Researching child poverty: Towards a lifeworld orientation

Griet Roets
Ghent University, Belgium

Rudi Roose
Ghent University, Belgium; Free University of Brussels, Belgium

Maria Bouverne-De Bie
Ghent University, Belgium

Abstract
Childhood research with children in poverty involves a diversity of dilemmas and complexities. In the context of a recent research project in Belgium, the authors attempt to embrace child poverty as a normative issue created a crisis of representation. In order to untangle this, they situate different methodological approaches in relation to the constructed epistemological windows on child poverty. The authors differentiate between research in which the authentic voice of children in poverty is represented, and research in which their lifeworld is interpreted through a lifeworld orientation perspective that pursues human dignity and social justice in our societies.

Keywords
Child poverty, crisis of representation, lifeworld orientation, social justice, voice

Introduction
Over the last few decades, researchers in a range of disciplines have increasingly acknowledged the importance of grasping children’s perspectives as sophisticated ways of knowing, which implies an effort to move beyond constructing and reconstructing children’s experiences based upon adult-centred ideals (Alanen and Mayall, 2001). The impetus has been that children are recognized as active agents shaping their lives, and therefore have a right to express their views in research ventures (James et al., 1998;
Mayall, 2002; Qvortrup et al., 2009). As a correction of existing research paradigms in which children are portrayed as passive objects of research (Ridge and Saunders, 2009), the ‘power relations implicated in knowledge production and the extent to which children are constructed as knowing subjects’ are reconfigured (Balen et al., 2006: 31), framing children as ‘epistemologically privileged in that they are better placed than adults to produce situated knowledge … of their everyday experience’ (Balen et al., 2006: 32). As children in poverty and their families are one of the most frequently governed groups in society, researchers have highlighted the importance of developing ‘a spectrum of qualitative research with disadvantaged children that is growing and changing as it responds to new and innovative ways of engaging with children’ (Ridge and Saunders, 2009: 499). People in poverty have only quite recently been recognized by researchers for their own relevant perspectives on poverty (Lister, 2004), and it is only relatively recently too that poor children’s involvement in research has been widely accepted and desired (Redmond, 2009; Ridge and Saunders, 2009). In the aftermath of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion in 2010, however, there appears to be an impressive body of qualitative childhood research in which giving ‘voice’ to children in poverty has taken high priority (for reviews, see for example Attree, 2006; Crivello et al., 2010; Ridge, 2011; Ridge and Saunders, 2009). In the field of childhood studies, research has highlighted the importance of involving children in poverty themselves, since ‘carrying out research with rather than on children remains relatively rare within poverty research … [while] participatory approaches can offer nuanced understandings, with a particular emphasis on children’s own experiences, perspectives and agency’ (Crivello et al., 2010: 256).

It has been critically observed, however, that research conducted with children in poverty seems to involve a diversity of methodological dilemmas and complexities (see Lundy, 2007; Ridge, 2011). In this article, we explore these issues more in-depth in the context of a recent research project in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium). As the currently popular discourse of ‘listening to children’ is beset with methodological and ethical ambiguities (Komulainen, 2007), we struggled with key questions such as how to involve children in poverty during the research process and how to represent their voice, experiencing what has been framed as a ‘crisis of representation’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). As Spyrou (2011: 151) argues in a recent issue of Childhood, although the field of childhood studies has built its very raison d’etre around the notion of children’s voice, ‘this preoccupation with children’s voices … has mostly failed to scrutinize itself and to attend critically to issues of representation’. We argue that engaging with vital methodological questions concerning giving voice to children in poverty and the representation of their perspectives can open up epistemological possibilities for public debate concerning the value of human dignity and the quality of social justice in anti-poverty policy making and practice (Platt, 2005).

Untangling a crisis of representation

In order to untangle this crisis of representation, Andreola (1993) asserts that issues of representation are interrelated with epistemological as well as methodological issues
(see also Bogdan and Biklen, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Hogan and Gilligan, 1998).

The epistemological issue implies that researchers need to be aware of the fact that (child) poverty is an extremely normative social problem (Lister, 2004; Platt, 2005), and that research is always politically charged since researchers intervene in existing assumptions about social problems (Bouverne-De Bie, 2011). According to Levering (2010), the role of research in the process by which knowledge is generated as socially constructed in relations of power implies that the ways in which research intervenes in existing assumptions about social problems should be open to scrutiny. This is particularly relevant for researchers undertaking research on (child) poverty, as the ways in which societies intervene in poverty situations, influenced by research, is an extremely normative and political issue (Corden, 1996; Platt, 2005). Mestrum (2011: 162) argues aptly with regard to researching child poverty that there are serious problems with a conceptualization of child poverty that is not openly discussed, as ‘researchers are clearly influenced by what they think is economically sustainable, socially desirable or psychologically feasible’. This implies that choices must be made, legitimized and openly discussed in constructing research related to (child) poverty, yet the considerations in making such choices are less frequently discussed (Corden, 1996). As D’Cruz and Jones (2004: 9) argue, it is important to understand the political dimension of generating knowledge, requiring:

… a greater degree of reflexivity … to think about what assumptions about the world are taken for granted and what questions and answers are not addressed or precluded by particular pieces of research or particular research designs.

Being reflexively aware of the limits of generating knowledge about child poverty embodies methodological issues as well. Across disciplines, qualitative researchers have been in search of methodological ways to uncover the meanings their research subjects bring to social problems, ‘given by the individuals studied as windows into the inner lives of these persons’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003: 30–31). In childhood research, it is a vital starting point to generate knowledge about child poverty that is ‘open to children’s own views so that they can express what are relevant matters and priorities for them’ (Hogan and Gilligan, 1998: 11). In the context of a recent research project, we were commissioned to explore the experiences of children in poverty to gain insight into their meaning of leisure time participation (Coussé and Roets, 2011). The Flemish government commissioned the research project over nine months to explore the ways in which children in poverty experience their leisure time during the summer holidays in three cities in Flanders. In the configuration of the research design, we struggled with the complexities of giving voice to children in poverty while attempting to ‘render the reality of poverty both meaningful and immediate to publics and governments’ (Platt, 2005: 9). Our attempt to open up the normative issue of child poverty for public debate created a high sense of uncertainty during the research process. In the following, we throw light on the emergent methodological dilemmas and complexities, and the eventual choices made. In the discussion, we situate these different approaches in relation to the constructed epistemological windows on child poverty.
Methodological configurations of research involving children in poverty

Since childhood research with children in poverty draws on a diversity of methodological approaches (Ridge, 2011), we considered different methodological configurations of research that aims at giving voice to children in poverty. In the following, we identify two different approaches and differentiate between childhood research that attempts to capture and represent the authentic voice of children in poverty, and childhood research that aims at giving voice to children in poverty while attempting to capture and interpret the complex interplay between individual aspirations and systemic forces.

Capturing and representing the authentic voice of children in poverty

In an attempt to embrace children’s voice, much childhood research has attempted to capture and represent the authentic voice of children in poverty (King, 2007; Spyrou, 2011). In reviewing a considerable body of childhood research with children in poverty from a range of disciplines, giving voice to children in poverty is generally translated as an attempt to capture and represent their authentic voice, aiming to produce versions of what children ‘really say’ as ‘facts’ (Hogan and Gilligan, 1998), and believing that ‘the truth about children’s understanding of the world around them is accessible’ (King, 2007: 196). From this perspective, the dominant emphasis is placed upon recognizing and embracing poor children’s agency, seeing ‘them as active in the construction of their own lives’ (James, 2009: 41). A review of an extensive body of qualitative research involving children in poverty in the UK, for example, stresses children’s agency showing that ‘children were clearly not passively enduring the effects of poverty and many were actively adopting a range of strategies to mediate and negotiate the impact of disadvantage on their lives’ (Ridge, 2011: 81). While children have been shown to embrace their agency, mirrored in their active strategies of coping, many researchers have concluded that growing up poor constitutes ‘a particular source of vulnerability and disadvantage for children, especially where they are confronted with gross inequalities’ (Crivello et al., 2010: 255). Based on a systematic review of the qualitative evidence, Attree (2006) indicates that research predominantly demonstrates that the costs of poverty are profoundly social, and that listening to poor children’s voices demonstrates their acceptance of material constraints while coping with poverty. Further, the psychological effects of living in poverty and individual ways of coping with, and acceptance of, living in poverty are stressed. As Ridge (2011: 81) concludes, ‘poverty imposes a harsh penalty on children’s lives, constraining their social engagement and penetrating deep into the emotional heartland of their personal and family life’. In the majority of these childhood research projects, when the wider social, economic, cultural and political structures, resources as well as discourses are touched upon and discussed, rather static claims of knowledge are represented, for example, a lack of material resources, dysfunctional family dynamics, poor housing, employment and educational conditions for parents and children (see Ridge, 2011). Rather than raising questionable issues (Levering, 2010), the research findings are represented as facts and claims of knowledge that might enable and activate actors in policy and practice in pursuing anti-poverty policy making, ‘drawing attention
to child welfare issues and creating an imperative for further action’ (Platt, 2005: 28). The question is, nevertheless, how far the complex interplay between individual aspirations and wider social, economic, cultural and political structures, institutions and discourses can be seen in these representations, and how far the complexity of child poverty can become susceptible to public debate.

Capturing and interpreting lifeworlds of children in poverty

In childhood research, other researchers have shifted the focus to explore dynamic and interpretable ways in which material, social and cultural resources as well as discourses are viewed as constraints, opportunities and limitations for children to practise their agency, constituting their lived experiences and indicating the state of children’s welfare (Alanen, 2004). It is argued that the production of the child’s voice should be captured in its interactional context (Komulainen, 2007).

As a methodological approach that takes into account the contexts in which children’s voices are produced and the poverty situations that shape them, we explore the interpretive paradigm of lifeworld orientation that is rooted in theories of social pedagogy (Hämaläinen, 2003; Otto and Thiersch, 2001). The theoretical framework of lifeworld orientation was developed as a radical social criticism, challenging taken-for-granted institutional problem constructions that are wielding an alienating and colonizing influence on people’s everyday experiences as ‘this understanding of the everyday with reference to its obstinacy, its alienation, its self-assertion and its aspirations’ is linked to a social justice project (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009: 132). Thiersch describes this perspective as both ‘emancipative and realistic, meaning that more attention has been paid to the emancipation of people suffering as a result of social problems caused by economical, social and political factors’; and as such, promoting human dignity (cited in Hämaläinen, 2003: 77).

In this frame of reference, the reconstruction of the lifeworld implies that research focuses on the complex and dynamic relationship between the individual and society, where the interplay between lifeworld and system becomes vital as the everyday life is contingent on social and systemic forces (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009). In the same vein, the work of Paolo Freire offers a hermeneutical framework of how the world can be known. According to Freire (1970: 36), ‘world and men do not exist apart from each other, they exist in constant interaction’. Also, Wright Mills (1959) makes a fruitful distinction between individual troubles, which imply private and biographical matters within the scope of the social setting that is directly open to one’s personal experience and to one’s activity, and public issues of social structure, which are inherently interrelated. Public issues have to do with ‘the larger structure of social and historical life’ (Wright Mills, 1959: 8).

According to Wright Mills (1959: 7), interpreting the dynamic and complex relationship between individual aspirations and social forces requires sociological imagination, which enables us to grasp the relations between biography and society:

… for that imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another … there is always the urge to know the social and historical meaning of the individual in the society and in the period in which he has his quality and his being.
From a lifeworld orientation perspective, this interpretation is inherently related to a social justice project, which implies that the expression of forms and constructions of social problems is considered from the point of view of human dignity and social justice, using ‘the issues, crises and experiences within … lifeworld situations as reference points … : the lifeworld and the everyday manifest themselves as primary and fundamental dimensions of human life situations in all their meaning and dignity’ (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009: 133).

During our research project, nevertheless, we struggled with the methodological complexities of giving voice to children in poverty while making a lifeworld orientation approach operational.

**Lost in translation**

Our attempt to elaborate a lifeworld orientation approach created a high sense of complexity and uncertainty during the configuration of the research design and during the interpretation and representation of the findings. Our crisis of representation meant that we did not want to approach ‘poor children’ and ask them explicitly about the meaning of ‘being poor’, claiming that we could access the authentic voice of ‘the poor child’ to represent the essence of living in poverty. We also did not want to research the meaning of ‘leisure time’ for children according to an adult-oriented and institutional definition. In our point of view, elaborating these complexities is crucial and implies a shift in perspective, but how and where could we possibly approach children in poverty then as research subjects? As Spyrou (2011: 161) asserts:

… what gets researched, when, how and why are all key questions that need to be asked of every piece of produced research by reflexive researchers who seek to challenge the taken-for-granted in the production of knowledge about children and childhood.

In an endeavour to clarify where we got lost in translation and interpretation, we throw light on (1) the strategies of data collection and (2) the strategies of data analysis employed.

**Strategies of data collection**

In the following, we clarify why and how we adopted ethnographic research and open qualitative interviewing as methods of data collection.

**Ethnographic research**

The ethnographic research approach gave us the opportunity to select contexts in which processes of meaning making in working with a diversity of children – including children in poverty – actually took place (Angrosino, 2008). Based on an analysis of the interviews with local key actors who were involved in setting up leisure time activities, we identified three different research sites in three different cities where interactions could be observed between a wide diversity of children, their parents and other people such as volunteers,
(professional) youth workers and social workers. In the first city, we immersed ourselves in a community-based, after-school child care centre. In the second city, it concerned a city playground where day-care was provided for more than 400 children. In the third city, we followed an outreach youth worker, who travelled around different quarters of the city to set up sports activities. We spent time with the children, their parents, volunteers and youth workers in these natural contexts to learn from their experiences and meanings (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). We tried to gain an in-depth understanding of the research context, studied through the eyes of the children, and rendered descriptions of these situations and interactions through field notes (Angrosino, 2008). This research method enabled us to gain an understanding of how situations in which children and parents were living got collectively coded and acted upon as ‘poverty situations’ in these particular research contexts, and why; and to figure out which children were named and named themselves as living in poverty. We had to deal with two problems in this phase of the research process. The first and rather intractable problem is related to the multidimensional meaning of poverty (Lister, 2004). Relying on a very broad and sensitizing conceptualization of poverty as ‘a lack of material and non-material resources and power’ (see Lister, 2004: 13), we realized that we were only allowed to use the ways in which children were self-identifying as being poor as a starting point, as an open-ended issue that enabled us to establish high levels of ‘rapport’ while constructing non-intrusive relationships with the children. As King and Horrocks (2010: 48) observe, however, ‘there are no guaranteed recipes for rapport’. In that vein, our ethnographic research involvement did not directly lead to the production of research materials, but served the process of building rapport as a key ingredient in qualitative research since ‘rapport is essentially about trust – enabling the participant to feel comfortable in opening up to you’ (King and Horrocks, 2010: 48). Therefore we used our ethnographic involvement in the field to develop and establish a reciprocal dialogue with the children and their parents, opening up their lifeworlds and problem constructions rather than reinforcing institutional problem constructions as a point of departure for further research. Inspired by Freire’s pedagogy, we tried to shoulder the ethical responsibility to engage with the children in sensitive ‘detective work’. As soon as the issue of poverty was explicitly mentioned by children who were living in poverty themselves, we invited them to participate in the research project while focusing further on decoding and recoding particular issues, concerns and problems that were constituted as ‘real’ for the people in these settings in relation to poverty while constructing open qualitative interviews. The second problem was the pressure of limited time, since the entire research project took only nine months. As Spyrou (2011: 156) appropriately comments, if researchers aim to access deeper layers of meaning, social research with children is ‘a time-consuming enterprise’. Nevertheless we follow King and Horrocks (2010: 48), who argue that researchers should take time before they start interviewing, because getting this process of negotiation in the natural context of research subjects wrong ‘can undermine anything else you do’.

Open qualitative interviews

During the last weeks of the summer holidays, we constructed open qualitative interviews with 39 children in poverty. Quite surprisingly, we discovered that the notion
of ‘leisure time’ as such did not actually resonate with the vocabulary of the majority of the research participants. In that vein, rather than using a prestructured definition of leisure time, we explored in an open phrasing how the regimes of time of the research participants were shaped in their everyday lives. Instead of using predetermined concepts, we engaged with the children’s meaning of ‘leisure time’ and ‘poverty’ as sensitizing concepts that give ‘the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances’ (Blumer, 1954: 7). We applied a problem-posing investigation approach that is inspired by a lifeworld orientation perspective. In order to negotiate the meaning of the possible impact of poverty on the ways they shaped and experienced their leisure time, we tried to embrace the heterogeneity of children’s lifeworld experiences and aspirations in shaping their daily life while problematizing the discrepancy between the given, the possible and the abandoned (Freire, 1970). According to Grunwald and Thiersch (2009: 136–137), while reconstructing the lifeworld:

… it can always be asked whether things have to be as they are, whether they could not be different. People are driven by a hunger, … for sufficient resources, creative freedom, acceptance and meaning … . It is exactly these alternatives that are needed. In order to open oneself to new options, the taken-for-granted must first be problematized, broken open.

In the course of the research process, we used the following research questions that served to problematize the meaning of poverty and to negotiate children’s aspirations: (1) what would you do if you had a lot of money and (2) what are you longing for in your future life? As such, we researched the meaning of poverty as an interpretable issue that can acquire a diversity of meanings in the eyes of children dependent on their differing social positions and individual experiences, and on differing contexts, such as the contexts in which their leisure time unfolds. In order to problematize and negotiate the meaning of leisure time, we explored how they shaped their regimes of time and how they experienced their social worlds in daily life, including the ways in which they moved across different contexts, such as the family and school.

**Strategies of data analysis: Interpretation and representation of research findings**

While constructing a research report in order to represent the findings, we were struggling with the complexity and ambiguity of the rich research materials. We became aware that we failed to keep the ambiguity of possible interpretations to a minimum and even seized this while entering into an engagement with the significance of our research materials, established on the basis of sociological imagination (Wright Mills, 1959). We realized that children have differentiated agentic orientations yet their lifeworlds are also shaped by discourses and practices that are often negotiated by adult gatekeepers. We were particularly unsure how to interpret the significance of ‘poverty’ and its possible impact on the children’s experiences of ‘leisure time’. While keeping the dynamic context in which their voice was produced in the picture and exploring the meaning of ‘poverty’ and ‘leisure time’ as sensitizing concepts in their lifeworlds, a diversity of interpretative repertoires
emerged. Let us have a look at some excerpts of the research findings taken from interviews with Benjamin, Charlot and Karel.

Benjamin, 7 years old
I get my own new bike tomorrow, my dad paid for it! I live around the corner here. I have a lot of plans: riding on my bike to get a breath of fresh air, joining my dad going to the park! But I can do things without my dad too, I can join my friends when they are heading for school or going to our football pitch by bike. Now I can see my friends again who are in the second grade, now that I’ve stayed down a grade at school I never have the opportunity to see them anymore. But now I will see them again on our bikes when we are heading for school! I wanted to become a policeman later on in my life. But now, I want to be a postman! All I need to do then is put letters in people’s letterboxes, I don’t need to be able to read that much, only the addresses. That is good news because my teacher said I’m a problem case in reading at school. But it won’t be a problem being a postman, I have a bike now!

Charlot, 9 years old
I have one brother and two sisters. At home I don’t have a room of my own to do my homework. I’m just around in the house, to help my mother in the kitchen. You know, we have a lot of work in taking care for the children: making feeding bottles for my little sister, taking care of that 7-year-old rogue! In the future, I would wish to become a doctor! That would make it affordable if my father is getting sick, and so I would be able to help him in the house as well. He works in IKEA in Brussels, he is going there by car and sometimes he has to stay the night at his sister’s house. My mom works as a cleaning woman, so my little 2-year-old brother has to stay the night at my aunt’s house as well. My father doesn’t have money, neither does my mother. At home, I take care of my two sisters when my mother is busy at work. And if they really misbehave, then I make a fuss about it just the way my mother does … and they listen well!

Karel, 11 years old
I really want to work, now as well as later! I want to become a waiter in a restaurant, so as to have a lot of money. That would allow me to establish my own restaurant, to invite my own guests, and to buy a Porsche! I’m investing my energy in becoming a brilliant basketball player now, so I will get 9 million euros each month later. Or I can become the most funny star actor on earth, they make a lot of money too! I want to take poor people along to my house where I will invite them for a nice meal, free of charge because I pay for it! Perhaps I can emigrate to Italy. I figured out that Italians serve pizzas. It’s quality at prices you can afford. My plan is to live in Rome, the capital city of Italy, very near the Tower of Pizza [sic] where people eat pizzas all the time.

In their lifeworlds, possible repertoires of interpretations might imply that:

- Poverty is chiefly an individual problem as it engenders pervasive, deeply painful and damaging costs and effects on the children’s personal and psychological development. For Benjamin, this implies that he is not aware of his disadvantaged social position and can be perceived as a victim of his situation while becoming a postman. For Charlot, this interpretation means that she is seen as a subject of exploitation in the household for being too young to take care of her family. In Karel’s story, it could be argued that he will be very disappointed and suffer from psychological...
damage when he realizes that his plans are unrealistic. These interpretations are likely to enable societal assumptions and interventions directed at investing in the children’s personal and psychological development, constructing them as vulnerable citizens-in-the making and as objects of intervention. In that vein, their lifeworld risks being colonized because they need to become self-providing and competent individuals.

• There is no necessity to problematize poverty as a social problem since the children are, as individuals, pretty much aware of their tragic position in life, but they are resilient and develop strategies of coping and acceptance. Benjamin’s new bike implies that he can accept his individual reading problem; he doesn’t have to make every effort at school, and can enjoy having more leisure time because he will be a postman later in life. In Charlot’s story, it can be interpreted that she is proud of learning to take care of her brother and her sisters. She wants to become a doctor, which would enable her to cope with the situation and to help her father and mother in the house if her father gets sick in the future. Karel’s resilient activities of playing basketball and eating pizzas at affordable prices are a sign of his creative and optimistic strategies of coping.

• There is no necessity to problematize poverty as a social problem since these children are aware of their disadvantaged position in life and develop creative strategies of survival to negotiate and overcome their situation that simultaneously constrains and enables them. For Benjamin, it can be interpreted that he is aware that his new bike costs relatively a lot of money for his dad, but owning a bike opens up new scope and he is cherishing a multiplicity of plans that are very practical and realistic as part of overcoming his poverty situation. In Charlot’s story, it can be interpreted that her strategies of survival imply that her situation results in her personal growth: she learns a lot at home and she invests her energy at school as she hopes to become a doctor, because she knows that doctors make enough money to overcome poverty. For Karel, the interpretation goes that he is a symbolic bundle of creative ideas about earning money – becoming a brilliant basketball player, becoming a star actor – to overcome his situation while working as a waiter in a restaurant, while developing a sense of solidarity with other poor people who can eat pizzas at his expense.

• Poverty is problematized as a complicated social problem while questioning the interplay between the children’s everyday realities, experiences and aspirations (lifeworld) and the ways in which they are potentially suffering as a result of living in poverty which is caused by economic, social and political factors (system). We were trying to interpret the relationship between children’s individual aspirations and the social and systemic conditions under which the children are growing up. For Benjamin, we are inclined to problematize the ways in which he is already giving up hope, becoming alienated from a socially just future perspective, and internalizing his expectable adversity and predicted future perspective. Related to systemic conditions, school seems to give him a limited scope in embodying his present and future life, without providing appropriate resources, power and opportunities to do so. This interpretation rings true for Charlot as well, since her resources and power do not come up to the mark of having the opportunities to
become a doctor or to qualify in the educational system. In Karel’s story, it could be said that he doesn’t realize that the ways in which equal opportunities are provided by, for example, the educational system and the labour market. In a nutshell, it becomes extremely significant and necessary to involve the children as meaning-making subjects in problematizing the interpretations of their actual situation in the here and now while developing actions upon their situation.

From the perspective of childhood research that (cl)aims to represent the authentic voice of children in poverty, raising a multiplicity of interpretative repertoires rather implies a risk of getting lost in translation with policy and practice while interpreting and representing layered and ambiguous findings. Nevertheless, in the course of representing the research findings as a multiplicity of interpretable issues to different audiences, we started to embrace this ambiguity as an opportunity (see Roose et al., 2012). From a lifeworld orientation perspective, the researcher questions the obviousness of institutional problem constructions through which people learn to accept social injustice, by which the ‘unquestioned’ becomes ‘questionable’ (Schuyt, 1972). In that vein, as Schuyt (1972: 25) asserts, the researcher’s interpretation might create conflict between existing, taken-for-granted institutional and the suggested non-institutional problem definitions since:

… the interpreted problem constructions of the relationship between the individual and society can vary blatantly … [as] non-institutional phenomena stem from radically different perceptions of reality, they obey quite different rules of action from those underlying the existing social order.

This implies that knowledge claims can be presented as questionable issues rather than neutral facts to stimulate a process of humanization, which can be read in multiple ways by the different actors involved, since (new) meaning can come into existence in participative and dialogical processes of interpretation between the researcher, the research subjects, policy and practice. Here Komulainen (2007) suggests that the interpretation and representation of children’s voices should inherently be considered as social, in a sense that contradiction of the ways in which children’s perspectives can be interpreted should be embraced as an unresolved puzzle in human interaction rather than minimized. Also, Lather (2009) argues for dialogical representational practices that reside in contradictory and constantly shifting and changing interpretations.

**Constructing different epistemological windows on child poverty**

We have argued that childhood researchers need to critically scrutinize the ways in which they approach and represent children and their voices, and particularly the assumptions that underpin these representations in their work:

… this is all the more vital if the stated rationale behind the social study of children and childhood is not just to produce better knowledge, but to contribute to … social justice for
This seems particularly worth considering while researching child poverty. Therefore, the following questions are essential: which epistemological assumptions about child poverty are produced in these different methodological research ventures, and what are the possible implications for the ways in which policy and practice, influenced by the research findings and representations, are pursuing anti-poverty policy making and a socially just society?

In the aforementioned research ventures, we argue there is a major risk that representing the ‘authentic voice’ of children in poverty eventually renders the dynamic ways in which material, social and cultural structures, resources and discourses constitute children’s individual aspirations invisible (Spyrou, 2011). Yet Komulainen (2007) cautions against an uncritical use of the child’s voice by critiquing the individualizing tendencies in voice research when the production of the child’s voice is divorced from its interactional context. In our point of view, this is particularly problematic in research focusing on the issue of child poverty, where children in poverty are often represented as objects of intervention whose potential needs special protection because of their vulnerability as ‘adults in waiting’ (Lister, 2003). All of these findings and representations orient the attention of social policy makers to the individual child as the locus of intervention. These decontextualized findings are represented as causal explanations and facts rather than interpretative understandings, hence discrediting the possibilities of democratic debate with actors in our society – including the children themselves – about the complexity of pursuing policy and practice to counter dynamics related to child poverty and about the ways in which policy and practice shape the structures and discourses that influence concrete circumstances of children living in poverty. When research is losing its relation to the conditions in which the voices of social agents unfold, it is in danger of discrediting social policy strategies since these circumstances are shaped by society (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009).

In other words, childhood researchers can move beyond claims of authenticity in the representation of children’s voices, and account for the complexity behind children’s voices (Spyrou, 2011). In our attempt to embrace the voice of children in poverty while interpreting the dynamic interplay between their individual aspirations and systemic forces, problematizing the issue of child poverty in all its complexity as a social and political problem that requires solidarity and a collective sense of social justice becomes the key dimension of the research venture. For example, we raised the last interpretation of Benjamin’s situation as a provisional standpoint, using Benjamin’s reading problem as a reference point to reflect on policy and practice in the role of the educational system in educating a wide diversity of children, including children in poverty. We stressed that the wider society should ensure that Benjamin can benefit from an investment of surplus time and energy at school to guarantee that he will learn to read properly, have a proper education and an open future perspective. This perspective would also imply that his new bike meant that he could enjoy a wealth of meaning during his leisure time. Nevertheless, we also realized that the weakest point of our research project consisted of the lack of renewed dialogue with the participating children involved, to embrace their reflective
point of view about this standpoint in further actions to engage jointly in cultural action (Freire, 1970). In binding social justice with equality and human dignity (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009), it is essential that the often contradictory subjective interpretations of all the actors in society’s social traffic are embraced throughout the research process (Schuyt, 1972). This implies that a researcher’s interpretation of the social problem at stake in relation to children’s lifeworlds can only be represented as one of many possible and provisional social problem constructions. As Spyrou (2011: 162) concludes, ‘no single method can guarantee successful representation in itself. Reflexive research however accepts the messiness, ambiguity, polyvocality, non-factuality and multi-layered nature of meaning in “stories” that research produces.’

Concluding reflections

We learned to conceive childhood research as an open-ended and undetermined but democratic site of discussion (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003), as the researcher can open up epistemological possibilities for public debate about the ways in which societies act – and can act – upon poverty issues. Research can acquire this practicality in putting the finger on contemporary indifference, stimulating a process wherein ‘the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues’ (Wright Mills, 1959: 5). This implies that researching poor children’s lifeworlds goes hand in hand with acting upon the poverty problem in a praxis that takes a perspective of social justice and equality as a point of departure (Freire, 1970). In that light, while raising questionable issues, research can provide further food for thought for actors who construe the conditions under which children are growing up and for the children themselves to remain sensitive to the complexity of child poverty and a collective sense of human dignity and social justice in our societies.

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