



Book review

Childhood

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Jo Boyden and Michael Bourdillon (eds), *Childhood Poverty: Multidisciplinary Approaches*, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2012; 336pp.: 9780230319240, £60.00 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Catherine Walker, *Institute of Education, University of London, UK*

The first of three volumes arising from ‘Young Lives’, this edited volume opens what promises to be a stimulating series for researchers from the disciplines that cohere around the study of childhood poverty. ‘Young Lives’ is a mixed-method longitudinal study, researching how poverty affects the lives of 12,000 children and young people from urban and rural communities in Ethiopia, India (the state of Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam over a period designed to coincide with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) policy framework (2000–2015).

The volume comprises evidence-based research and policy-oriented discussion arising from quantitative and qualitative data collected from the first two rounds of ‘Young Lives’ research and complementary research from Tanzania and South Africa, along with discussions of methodological and ethical considerations. The substantive papers are organized into three thematic sections each representing an area identified as bridging research and policy interests in progressing understanding of childhood poverty; poverty dynamics and mobility, children’s experiences of poverty and children’s learning, time use and life transitions.

In an introduction to the volume, Michael Bourdillon describes the challenge of moving beyond the ‘critical threshold’ – that is, reaching the poorest quintile of children with effective poverty alleviation measures – as one that ‘costs as much as providing for the first eighty per cent, and is far more complex’ (p. 4). This challenge is one which the ‘Young Lives’ study stands to make a significant contribution towards and much of the value of this volume lies in the fact that the contributors do not eschew these complexities as they make links between empirical child-centred research and policies for the world’s poorest children.

One major complexity lies in reconciling the demands for comparable data with which to review the utility and measure the achievement of global frameworks such as the MDGs with an attention to the particularities of the contexts in which data are produced. As Laura Camfield argues in this volume, sensitively applying empirical data to theoretical debates pitting ‘local’ against ‘universal’ data can reveal the discursive nature of such labels as ‘the local appears multiple and contested and the universal equally local, given that all ways of thinking are specific to particular times, places and purposes’ (p. 200). Camfield illustrates this by presenting the results of group ‘wellbeing’ and

'ill-being' activities with young people and adults in three communities in Ethiopia, wherein individuals in communities with similar economic profiles differed in their definitions of what made for a good or bad childhood. A move away from normative ideals in constructing policies is further advocated by Jo Boyden and Gina Crivello in their chapter on perceptions of risk, wherein they present qualitative data from young people in Andhra Pradesh to support the argument that 'there is considerable complexity in human responses to risk and outcomes are not all knowable' (p. 168). As Crivello et al. point out in a separate chapter also based on qualitative data from Andhra Pradesh, the politicization of policy interests such as inequality can even become an emerging source of risk for children, as socioeconomic and structural inequalities become 'the subject of vociferous contestation and collective political struggle in some quarters' (p. 181).

Other contributors to the volume use disaggregated survey data to underscore the intersection between individual and structural factors in causing and sustaining poverty, again with the aim to overcome simplistic policy initiatives based on universal ideals. Tassew Woldehanna's use of survey data from Ethiopia to explore the impact of pre- and post-natal economic shocks on young children's development is valuable in demonstrating how both 'idiosyncratic' (unique to the family) and area-wide shocks can intersect to impact negatively on children's health (measured by anthropometric height for weight *z*-scores), making for a compelling policy argument for government social assistance policies to provide coverage for potential idiosyncratic household shocks as well as area-wide shocks like drought and flooding (p. 120). This illustration of how data can be usefully disaggregated builds upon Stefan Dercon's methodological argument that whilst a consideration of the dimensions commonly used to understand and explain childhood poverty may offer 'a set of powerful general patterns ("stylised facts")', these may detract from the deep-rooted interactions between factors causing and sustaining deprivations (p. 53). He argues for a multidimensional disaggregation of variables in analyses of childhood deprivations. Concurrently, John Hoddinott's consideration of methodological approaches to analysing the consequences of pre-school malnutrition serves as a caution against researchers establishing causal relationships where deprivations may be the result of multiple factors, arguing that where correlations between variables are identified these should be considered as *associations* rather than causes, so as not to prioritize observable over unobservable causes for different deprivations in children's lives (pp. 43–44).

Where authors present findings from other research studies, these complement rather than detract from the emerging 'Young Lives' research findings included in the volume. Gillian Mann's chapter on teenage Congolese refugees in Dar es Salaam serves as a powerful example of how material poverty is but one factor in determining self-understanding, often overshadowed by the social stigma of being treated as a second-class citizen. Parallels can be found here between Mann's research and qualitative data collected from minority groups in Andhra Pradesh (see chapter referenced above by Crivello et al.) and Peru (for example, Cueto et al.'s chapter discussing non-Spanish speakers' experiences of education). In the case of Mann's research, descriptions of the coping strategies adopted by some of her research participants in response to experiences of discrimination make for a fascinating read.

The range of researchers' perspectives, geographical focus and disciplines included in this volume combine to make it highly relevant to child-focused research on poverty

undertaken in a variety of contexts. Furthermore, the editors' organization of the volume is such that it consistently points forward to future data collection and analyses. This perhaps accounts for the absence of a concluding chapter to the volume, reflecting the fact that the series it pertains to, like the 'Young Lives' study and indeed the development of research-based policies contributing to the alleviation of poverty amongst the world's poorest children, is not yet complete.