coping strategies across various situations.

With regard to meeting their own needs, children might feel they possess some personal control to actively improve their situation. Although they could not change the fact that they grow up in a poor family – after all, they were not in control of their parents' income – still, they might attempt to satisfy their needs by means of a spare time job, saving up pocket money or positive reappraisal of the situation they live in (see section 5.1).

However, as regards experiences that involve direct confrontations or discussions with peers and parents, it appears that avoidance-oriented coping is more often employed. Hence, children might try to avoid situations in which they feel excluded or different from their peers. Moreover, various children interviewed tried to avoid money-related discussions with their parents as much as possible. They kept their wishes to themselves, either because they already knew that the answer or, what was more, because they did not want to make it any harder on their parents and therefore tried to protect their parents from extra worries over money (see sections 5.2 and 5.3).

Furthermore, as had been stated in section 5.4, in some cases, children just expressed their emotions related to the experiences they had been facing due to poverty, without reporting any further actions on them. They might feel overwhelmed by the poverty situation they were in, without being able to offer an adequate answer to it.

Seeing that the literature on children's coping shows that the more passive and avoidance-oriented coping strategies are the least effective and related to higher mental health problems in children (see section 2.2), the children who principally employ strategies as such should be of our greatest concern.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Attention to child poverty in rich countries is clearly on the increase. This rising receptiveness especially finds expression in the fact that children are being made much more visible within national and international poverty statistics; by making children the unit of observation – as opposed to the more customary practice to subsume them to the family unit – new essential information on children's conditions is emerging. However, one of the barely touched areas within today's mainstream child-poverty research is the life world of 'real' children that lies concealed behind statistical numbers. Hence, although the child evidently has come into view, the perspective is primarily directed upon the child, whereas yet little notice is taken of a perspective from the child. It results in the depiction of children as playing only a passive role in the situation they live in. Consequently, children's personal experiences and own actions remain largely unnoticed. The main objective of this formative study has therefore been to deepen our understanding of child poverty and to consider child poverty from the perspective of children actually living in poverty and to capture their personal experiences and own ways of dealing with it. This study has aimed to promote children's visibility and their voices

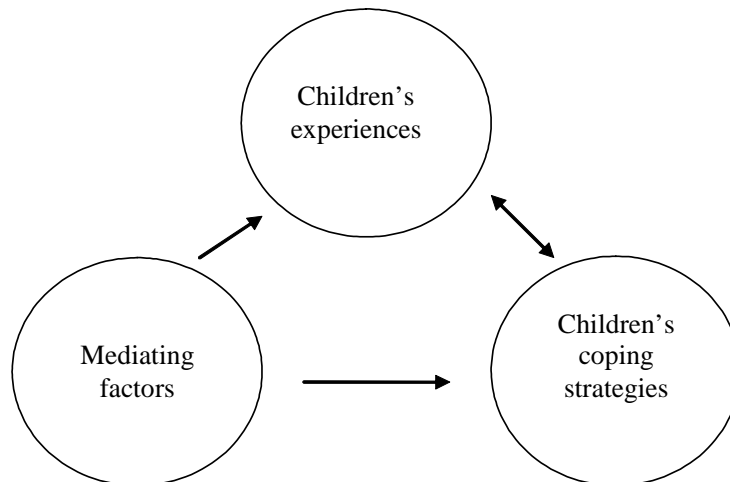
within the scope of research on child poverty in rich countries, both through a theoretical and empirical exploration.

*Child poverty through children's eyes, what have we learnt?*

How may children's perspectives contribute to the knowledge on child poverty in rich countries? First of all, children's perspectives offer a view on what growing up in poverty means in the everyday life of a child. It is especially through their interaction with peers that the limited financial circumstances they live in acquire significance: by means of their social contacts with friends and classmates, the existing differences between themselves and others become apparent. Thus, they are frequently confronted with situations in which they may feel materially and socially deprived. In addition, they may also be pressured emotionally by the difficult financial situation of their family, i.e., when their parents confide in them. Nevertheless, it also became clear that children develop various strategies to deal with poverty. It is striking that many of the children interviewed demonstrated reactions that involved active steps with the intention of changing the difficult situation. Hence, these children clearly were not just passive victims of the poverty situation they grew up in.

At the same time, it should be noted that when children's experiences and coping strategies are examined at the individual level, clear differences emerge within the group of children labelled as poor (children whose family income falls below a certain threshold). That is, not every child is materially or socially deprived in a similar sense, not every child is emotionally burdened with family financial problems and not every child copes effectively with the situation of poverty. It is therefore important not to consider poor children as a homogeneous group, but rather to emphasise the individual differences within the group of poor children and to identify the mediating factors that may aggravate or diminish the negative impact of poverty on children's daily lives.

Hence, the empirical part of this initial study has first presented the diversity of experiences that follow growing up in poverty and, subsequently, has brought to light various of the mediating factors that influence the extent to which children are confronted with the challenging experiences that tend to be related to poverty, i.e.: the family's actual free space expenditure, parental coping, parental creativity, parent-child communication, the family's social support network, children's age and communication with peers. Next, it is shown that living in poverty elicits a wide range of coping strategies from children and that they seem to vary them across the various situations they encounter due to poverty. In turn, the way children cope with poverty, influences the way poverty is experienced. Hence, the combined action of mediating factors, personal experiences and coping strategies determines the impact of poverty on children's lives. Schematically, this could be depicted as follows:



*Translation into complementary policy directions*

Child-poverty research that is focused on determining its extent, trends and characteristics across rich countries, elicits policy measures that aim to reduce child-poverty rates. Studying child poverty from the child's perspective enables us the development of policy interventions that make a difference to the lives of children who grow up in poverty at the present, as children's voices offer valuable keystones to formulate policy measures that are targeted directly at improving their life conditions. For instance, further clarification of the aforementioned mediating factors and subsequently classifying protective and risk factors may give some clear underpinnings for policy makers: factors that prove to be protective should be strengthened, whereas factors that seem to exacerbate the negative impact of poverty on children should be tackled.

Moreover, listening to children reveals the issues that children themselves consider important in their lives and identifies the areas in which they experience growing up in poverty to be most severe. Such an insight helps to develop policy interventions that attend to their own needs. In addition, especially since it is increasingly challenged that the household can be treated as a single unit in which resources are shared equally, it also enables us to formulate certain child-specific policies over and above family policies (e.g., measures that guarantee that certain social activities of children, such as a (sports)club and school excursions, are accessible to children from poor families), in order to open up chances for children in poor families and to loosen the strict linkages between parents' situation and children's conditions.

Giving voice to children enables us to complement the policies directed at reducing the quantity of child poverty, with policies directed at improving the quality of the lives of poor children. Accordingly, if we mean to improve their life conditions while living in affluent societies, we must reinforce children's voices within the scope of research on child poverty and strengthen the initiatives for reporting systems in which children can be heard themselves.

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