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Shattering the Silence: The power of *Purposeful Storytelling* in challenging social security policy discourses of 'blame and shame' in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This article reports on a pioneering engagement project between team members from the Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK (PSE UK) study, the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and marginalised communities, located in areas of high deprivation in Northern Ireland. Community conversations and a tailor-made methodology of ‘Purposeful Digital Storytelling’ to capture and share data, engendered empowerment, engaging individuals and communities as producers of knowledge and agents of change. Findings from this Participatory Action Research collaboration offer fresh insights into the potential of collective knowledge sharing to challenge the corrosive impact of poverty-induced shame

Key words

Poverty, shame, Participatory Action Research, community engagement, Purposeful Storytelling

Introduction

‘There is a culture of silence around poverty. By its nature it is isolating. It cocoons you’ (Community Practitioner, County Derry)

One of the most corrosive effects of poverty is the shame and stigma experienced by those who fall below the minimum standard of living in the society in which they live (Lister 2004; Ridge 2011; Sen 1983). Recent research has identified shame as a common factor in how poverty is experienced in a range of countries and social policy contexts around the globe (Chase and Walker, 2014; Gubrium et al 2013; Walker et al 2013; Yongmie 2014). In this body of work, researchers argue that public discourse and anti-poverty policies have deleterious effects on human agency and self esteem further limiting people’s ability to escape poverty.

Building on Scheff’s (2003:255) definition of shame as social emotion which originates in ‘threats to the social bond’, Chase and Walker (2014:752) assert that ‘shame is co-constructed’ – both internally felt through feelings of inadequacy and externally imposed through public and policy discourse – ‘undermining human dignity and social solidarity’. In this article, shame is also understood to be co-constructed. This is exemplified in recent political discourse around social security reform in the UK which focuses on individual personal failings as the underlying cause of poverty and publicly stigmatises those in poverty and in particular, those in receipt of benefits. These discourses underpin the Welfare Reform Act 2012, largely implemented in England and the Welfare Reform (NI) Bill, under consideration by

the Northern Irish Parliament during this engagement project. This article refers to these policy discourses as ‘social policies of shame’.

While the psychosocial effects of poverty-related shame are widely recognised, less is known about mechanisms for countering the impact of shame and shaming on individuals. Drawing on findings from an experimental engagement project in Northern Ireland, this paper addresses that gap.

The Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) engagement project, which is the focus of this article, took place in Northern Ireland, where the situation for people on low income is particularly bleak. A history of violent conflict has shaped Northern Ireland’s poverty landscape, compounding social isolation and social exclusion and leaving a profound impact on people’s physical and mental health (Hillyard et al 2003; Tomlinson 2012). The 2012 Poverty and Social Exclusion survey¹ found that 36% of the population in Northern Ireland are multiply deprived compared to 33% for the rest of the UK (Gordon et al, 2013; PSE NI). This is due in part to the particular socio-demographic characteristics of Northern Ireland which has a higher proportion of households with children and a higher proportion of household income sourced from social security benefits (DSDNI, 2010).

Seventeen years after the Good Friday peace agreement, Northern Ireland, remains a largely divided society with marked segregation between Catholic and Protestant communities (Horgan, 2011). Historical differences in poverty prevail, with Catholic households and communities consistently poorer than Protestants. Inequalities in economic activity have begun to be addressed post-conflict, with the percentage gap in unemployment rates between these communities reducing from 9% in 1992 to 2% in 2012 (OFDFM, 2014). The recent global economic downturn, social security reforms and failures to address more deep-seated inequalities however, appear to have taken their toll. A comparison between the 2002 and 2012 PSE NI survey findings shows the poverty² gap between Catholics and Protestants has widened since 2002, with 32.5% of Catholics in poverty today compared to 18.5% of Protestants. Yet the PSE NI *Necessities of Life* survey found that public perceptions of the basic necessities for a minimum standard of living today, are much the same between Protestants and Catholics (Kelly et al 2012). This cross-community consensus on what constitutes poverty suggests possibilities for forging common ground between communities.

On the ground however, a palpable climate of fear has effectively silenced and isolated people on low income, across both communities. As Wiggan (2012:390) notes, ‘a hostile environment is slowly being constructed for all those who rely on social security’. People living in poverty, particularly those in receipt of benefits, find themselves the target of social security policies and the subjects of negative media stereotyping (Baumberg et al 2014; Garthwaite, 2011; Wiggan, 2012) and hardening public attitudes (Clery et al, 2013) fuelling people’s fear and reluctance to share their private experiences publicly. ‘The poor’ after all, are not only more likely to be

affected by social security policies; they are also more likely to be ‘subject to government surveillance to ensure compliance with these policies’ (Ravensbergen and Vanderplaat, 2009:392). This was corroborated by the experiences of PSE NI researchers undertaking qualitative research who reported a heightened atmosphere of apprehension and suspicion, associated with impending ‘Welfare Reform’ changes, and Northern Ireland’s vulnerability to cuts in social security and public sector spending (Daly and Kelly, 2015).

This ‘culture of silence’ (Freire, 1970), in which people living in poverty are largely excluded from civic participation, has important implications for policy-makers, poverty researchers and campaigners. By reducing the range of voices from marginalised individuals and communities in the public realm, the knowledge gap increases between those devising policy and those who are the subject of its interventions (Beresford and Croft, 1995; Lister 2007). Processes which support agency – ‘individuals finding their own voice and using it to exercise choices, to act on their circumstances and initiate change’ (Sen in Jeffery, 2011:78) – are particularly important within this current climate of fear.

One of the aims of the PSE project was to amplify the voices of those on low income as part of its commitment to encouraging public engagement, stimulating debate and informing policy. This Participatory Action Research (PAR) collaboration in Northern Ireland was devised to fulfil that remit. Findings from community-led research, community produced films and from PSE survey research findings on the psychosocial aspects of poverty, alongside a review of unexpected outcomes from this engagement process are examined and discussed as follows:-

Firstly this paper outlines the sense of shame, social isolation and social exclusion experienced by those who are unable to afford to participate in social life. It then argues that stigmatising policy discourses around social security reform reinforce this shame and social isolation by creating intra-community divisions between those who consider themselves ‘deserving’ and others deemed the ‘underserving’ poor.

Secondly the article illustrates how community evidence gathering and storytelling, as a collective response to the ‘shame-poverty nexus’ (Walker et al 2013) can reduce social isolation, promote social inclusion and challenge the discourse of blame and shame currently dominating the policy and media landscape.

Finally this paper suggest that these unexpected outcomes offer the potential of collective knowledge sharing to challenge the corrosive impact of shame, engender empowerment and engage both individuals and communities as agents of change.

Data and methods

This paper presents findings from the ESRC funded Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE UK) 2012 study and the PSE engagement process.³ New approaches to engaging with grassroots lobbying groups, community practitioners and people directly affected by poverty and social exclusion were also developed. Between April

2012 and September 2013, PSE team members from the Open University (OU) and Queen's University Belfast (PSE NI) ran a pilot engagement project in collaboration with the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) and local community groups in Northern Ireland⁴ (Kent, 2013). This PSE engagement project was designed to support CFNI's existing *Communities in Action* (CiA) action research programme, established to enable marginalised communities to 'chart the impact of austerity measures, recession and welfare reform' and importantly, to develop community-led responses and solutions⁵.

Twenty seven community focus group transcripts, from the 18-month PSE engagement project and from a further six months of the ongoing CiA programme, were analysed through a poverty-shame lens, using a framework populated with themes of poverty related shame and shame cognates (Scheff, 2003). This paper also draws on community-produced findings from their focus group discussions and short films. In addition, semi-structured interviews by the author with community practitioners at the start of the engagement project in 2011 and again in 2013 were reviewed to identify the perceived impact as well as tangible outcomes of this project.

The process

This Participatory Action Research (PAR) collaboration involved the PSE, CFNI and existing resident and community associations located in geographic areas ranked high in the Northern Ireland multi-deprivation measure (NIMDM, 2010). Eight community associations from these Catholic and Protestant and mixed areas, were selected by CFNI to participate in their *Communities in Action* (CiA) programme.

Community practitioners from each of these associations led and managed the CiA project locally and provided the primary interface between participants and the CFNI and PSE team members. These practitioners had strong local knowledge and in many cases were local residents. Some shared common experiences of low income. All but two were paid workers.

PAR encompasses a range of participatory practices bound by the notion that the investigation of knowledge leads to voice and action (Collins 2005; Fals-Borda, 2006; Freire, 1970). It is notable that this PAR project was framed through the lens of 'community' knowledge sharing and collective action. The term community is problematic by nature (Kymlicka, 2002; Shaw, 2006) presenting the notion of a homogenous group while concealing a plurality of contradictory identities and interests, stories and experiences. In this period of increasingly individualistic policy discourse, finding a collective 'community' voice both within and between these newly created research communities challenged people to find common ground through shared experiences. Poverty focused participatory research is also notoriously difficult due to 'the stigmatizing nature of poverty itself' (Dodson and Schmalzbauer, 2005; Ravensbergen and VanderPlaat, 2010) and this was the case in Northern Ireland. Community practitioners considered finding people, who would be willing to

publicly share their ‘private troubles’, a key challenge and so a research process, which offered participant anonymity and confidentiality, was essential.

The PSE engagement process involved three components developed in collaboration with community partners to support the CiA programme (Kent, 2013): data collection methods (allowing comparisons between local experiences and the national PSE study findings); Digital Storytelling; and digital dissemination of findings and films.

This collaboration project was governed by the strict ethical code of the PSE project and participating PSE academic institutions. ‘Ground rules’ were discussed and jointly agreed with PSE members, CFNI and community practitioners early in the process on data collection, sharing and utilisation, creating an ethical framework. Detailed guidance was also provided during process development on informed consent, data protection techniques and confidentiality.

CFNI and community practitioners chose ‘community conversations’ in the form of community run focus groups, to be the most appropriate research method for their constituents, rather than surveys, which are associated with state-led information gathering. PSE NI researchers provided community practitioners with training in running their own focus groups including guidance on ethical issues. Community practitioners then selected focus group participants to form local CiA research groups in each of the eight areas. These included single identity Catholic and Protestant groups and mixed identity groups. Participants in these new ‘research communities’ were loosely connected by their experiences of life on low income.

A series of question sets were co-developed with PSE team members, tailored to community research needs but also designed to link to the PSE 2012 *Living Standards in the UK* survey. Three rounds of focus groups were held between April 2012 and April 2014 covering different aspects of material and social deprivation and its effects on social participation:- Baseline Living Standards; ‘Necessities of life’ (what people were doing without); and Debt and Finances.

Community-led data sharing was supported through the use of novel digital storytelling and web platforms, enabling community research groups to identify themes and highlight their key findings to a wide audience. Digital storytelling, which Meadows (2003:189) defines as ordinary people telling ‘personal stories for publication on the internet’, is an increasingly popular tool among grassroots organisations to give voice to marginalised populations (Rossiter and Garcia 2010).

In this case the author developed a new tailor-made ‘Purposeful Storytelling’ process for community self-advocacy through collective storytelling. This process enabled people to work together to analyse their transcripts, identify recurring themes and to share these findings in narrative form, as digital stories. Participants used photos and drawings of objects and places rather than of people, to tell a collective story while preserving their individual privacy. Cost effective, intuitive and accessible technologies (iPads and editing apps) were employed to create a sustainable process,

refined in collaboration with a pilot group. Practical workshops were then offered to other research communities.

Up to 80 people from these Catholic, Protestant and mixed communities, regularly participated in community conversations across the Northern Ireland during this two-year period. This timeframe enabled the CiA project to identify broader patterns and recurring issues affecting all communities. Three community groups produced digital stories. All eight groups shared their findings on the PSE website (www.poverty.ac.uk) with support from the OU team and CiA project officer, linking local and collective community findings to the PSE's national research project. Digital dissemination via the PSE website also expanded opportunities for these community voices to be heard.

The view from the ground in Northern Ireland

Over the course of two years, community researchers captured rich, and in many cases longitudinal data on their experiences during this period of increasing austerity and amidst on-going uncertainty around the extent and nature of social security reforms. Social security is in principle a devolved responsibility in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In practice parity with Westminster is usually maintained (Birrel and Gray, 2014). Not so The Welfare Reform (NI) Bill, which due to a lack of cross party consensus, remains under consideration by the Northern Irish Parliament at the time of writing, and provided a focus for community lobbying during the engagement process⁶.

As Horgan (2011) notes, the geography of poverty in Northern Ireland highlights a striking concentration in areas most affected by the conflict. Continuing structural divisions between Catholics and Protestants within housing and education have also maintained strong social divisions between these largely segregated communities. The impact of the recent recession, austerity cuts, unemployment, pay freezes and falling incomes however, has been keenly felt within all the deprived Catholic and Protestant communities participating in the project.

'Avoiding public shame'

The 2012 PSE survey found that over a quarter of a million adults (19%) in Northern Ireland 'felt embarrassed because of having a low income' (PSE NI, 2013). Community transcripts offer a glimpse into the shifting economic fortunes of people within these close-knit communities over the past 20 years and how this has shaped poverty induced shame. Historically many low-income Catholic communities developed strong intra-community networks of support and community solidarity, bound through a common experience of economic and social disadvantage and political discrimination (Leonard, 2004). In recent research on young people in areas of high deprivation in Belfast and Derry, however Horgan (2011) notes that even *within* the most disadvantaged Catholic and Protestant communities, poverty causes shame, embarrassment and social withdrawal for those who cannot afford to keep up with their peers. These findings are mirrored in community conversations.

Women of working age in one Catholic community, for example, describe how in recent years they and their families had been able to 'better themselves', find employment, create some security and even buy their own homes, only to find this security slipping away. One working mother described this as a process of 'downgrading':

'We were always taught ... you upgrade, you buy a newer car, you do this, you're up, but everybody is downgrading, making smaller, just to try and hang in there... everyone is taking a step backwards instead of going forwards.'

The practitioner in this community described how those who had been financially successful and were now struggling, felt a sense of stigma and shame about their situation.

Within a working class Protestant community, parents describe wanting to protect their children from the shame they had themselves experienced as children. As one mother explains:

'When I was growing up I didn't have much ... I used to lie about what I had, because I wanted to be the same as everybody else. I don't want my kids being like that...'

Social isolation and exclusion is a complex product of social relations and private responses to public shame. Sen (1983) asserts that social isolation and social exclusion are driven by people's need to avoid public shame through their 'failure to meet social conventions' and 'the need to retain self respect'. The inability to participate in the everyday social life of the society in which we live is now recognised as a core component of poverty and indicators for social exclusion are included in UK and EU poverty measures (Levitas 2006). They are also widely recognised by the public, as affirmed in 2012 PSE surveys on public attitudes to necessities (Mack et al 2013; Kelly et al 2012). In Northern Ireland for example, being able to afford a hobby or leisure activity or attending weddings, funerals and such occasions are seen as basic necessities for a minimum standard of living (Kelly et al, 2012).

Some of the most common experiences of shame or shame cognates across all the participating communities were guilt, embarrassment, stress, anxiety and depression, including suicidal thoughts. Guilt in particular, was commonplace across all communities and age groups. Parents felt guilty that they were 'limiting their children's life experiences' and opportunities, or that they were opening them to bullying and embarrassment amongst their peers. Young people felt guilty about the financial sacrifices they felt their parents were making for them or for the pressures they felt they imposed on their parents to keep up with societal expectations, reinforcing research carried out in other parts of the UK (Ridge, 2011). As one young person commented in the run up to Christmas:

'I've already said to my parents don't be worrying about me (for Christmas presents) I don't want anything.'

Embarrassment also features strongly, particularly in relation to talking to other people including friends and family about their struggles. The PSE NI 2012 survey found that 20% of people relied on friends and family for financial support and that for 43% of these households, this had made a 'very big impact on their material standard of living. Community conversations reveal the emotional toll of such transactions. One parent who relied on her parents for financial help explains:

'I'm actually embarrassed every time my parents see me coming ... they know that I'm not spending it silly, they know it's things for the wains (children) ... I would be proud, and I will get it back to them someday, I don't know when, but I will.'

Shame has also impacted on people's mental health, compounding feelings of stress, anxiety and depression. 'I feel I have let my children down and I am a failure', as one woman explained.

Social policies of shame and division

Community findings shed some light on how UK government discourse around social security reform and accompanying social security policies exacerbate the sense of shame and stigma already keenly felt by those in poverty. The UK Welfare Reform Act 2012 is founded on the narrative that the 'root causes of poverty' are located in individual rather than structural failings, namely: 'family breakdown; educational failure; drug and alcohol addiction; severe personal indebtedness; and economic dependency' (DWP, 2012:1). Advocates in the public arena such as the media, aid this discursive strategy in which stories of 'Welfare dependents', the 'feckless poor' and 'benefit scroungers' abound (Baumberg et al 2014; Garthwaite 2011; Wiggan 2012). One young person in Belfast describes the impact of these derogatory narratives:

'My mum won't talk to me about it at all... She won't say "I can't get you this because there isn't a lot of money". It's quite taboo. You just keep it to yourself and don't mention it. You can't talk to other people about it because there is a big stigma like, because my mum is a single parent too.'

One of the most destructive aspects of these 'social policies of shame' is how they undermine the social fabric of communities by fostering intra-community divisions between those seen as 'deserving' and those seen as 'underserving' poor, as one working parent explained:

'People are starting to fall out over it. You can see what people say: "why should I work, when you sit at home on benefits, and getting as much as me."'

Participants were largely critical of negative media and policy stereotyping. A process of ‘othering’ (Lister 2004) however, was also evident with people demarcating between ‘them’ and ‘us’ or ‘them’ and ‘I’, as part of increasingly individualized discourse. In another conversation between young people in 2012, participants differentiated between people housed in one area of the estate and another group seen as ‘more deserving’ in this case, single parents. One young person commented how:

‘... in the flats they are just people getting money off say like the bru (out of work benefits) and stuff like that there and not working and just lying about... I heard they don’t, they don’t have to pay nothing (on rent)’.

While this discursive strategy has exacerbated social divisions, longitudinal community data reveals an attitudinal shift over time, as evidenced in this conversation with the same young people in 2013.

Facilitator: ‘Are people struggling?’

Young person: ‘If you look at them flats you see a lot of poverty’.

Facilitator: ‘But... in the previous conversation people said that “they were all unemployed ... all had plenty of money to spend on drink and stuff, they get everything paid for them” ...’

Young person: ‘Not all of them are, but there are some people in there that have no money...’

Community conversations were providing a forum for people to engage in dialogue, to explore different viewpoints, as in this exemplar from this community conversation in Belfast:

‘Sometimes you feel if you don’t work you get more money... I look at other girls who haven’t worked a day in their life but they seem to get everything off the Government.’

‘You see that’s a perception, you think there’s people you know, living beside you who are on benefits, but if you knew the total background well you’d see they can’t be employed, for whatever reason..’

Other participants in the same group picked up on this theme shifting the discussion from ‘them and us’ to a wider discussion about political discourse in which several people took part, concluding:

‘That’s what the Government is trying to do, they’re trying to drive (a wedge between) any working class... It’s easier to divide ... everybody has tried it over the years, it’s happening here now.’

In these research communities, the process of identifying common concerns was beginning to disrupt these policies of division. It is the impact of this burgeoning sense of shared experience on the culture of stigma, shame and silence imposed on these individuals that this article turns to next.

Shattering the silence: The power of storytelling

'With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world'.

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958)

In April 2014, a small but extraordinary event occurred at a CFNI conference held at the Northern Irish Parliament, Stormont. Individual participants from each of the eight research communities stood up and spoke publicly for the first time to an audience of politicians and their peers, about their experiences and research findings. Two years earlier, conversations about personal struggles with neighbours or other residents in these tight knit communities would have been rare. Sharing these stories publicly was for most unthinkable. One community practitioner in County Antrim described the challenges he faced in early 2012:

'People have a lot of pride and so they won't talk about their situation. So there is a lack of information on what is really happening around the estate and the issues that are really affecting people...'

Over time however, through community conversations and storytelling to gather and share experiential evidence on poverty and social exclusion, barriers were breaking down and people were overcoming the sense of shame that had isolated them.

As part of this process three research groups used digital storytelling to share their community findings publicly, providing alternative narratives to the dominant discourse, from those living in poverty⁷.

Soaring living costs, debt and concerns about proposed changes from weekly to monthly social security payments featured strongly in community conversations in Ardoyne, North Belfast. Their first film *Surviving on the Edge* provides a snapshot of the daily struggle to make ends meet, alongside coping mechanisms to manage budgets. Through the process of telling one person's story, the research group identified common concerns linked to structural issues such as unregulated money lending leading to a cycle of debt, spiralling fuel costs, and 'punitive' metered payment for electricity, rather than 'personal failings'. When asked about the impact of the overall process, the community practitioner described it as 'empowerment'.

‘I think the group has decided they are not going to just sit back and let things happen, they are going to do something about it themselves and that they can find solutions to their own problems’.

In Doury Road, a sprawling housing estate on the outskirts of Ballymena, area deprivation was an overwhelming concern in their community conversations. This compounded the sense of shame many people felt. As one resident commented: ‘I think along with the dereliction goes the stigma, you know to the estate.’ A mix of rented and owner-occupier housing, many of the housing executive homes are derelict and the estate is in the midst of a political wrangle over regeneration. With no community centre and few services or facilities this is a fragmented community, with social isolation a key issue for those living on low income. Residents of Doury Road used their film, *The Forgotten Estate*, to present an alternative narrative of community pride, hope and aspiration, alongside potential solutions, to policy and decision makers. The chairman of the residents association reported another unexpected outcome. Through the media process people from different parts of this fragmented estate got to know each other, breaking down barriers. ‘It got the community together’, he explained.

In Lettershandoney, an isolated housing estate in rural County Derry, the theme of ‘downgrading’ featured strongly. Participants chose to highlight the ‘hidden issue’ of mortgage arrears and housing repossessions on the estate and people’s coping mechanisms. Their film, *Going Backwards*, told one family’s story of resilience in which they chose to ‘hand back the keys and walk away’ from their home, rather than struggle on paying the mortgage or wait to be repossessed. Through conversations and storytelling, other participants began to break their silence, share their fears and make their own choices. As the community practitioner in Lettershandoney explains:

‘The mortgage and house repossession (discussion) it was a watershed. People took counsel and therapy from other people. They thought they were on their own - because no one else was and now they realise we are representative of the region.’

A transformative process was evident for participants in all three of these research groups through finding their voice. In Ardoyne, for example, the community worker observed how the culture of fear, once so tightly felt, was beginning to break down:

‘At the start they (participants) were saying they didn’t want their identity known. Now they want to do lobbying! I say to them “that means people may know who you are” and they say that’s ok..’

In Doury road, the community practitioner and chairman of the residents group described how:

‘It started off that people would come into the estate telling us “we have money and help for you”. And now it is changing around and we are starting to take the lead, saying what we need’.

CFNI also facilitated regular meetings between all eight CiA groups, providing opportunities for community practitioners to share their local findings with other disenfranchised communities across Northern Ireland. Recurring themes, such as fuel poverty, debt, stress and anxiety took on greater resonance, as it became clear such issues affected all the groups in this collaboration, revealing poverty as a patch of common ground between low-income Protestant and Catholic communities. This emerged as one of the strengths of the project, creating the potential for collective action. As one community practitioner from a largely Protestant community observed:

‘Sitting down with other groups we got to see what others were doing. I was learning from the other groups and feeling that we are not alone’.

Another from a single identity Catholic community summed up as follows:

‘By taking part in collective research the same issues come out elsewhere too rather than just in one area. What was interesting was to see common issues. Poverty – regardless it affects everyone. By knowing an issue affects everyone, it gives more legitimacy’

Acknowledging and voicing experiences of the impact of poverty including experiences of shame and being shamed, as Scheff (2003:258) suggests, ‘may be the glue that holds relationships and societies together, just as unacknowledged shame is the force that blows them apart’.

From common experience to collective action

The primary aim of this experimental collaboration was to support communities in producing knowledge that they could use to effect change through local solutions. Over a two-year period, this community-led project has created new ‘research communities’ who are sites of agency and resilience and the interlocutors between policy and experience. This process both gathered individual experiences and enabled discussion and debate and in some cases disagreement, allowing a form of ‘community as politics’ to evolve (Shaw 2008). Common concerns were identified, both within and between communities, providing space for a broader understanding of structural factors to emerge.

Community practitioners have built on their achievements using their films and evidence as lobbying tools, on occasion achieving small but tangible successes for their local communities. Ardoyne presented their first film to politicians in Stormont in 2013 and to the Lord Mayor’s Civic Forum on poverty in Belfast in 2014. Their second film, *Hopes and Dreams*, highlighting the digital divide faced by young people on low income was shown to local politicians to evidence the need for free Wifi access in their local community centre. This has subsequently been provided. In

Doury Road, members of the group have successfully lobbied for inclusion in the Department for Social Development's new pilot programme, Building successful Communities, opening up funding and support for the estate. With funding from CFNI, many community associations have also implemented practical interventions based on specific needs identified through their research such as budgeting classes, intergenerational cookery clubs and community oil buying clubs.

With support from CFNI, Catholic, Protestant and mixed groups have worked together, using their collective voice to lobby their political representatives at various points in the ongoing debate on the Welfare Reform (NI) Bill in Stormont. A series of CiA reports in 2013 (Wilkins/CFNI, 2012) and again in 2014 (Kent/CFNI, 2014) on collective community findings and recommendations, were presented to politicians at Stormont, highlighting to policy and decision makers that poverty requires systemic support, not just behavioural interventions.

Connections have also been made between these experiences in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK through the PSE project and PSE website (www.poverty.ac.uk/community/northern-ireland) lending further legitimacy to the work of community researchers and community practitioners. As one practitioner noted:

'By being part of this collaboration... people know we exist. We are sitting with the big people now.'

'Community' is a popular phrase in recent UK government social policy, which has been dismantling the foundations of community solidarity, while simultaneously constructing 'new communities' as compliant providers of public and political interests, through *The Big Society* (DWP, 2010), the Localism Act (DCLG 2011) and other policy responses. This notion of community can be understood in terms of 'community as policy', with the notion of 'spurious unity' making them more manageable (Shaw 2008:32).

This is far from the notion of community as knowledge producers and agents of change, which is at the heart of the Northern Ireland engagement collaboration. These 'research communities' offer the potential of a collective lobbying voice that challenges current punitive interventions focused on individual behavioural change while offering a conduit for collective and in some cases structural solutions. The extended political debate around the introduction of the Welfare Reform NI Bill, suggests some opportunities for influencing decision makers exist. Whether these alternative voices are heard and can effect change at a policy level is harder to gauge. This is perhaps one example of the social reality, posited by Shaw (2008) in which:

People collectively experience both the possibilities of human agency and the constraints of structure – between, in Mills' (1970) terms, the micro politics of 'personal troubles' and the macro politics of 'public issues' (Martin, 2003) (Shaw 2008:32)

Conclusions

People's experiences of poverty and poverty related shame, while profoundly personal, are also powerfully shaped by the wider socio political context in which they live, as illustrated in this case study in Northern Ireland. Unchallenged, this can lead to social isolation, powerlessness and despair. Conversely, through collective knowledge sharing, a broader understanding of poverty and its underlying causes can be engendered.

Collective storytelling has enabled individuals and research communities to have a 'voice' and to share alternative perspectives of and coping mechanisms for life on low income leading to collective responses. In many cases, a sense of social solidarity has evolved between participants in these 'research communities' and within their wider geographic communities. While analysis of participatory processes cannot be isolated from their context, lessons have emerged from this project that are mirrored in other research on both the psychosocial impact of poverty and on empowerment tools.

By empowering individuals and community groups to research and document common experiences, which can be compared to wider national research, the dominant narrative of personal failings and individual blame can be challenged, enabling individuals and communities to advocate for their needs and posit structural solutions as agents of social change.

In this harsh climate of austerity, rising poverty and corrosive policies of shame, the flame of social solidarity had been rekindled and a culture of silence shattered. As one practitioner observed:

'As part of a collective group you are more powerful'.

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¹ Two separate surveys on living standards were carried out as part of the PSE UK (2012) study: A Northern Ireland survey undertaken by NISRA and a British survey undertaken by NATCEN.

² The PSE measure of poverty is defined in terms of both multiple deprivation and low income.

³ PSE UK (2012) follows the consensual approach developed by Mack and Lansley (1985), to measure poverty and social exclusion in the UK and is funded by Economic and Social Research Council Grant RES-060-25-0052. See www.poverty.ac.uk

⁴ A list of participating community groups is provided in acknowledgements

⁵ For more information on CFNI's Communities in Action programme, see www.communityfoundationni.org/Programmes/Communities-in-Action-

⁶ Reforms such as the introduction of the *housing benefit under occupation charge* (commonly known as the spare bedroom tax) and changes to Disability Living Allowance (DLA) are under the jurisdiction of the Welfare Reform Bill (NI). Changes to tax credits, child benefit and housing allowances fall under the Welfare Reform Act UK (2012) and were implemented in Northern Ireland during the course of this engagement process. See also www.nicva.org/article/welfare-reform-explained

⁷ These films can be viewed at the Ardoyne, Doury Road and Lettershandoney community webpages on the PSE Website www.poverty.ac.uk/community/northern-ireland

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