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**Well-being of children and labour markets in Europe  
Different kinds of risks resulting from various structures and changes in the labour  
markets**

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**Growing up in poverty and the coping strategies of children – research  
results related to Germany**

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

When we talk about poverty in countries such as Germany, which are generally seen as well-to-do, than it seems imperative to me not only to stress that we are considering relative poverty but that we must also, above all, take new kinds of poverty and social exclusion into consideration. This becomes clear if we take a closer look at the groups of persons in question and the different ways that the biographies of poor persons develop. In this context, we are not only talking about old, i.e. familiar forms of so-called socially inherited poverty in the social hot spots and poor city quarters which are characterized by the long term provision of social welfare, poor standards of education and few prospects of escape. In fact new forms of poverty are appearing which, determined by a period of life, may also be limited in time. These may well be the result of too little income from social welfare, unemployment or too little income from work, of lone parenthood – especially with women – or migration.

Thus we are dealing with a poor population who have very varied resources and coping strategies available to them, e.g. cultural, social and educational resources. It is of prime importance to look more closely at the prospect of escape. An essential feature of these new forms of poverty is, no doubt, the fact that they cannot be recognized at first glance, which makes it difficult, above all, for the professional people concerned with these children to discern and to deal with the problem.

A further significant aspect of the discussion about poverty in developed welfare states concerns the effects :

These are, indeed, the material results for the children whom we are observing. In our investigations, we have noticed time and again a lack in the various areas of material provision for and, in some cases, also in the basic care of children. However, from the point of view of the children, it is the non-material results, the effects on the children's space for activity, their possibilities of learning and experiencing things, their social contacts to their peers and the development of their artistic and other abilities, their self-perception and their personal effectiveness, their emotional and social feelings which weigh more. Moreover, we are obliged, above all, to analyse and to consider the coping strategies of the families and the children as well. In this context we must, from the start, recognize that poverty among children, in spite of a similar starting position, can have very different effects. An important understanding from qualitative empirical research is that there are relieving and burdening factors in the various lives and worlds of the children which affect the child's ability to cope. One can, so to speak, quote from research into resilience and the presence of risk and protective factors which offer an explanation for why growing up in poverty can have different effects. Such insights are of particular importance because they give us guidelines on where and how supporting measures can be introduced for the children and the families.

## **2. PURPOSE AND CONCEPT OF THE RESEARCH**

I would like to present the results of two empirical studies in which – together with my colleagues K.A. Chassè, K. Rasch, H. Böhm, B. Imholz and G. Wuttke – I examined child poverty in general and the coping strategies of the children in particular. In our research, which was largely survey-based, we were guided by the following questions:

- How do children of primary school age perceive poverty (theirs and that of others)?
- How do they interpret the situation?
- How do they, as those affected, handle the situation?

We carried out qualitative cross-sectional studies, our methodological premise being that, first and foremost, the children should do the talking. We surveyed primary-school-aged children (from 7 to 10 years old), girls and boys, and their parents. We carried out fourteen case studies in the Jena region of East Germany and twenty-five cases in the Münster region of West Germany. We interviewed only such children whose families were living on welfare benefits or on a poverty-similar income.

Our findings showed that, in a great many of the families, there were cases of accumulative stress (such as the psycho-social effects of unemployment, addiction, debt,

illness etc.) as well as the pressure of structural demands — e.g. single parents out at work all day. Also characteristic was the great variety of atypical family forms which may have an effect on the children's sensitivity, well-being and experience. And, in addition, I should point out that our survey did not focus on conventional forms of poverty in the "inherited" or "poverty-trap" sense; we concentrated more on new phenomena mainly associated with short-term or longer-term unemployment, the instability of casual work and inadequate social security for families — particularly single parents. From a social structure point of view, this can mean that the risk of poverty can hit the middle classes at certain times in life. (The results of the two surveys were published in two separate publications earlier this year. <sup>1</sup>)

These studies took place in the Federal Republic of Germany. We are thus speaking of poverty phenomena in an affluent society. Which means that we are not addressing "absolute poverty" as such – i.e. covering basic needs, the fight for survival – but a *relative* form of poverty.

When we came to formulate our research concept, we drew on the premises and discourse patterns of modern sociological childhood research. This means, that we let the children speak for themselves, that we register their sensibilities "as-is" and that we see them as autonomous subjects. On the other hand, we have also drawn on the latest poverty research in Germany and on a concept it often uses: I refer to "poverty as life situation". It is a useful multidimensional concept which comprises different dimensions of inequality or underprovision. The effects of poverty are thus examined in five different dimensions (following a scheme drawn up by the well-known German social scientist Ingeborg Nahnsen).

- (1) Income and provision
- (2) Learning and experience
- (3) Leisure and regeneration
- (4) Contact and cooperation and
- (5) Disposition and possibilities for decision-making.

Poverty as a "life situation" means that the people concerned are exposed to different kinds of restrictions on different kinds of scale in the five dimensions mentioned. Needless to say, there are certain overlaps and interdependencies within the five. But we paid particular attention to the question of what effects the limited income situation has on other dimensions.

The concept of life situation as formulated was based on adult related usage. We have endeavoured to apply this concept of poverty to children and to develop it from a child's perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> Chassé, K.A./Zander, M./Rasch, K.: Meine Familie ist arm – Wie Kinder im Grundschulalter Armut erleben und bewältigen [Opladen 2003 and Wiesbaden 2005]  
Butterwegge, C./Holm, K./Zander, M.: Armut und Kindheit [Opladen 2003 and Wiesbaden 2004]

In the course of our research, we proceeded in three basic steps :

- a) First, we looked at the effects of the family life situation on the children's space to develop;
- b) We then observed the coping strategies developed by the parents and/or the mothers as a background of how the children handle the situation — with parent/child communication playing an important role here; and
- c) Against this background, we examined the children's coping strategies and compiled a typology.

Time only permits me to sketch our findings in abstract form.

### **3. THE IMPACT OF THE FAMILY LIFE SITUATION ON THE CHILDREN**

The life situation of the children we surveyed was characterised in many ways for material restrictions and deprivation in their different developmental surroundings — day-to-day care, social contact, learning opportunities, possibilities for new experiences, leisure activities, recreation etc. In some cases, there were, indeed, palpable shortages in terms of basic provision.

Although the children were more or less consciously aware of these limitations and disadvantages, they seemed to forefront the *immaterial* aspects of poverty in all its more subtle consequences, above all, on the emotional climate, the social status of the family and the interrelated social isolation. Not that I wish to trivialise the material effects; I merely want to point out that the children simply don't articulate certain needs and deficits. On the contrary, they conceal them, and that is one cause behind the external invisibility of the new forms of poverty.

### **4. PARENTAL COPING STRATEGIES AND IN-FAMILY MEDIATION**

As children of primary school age absorb cultural and social patterns, they are considerably reliant on their families. Any parental handling of the situation clearly influences the shape of the child's day — especially in the way the limited resources are shared within the family and in the way priorities are set in doing so. Similarly, parental coping strategies

may well take on a role-model function for the children. Crucial here is whether the parents or the mothers convey to the children the feeling that they have got matters under control.

As for those parental coping strategies, let me identify three separate patterns, if only briefly

1. **reductive strategies** i.e. relinquishing, saving, self-imposed restrictions;
2. **adaptive strategies** i.e. looking for compensation, substitutes and less expensive alternatives; and
3. **constructive strategies** i.e. finding extra resources and a clear setting of properties as well as making use of social networks and of outside offers of support.

Crucial for coping strategies on the part of the children is whether the parents are in a position to support them by means of sympathy and encouraging support. A significant role is played here by in-family communication about the life situation: how is the state of poverty discussed and are the children shown ways of dealing with it:

1. **positive communication strategies** i.e. the state of poverty is discussed and the children are shown ways of dealing with it;
2. **ambivalent strategies** i.e. the state of poverty is discussed but the children are not shown any coherent ways to cope; and
3. **negative strategies** i.e. the state of poverty is either not discussed or, if it is, in a circumlocutory fashion: the children are not helped to handle the situation; they are left to their own devices.

The twofold conclusion to be made is that – even in comparable material situations –

- (a) the life situations of the children can differ in different dimensions and
- (b) that they are exposed to highly different coping patterns moulding everyday family life and the family climate.

## 5. THE CHILDREN'S COPING STRATEGIES

For children of primary school age, the family has an important moderating influence on the development of their coping patterns. As children come to terms with everyday life, they are heavily reliant on the family situation per se and on the adults who care for them. At the

same time, however, the children should also be seen in terms of their own autonomy, if relative, and in their subjective coping skills. They have unique life and development tasks to deal with as they move in various other life worlds: school, after-school club, peer group relationships, neighbourhood etc.

For this reason, it is important that, in these life worlds, too, specific factors are to be taken into

account

- be they **pressure-decreasing and supportive** (like social networks, social contacts and compensation offered by public institutions and services)
- or **pressure-increasing and restrictive** (i.g. extra pressures such as parental separation and divorce, sickness and addiction, violence...)

With regard to the forms of coping that the children develop, we established that these tend to move along a continuum between two opposites — with a broad but very differentiated middle field. Let us first look at the two opposite poles:

**Type 1: Multiple pressure on the family leads to greater disadvantage or even neglect of the child**

We have a group of children whom we describe as "neglected" and who have to cope with considerable deficits in their everyday life. They have great difficulties in facing the challenges posed by development.

In this case, several additional burdens add to material poverty, thus virtually excluding any pressure-decreasing factors. An essential feature here is the fact that the parents are no longer in a position to support the children in helping them cope with the situation. All in all, these children are exposed to few development enhancing structures, either internal or external to the family.

**Type 2: Parental poverty dealt with by compensating the children**

We have an other group of seemingly "socialised" children who, unaffected by a materially difficult life situation, seem to deal with their development challenges in all three socialisation areas (family, school, peer groups).

In this case, it is clear that the pressure-decreasing factors are in the ascendancy or, at least, that fewer added burdens compound the material needs situation. One essential feature is the way the parents sympathise with and support the child. Although these children,

comparatively speaking, are materially poor, they do have recourse to numerous family-internal and family-external possibilities for compensation.

**Type 3: Somewhere in between is a third group of children who, in an overlapping way, can be assigned to both groups**

These "median children" display different kinds of disadvantageous and feature profiles. In terms of coping strategy, they can partly tend towards Type 1 or partly towards Type 2.

On the one hand, we have children with access to external coping strategies - who thus succeed (if only partly) in compensating for the restrictions, disadvantages and pressures affecting them. On the other hand, in this middle field, we find children with generally less effective opportunities for compensation, children who are therefore open to greater pressure. Compared to Type 1, however, the problems that occur in addition to material poverty, do seem fewer.

**CONCLUSIONS** (only briefly)

There are three differential factors to be taken into consideration:

- a) Children opening themselves to external means of compensation — e.g. via their own social networks, such as friends, or via their own activities;
- b) Children benefiting from the active extension of the paternal or maternal network — e.g. via their friends, acquaintances and relatives; and
- c) Children making use of institutional means of compensation — e.g. the school or after-school club.

In conclusion, it is clear that family-external factors such as social networks, peer group relationships, social institutions such as school, after-school-club and kid centres (not to mention other public, social and cultural facilities in the leisure sector) play an important moderating and compensating role. It is here that social politicians, social education workers and child protection officers should see a starting point and opportunity. A timely motto might be: support the parents and encourage the children!

At this point, I would like to close my speech with the words of Nathalie, a seven-year-old girl. This was her reply to the question: what is poverty?

Poor is ... "if you haven't got enough to buy any new clothes. If you haven't got such a big family, only one or two members or so. If you don't live under one roof. If you don't have

enough to eat. If you haven't got a job and can't earn any money. If you haven't got a warm bed. When you haven't got a bike to ride or a car to drive somewhere. If you haven't got enough money. If you can't go to school or kindergarten. If you can't get enough light at home. If you haven't got the right crayons to do your homework. If you can't go shopping. If you can't do anything in your free time. If you haven't got a camera for memories. If you're supposed to take something to school, like a book or a tape, and you don't have it ... "

This child was able to give a very impressive answer to the topic of poverty and now I would give you the opportunity to ask questions related to my talk.