

Subjective Well-being and the Measurement of Poverty

By

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## Abstract

Within the United Kingdom, assessments of societal progress have traditionally been made according to objective measures such as Gross Domestic Product, unemployment rates and more recently, poverty levels. However, there has been a discernable shift towards measures of subjective human conditions, sometimes referred to as 'quality of life', sometimes 'happiness' or 'well-being' and on occasion, 'welfare'. This is reflective of a worldwide concern about the limitations of economic measures and the growing desire for complementary subjective measures to inform policy making.

This thesis is concerned with the level of enthusiasm and speed at which these alternative subjective measures have been embraced and the consequences this poses for objective measures of poverty based on low income and material deprivation.

From an anti-poverty perspective, the possibility that subjective self-reported satisfaction levels come to take priority over objective measures of poverty is a major concern. This is because reflective measures like life satisfaction and overall well-being have been shown to be vulnerable to the phenomenon of adaptation and social comparisons, where people rate their situation with that of similar others and relative to what they have come to expect (Burchardt, 2013).

Conversely, the way in which deprivation is measured by the 'enforced lack' criterion (Mack and Lansley, 1985) has itself been critiqued by some along similar lines to adaptive preference formation (McKay, 2004; Halleröd, 2006; Crettaz and Suter, 2013).

Therefore, resistance to the promotion of subjective perceptions of well-being in favour of objective measures of low income and deprivation cannot be validated without an exploration of the 'enforced lack' criterion along similar grounds.

Much of the qualitative work examining the concept of adapted preferences within the poverty literature does so from the viewpoint of resourcefulness and agency amidst persistent pressures and strains (Kempson et al., 1994; Kempson, 1996; Scharf et al., 2002, 2005; Dean and Shah, 2002; Orr et al., 2006; Flint, 2010; Hickman et al., 2014). Fewer qualitative studies have examined the extent and intensity of adaptation and the degree to which reference group choices affect people's experience of this phenomenon. Moreover, empirical evidence on how poverty indicators are affected by these processes is *'still surprisingly scarce'* (Crettaz and Suter, 2013: 140).

Hence, the intention of this research is to address the gap in the existing knowledge base on the role that social comparisons, adaptation and expectations command over reported levels of perceived deprivation. It does so through the lens of Walter G. Runciman's (1966) concept of relative deprivation.

This study uses a mixed methods approach to carry out this investigation. Findings from interview data carried out with 51 respondents from low income families, together with quantitative analysis of a large random sample survey of the Northern Ireland population, are analysed to examine whether and how social comparisons affect perceptions of objective conditions.

Results reveal that people often make comparisons with similar others, either in a lateral or downward manner. As a result, expectations are lowered with aspirations and preferences being adapted to people's material and financial constraints.

The study concludes that the 'enforced lack' measure of deprivation is the most effective in identifying individuals at risk of material deprivation. Meanwhile, levels of overall life satisfaction are argued to be particularly vulnerable to adaptation processes. This is because people rate their satisfaction relative to the quality of their personal relationships, rather than using a more reflective view of life overall.

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother who would have been so proud.

# Chapter one - Introduction

## 1. Study overview

Traditionally, judgment of societal progress has relied primarily on objective information to monitor and evaluate social and economic performance, with reliance on subjective data to supplement objective information largely deemed unnecessary (Diener and Suh, 1997, Veenhoven, 2002). However, this situation is changing rapidly, both nationally and internationally. There is now an increasing focus on subjective human conditions like quality of life, happiness and overall well-being, assessed on measures of personal satisfaction and viewed as important policy goals. The common theme running through such developments is the growing awareness of the limitations of standard measures of progress such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the full assessment of societal advancement (Stiglitz et al., 2009).

The rationale behind the lack of trust in standard measures is understandable. For example, GDP principally measures market production which is taken to represent a country's economic well-being. However, it is incapable of taking into account other goods and services which contribute to well-being such as government provided health insurance, households engaged in child care or other types of unpaid work like volunteering. The quality of services is a missing component of GDP, as are measures of inequality in the distribution of the benefits of economic activity (Burchardt, 2013). Equally, it fails to reflect environmental damage caused by the production or consumption of activities that detract from well-being such as a person's demand on the earth's ecosystems (their carbon footprint) (New Economics Foundation, 2007; Stiglitz et al., 2009). For all these reasons and more, there is good cause to believe that subjective indicators offer much potential in terms of relevant indicators of social progress.

However, the level of enthusiasm and the speed at which these alternative subjective measures have been embraced since the global financial crisis and subsequent fall in living standards is fostering some suspicion that it may be more than simply a coincidence, and actually politically convenient (Burchardt, 2013: 4).<sup>1</sup>

This thesis is concerned with the significance that such a shift has for current poverty research which has been heavily influenced by Townsend's (1979) concept of objective

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<sup>1</sup> Household incomes in the UK have fallen sharply since the economic recession in 2008. They are around 7% below pre-crisis peak levels and forecast not to return to previous peaks until 2018 (for average real incomes) or 2019 (for median real incomes) (PwC, 2014).

relative deprivation and based on an individual's inability to meet a minimum standard of living such as diet, shelter, clothing and heating and to participate fully in the social activities, customs and norms which the society views as normal.

From an anti-poverty perspective, the possibility that subjective self-reported satisfaction levels come to take priority over objective measures of poverty is a major concern. This is because reflective measures like life satisfaction and overall well-being have been shown to be vulnerable to the phenomenon of adaptation and social comparisons, where people rate their situation with that of similar others and relative to what they have come to expect.

In a seminal study published in 1966 *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice: Attitudes to Social Inequality in Twentieth Century Britain*, Walter G. Runciman examined the relationship between institutionalised inequalities and the level of resentment such inequalities provoked. His study revealed a disparity between objective disadvantage and feelings of dissatisfaction.

Relative deprivation in this sense was used differently to the way it was later used by Townsend. Runciman used the term to mean a sense of deprivation by subjective comparison with a reference group, while Townsend used it objectively (Veit-Wilson 1987: 195). According to Runciman, people were not consciously aware of the extent of inequality, mainly because the degree to which a person felt deprived was influenced significantly by their subjective comparison to a specific reference group which, in most cases, tended to be quite narrow and limited.

This was particularly evident at the lower end of the income distribution with disadvantaged individuals having a higher probability of making downward comparisons with people worse off than themselves. Consequently, people felt grateful for what they had and adjusted their expectations and preferences to their material and financial constraints. The study concluded that feelings of discontentment and grievance could not be used as justifiable evidence for social injustice, as subjective feelings of deprivation were a poor reflection of objective disadvantage.

This conclusion is said to have influenced the preference for objective measures of relative deprivation which could be tackled through public policy (Fahey, 2007; 2010). Indeed, Townsend strongly defended objectivity along similar grounds claiming that people can be

manipulated into accepting positions of unequal status and unfairness as legitimate and in their own interests. Drawing on references to Marxist theory he explained how:

*'false consciousness is not an important sociological concept for nothing'*  
(Townsend, 1985a: 44).

Conversely, the way in which Townsend's original work has been developed by the 'enforced lack' criterion (Mack and Lansley, 1985) has itself become the subject of debate, with it too being critiqued by some along the lines of adaptive preference formation (McKay, 2004; Crettaz and Suter, 2013). However, this opinion remains currently a minority view and the enforced lack of socially perceived necessities continues to grow in significance as a method of measuring deprivation across the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU).

A number of official statistics of poverty now include measures of deprivation alongside relative income measures. Until very recently these measures were reported on separately, (for example, see Households Below Average Income Series (HBAI) and Family Resources Survey (FRS)), with the combined income and material deprivation measure more commonly found in academic research than in policy circles (see for example, Gordon et al., 2000 and Hillyard et al., 2003). However, this combined method of poverty measurement has now been incorporated more widely into official anti-poverty targets within the UK and EU, making deprivation indicators highly significant in their own right.

Nevertheless, strong resistance to the inclusion of subjective perceptions of well-being within the broader conception of social progress on the grounds of adaptation processes cannot be validated without an exploration of the 'enforced lack' criterion along similar grounds.

The role of adaptation processes and their influence on human behaviour have been debated for over sixty years across a wide spectrum of the social sciences. Much research exists which investigates the mechanisms and direction of social comparisons to explain many different types of phenomena. However, much of the qualitative work examining the concept of adapted preferences within the poverty literature do so from the viewpoint of resourcefulness and agency amidst persistent pressures and strains (Kempson et al., 1994; Kempson, 1996; Scharf et al., 2002, 2005; Dean and Shah, 2002; Orr et al., 2006; Flint, 2010; Hickman et al., 2014). Fewer qualitative studies have examined the extent and intensity of adaptation and the degree to which reference group choices affect people's experience of

this phenomenon. Moreover, empirical evidence on how poverty indicators are affected by these processes is '*still surprisingly scarce*' (Crettaz and Suter, 2013: 140).

Hence, the aim of this research is to address the gap in the existing knowledge base on the role that social comparisons, adaptation and expectations command over reported levels of perceived deprivation.

## **2. Rationale**

This research will investigate the degree to which a person's perception of their current objective circumstances is influenced by their expectations, previous experiences and social reference groups and examine how poverty and well-being indicators are affected by these processes. The research uses secondary analysis of qualitative and quantitative data from the 2012 Poverty and Social Exclusion study (PSE). The qualitative data consists of interviews carried out with 51 respondents from low income households in Northern Ireland where people were asked about the nature and significance of family life in a context of poverty and low income. In this regard, the individual respondent (mostly mothers) is providing their own perception of family well-being. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter five.

One area of interest was how respondents see themselves and their family in comparison to other individuals and families in contemporary society. This specific area of investigation has substantial relevance for this thesis as it helps elucidate the reference points for comparison. The interview data is augmented by analysis of responses to the PSE's Living Standards Survey where people were asked about a range of dimensions of deprivation and social exclusion at the household and individual level.

By combining the qualitative findings with quantitative analysis of a large population survey, the study finds that the frame of reference of social comparisons and previous experiences are important factors in people's evaluations of current situations. People adapt to precarious situations as a way of avoiding the harsh realities of disadvantage. The 'enforced lack' measure of deprivation proves a robust measure of deprivation, whereas the overall life satisfaction measure tends to be vulnerable to subjective perceptions of personal relationships. This is highly significant because material deprivation measures and subjective well-being measures are now being used for assessing the success or failure of related policy interventions and programmes. It makes a valuable contribution to the methodological discourse regarding poverty measurement and contributes additional

information to aid the interpretation of measures of subjective satisfaction levels by bringing to light the complexities involved in making life evaluations and judgements.

All data were collected between 2011 and 2012. This was during a time of substantial public spending cuts in the areas of social security benefits and public services across the UK and elsewhere. The study is located in Northern Ireland where it has been argued that the political, economic and social structure of the region makes it particularly vulnerable to these cuts (Browne, 2010). This contextual setting is described in more detail in chapter five to support interpretation of the study findings. However, it is argued that what is revealed about the way social comparisons and adaptive preferences impact on the measurement of poverty and social progress has resonance beyond Northern Ireland.

### **3. Aims and objectives**

This research has two main aims:

**Aim 1:** To investigate the degree to which adaptive preference formation and social comparison processes may or may not lead to a form of compliance that diminishes people's sense of entitlement and their hopes for the future.

**Aim 2:** Bring to light any impact such processes could have for the measurement of poverty and social progress.

Associated objectives are to:

1. Examine the shift away from objective metrics of welfare towards subjectivity.
2. Identify the main drivers for such a shift.
3. Investigate the influence of social reference groups in terms of contentment through the analysis of qualitative interview data.
4. Examine the implications of lowered expectations and adaptive preferences on a consensual method of poverty measurement that is predicated on the concept of 'enforced lack' through quantitative analysis of the Poverty and Social Exclusion study's Living Standards Survey.
5. Examine the implications of adaptive preference formation on an individual's subjective assessment of their overall life satisfaction through analysis of responses to the life satisfaction question asked in the Living Standards Survey.

## **4. Research questions**

The motivation for this research stems from a desire to ensure that poverty measurement maintains the traditional concern with social need and redistribution and at the same time, investigate the scope and nature of long-established theories, to see whether or not there is anything we can learn that may shed new light on the relationship between objective relative deprivation and subjective perceptions of such conditions. In order to do this, the following questions need to be addressed:

1. Do people make social comparisons and if so, how and with whom do they compare?
2. How does the choice of social reference group influence a person's subjective assessment of their living standards and quality of life?
3. How do subjective perceptions of quality of life influence contentment with objective standards of living?
4. Do people adapt to their circumstances by lowering their expectations?
5. Could the process of adaptation influence the degree to which people report objective relative deprivation and overall well-being?

## **5. Thesis structure**

Chapter two details the move towards subjectivity and maintains that the shift has been directed mainly by the influences of positive psychology, behavioural economics and influential advocates of human development and global sustainability in their mutual desire for indicators of well-being that go beyond economic measures. Section two of that chapter discusses how these influences have been translated into UK government policy. A major focal point is the establishment of the UK National Well-being Index and the mainstreaming of subjective well-being indicators as measures of progress across government departments. This is followed by a discussion of the growing desire to better understand how human emotions are shaped and how individuals can be influenced into making behavioural choices believed to be in their best interest in terms of increasing their own well-being. To explain this, a focus is placed on 'nudge' policy making and behavioural conditionality, which builds on the principle of nudging people towards making the right choice by making it more difficult to make the 'wrong' decision (Standing, 2011). The role that randomised control trials have come to play in the evaluation of government policy

interventions is highlighted and concern is expressed at how unfavourable outcomes often go ignored.

Chapters three and four set the study within its theoretical context and background by looking at the origins of the concept of relative deprivation in both subjective and objective senses. In chapter three, particular emphasis is placed on Runciman's concept of relative deprivation and social justice (1966). It considers phenomena associated with this concept - those of adaptive preferences and lowered expectations. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the politics of lowered expectations which, it argues, is at the core of current government thinking and rhetoric.

The objective relative deprivation approach associated with Townsend and his aim to establish a '*national style of living*' (1979: 558) is discussed in detail in chapter four. A number of prominent critiques which this initial work invoked are examined in terms of the extent of conceptual overlaps and conflict. This is followed by an assessment of the main modifications made by subsequent research, namely the consensual method based on 'enforced lack' and developed by Mack and Lansley (1985). The chapter concludes by setting out the challenges such debate presents to the measurement of poverty, in light of the increasing significance being attributed to material deprivation and subjective well-being indicators.

Chapter five sets out the study design, research methods and analytical methods chosen to investigate the research questions. This study uses a mixed methods approach to data gathering and analysis. There are two main justifications for combining qualitative and quantitative research in this study. Firstly, for triangulation purposes, that is, to provide greater validity in order that the findings may be mutually corroborated (Bryman, 2006) and secondly, to provide completeness in the belief that each method is best suited to its own specific part of the problem and can each address a meaningful group of questions (Mason, 2006: 6). In combination, it is argued that the different types of data can give a better sense of the whole, particularly as the measures share the same issue of investigation (poverty measurement) and theoretical orientation (relative deprivation).

Chapter six and seven is based on analysis of qualitative data emanating from the Poverty and Social Exclusion Study (PSE) carried out in Northern Ireland and Britain in 2011/12. Both chapters investigate, in much greater detail, one of the themes from the qualitative component of the PSE research in Northern Ireland – how families compare themselves with others. Chapter six seeks to discover if people find it easy to make comparisons, and

the manner in which these comparisons are made. A typology of responses is developed to describe where those assessments are commonly made and the rationale for these judgments. The chapter concludes with the strong suggestion that people are more likely to compare with similar others and comparisons are subconsciously made to lessen feelings of discontent. This conclusion gives rise to the question: will this influence a person's subjective assessment of the quality of family life and actual living standards? For example, will a person be content with their family's standard of living as long as it is no worse than the perceived standard of living of their reference group?

Chapter seven seeks to answer this question by examining respondents' views of their current living standards and the reasons why people hold such opinions. Respondents were asked similar questions about their perceptions of quality of life and the reasons for their view. When standard of living and quality of life evaluations are analysed together, it reveals mostly an inconsistent pattern, with average or low evaluations of living standards commonly reported alongside high quality of life assessments. The chapter concludes with the assertion that a person's contentment with their standard of living is influenced, not only by comparison with similar others, but with their satisfaction with personal relationships. Both factors are argued to diminish feelings of dissatisfaction and instil a sense of acquiescence.

Chapter eight investigates the findings from the qualitative examination further, through the use of quantitative analysis of the Northern Ireland component of the PSE's Living Standards Survey. Direct logistic regression analysis was performed to test whether, and to what degree, indicators of material deprivation and subjective well-being are affected by the process of adaptation. The chapter did not find strong evidence to suggest that adaptive preference formation influenced the measure of material deprivation. In particular, the 'enforced lack' measure was found to be the most robust in terms of differentiating between the least and most deprived when compared to objective deprivation. In relation to life satisfaction, those who were slightly, or very dissatisfied, with their social relationships were more likely to have low scores on the life satisfaction scale. This substantiates the findings from the qualitative data which found that having good social relations was one of the most important aspects of family life. The chapter argues that older people and women are more likely to be under-represented in a measure of low life satisfaction.

Finally, chapter nine sets out the findings by addressing each of the five research questions in turn. The implications of the study are outlined in terms of poverty measurement and general observations are made which relate to the measurement of societal well-being based on subjective assessments. The chapter concludes with support for the use of the 'enforced lack' measure of material deprivation as a poverty reduction target and advises caution on the use of subjective well-being indicators as a measure of social progress. Analysis indicates that people rate their satisfaction relative to the quality of their personal relationships, rather than using a more reflective view of life overall.

# Chapter Two - Towards subjectivity

## 1. Introduction

Policy makers' enthusiasm for subjective measures of progress based on emotions, feelings and experiences reflects the level of dissatisfaction with standard measures of progress such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The popularity of public policies informed by identifying the external effects that shape these individual emotions has been described lately as the emergence of 'psychological governance' (Jones et al., 2013).

While there are good reasons to seek methods capable of complementing traditional measures of economic performance, the greater focus on subjectivity within social policy has led to measures of reflective assessments of life satisfaction being the norm, with subjective well-being indicators mainstreamed through UK government policy.

The aim of this chapter is to critically assess the political and intellectual influences behind the growth of interest in subjectivity. Section one devotes particular attention to the role played by positive psychology, behavioural economics and influential advocates of human development and global sustainability. Section two details how subjectivity is being operationalised through the establishment of the UK National Well-Being Index and a raft of public policies informed by a 'nudge' approach, evaluated through randomised control trials and shaped by expanding conditionality.

The chapter concludes by acknowledging the potential for subjective indicators to act as a complement to more objective measures but echoes the growing call for attention against the possible misuse of such measures for 'political convenience' (Burchardt, 2013: 4).

## 2. Background summary

What constitutes the quality of a person's life or their well-being has been debated by leading philosophers, political scientists and sociologists since the time of the ancient Greeks. While numerous definitions of the 'good life' are discussed in the literature, no universal agreement exists. It is commonplace to see terms such as quality of life, well-being and sometimes welfare, being used interchangeably. More recently, happiness has come to represent a person's well-being.

In terms of comprehensiveness, it is useful to review three major philosophical approaches to determining the quality of life (Brock, 1993). The first approach characterises a 'good society' or a 'good life' based on normative ideals of what a good society should look like. Such notions have been largely shaped by the ideologies of the ruling governments of the time, along with scholarly influences and environmental conditions. This approach is closely associated with the social indicators tradition in the social sciences (Diener and Suh, 1997). The emphasis here is on having a collection of measures that reflect people's objective circumstances, across a wide range of societal domains deemed necessary by the collective norms of that society. For instance, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it has become the norm to measure the relative health of the population not just in terms of life expectancy, but to augment this information with data on the quality of life spent in a healthy state, as measured by the 'Healthy Life Years' indicator<sup>2</sup>.

The second approach defines the good life in economic terms, based mainly on the satisfaction of preferences and underpins much of modern economic thinking. Here, the quality of one's life, or their well-being, is measured in terms of consumers' choices and behaviours and whether or not an individual can obtain the things that they desire, relative to their level of resources and economic constraints. Consideration is also given to the satisfaction gained from obtaining the things that others deem valuable and desirable. A guiding concept here is neo-classical economics which theorises the economy through an analysis of individual behaviour and rational decision making. When faced with constraint, the assumption is that consumers will allocate their resources in a way which optimises their satisfaction – thus increasing their well-being (or utility). According to neo-classical theory, understanding individual behaviour and the drivers of rational choice are key components of the power of economics to predict societal well-being. The measurement of market transactions such as GDP is viewed as fundamental indicators in this regard.

The third approach describes quality of life in terms of the experience of individuals. In this approach, actual feelings of joy, happiness and life satisfaction are the principal components by which to define life's quality. If a person experiences their life as good and desirable, then it is taken for granted that they have a good quality of life. This subjective well-being approach has two main positions. One position has philosophical roots in the utilitarian traditions of philosophers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Diener and Suh, 1997). Jeremy Bentham, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, identified pain and pleasure as the only intrinsic values in the

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<sup>2</sup> See [http://ec.europa.eu/health/indicators/healthy\\_life\\_years/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/health/indicators/healthy_life_years/index_en.htm)

world, arguing that the moral worth of an action (its utility) was determined by its outcome and that actions that brought about the maximum happiness were of the greatest value (Phillips, 2006). For Bentham, utility was the mental state of pleasure, or happiness, and as individuals would rationally choose pleasure over pain, an ideal society is one where individual utility is maximised. The environmental conditions at this time were characterised by severe poverty, hunger and low life expectancy, so there was often a connection made between maximised utility and the possession of wealth (Fischer, 2009).

The second position is based within the philosophical tradition associated with Aristotle where well-being is reflected not by individual happiness, but rather by personal fulfilment and self-actualisation. In contrast with maximising utility, in the sense of increasing individual pleasure and happiness, the focus here is on achieving a deeper purpose in life through living a life that has value and meaning. The individualistic orientation of subjective well-being (both utilitarian and Aristotelian positions) is a good example of the built-in assumptions that individual behaviour is guided by a quest for individual happiness and fulfilment. As Daly (2011: 41) notes, the individual – collective question remains, as we ask ourselves ‘does pleasure and well-being emanate from ourselves or from those around us?’

While these three approaches have often competed in political and philosophical thought (Diener and Suh, 1997: 190), it is the second approach, the economic interpretation of well-being which associates quality of life with consumer choices and the distribution and flow of money, that has remained prominent until now. Societal progress has continued to be commonly measured along economic dimensions, typically by the market value of all goods and services produced within a country in a given period of time - a country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

However, the validity of using income as a measure of utility has been increasingly challenged in the last 20 years, by a growing body of work emanating from differing intellectual disciplines. This contradicts the association between increased incomes and corresponding increases in levels of well-being. The work of economists (for example, Blanchflower and Oswald 2004; Layard 2005; Johns and Ormerod 2007) and psychologists (for example, Diener and Biswas-Diener 2002; Seligman 2002; Diener 2006) has been highly influential in calling for a greater understanding of well-being, happiness and quality of life.

This academic work has in turn facilitated expansive debate in the area of utility and satisfaction, giving a platform to growing demand for indicators capable of informing such

holistic notions. The petition for quality of life and well-being measures has been accompanied by a number of influential national and internationally renowned advocates, all of whom seek to restore the balance between measuring human well-being solely in economic terms, and seeing economic progress as one of a number of supporting pillars of overall human development and global sustainability.

### **3. Section One: Political and intellectual influences**

#### **I. The contribution of psychology**

Information on people's well-being based on personal feelings and subjective experiences is associated with the Subjective Well-being (SWB) approach to measuring quality of life. It is distinguished from objective measures of quality of life such as income, housing and health not just in the method of measurement (as in what is observable and what is self-reported) but in what is being measured. Over the past ten years, interest in positive states of mind and the cultivation of positive attitudes and emotions have become the basis of a new positive psychology movement concerned with why people experience their lives in positive ways, including happiness, life satisfaction and positive mental states (Seligman and Peterson, 2003). Well-being has now become synonymous with happiness. It is distinct from the study of mental ill health and negative social circumstances that traditionally dominate the social sciences (Seligman, 2002).

This emphasis on positive mental health has also permeated other spheres. For example, in his influential book, *'Happiness: Lessons from a new science'*, economist Richard Layard (2005) argues for a closer relationship between economics and positive psychology, claiming that the 'new science of happiness' provides a robust basis for measuring average happiness and for making comparisons between people and over time. The purpose of public policy, argues Layard, should be 'to pursue the greatest happiness of all' (2005: 234). Happiness measures should therefore be used to judge the value of public policies including: taxation/redistribution, employment (including work/life balance), mental illness, the regulation of work and pay, moral education and 'community life' (2005: 232-235). The link between positive mental health, employment and well-being was further strengthened by Layard's successful championing for investment, by central government, into expanding mental health treatments, through the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) initiative.

This was not simply a response to serious levels of unmet need, but a calculation that ‘since people suffering from depression and anxiety are already costing the Government quite a lot of money, there could be significant savings if they got better’ (Hodson and Browne, 2008: 4). Hence, IAPT was not only supported by Alan Johnson (at the Department of Health) and Gordon Brown (Chancellor, then Prime Minister) but also by the Department of Work and Pensions: ‘because of the problem of people on Incapacity Benefit’ (2008: 4).

## II. Measuring Subjective well-being

In general, two main theoretical approaches to measuring SWB have emerged – the ‘affective’ and the ‘cognitive’ approaches. These have also been termed as ‘evaluative’ and ‘hedonic’ (Kahneman & Riis, 2005) and ‘hedonic’ and eudaimonic’ (Ryan and Deci, 2001)<sup>3</sup>. Even among themselves however, the researchers of happiness are undecided about whether empirical research should use measures of the affective, or of the cognitive, component of subjective well-being (Fischer, 2009).

The affective approach is concerned with mood or emotional state and how we experience happiness or pleasure *in the moment*. It is the ‘here and now’ experience of utility that is the main concern of the affective component of measuring well-being. It is represented by people’s actual positive and negative emotions such as happiness, sadness, pain, worry, anxiety and respect as reported in real time and which are said to be less affected by memory or by external influences (Stiglitz et al., 2009). There are no distinctions made between higher or lower levels of experienced satisfaction or pleasures, nor is any weight given to considered preferences, meaning it is closer to classical utilitarianism (Burchardt, 2006). Typical questions that aim to capture ‘affect’ in the ‘here and now’ are:

*“Did you experience sadness during a lot of the day yesterday?”* (Gallop World Poll)

*How much of the time during the past 4 weeks... have you been happy?* (Welsh Health Survey, 2009)

*During the past 4 weeks, how much of the time has your physical health or emotional problems interfered with your social activities (like visiting friends, relatives, etc)?* (Welsh Health Survey, 2009)

The cognitive approach is concerned more with remembered utility and a retrospective assessment of life satisfaction as a whole. Also known as the eudaimonic approach, it has

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<sup>3</sup> Later work has separated the approaches into three dimensions: ‘evaluation’, ‘experience’ and [sic] ‘eudemonic’ (Dolan et al., 2011). This is discussed later in the chapter.

been termed 'decision utility' or 'remembered utility', and is based on a more reflexive judgment of life satisfaction. It is this overall assessment of life satisfaction on which people are said to base their decisions and choices (Kahneman and Krueger, 2006). The suggestion here is that if policy makers are interested in understanding people's actual choices, and are concerned with influencing real-life behaviours to enhance their utility, it is the cognitive component of SWB that should be the focus of policy evaluations (Fischer, 2009: 11).

Typical questions within the cognitive component are:

*All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?*  
(Scottish Health Survey, 2008)

More frequently, the life satisfaction question is accompanied by questions relating to satisfaction in domain specific areas of a person's life, such as standard of living, health, education, family life, social life, job satisfaction and job security, leisure time (see World Values Survey, European Quality of Life Survey, Australian Personal Well-being Index, and Understanding Society). This constitutes a more multi-dimensional approach to measuring life satisfaction. Several studies have examined the relationship between SWB as measured by the overall life satisfaction question, and the satisfaction in other domains of life. Using the 2005 World Values Survey, Fischer (2009) found the strongest correlations with overall life satisfaction were in the domains of people's social life and their financial situation. Alesina et al. (2004), comparing American and European data, found SWB to be lower in areas with high levels of income inequality. Studies examining the relationship between individual income and SWB suggest that the subjective value of a person's income depends on comparisons they make with other people's incomes, with SWB being lower when income inequality is high (Burchardt, 2006).

Much research is concerned with SWB and the concept of homeostasis which is based on the belief that when threatened by external adverse change, the body will set in motion physiological processes to restore and maintain normal body equilibrium. It further suggests that we all have an individual 'Set Point Range' (Cummins et al., 2009: 26) which ensures proper functioning of the body by giving everybody a sense of positive well-being. Some people will have a higher or lower set point than others, reflecting differences in optimism and genetics, but all points are within a set range. Therefore, responses to questions such as '*on the whole, how satisfied are you with your life these days?*' are argued

by some to reflect a positive mood state, and not a cognitive evaluation of life satisfaction (Davern et al., 2007).

Adaption to positive experiences is said to happen more quickly as the body has to work harder to restore a sense of balance when the experiences are negative. The more negative the experience and the longer it persists, the harder the body has to work to restore a balance and the greater the risk that a person's sense of well-being will fall below their natural set point range. The idea that people naturally return to a level of positive well-being that allows them to function as best they can, suggests that this is achieved through the process of adaptation and inevitable acquiescence, thus limiting the possibilities of improving happiness over time (Tomlinson and Kelly, 2013). Here, the similarities between homeostasis and concepts such as adaptive preference formation and false consciousness are clearly evident. This is discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

The central focus of analysis within the psychological approach to measuring SWB is at the level of the individual. The affective or hedonic tradition stresses the importance of the individuals' personal freedom to make judgements about whether their life is good or bad – judgements which can be determined from responses given to a set of questions. Meanwhile, the cognitive or eudaimonic approach focuses less on happiness and more on individual self-actualisation and the achievement of personal potential. Unlike hedonic measures, the focus here is on good psychological 'functioning' elements of well-being such as individual autonomy, achieving goals, having a sense of purpose in life, independent of pleasure (Huppert et al. 2009).

The growing attention on individual SWB has stimulated interest in children's own subjective sense of their well-being which, until recently, has been more usually assessed using objective measures such as child poverty rates or measures of deprivation in domains of children's lives such as health and education (Bradshaw et al., 2013). Less emphasis has been placed on the well-being of the family as a collective unit despite the fact that the majority of children grow up in a family and it is through the family that their care needs and dimensions of well-being are provided (Daly, 2011).

### **III. The contribution of economics**

Within traditional economics there has been a long established interest in how human interactions affect individual decision making and the values and external effects that shape consumption behaviour. The importance of other people in consumption decisions is said to go back to the inception of modern utility and consumption theory (Ferrer-I-Carbonell,

2005). Leibenstein (1950) put forward the notion that consumers get satisfaction, not just from the purchase of a specific good itself, but also from other factors related to the good such as how much it is consumed by others. The ownership of something a large proportion of others consume and deem valuable and desirable, is said to instil a notion of social belonging. The work of economist Richard Easterlin (1974), in particular, has accelerated the interest within economics in investigating income comparison for people's well-being or happiness. His work has centered on the paradox that while richer people within countries are happier than poorer people, richer countries are not happier, on average, than poorer countries (Easterlin, 1974; 1995; 2001).

Many studies that have used cross-sectional data at the individual level within one country have found a strong association between income and well-being (Dolan et al. 2006; 2008; Kahneman and Deaton, 2010; Layard et al., 2010). However, while these studies note that richer individuals report higher levels of well-being, they also show a diminishing return in that well-being does not increase analogous to income. This implies that well-being stalls once income reaches a certain level. Such findings suggest that richer individuals are only slightly happier than poorer people in the same country (Diener et al., 1999). Still, there is on-going speculation that the reported positive association within countries between high income and high levels of well-being, shows signs of decline at high national income levels (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004; Layard et al., 2008; 2010; Deaton, 2008; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2008). Studies within countries also show that additional income matters more to poorer people than it does to the rich (Cummins et al., 2010).

Studies using cross-sectional data across multiple countries report a positive correlation between household or individual income and well-being, with higher income countries experiencing higher levels of well-being than poorer nations (Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2002; Dolan et al., 2006; 2008). Although here too, increases in income do not translate into equal amounts of increased well-being. However, as reported by the New Economics Foundation (NEF, 2012) in most cases the positive correlations between average levels of life satisfaction and national income exist even when individual or household income is controlled for (Inglehart and Klingemann, 2000; Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2002; Diener and Seligman, 2004; Dolan et al., 2006, 2008; Deaton, 2008; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2008; Easterlin and Sawangfa, 2010). However, the extent of the association depends on which countries are being compared. When a combination of low, middle and high income countries are contrasted, the positive relationship between income and well-being appears stronger than if mainly high income countries are being studied. This suggests that as

countries become richer, the correlation between income and well-being weakens (NEF, 2012).

Fewer studies have used panel data following the same individuals across time, but of the ones that have, findings have been somewhat contradictory. For example, several studies have confirmed the findings of Easterlin's original study in 1974 of a negative association between raising income and associated increases in well-being (Easterlin et al., 2010; Frey and Stutzer, 2002; Easterlin 1995). However, many report a positive correlation between the effect of income and well-being (see van Praag et al., 2003; Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters, 2004).

#### **IV. Behavioural economics**

In an attempt to explain such contradictions, a strand of behavioural economics has emerged from main stream economics which uses psychology to study the external effects that shape individual emotions and behaviours, and the subsequent effects on individual levels of satisfaction. Such external effects include how people perceive the adequacy of their income relative to others (comparison with a reference group), how people adapt to changes in income (adaptation) and whether higher incomes are accompanied by rising expectations leading to what has become known as the 'hedonic treadmill' (Brickman and Campbell, 1971). Thus, individual rises in income ultimately lead to increased aspirations and expectations, resulting in only temporary increases in well-being, returning eventually to a neutral position.

Relative income, that is, when one's income is evaluated with a comparative other, has been found to have an important effect on well-being in an increasing number of studies (Powdthavee, 2010; Van Praag and Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2010). The *relative-income hypothesis* (attributed to James Duesenberry in his 1949 book *Income, Saving and the Theory of Consumer Behavior*) suggests that an individual's well-being is influenced not by their actual income *per se*, but by their income relative to that of their reference group. The assumption is that increased income will increase well-being if all else is held constant. Satisfaction is increased if a person's income rises above that of their reference group and decreases when their income falls below that of their peers.

For example, Frey and Stutzer (2005) showed that levels of life satisfaction were associated with the amount of income people evaluated as adequate for their needs. They found that what people perceived as sufficient income was totally dictated by their relative economic situation, rather than the amount of income they earned in absolute terms. Similarly,

Stutzer (2004) found that well-being depended on the gap between actual income and income aspirations, rather than absolute income itself. Thus, the higher the gap between aspired income and actual income, the less satisfied people were with their life. Individuals' aspirations were also found to be greatly affected by existing general levels of income in their community, leading the author to conclude that *'adaptive and comparative processes form individuals' aspirations and that these aspiration levels make for relativity in our utility judgements'* (2004: 106).

Similar conclusions were reported by Burchardt (2004), where attention was drawn to the psychological processes of adaptation, aspirations and previous experiences in the assessment of well-being. In a study using ten years of panel data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), the writer examined subjective assessments of financial well-being at a certain time for individuals with a given income level, and compared the income trajectory of the individual over the previous one to nine years with their income at a given time. Those who experienced a drop in income since the previous year were less satisfied than those with a constant income, suggesting a correlation between life satisfaction and previous experience. Those who became poor within the study period were less satisfied than those who were poor throughout that time and those with rising incomes were no more satisfied than those who had experienced a high income over a longer period, thus suggesting that people more readily adapt to rising incomes than falling incomes. The research concluded that adaptation, previous experiences and future aspirations influenced individual perception to the extent that satisfaction *'is unsuitable for assessing current well-being, justice or equality. Instead we need an objective normative standard of assessment, such as is offered by the capabilities framework.'* (2004: 31)

Statistical advances and the increasing number of large-scale longitudinal datasets available for analysis have provided opportunities to study phenomena like individual satisfaction, not only in greater depth, but across a broader range of major life events (Clark and Georgellis, 2013). For example, Lucas et al. (2004) used longitudinal data from Germany to test the 'set point' theory, that is, after reaction to a negative life event, people will return to their natural baseline level of happiness or satisfaction over time. When examining adaptation to unemployment, the authors found that after an initial strong negative reaction, people did begin to shift back towards their initial level of satisfaction, but not completely, even after they were reemployed. Furthermore, contrary to other findings, those who had experienced unemployment previously were no less negatively affected after another spell of unemployment than those who had no experience of unemployment.

In addition, the negative effect on well-being for individuals who were unemployed for longer than one year, was worse than for those unemployed for a shorter period, suggesting they did not adapt over time. The authors did not abandon the 'set point' theory; rather they concluded that there are some major life events that are so powerful, like unemployment that they can lead to long-term changes in satisfaction levels. This seems to be consistent with research examining adaptation to other life events which found, for example, quick adaptation to divorce (Gardner and Oswald, 2006), and Stutzer and Frey (2006) who examined adaptation and changes in marital status and found the positive well-being effects of marriage were short lived.

Clark et al. (2008) used data from the German Socio Economic Panel (GSOEP) study to investigate adaptation across six major life events - birth, death, marriage, widowhood, layoff and unemployment: using a single measure of SWB (life satisfaction). The authors found that, for all events except unemployment, people tended to return quite quickly to their baseline level of satisfaction. This lends further weight to the assumption that unemployment stands out as being resistant to adaptation and where negative effects of well-being are greatest (see also Rudolf and Kang, 2011). Applying and extending the method used in the GSOEP study, Clark and Georgellis (2013) used 18 waves of panel data from the BHPS to evaluate the extent of adaptation, using two separate measures of well-being. The first measure was based on responses to the life satisfaction question. The second was a measure of mental health calculated from responses to the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ -12)<sup>4</sup>.

Similar patterns of adaptation were found using the British data as were found using the German data, leading the authors to suggest that adaptation is a general phenomenon. In addition, results using the two different measures of well-being were quite close, indicating that adaptation was a general occurrence and not a product of a specific measure. An important point is made by Clark and Georgellis (2013) when they speculate about the relevance of their findings for future work in this area:

*'The identification of different groups that do better or worse in the face of significant life events not only informs us directly about the changing distribution of well-being over time, but may also provide some clues about why different groups do not adapt in the same way. While there is no clear optimal degree of adaptation*

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<sup>4</sup> GHQ-12 consists of twelve questions covering feelings of strain, depression, inability to cope, anxiety-based insomnia, and lack of confidence.

*(in well-being terms, we would probably like individuals not to adapt to good events, but to adapt to bad events), any adaptation that we do observe might be determined by variables that are to some extent under the control of policy-makers. The extent to which we can, and should wish to, affect the degree of adaptation to life events remains an open question.’ (2013: 510)*

As the authors point out, optimising well-being requires encouraging adaptation to negative events. This begs the question: to what extent *could* adaptation to bad events come under the control of policy makers? Another question is *should* adaptation be in control of policy makers? For example, could people be persuaded to adapt to the consequences of reduced public expenditure and diminishing standards of living, rather than rail against imposed austerity measures? From the government’s perspective this would serve two purposes: improve individual’s SWB, while at the same time proceed with planned welfare cuts, unimpeded. The following chapter argues that adaptation to negative events has been a course of action directly employed by government through the systematic lowering of expectations.

The work of economists has revealed disparities in the widely held belief that a strong correlation between income and utility is a fact. Crucially, the work of behavioural economists has also helped to expose weaknesses in individuals’ assessments of satisfaction, by recording the strong influence of adaptation processes on self-reported levels of well-being. However, there are a number of methodological issues to consider when evaluating well-being research. For instance, precise findings will depend on the study design, and often studies will have been planned for different purposes. Fundamental problems in comparing studies across different countries include the assumption that response scales are used in the same way, which is often not the case (NEF, 2012). In addition, concepts such as well-being and quality of life may be affected by individual interpretation. Nevertheless, a consistent finding across studies is that adaptation is a significant factor. This cannot be ignored in any judgment using satisfaction as a measure of well-being.

## **V. The contribution of influential advocates of human development and global sustainability**

While concern about environmental pollution did feature in the call for more social indicators of progress in the mid-20th century, climate change and sustainable development have come to play a much more significant role in the support of happiness indicators. The Rio Summit in 1992 described sustainable development as resting on the

three pillars of economic efficiency, social equity and environmental sustainability. An agenda was adopted at the summit which invited signatory countries to set out their plans to develop statistical data to monitor and assess progress in this area. Hence, a large number of countries now contain information on sustainability and environmental issues, alongside overall social progress indicator sets (Stiglitz et al., 2009: 235). An important theoretical shift in the discourse of measuring progress has been the emergence of the concept of '*genuine progress*', which attempts to balance economic progress in the context of 'sustainable development' (Michalski, 2002). This notion has become more widespread among government and non-governmental organisations worldwide.

One such example is the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) Project initiated by Redefining Progress (see [www.rprogress.org](http://www.rprogress.org)). Redefining Progress has developed an alternative to the GDP measure of progress by taking the financial aspects of GDP that are relevant to well-being and then adjusting them for aspects of the economy that the GDP ignores. The GPI is a variation of the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW) first proposed by Daly and Cobb (1989). Both the GPI and ISEW use the same personal consumption data as GDP, but make deductions to account for things such as income inequality, costs of crime and depreciation of environmental assets and natural resources; they also make additions to account for the services from consumer durables and public infrastructure as well as the benefits of volunteering and housework (Talberth, Cobb and Slattery, 2006).

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) have been pivotal in promoting the link between well-being and the environment by drawing together evidence on the relationship between ecologically responsible behaviour and increased individual well-being. Their original global measure of progress published in 2006 'The Happy Planet Index' (HPI) charted the position of 178 nations for which information was available based on what is put into the economy (resources) and what comes out (human lives of different length and happiness). No country achieved an overall 'high' score on the HPI, with the UK coming in 108<sup>th</sup> place, which the NEF blamed on a heavy 'ecological footprint' (a measure of the amount of natural resources that an individual, a community, or a country consumes in a given year). The most recent HPI (2012) showed again that no country achieved high sustainable well-being with nine countries only close to achieving this, eight of which were in Latin America and the Caribbean. The United States of America was placed in 105<sup>th</sup> position out of 151 countries. The report went on to demonstrate how the scores of high-income countries are brought down considerably by their large ecological footprints. A measure of NEF's influence could be inferred from the fact that when the HPI was first published in 2006 it

was downloaded by 185 countries worldwide within two days of the launch (<http://www.neweconomics.org/pages/our-history>).

The approach taken by the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has, in particular, been influential in driving the measurement of happiness. The Sustainable Development Strategy (DEFRA, 2005) reflected the consensus for sustainable development emanating from the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002. The aim of the strategy was thus:

*Our Strategy for sustainable development aims to enable all people throughout the world to satisfy their basic needs and enjoy a better quality of life without compromising the quality of life of future generations. (DEFRA, 2005: 6)*

A framework consisting of 68 'Government strategic indicators' was developed with the intention to assess and report annually on progress against the indicators. The indicators were chosen to cover key impacts and outcomes reflective of the key priorities of the strategy. These included fundamental obvious areas like greenhouse gas emissions; renewable energy; land use and conservation. However, it also included less obvious areas such as child and pensioner poverty, crime and fear of crime; worklessness; educational attainment and health inequality. Indicator 68, 'Wellbeing', was in the process of development but by 2007, DEFRA had introduced survey questions covering overall satisfaction with life and satisfaction within other life domains including personal relationships. The DEFRA work has been described as one of '*the most comprehensive attempts at measuring the various aspects of subjective well-being*' (Waldron, 2010: 14).

DEFRA's revised set of Sustainable Development Indicators contains a reduced number of indicators with twelve headline and 23 supplementary indicators (DEFRA, 2013). Headline indicators still cover unemployment, child poverty and health, along with environmental issues. Supplementary indicators include indicators on debt, obesity, lifestyles and fuel poverty. In many domains, the measures now directly link up with other indicator frameworks used to measure progress against government department's business plans: such as the Office for National Statistics's (ONS) National Well-being measures and the Department of Health's Public Health Outcome's Framework (discussed in more detail in section two).

At European level, the European Commission's 'Beyond GDP' conference in November 2007 directed a pivotal debate on the need to develop more inclusive indicators in the

environment and social dimensions which would complement GDP as a measure of societal progress. The conference was successful in achieving a consensus among member states and statistical offices to improve existing measurements of progress. In 2009, the Commission adopted *A Roadmap for Action: GDP and beyond — measuring progress in a changing World* which set out short and medium-term actions which included the development of indicators on environmental protection and quality of life. Progress to date has been significantly noticeable in the detailed set of indicators of ‘Quality of Life and Well-being’ adopted by the European Statistical System. The index combines data from several sources for measuring quality of life in the EU across nine dimensions covering material living conditions, health and education, natural and living environment. Information on living conditions include ‘at risk of poverty’ measures, income inequality (quintile share ratio) and material deprivation. Satisfaction with income, work, education, housing and such like are also included. Also under development within the dimension on ‘Overall experience of life’ are indicators of cognitive and affective components of SWB, as it refers to quality of life outcomes on ‘life satisfaction’, ‘positive and negative affects’ and ‘the meaning of life’<sup>5</sup>.

In February 2008, the French President, Nicholas Sarkozy, asked Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean Paul Fitoussi to create a commission subsequently called ‘The Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress’. The aims were to identify the limits of GDP as a measure of economic and social progress, to identify additional information that could be used to measure more relevant forms of societal progress, while addressing the issue of environmental sustainability. The Commission published their report in 2009 and it is commonly referred to as the Stiglitz Report (Stiglitz et al., 2009).

The report presents a comprehensive critique of the limitations of GDP for assessing our well-being stressing the importance of considering, simultaneously, aspects concerned with health and education; time use; political voice and good governance; the quality of social connections and relationships; the environment both now and in the future; economic and physical insecurity.

A case is also made for a range of indicators that measure quality of life – a concept that is used interchangeably with ‘well-being’ and in places, ‘welfare’. The key point is that measures of market transactions are incapable of capturing quality of life and there is a need to develop appropriate ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ measures for international

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<sup>5</sup> See [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/quality\\_life/introduction](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/quality_life/introduction)

comparison, as well as national action. The Commission argues, for example, that collecting data on how unemployment affects people's mental states (happiness) and life evaluations (satisfaction), will demonstrate that

*'the costs of unemployment exceed the income-loss suffered by those who lose their jobs, reflecting the existence of non-pecuniary effects among the unemployed, and of fears and anxieties generated by unemployment in the rest of society'* (2009: 44).

This view was reflected in recommendation 10 of the final report and has been a major influencing factor in the shift towards subjectivity:

*Recommendation 10: Measures of both objective and subjective well-being provide key information about people's quality of life. Statistical offices should incorporate questions to capture people's life evaluations, hedonic experiences and priorities in their own survey. (2009: 16)*

In relation to 'Quality of Life' the Commission noted that, while objective resources which individuals have command over (such as income, assets, goods and services), are important, they are insufficient in themselves to measure human well-being. This is defended on a number of grounds, namely, adaptive preferences; the unequal accessibility of resources among individuals; that many of the determinants of human well-being are not monetary but aspects of people's life circumstances; and because resources are transferred into well-being by people in different ways.

However, it has been argued that, while the report was advocating the collection of SWB data, it was not promoting the inclusion of SWB in national well-being measures. Indeed, it is claimed that those involved in the Commission, including Amartya Sen, '*vehemently resist the inclusion of subjective wellbeing measures in national wellbeing measures*' (Venkatapuram, 2013: 11). The addition of recommendation 10 is said to reflect the fact that the Commission membership also included advocates of SWB who were able to influence its inclusion in the final report (*ibid*).

The report has resonated around the world and been translated into many different languages. The strong momentum for alternative measures of well-being and societal progress has led to many initiatives being taken at national and international levels which indicate the continuation of subjective well-being measures – some of which incorporate a stronger subjective emphasis than others.

## 4. Section Two: The operationalisation of subjectivity

At national level, the most notable example has been the publicly expressed support for measuring ‘national well-being’ by the Coalition Government within months of assuming office in 2010. The explicit concern with measuring happiness and satisfaction reflected a growing interest in these issues within the previous Labour government which saw such indicators as, not only having the potential to inform government policy making and evaluation, but also being able to provide information to assist individuals make better lifestyle choices (Jones et al., 2013).

In 2011, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) launched its ‘Better Life Initiative’ which extends its own previous work on measuring societal progress and draws heavily from the Stiglitz Commission report’s recommendations for improved and new statistical measures. The initiative is aimed at filling the gap between standard economic statistics and indicators that have a more direct bearing on people’s life (see <http://www.oecd.org/statistics/betterlifeinitiativemeasuringwell-beingandprogress.htm>). A high level expert group has been set up by the OECD which will review international projects on the measurement of well-being; connect measures and economic theory; commission analytical work on specific topics such as inequalities and sustainability; review achievements and identify gaps. The Group’s work will contribute to inform the OECD’s own work in the area of measuring well-being and progress.

### I. How subjectivity has been translated into government policy

Two primary developments illustrate how the subjectivity agenda has been activated through UK public policy. The first example is the establishment of the UK National Well-Being Index and the mainstreaming of SWB indicators as measures of progress across government departments<sup>6</sup>. In 2010 the Office for National Statistics (ONS) was tasked with developing a programme of measuring ‘national well-being’. The assertion by the Prime Minister, David Cameron, was that actions taken by government can affect the way people feel and that government policy has a role in this area because “*there is a link between what politics and government does and people’s happiness, contentedness and quality of life.*” (Cameron, 2010).

Following a public consultation process on the development of a well-being index, ONS added four new questions to the UK Integrated Household Survey:

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<sup>6</sup> ONS now refer to this domain as ‘Personal Well-being’ as opposed to ‘Subjective Well-being’ as information from focus groups suggested this was more easily understood.

1. *Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?*
2. *Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?*
3. *Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?*
4. *Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?*

These questions were designed to distinguish between three categories of measurement: *evaluation measurement* (global assessments of life or domains of life – question 1); *experience measurement* (experiencing positive and/or negative emotions in the moment – questions 3 and 4) and a *eudemonic measure* (purpose in life, autonomy, personal development – question 2) (see Dolan et al., 2011: 6-9). The questions are intended to represent both the hedonic and eudemonic conceptions of well-being.

People were asked to score their responses on a scale ranging from 0 to 10. The first set of results was published in July 2012 (Beaumont, 2012). Results are expressed in two ways: by average scores on the 0-10 scale and by the percentage of people giving different banded ratings. For the 'life satisfaction', 'worthwhile' and 'happy yesterday' questions, the thresholds are the proportions of responses that fall between:

- 0 to 4 (very low)
- 5 to 6 (low)
- 7 to 8 (medium)
- 9 to 10 (high)

For the 'anxious yesterday' question, the thresholds used are the proportions of responses that fall between:

- 0 to 1 (low)
- 2 to 3 (medium)
- 4 to 5 (high)
- 6 to 10 (very high)

Variations between social groups are slight, for example the mean score for 'Life satisfaction' for men is 7.4 and for women it is 7.5. More significant differences are evident such as higher life satisfaction scores for people reporting 'very good' health compared to those whose health was perceived as 'very bad'. The most recent results (ONS, 2013a) are displayed in table 1 below. They reveal Northern Ireland as being the region in the UK

scoring highest in overall life satisfaction, feeling life is worthwhile and being happy, and the least likely region to be anxious, along with Scotland. However, this appears incongruous with the rising number of suicides in Northern Ireland, particularly since the Peace Agreement (DHSSPS, 2006; Tomlinson, 2012; O’Neill et al., 2014).

**Table 1: Personal Well-being scores - 2013**

<b>Average score</b>	<b>Life satisfaction</b>	<b>Worthwhile</b>	<b>Happy</b>	<b>Anxious</b>
<b>UK</b>	7.45	7.69	7.29	3.03
<b>England</b>	7.44	7.68	7.28	3.05
<b>Wales</b>	7.44	7.69	7.29	3.04
<b>Scotland</b>	7.51	7.69	7.32	2.94
<b>NI</b>	<b>7.71</b>	<b>7.87</b>	<b>7.60</b>	<b>2.94</b>

An overview of surveys using the four well-being questions as of September 2013 (ONS, 2013b) reveals 18 surveys using the full set of four SWB questions and nine using variations of the four questions (see Appendix 1). This suggests a heavy reliance on SWB in the foreseeable future. Publication dates vary, with some survey results already published and others due for publication in 2014/2015.

While there is no shortage of communication on the collection of these data, there is less information on how the well-being data will be explicitly used to inform policy formulation. Vagueness surrounds guidance on its use within policy decision making. Therefore, it is noteworthy that the Department of Health’s Public Health Outcomes Framework (DH, 2012) (which DEFRA aligns with, to supplement the sustainable development indicators) has decided upon a specific calculation to measure well-being. Even more significant is that SWB data will very probably be used as a key component of local strategic needs assessments.

The vision of the Public Health Outcomes Framework for England 2013-2016 is: To improve and protect the nation’s health and well-being, and improve the health of the poorest fastest (DH, 2012a: 2). The overarching outcomes are to increase healthy life expectancy and reduce differences in life expectancy between communities. The Framework is organised across four domains; each domain has a specific objective and a set of domain specific indicators by which objectives are evaluated.

Of the 24 indicators in the ‘Health Improvement’ domain, four indicators measure ‘self-reported well-being’. The criteria for assessment are based on the following calculations:

The percentage of respondents scoring 0-6 to the question: *“Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?”*

The percentage of respondents scoring 0-6 to the question: *“Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?”*

The percentage of respondents who answered 0-6 to the question: *“Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?”*

The percentage of respondents scoring 4-10 to the question: *“Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?”*

The rationale for including the well-being measure is explained thus:

*People with higher well-being have lower rates of illness, recover more quickly and for longer, and generally have better physical and mental health. Local data on well-being is likely to be a key component of local Joint Strategic Needs Assessments and form an important part of the work of local Health and Well-being Boards. (DHb, 2012: 75)*

Furthermore, in 2012 the Northern Ireland Executive set up a framework called *Delivering Social Change* (DSC) to tackle poverty and social exclusion. Under this framework, seven ‘Signature Programmes’ have been initiated to bring about the Executive’s anti-poverty objectives. Currently, a set of common metrics are being developed to evaluate the Signature Programmes. One such measure will be the SWB life satisfaction question, broken down by domain (Doran et al., 2014: 22).

Given that these data are still very much at the experimental stage, their planned use in local needs assessment formula, and as an anti-poverty evaluation metric, is a matter of concern, particularly since existing research shows that life satisfaction, particularly the more reflective cognitive measures, are vulnerable to the phenomenon of adaptation or homeostatic processes. If it is the case that long-term deprived people adapt to their circumstances, then it is likely they will report higher levels of satisfaction than perhaps a more wealthy individual experiencing temporary loss or setback. This could have serious implications for any policy priorities made on the basis of this data analysis, with additional complications for area targeted policies designed to tackle local health inequalities.

## II. Nudge policy making

The second example of the operationalisation of subjectivity is the growing desire by policy makers to understand how individuals can be persuaded to optimise their own well-being by making better lifestyle choices. This is clearly demonstrated by the enthusiastic use by central government of insights gained from behavioural economics to influence individuals' environmental, financial and health decisions. If people can be influenced to change their 'bad' behaviours such as poor diet, lack of exercise, alcohol consumption for 'good' behaviours like saving, volunteering, donating, exercising then this in turn will lead to healthier, happier, more satisfied individuals who have less need of public services and resources.

Using psychological sciences to change individuals and group behaviour is not a new phenomenon (Jones et al. 2013). According to Rose (1999), the Second World War was a major driver in the widespread application of psychological techniques, either as a vehicle for morale motivation, or as a propaganda weapon against the enemy. However, it is argued here that a behavioural change agenda is now an established principal component of policy formation and evaluation.

The behavioural economic model used to investigate processes like adaptation, preference, aspiration and their effects on rational choice is increasingly expanding into areas of research interested in the psychological biases that compel people to make choices that appear contrary to their best interests (Standing, 2011). The concern here is to better understand how people can be encouraged to make the 'right choice' or 'better choice'.

Governments have become increasingly interested in the concept of 'choice'. For example, 'choice' was a key mechanism used to generate reform of public services during the Labour government's administration (1997 - 2010) and its modernisation agenda. The idea was that choice would redefine the citizen as a consumer; choice would stimulate competition which would in turn drive more efficient, responsive and improved services capable of meeting needs and improve equity for all, as well as being a good thing in itself (Peckham et al., 2010). However, this was in the context of expanding public sector budgets. While a consumerist model of public service provision has been central to both Conservative and Labour administrations, the programme of public spending cuts on benefits and public services introduced by the Coalition Government through the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review (HM Treasury, 2010) impacted mostly on the money spent on short-term housing and disability benefits. The reforms also represented a considerable restructuring

of state services which, according to Taylor-Gooby and Stoker (2011), resulted in a significant transfer of responsibility from the state to the private sector and to the citizen. People are now encouraged to make private provision in areas such as pensions, health and education. This requires choice and decision making.

Public service reform is being expanded further through more decentralised power which will give local authorities 'greater freedom and choice' (HM Treasury, 2010: 32). Reforms to the education system will ensure that parents have 'far greater choice' (2010: 42) and the National Health Service (NHS) will be liberated through more devolved powers to GP's which will promote 'patient choice'. The impact of the spending review, it is claimed, will meet environmental goals because:

*It moves away from a top down approach, instead freeing individuals, communities and businesses to make choices which protect the environment. (HM Treasury, 2010: 63).*

However, the emphasis on choice is predicated on individuals making the 'right choices'. As behavioural economics has begun to merge closer with psychology to investigate ways that people may be steered in the direction of the right choices, policy makers have become attracted to the potential of behavioural economics to improve the effectiveness of government. So much so, that the emergence of a '*behaviour change policy agenda*' has been identified as a prominent feature of governmental administration in the UK (Jones et al., 2013: 164). This behavioural change agenda first became evident with the publication of a significant discussion document by Halpern et al. in 2004. This document mapped out for the first time in the UK, the potential ways in which the science of behaviour change could be used to reorganise policy interventions in a wide range of different sectors including health, employment, crime and anti-social behaviour, and education, with the overarching endeavour to help people help themselves. It has been suggested (Jones et al., 2013) that one of the most appealing aspects of this approach was the section on improving 'cost effectiveness':

*Detailed cost-benefit analyses in health, crime and education have shown that behaviour-based interventions can be very much more cost-effective than traditional service delivery. For example, smoking cessation programmes deliver around ten-fold more quality-adjusted life years per pound than expenditure on drugs to reduce cholesterol. (Halpern et al., 2004: 10)*

The publication of the book 'Nudge' by economist Richard Thaler and academic lawyer Cass Sunstein (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009) draws heavily on the behavioural economics literature and is said to have provided a major stimulus for change in the public policy sphere (Standing, 2011). Within *Nudge*, Thaler and Sunstein introduce the reader to their new movement 'Libertarian Paternalism' which argues for self-conscious efforts by institutions in the private sector and in government 'to steer people's choices in directions that improve their lives' (2009:5).

One of the book's co-authors, Richard Thaler, has advised policy makers in several countries including Denmark, France and the UK. Guided by Thaler, David Cameron established a Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) in 2010 responsible for:

- encouraging and supporting people to make better choices for themselves
- considering the application of behavioural science to policy design and delivery
- advancing behavioural science in public policy
- championing scientific methodology to bring greater rigour to policy evaluation

The BIT is active in several substantive areas of policy, including the environment and issues such as obesity, as well as advising on the cross-cutting themes of well-being and issues relating to the 'big society agenda' – giving, and improving social networks. It uses a particular framework of behavioural 'truths' known as MINDSPACE which is said to improve policy outcomes by complementing, rather than replacing, existing policy tools – but at a lower cost (Cabinet Office/Institute for Government, 2010).

The BIT's schema is at the heart of Government thinking across key policy areas, but is particularly noticeable in public health reform. For example, a key objective of health improvement policy is to address inequalities in health. A major review of the most effective evidence-based strategies for doing so was conducted by the Marmot Review Team. The Marmot Review (2010) confirmed a 'social gradient' in health, which had already been exposed by the Black Report (1980), Whitehead Report (1987) and Acheson Report (1998), and recommended six specific objectives:

1. Give every child the best start in life
2. Enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives
3. Create fair employment and good work for all
4. Ensure healthy standard of living for all

5. Create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities
6. Strengthen the role and impact of ill health prevention

Government response to the Marmot Review was *'Health lives, Healthy People'* (HM Government, 2010) which favoured an approach based on a 'ladder of intervention' stating that:

*Where the case for central action is justified, the Government will aim to use the least intrusive approach necessary to achieve the desired effect. We will in particular seek to use approaches that focus on enabling and guiding people's choices wherever possible.*

*(2010: para 2.33)*

The policy document directly refers to such an approach thus:

*There is significant scope to use approaches that harness the latest techniques of behavioural science to do this – nudging people in the right direction rather than banning or significantly restricting their choices. (2010: para 2.34).*

A key vehicle for this approach is the *Public Health Responsibility Deal* (RD), a public-private partnership arrangement which was launched in March 2011. The arrangement is organised around a series of voluntary agreements that aim to bring together government, academic experts, commercial companies and voluntary organisations to contribute to meeting public health objectives. According to the Department of Health, the RD *'embodies the Government's ambition for a more collaborative approach to tackling the challenges caused by our lifestyle choices'* (<https://responsibilitydeal.dh.gov.uk>). The RD consists of five core commitments and four supporting pledges, which partners and organisations must sign up to together, while committing to at least one collective pledge. The number of organisations pledging support has increased steadily and reported on their website as at February 2014 to total 639. Supporters include a mixture of organisations ranging from charities to a large number of businesses, including the main supermarket chains such as Asda (22 pledges), Aldi (14 pledges), Sainsbury's (18 pledges) and Tesco (24 pledges). Pledges are accompanied by a delivery plan setting out details on how the pledge will be delivered. For example, pledges to raise public awareness of the calorie and alcoholic content of food and drink usually involve details on how the company plans to make changes to its advertising and marketing practices.

However, six public health organisations involved in the RD Alcohol Network publicly withdrew their support before the RD was announced. Among their concerns was that commercial interests were being prioritised over public health benefits and there was no government commitment to take alternative action if the pledges did not work (Petticrew et al., 2013). Concerns were also expressed by the House of Commons Health Select Committee concerning the effectiveness of the ‘nudging’ approach as regards the national policy dimension of health improvement.

*The Committee does not oppose the exploration of innovative techniques such as “nudging”, where it can be shown, following proper evaluation, to be an effective way of delivering policy objectives. The Committee were, however, unconvinced that the new Responsibility Deal will be effective in resolving issues such as obesity and alcohol abuse and expect the Department of Health to set out clearly how progress will be monitored and tougher regulation applied if necessary. Those with a financial interest must not be allowed to set the agenda for health improvement.*

(House of Commons, 2011: Col 287)

### **III. Randomised Control Trials**

Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) are a central component of the BIT’s methodology. Traditionally used extensively in international development, medicine and business, RCTs are now being used in numerous policy areas to evaluate the effectiveness of particular types of interventions. Interventions are targeted at the level of individuals, institutions (for example, schools and hospitals) and geographical areas. Groups are then randomly assigned into either an interventionist or control group. Success is measured by the degree to which the intervention delivers the desired effect and existing policy is adapted to reflect the trial’s findings. For example, an RCT was carried out with people who had outstanding court fines. The desired effect was to increase the response rate from reminder letters to pay the outstanding debt. The intervention was an individualised text message sent to the group of debtors as opposed to a letter, while the control group received only the reminder letter. The result was a 33 percent increase in response rate from the group which received the intervention, which subsequently resulted in the intervention being planned for national rollout. Other trials have been carried out in low key areas such as the wording on tax forms and such like, with similar success making their potential appealing to government departments.

However, not all RCT's have been so modest or uncontroversial. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) came under investigation by the health watchdog *Health and Care Professions Council* after trialing a psychometric test (a 48 question character-assessment test) devised by the BIT with jobseekers who were told they would lose their benefits if they did not complete the questionnaire. The credibility of the test was seriously questioned by US psychologists who had refused permission for the UK government to use the test as it had not been properly validated. The British Psychological Society (BPS) said it had submitted questions to the DWP after receiving complaints, which, it said, it was taking seriously.

*'We approached the DWP to try to discover how the Behavioural Insights Unit drew up its test. We have received a reply, but without our questions being fully answered. (Guardian Newspaper, 19 June 2013).*

Despite the enthusiastic support from within government ministerial departments for RCTs, the government is facing growing criticism that it often ignores the results of their own trials. For example, the assessment by the DWP of its own Mandatory Work Activity Programme found that the group of unemployed people who were randomly selected to undertake up to 30 hours of unpaid work per week for up to four weeks (the intervention), were as likely to be claiming benefits in the long-term as those who were not selected for the scheme. Moreover, it led to a proportion of the interventionist group subsequently claiming sickness related benefits. The research findings were lodged in the House of Commons three hours prior to the Minister Chris Grayling announcing an additional £5 million funding for the scheme's expansion (Guardian, 13 June 2012).

While not an RCT, another example where objective assessments have gone ignored was when a damning report by the National Audit Office regarding the introduction of Universal Credit (NAO, 2013) described the scheme as not achieving value for money and being beset by 'weak management, ineffective control and poor governance'. The report warned that the planned national rollout due to be introduced in 2017 may have to be postponed. However, the Department for Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith publically refuted this claim. Speaking on BBC Radio 4's Today programme, Mr. Duncan Smith said:

*'This is not an IT disaster. This will be delivered in time and on budget. I am not and will not be spending a penny more than we originally planned; in fact, I hope and believe that with the way that we've changed this we will actually be more efficient.'* (5<sup>th</sup> September, 2013)

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the work of the unit has proved attractive to a wide range of clients with demands for its services increasing from within government, the private sector and foreign governments (Guardian, 1st May 2013). A measure of its success and influence could be viewed in terms of the decision to make it the first policy unit to be 'mutualised', turning the team into a profit-making joint venture, with a private company taking a stake of up to 50 percent in the new business. The mutual will be guaranteed government contracts for a period of time, but it will be free to sell its services outside Whitehall (Cabinet Office, 2013).

#### **IV. Behavioural conditionality**

Of particular relevance to behavioural economics is the notion of 'behavioural conditionality' which involves the setting of certain conditions which must be satisfied in order to receive certain benefits or services. This essentially builds on the principle of nudging people towards making the right choice by making it more difficult to make the 'wrong' decision (Standing, 2011). One example is the government's Work Experience schemes which involve a number of programmes, some of which are offered on a voluntary basis and others which are mandatory. The voluntary schemes (such as Work Activity and Sector-Based Work Academies) offer some kind of incentive such as a contribution towards travel or childcare costs or a guaranteed job interview with the organisation. Placements can last up to six weeks, and while participation is voluntary, anyone who does not complete their placement faces sanctions to their benefits. Mandatory schemes are designed for longer term unemployed people who, it is claimed, do not understand the proper behaviours required for work:

*The introduction of Mandatory Work Activity will enable advisers to offer further support to small groups of customers who have little recent experience of employment, and little or no understanding of what behaviours are required to obtain and keep work. (DWP, 2011)*

Failure to participate or fully comply with the mandatory scheme invokes harsh penalties with benefit sanctions of 13 weeks. A second failure in a twelve month period will lead to a 26 week sanction.

While it can be said that conditionality has traditionally been a feature of social security benefit receipt, the transfer has been mainly based on contractual contributions based arrangements between the individual and the state through the National Insurance scheme. Means-tested benefit transfers traditionally represented a residual role in the

overall social security budget. However, in recent years the role of contributory social security entitlement has diminished people's statutory rights to incomes in sickness and unemployment by reducing the eligibility period of rights based benefit receipt, thus increasing the scope of means-tested benefits (Veit-Wilson, 2013). The introduction of Universal Credit (UC) has set in place substantial conditionality requirements with the 'Claimant Commitment' at the heart of the conditionality regime. The Claimant Commitment is a record of the claimant's responsibilities in relation to an award of UC and an account of all job seeking behaviours such as participating in training, work experience and any other activity undertaken to enhance their job prospects. Acceptance of the Claimant Commitment is a basic condition of entitlement of UC. What is distinctive about UC is that it extends conditionality within the benefits system to claimants already in work. The 'in-work conditionality' principle means working claimants will be expected to meet a new, 'higher' conditionality earnings threshold equivalent to a 35 hour week at national minimum wage rates through a combination of taking on additional employment, looking for employment with higher hourly wages or increasing their existing hours of work. Given the uncertainties that surround the detailed administration of UC, sanctions for people already in work are not yet clear. However, a report by the Resolution Foundation questions the feasibility of 'in-work conditionality' in a context of an economic recession with high levels of under-employment as well as unemployment (Pennycook and Whittaker, 2012).

The extension of behavioural conditionality within the benefits system erodes further the principles of a contractual contributory rights based benefit system. This suggests that harsher conditions and behavioural expectations may well be introduced to align with further planned public sector reform. It is not unreasonable to assume that objective well-being needs such as health provision, education, housing and economic security will be limited to those satisfying preset behavioural norms. Such a notion is evident in a recent proposal by a member of the Number 10 Policy Board to limit all child related benefits to two children for every family. Speaking in the Daily Mail under the headline 'If she can't afford a third child, why should you foot the bill?', Nadhim Zahawi (2013) explains how decades of *'unconditional and unchecked welfare has led to enclaves of entrenched worklessness up and down the country.'*

## 5. Overview

This chapter has argued that the shift towards subjectivity has been directed mainly by the influences of positive psychology, behavioural economics and influential advocates of human development and global sustainability in their mutual desire for indicators of well-being that go beyond economic measures.

There are good reasons to be sceptical about the robustness of GDP as a comprehensive measure of societal progress. Movements such as Redefining Progress have been successful in bringing to the fore the societal value of time spent on parenting, caring, volunteering and housework, and highlighting how the social costs of crime or loss of leisure time negatively affect our well-being. Depreciation of environmental assets and natural resources is a major cause of concern and organisations like the New Economics Foundation are justified in drawing attention to such matters. The future sustainability of the world's resources is the responsibility of us all and indicator sets are enhanced by their inclusion.

However, it is claimed here that an over optimistic view of the potential of SWB measures has evolved, evidenced by the development of the UK National Well-Being Index and the array of high profile surveys covering issues like crime, employment and education which have incorporated the full four SWB questions or alternatives of these questions into their survey domains. Given the weight of evidence which supports the notion of adaptation, the use of SWB indicators as a metric for evaluating health improvement, and crucially their likely use in the calculation of area based needs assessments, is a major concern.

In addition, it is difficult to understand how public-private partnership arrangements like the Department of Health's RD, which is predicated on influencing personal choice, can contribute to meeting public health objectives when 'pledges' are unregulated and there is no government commitment to take alternative action if the pledges are unfilled or simply do not work.

The connection between increased behavioural nudging and expanding behavioural conditionality resonates with the principle of 'less eligibility' – a key component of the Poor Law whereby an individual was publically stripped of their eligibility to be a fully functioning member of society if support for relief was sought. The belief was that by making the conditions attached to poor relief so bad, the individual would be deterred from claiming help. Statutory rights gained through contributory arrangements between the individual and the state played a major role in reversing this situation in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century (Veit-Wilson, 2013). Extended conditionality weakens these gains by bringing more people into the realm of means-tested benefits and once again making a moral link between requiring help and worthiness.

In conclusion, it is argued that the over-reliance on subjective measures of societal progress poses as much a threat to effective policy making as their under-usage. This was evidenced by seminal work in the mid-1960s by sociologist Walter G. Runciman which revealed how reflective measures like life satisfaction are vulnerable to the phenomenon of adaptation and social comparisons where people rate their situation with that of similar others and relative to what they have come to expect. This work is examined in more detail in the following chapter.

## **Chapter three - Subjective relative deprivation**

The concept of relative deprivation is one of the most well-known theories in poverty research but it is used in two very different ways – both are relative, but one is objective and the other is subjective (Halleröd, 2006: 371). The objective relative deprivation approach is most closely associated with Townsend (1979) and argues that poverty is the inability of people to meet a minimum standard of living and to participate fully in the social activities, customs and norms which society views as normal. Here, the concept of relative deprivation involves the use of social indicators to measure different kinds of social activities and material circumstances in order to derive a direct measurement of poverty based on the level of deprivation of these items. From this perspective, poverty can be measured objectively without consideration to subjective feelings of deprivation. This is the conceptualisation with which people have become most familiar.

In contrast, the subjective approach is more concerned with understanding the role of social comparison in human agency and the development of a theory to explain human behaviour (Walker and Smith, 2002). In this context, relative deprivation is based on the judgment that one is worse off compared to a certain standard and is accompanied by feelings of anger and resentment (Smith et al., 2012). This construct has been used for over 60 years across the social sciences to explain different types of phenomena ranging from participation in collective action (for example, Newton, Mann and Geary, 1980), human deviance (for example, Lea and Young, 1993), racism (for example, Taylor, 2002), social identity (for example, Ellemers, 2002), through to susceptibility to terrorist recruitment (see Moghaddam, 2005). However, the main interest of this study is the interpretation of subjective relative deprivation invoked by Walter G. Runciman (1966) in his investigation of levels of inequality in a society and associated feelings of resentment or dissatisfaction which such injustices provoked.

It has been argued that while Townsend's relative deprivation approach was rooted in this earlier subjective version, over the past 40 years these two approaches have developed along separate courses and now address entirely different intellectual concerns (Fahey, 2007; 2010). The following two chapters discuss both approaches to the concept of relative deprivation and examine the significance for poverty research based on self-reported levels of deprivation.

This chapter details the subjective relative deprivation approach and introduces associated phenomena – that of adaptive preferences and lowered expectations. In so doing, it highlights the susceptibility of disadvantaged individuals to adapt to their straightened circumstances due to social comparisons with others in a similar or worse position. Furthermore, it is claimed that a policy of purposive negative thinking and lowered expectations forms the philosophical underpinning of the Coalition Government’s administration. It makes the case that this policy has been deliberately designed to dampen rising expectations and encourage adaptation to financial constraints, thus making it possible for the introduction of swingeing welfare cuts to proceed unimpeded.

## **1. The origins of subjective relative deprivation**

The actual term ‘relative deprivation’ originated from early studies based in social psychology and sociology in the 1940s and 1950s. This involved examining how the social comparisons people made influenced their perception of satisfaction. The term was conceived following a large-scale social-psychological study of motivation and morale among the American army during the Second World War (Stouffer et al., 1949). The study reported the unusual finding of a lack of correspondence between dissatisfaction in a military occupation with low promotional opportunities, compared to the presence of grievance in a military occupation where higher levels of promotional opportunities existed. Other findings revealed African American soldiers stationed in the southern American states were more satisfied than African American soldiers stationed in the Northern states. The study concluded that the unexpected relationships between feelings of satisfaction and a person’s objective circumstances were a result of how people perceived their situation compared with others. While the authors give no precise definition of the term, they highlighted the need for *‘the theory that such opinions by soldiers represent a relationship between their expectations and their achievements relative to others in the same boat with them’* (1949: 251).

Hence, the principal aim was the desire to develop a theory of relative deprivation that could explain the role of subjective social comparison and its influence on human behaviour. This work steered attention to the concept of reference groups, which first originated in social psychology in the 1940s by Hyman (1942) in his study ‘The Psychology of Status’. Hyman’s study sought to understand how individuals ranked their position according to a certain standard. This work was developed further into ‘reference group theory’ in the 1950s by sociologists Robert Merton and Alice Rossi (Merton and Rossi, 1950;

Merton, 1957). The theory proposed that the frame by which people make their comparisons may not just include their own group, but could extend to other groups also.

Runciman (1966) adapted this original theory and applied it to British society in the 1960s. He too focused on the relationship of the objective deprivations which were part of a person's experience and their subjective feelings of dissatisfaction or levels of grievance. He describes relative deprivation thus:

*If A, who does not have something but wants it, compares himself to B, who does have it, then A is 'relatively deprived' with reference to B. Similarly, if A's expectations are higher than B's, or if he was better off than B in the past, he may, when similarly placed to B, feel relatively deprived by comparison with him* (Runciman, 1966: 10).

An important qualification made by Runciman is the 'feasibility' of the desired want in order for relative deprivation to be of true value. That is, the desire should not be linked to envy, rather the perceived disadvantage must be viewed as unfair and engender an angry resentment.

He posed two questions:

(1) What is the relationship between institutionalised inequalities and the awareness or resentment of them?

(2) Which, if any, of these inequalities ought to be perceived and resented – whether they are or not – by the standards of social justice (1966:3).

In this regard, Runciman's approach to relative deprivation differs from the earlier American versions which lean towards a 'deterministic interpretation' whereby people under strain conditions make a number of adaptations in a desire to fulfil the American dream (Webber, 2007: 100). Runciman's concept allows for resentment and acquiescence to be considered. Furthermore, the focus on fairness in society is said to have introduced a normative concern for social justice which was not present in the American approach (Fahey, 2010).

Runciman extended the work on reference group theory proposing that the degree to which a person may, or may not feel deprived (or poor) depends on their subjective comparison to a specific reference group. Distinctions of groups are made in the following way:

*Comparative reference group* – refers to the person or group whose situation or characteristics a person compares himself to. It could be other family members, or neighbours, or work colleagues or the broader population. It may not necessarily be a group of people; it could be one person or even an idea, the point of reference may also relate to a past experience.

*Normative reference group* – this represents the group from which a person takes his standards and the group to which they believe they belong (for example, the working class, the middle class, or a skilled professional class).

*Membership reference group* – the specific role a person has in mind in the context of the perceived inequality (for example, a Protestant, a Catholic, a student, a lesbian, a partly-skilled worker) (Runciman, 1966: 12).

While these typologies are not intended to be read in the strictest sense, and with the writer's full acknowledgement of possible overlaps, they are used as a framework by Runciman to investigate the relationship between inequality and levels of grievance. A better understanding of the interplay between the manner in which comparative reference groups are chosen, the membership role which give the comparison its basis, and the normative reference group which can either intensify or weaken the perception of inequality, is argued to be key to finding out why levels of inequality may, or may not acquire the resentment their significance deserve. Runciman's work was carried out almost five decades ago and the implications of this are considered further below.

Without an external stimulus, Runciman claims reference group choice is usually limited and self-perpetuating. Powerful influences are required to bring about change of reference group. Major examples of such events are a time of war when expectations of a better future may be engendered among whole populations, or advances in access to higher education opening up opportunities for progression. Another external stimulus to disrupt reference group choice is economic change. There is, Runciman claimed, a strong connection between subjective relative deprivation and economic transformation. For example, during times of economic growth and advances in equality generally (for example, increased job opportunities, higher wage increases or better employment conditions) people can come to expect more than they thought possible, leading to an increase in subjective relative deprivation, with demands for greater advancement and opportunity more likely. For instance, in times of prosperity if people see members of their own reference group succeeding at a faster rate than them, this can lead to feeling of increased

discontentment. Or, if a person's choice of reference group has changed in response to an increase in their own financial prosperity but the members of the current reference group are noticeably better off, this can lead to greater levels of feeling deprived. On the other hand, in times of financial hardship (for example, during recession) perceived deprivation can fall when people see no reason to expect, or hope for more and are less inclined to engage in confrontational demands for equality, being thankful for what they have –hence Runciman's observation that:

*'Although at first sight a paradox, it has become a commonplace that steady poverty is the best guarantee of conservatism: If people have no reason to expect or hope for more than they can achieve, they will be less discontented with what they have, or even grateful simply to hold onto it. But if, on the other hand, they have been led to see a possible goal the relative prosperity of some more fortunate community with which they can directly compare themselves, then they will remain discontented with their lot until they have succeeded in catching up.'* (1966: 9)

Runciman broadened the concept further by distinguishing between egoistic and fraternal relative deprivation, commonly referred to as individual and group relative deprivation in later literature (Walker and Smith, 2002). Egoistic relative deprivation is said to occur when an individual becomes dissatisfied with their situation within a group, compared to the situation of other individuals of that group and want to rise out of their reference group. Fraternal relative deprivation is said to occur when a person becomes dissatisfied with the position of their group as a whole, independent of their own position but relative to the position of other groups in society and want their group to rise to a better societal position. This distinction is viewed as important because it is fraternalist deprivation that generates solidarity with other members of a person's group and encourages collective action and confrontation for or against structural change (Taylor, 2002: 15).

The fraternal/egoistic distinction has featured in a large range of social science studies and raised speculation that fraternal and egoistic deprivation may have different psychological consequences (Schmitt et al., 2010). Several authors have assumed that fraternal relative deprivation is likely to cause social protest but not stress, whereas egoistic relative deprivation tends to produce psychological stress, depression and anxiety but not protest (Walker and Pettigrew, 1984; Smith and Ortiz, 2002). Testing this differential effect hypothesis further, Schmitt et al., (2010) used data from a longitudinal survey of the German unification process, mainly to test whether fraternal relative deprivation might

negatively affect well-being (life satisfaction and mental health) if the deprivation is long-term. In their sample of East Germans the findings were consistent with previous research and egoistic relative deprivation did have a negative causal effect on well-being. However, fraternal relative deprivation was also found to have a longitudinal effect on well-being that was independent of the effect of egoistic relative deprivation. The authors equated the findings to the slow progress and enduring relative deprivation of East Germans across the time of the study.

In their preliminary review of an on-going meta-analytic study of research that distinguished between individual and group relative deprivation, Smith and Ortiz (2002) found that much of the research neglected this important distinction which resulted in many researchers confusing these different levels of analysis. A more recent and fully comprehensive appraisal of this completed meta-analytic study, including a literature review of relevant social science research from 1949 to January 2010 by Smith et al. (2012), focused on the relationship between subjective experiences of relative deprivation and a range of possible outcomes. They set three strict criteria for inclusion to match their theoretical conceptualisation. These criteria also concur closely with Runciman's contention, that is:

- There must be comparisons made by the individual.
- A cognitive appraisal must be made that leads the individual to believe that the individual or in-group is at a disadvantage.
- The perceived comparative disadvantage must be considered unfair and viewed with angry resentment.

(2012: 204)

Among their conclusions was the confirmation of Runciman's assumption – that two people in the same position can perceive their situation quite differently due to their comparative standard. Furthermore, collective and individual challenges to disadvantage often come from people who have more, rather than fewer resources (2012: 220).

From the 860 studies initially obtained, the final count which matched the inclusion criteria was 210 – a drop of 76 per cent. The authors used this finding to demonstrate that most of the relative deprivation (RD) literature that claims to test the theory does not actually test relative deprivation directly. Here too, failure to differentiate between individual and group deprivation was one of a number of major oversights made by researchers. A valid point is

made by Smith et al. (2012) when they assert how such inaccuracies in measurement may account for inconsistencies in support for relative deprivation theory and previous negative reviews (for example, Gurvey and Tierney, 1982; Finkel and Rule, 1986; Brush, 1996). They conclude:

*We believe that if RD is measured effectively (with a clear comparison, angry resentment and matched to the outcome level of analysis), its full potential as a tool for understanding people's subjective interpretation of objective disadvantage can be achieved. Measured properly, RD is a significant predictor of a wide range of important outcome variables spanning collective action, individual deviance and physical and mental health. (2012: 221)*

What these studies point to is how Runciman's distinction of egoistic and fraternal (or individual and group) dimensions can be used to capture an important dimension of the phenomenon of relative deprivation that might otherwise go unrecognised.

In Runciman's survey of attitudes to social inequalities in 20th century England, questions were designed to elicit information on how people perceived themselves in the social structure and to relate this self-assessment of social class to attitudes to inequalities of class, status and power. For example, people were asked to give an approximation of their household income; this was used as background information against which relative deprivation could be considered. Follow-up questions then enquired whether respondents could think of others doing noticeably better than themselves or their family and if so, what sort of people were noticeably better off. Thirdly, people were asked how they felt about this. Replies confirmed that people generally used a narrow range of reference groups and most commonly made comparisons with those closest to them. The majority of responses did not derive from the fact that the reference group was on either side of the manual/non-manual divide; rather, comparisons were mostly termed in relation to the actual situation of the respondent and could not be termed in any sense 'class-conscious' (1966: 194). For instance, even though at the time of the survey huge discrepancies existed among manual and non-manual occupations regarding levels of pay, very rarely did any manual worker refer to members of the non-manual stratum as being better off financially.

Manual workers who reached the higher income level were still less well off than other non-manual workers, but remained satisfied in terms of their traditional comparisons and were unlikely to feel relatively deprived. It was because of this close comparison with similar others that little evidence of subjective feelings of deprivation was found in his

study, with few people believing others were doing better than them. According to Runciman, people were not consciously aware of the extent of inequality and were therefore more complacent about their current income situation, particularly so at the lower end of the income distribution. The writer found it 'remarkable' that so many of the poor were unable to think of others who were doing better.

It was concluded that feelings of discontentment and grievance could not be used as justifiable evidence for social injustice, since a subjective feeling of deprivation was a poor reflection of objective disadvantage.

*The only generalisation which can be confidently advanced is that the relationship between inequality and grievance only intermittently corresponds with either the extent and degree of actual inequality, or the magnitude and frequency of relative deprivation which an appeal to social justice would vindicate. (1966: 286)*

This conclusion is said to have influenced the setting aside of interest in the complex processes of subjective social comparison, in preference to objective measures of inequality (Fahey, 2007; 2010). Furthermore, Runciman's main concern with fairness and justice in British society, as opposed to developing an explanatory theory of relative deprivation, placed the focus on deprivation as an outcome that could be tackled through public policy. If it could be challenged through policy then deprivation needed to be identified, measured and progress towards its eradication assessed. It was in this context, claims Fahey (2010) that Townsend's relative deprivation approach to measuring poverty was rooted – an approach which shifted the concept from the more complex study of human emotion and behaviour to the identification and measurement of poverty. Moreover, as this objective approach extended its scope into social exclusionary dimensions of disadvantage, a quest for more sophisticated social indicators ensued, which is said to have set the direction of poverty research in Britain and Europe more widely (Atkinson et al., 2002).

Runciman's work was carried out in the early 1960s when the class structure in Britain was strongly and clearly differentiated, with distinctions between manual and non-manual work reflected in status structures both in the workplace and in society more widely (Rose, 2006). In the later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, theories of individualisation became more popular in political sociology with a shift in focus from using class stratification as a means of understanding societal differences and conflict, to observing social distinctions through patterns of consumption, lifestyles and opportunities in the analysis of social inequalities. According to Andersen and Yaish (2012: 11), while such theories take differing perspectives

– for example, post materialism (Inglehart, 1990; 1997), post industrialism (Giddens, 1984); second modernity (Beck, 1995); postmodernism (Pakulski and Waters, 1996) – the overall premise is based on the belief that social class identities are outdated and of minimal relevance to values and behaviours in modern societies.

For example, recent opinion suggests that modern consumerism, along with globalisation and advances in information technology, may have opened up the once narrow point of social reference because it is much easier now to make social comparisons with others beyond our own social circle (Schor, 1998). Using survey data, Hamilton (2003) argues that wider access to the internet and the expansion of mass media channels have widened people's reference groups because people want to copy the lifestyles of the rich and famous. Additionally, the expanse of social media networking sites like Facebook and such like are said to have given rise to virtual communities whereby social comparisons can be easily made (Delanty, 2010).

However, a recent review of the sociological evidence on social comparisons in contemporary society which proposes the fragmentation of the traditional class structure (Kasengele, 2011) cautions against widespread acceptance of the late modernity argument that globalisation, consumerism and expansion of the media have helped to widen people's reference groups, on the grounds that this theory has not been fully tested. The writer goes on to explain how evidence from community studies strongly suggests that differences 'within' classes tend to be more salient than 'between' classes. Furthermore, and in line with a Weberian emphasis on multiple status hierarchies (Weber, 1948), evidence is provided to show how people often utilise both material (including income, housing and conspicuous goods) and non-material factors (like speech, education, and respectability) when making social comparisons, as opposed to a single hierarchy such as wealth (2011: 23).

There are some grounds for this assertion with several examples emerging from the field of economics investigating income and life satisfaction. Such studies include Boyce et al. (2010) who used seven years of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) data (1997-2004) to test the *rank-income hypothesis* against the *relative-income hypothesis*. The study found that ranked position of income, and not income *per se*, was significant in determining life satisfaction. They explored the possibility that people compared their income to the income of (1) other individuals in the same geographical region, (2) of the same gender and education and (3) of the same age. The writers computed the relative rank of each

individual income within the reference group and the mean income of all individuals within the reference group. They found that the rank position of an individual's income within his or her reference group was the most significant explanatory factor for life satisfaction. Their findings further confirmed the conclusions of other similar studies (Duesenberry, 1949; Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004; Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2005) that comparisons are primarily made in an upward manner with those earning more than themselves. This is in contrast to Runciman's study which found the greater propensity of people on low income to make comparisons largely in a lateral or downward fashion.

## **2. The direction of social comparisons**

Recent research lends weight to Runciman's assumption that those with the lowest incomes are less likely to report relative deprivation, because of the inclination for low income respondents to draw on similar comparative reference groups and to make lateral or downward comparisons. For instance, Lansley (2009), when comparing people's actual and perceived position in the income hierarchy found that, on average, respondents tended to understate their true position in the income hierarchy, thinking they were relatively poorer than they actually were; this tendency to understate was strongest among those with the highest incomes. Most accurate assessments in terms of actual and perceived income were made by those in the poorest quintile – with 56 per cent saying they were 'towards the bottom'. A number of possible explanations was posited for this outcome, one of which was reference group theory – people on different incomes have different reference points with those on lower incomes being more likely to compare themselves, their work experience and life chances with those close to their own class and social groupings, making them more realistic in their judgement of their social positioning.

Similar findings were demonstrated in Pahl et al. (2007) where study participants more often compared themselves with people similar to themselves, with some evidence to suggest that middle and lower earners are content as long as they feel better off than their parents. Further evidence proposes that the wealthy are more likely to make comparisons with those in even more affluent circumstances than themselves, thus increasing their perception of subjective relative deprivation (Toynbee and Walker, 2008). Lansley (2009) proposes that downplaying relative advantage by the rich is in fact a form of 'psychological denial' – a tactical form of defence against claims that the better off should be making a greater contribution to helping those with lower living standards than themselves.

Townsend noted that to fully understand and explain poverty requires a full understanding and explanation of riches (1979: 337). However, comprehending how dominant groups in society become powerful and manage to retain their power is, Townsend claims, extremely difficult. This is as much to do with people's attitudes towards wealth or power positions as it is to do with methodological challenges of identifying the characteristics of wealth or position. However, it was Townsend's position that the rich actively defend their position, not by individual or group actions, but by institutionalised social order. This is facilitated by what he called the 'proselytisation of lifestyles' (1997: 367) whereby the style of living enjoyed by the rich become sought after by the majority of the population. What were once luxuries become necessities which, after a period of time, have to be replaced with new luxuries. In this way, the standards of the rich are not only justified because everybody wants to own these goods, but that they uphold inequality and poverty. The desire to obtain the commodities set by the value standards of the rich are, according to Baudrillard (1970) how people create their self-identity and at the same time maintain the social order. Townsend's suggestion that the living standards of the rich act as drivers of expectations of society suggests that while low income groups may not compare directly with the rich, consumerism is a driver of expectations that are fuelled, however indirectly, by the preferences and consumption patterns of distant groups (Dean and Melrose 1999: 53-56).

Dean and Melrose (1999) is one of only a few studies to examine wealth as well as poverty. Their qualitative work with both rich, middle income and poor respondents examined different theoretical perceptions, including that of Runciman (1966), about citizenship within the context of the expanding gap between the income of the rich and poor at the end of the twentieth century. However, their study focused more on popular understandings of poverty and wealth rather than 'expert' opinion. Their work is of relevance for this thesis in that Dean and Melrose propose the view that people fear poverty more than they revere wealth (1999:23) – a finding that is borne out by the practice of what Lister (2004) refers to as 'othering'. When people's awareness of poverty and riches were explored, the majority of all respondents believed the state of poverty and wealth was something that happened to others.

Leach et al. (2002) is another study which examined '*relative advantage*'. They assert that there are three ways relative advantage is experienced. First, the advantaged can take their privilege so much for granted when it is stable and secure that they are completely unaware of their membership of an advantaged group. To encourage social equality the disadvantaged must make this privilege visible and encourage downward comparisons that

promote a more just society. Secondly, the privileged can minimise their own advantageous position either to limit other's claims of social injustice, or to limit their own guilt (as Lansley (2009) maintains). Thirdly, relative advantage can be acknowledged. The writers claim that support for equality by the advantaged will be greatest when their position is more insecure, or seen as unstable. In confirming that the advantaged and disadvantaged often perceive their positions differently, Leach et al. (2002) make an important assertion that a proper understanding of relative deprivation and social justice requires an understanding of advantage as well as disadvantage:

*'Given this fact, the way in which advantage is experienced must also be examined if we are to know the true potential for social equality.'* (2002: 157).

Recent research using International Social Survey Program (ISSP) data to explore the relationship between economic inequality and attitudes towards income inequality in 20 capitalist societies (Andersen and Yaish, 2012) found that respondents' social class and that of their father were both significantly related to attitudes and views on inequality. These findings questions further the hypothesis that social class as a source of identity in modern societies is not relevant and adds weight to the call for more research on relative advantage.

Using the European Social Survey (ESS)<sup>7</sup>, Clark and Senik (2010) looked at the relationship between income comparison and SWB across 18 European countries. They investigated both the direction and the intensity of income comparison across and within countries. For the majority of people, income comparisons were viewed as important. However, in this study those on lower income were inclined to compare more, while people compared their income less often when income increased. This was the situation across and within countries. The more intensely people made comparisons the more negative the effect on SWB. People cited their colleagues as the group most often compared with; those who compared with their work colleagues were happier than those who made comparisons with their friends or family. The negative correlation between income comparison intensity and happiness led the authors to suggest that income comparison is mostly upwards. However, they did concede that unhappy people may simply compare to others more in an effort to explain their lower well-being. Equally, those unhappy with their current income, but with high expectations of future increased income, were thought likely to compare upwards as a strategy for motivation and self-improvement.

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<sup>7</sup> Wave 3 of the ESS was used which contained a Well-Being module.

The direction of social comparison also featured in Runciman's study where he introduces the phenomenon of equality translating into resentment when relative deprivation is based on dominant group members' downwards comparison with subordinate groups (Taylor, 2002). Grievance became an issue when non-manual workers expressed feelings of relative deprivation when they compared their situation with the gains of manual workers. Respondents were given two lists of items covering a number of regular consumer goods and more luxury items and asked which items they possessed; whether they wanted the items they did not possess; whether they expected to get the items they wanted within the next two to three years; and whether they thought other people could afford the desired items. The awareness by non-manual workers that some manual workers possessed items that used to be the prerogative of the non-manual class was claimed by Runciman to be the significant comparison which translated into relative deprivation. In this instance, the downward comparison produced negative responses because the comparison was being made with what the non-manual workers considered a subordinate reference group. This serves as a good example of the complexity of egoist and fraternal group deprivation because here fraternal group relative deprivation is experienced by the dominant group anxious to '*maintain a diminishing difference*' (Runciman, 1966: 93) and preserve their privileged position. Furthermore it provides evidence of the usefulness of this conceptual distinction in explaining experiences of relative deprivation.

For example, similar findings were reported in Vanneman and Pettigrew (1972) where they identified White Americans' reactions to Black Americans' advances as a form of relative deprivation. As Tyler and Smith (1998: 599) note, some researchers perceiving dominant group reactions to progress by subordinate groups as relative deprivation, have suggested that perceived loss of ground may be more psychologically poignant for the dominant group than a widening of the differential between themselves and a higher group (see Crosby, 1984; Kahneman, 1992). Thus Taylor (2002) proposes that fraternal deprivation by a dominant group vis-à-vis a subordinate group '*may be a particularly powerful phenomenon*' (2002: 17).

In a qualitative study (Duncan, 2010), the life story of a former German neo-Nazi leader was used to illustrate how White Germans who perceived themselves to be under attack and deprived of political power adopted extreme political ideologies even when the objective political situation confirmed otherwise.

Research along a similar theme by Shedd (2008) argues that the failure of the 1996 Russo-Chechen peace process was an inevitable consequence of the failure of the post-Soviet Union to deliver the political and economic benefits anticipated by the raised expectations of the Chechens after the fall of the Soviet Union. Their subsequent relative deprivation made the peace process impossible to succeed.

From a Northern Ireland perspective, there could be value in paying attention to this particular form of fraternal relative deprivation. For example, according to the second Peace Monitoring Report published by the Community Relations Council (Nolan, 2013) the underlying momentum for the peace process was strong in 2012. However, the fragility of the process has increased due mainly to the absence of a policy on community division and the failure of the Executive to reach agreement on the Cohesion Sharing and Integration document, which was intended to be the policy framework for community relations. This has been manifest in the violent protests about flag restrictions and claims of a diminishing British identity by members within the unionist community. The report further notes that loyalist paramilitaries have been given a degree of legitimacy because of the leadership role they assumed within their communities during the flags protest. Consequently, they have been '*brought back into the unionist fold*' (2013: 7) by the mainstream unionist parties eager to build support against perceived threats to British culture.

In Northern Ireland, socio-economic inequalities are an objective reality; 15 of the top 20 most disadvantaged wards have a majority Catholic population, while only six of the 20 least disadvantaged wards have a Catholic majority<sup>8</sup>. Deprivation indices show that 24 percent of Catholics live in households experiencing poverty, compared to 20 percent of Protestants (NISRA, 2013). Meanwhile, Catholics continue to enjoy greater educational success than Protestants, and working class Protestant males continue to underachieve (DENI, 2013). However, Nolan (2013) notes the way in which these disadvantages are subjectively perceived is different between the two communities. This resonates strongly with Runciman's fraternal relative deprivation theory as the following comment illustrates:

*The nationalist narrative is of an upward trajectory, while the unionist narrative is one of loss. This latter perspective tends to magnify the sense of diminishing shares, while the nationalist perspective tends to emphasise an historical drive towards*

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<sup>8</sup> Although this could be an ecological fallacy which involves drawing conclusions about individuals on the basis of analysis of group data (O'Dowd, 2003).

*equality. The conflict of the two narratives risks a return to zero sum politics where a gain for one is seen as a loss for the other. (Nolan, 2013: 8)*

This draws attention to the importance of not only the comparative reference group, but the direction of the comparison and the consequent impact on the experience and extent of relative deprivation. The findings suggest that people on lower incomes have a greater tendency to compare laterally or downwards with those closest to them in terms of income and personal circumstances, resulting in reduced perceptions of relative deprivation. Meanwhile, people with higher incomes and with aspirations of future economic improvement are more likely to make upward comparisons with those better off thus leading to experiences of relative deprivation. Central to this assumption is the issue of adaptation and the degree to which people become accustomed to their situation subsequently setting their expectations and aspirations to what they have come to expect thereby avoiding disappointment and frustration.

It is argued here that a better understanding of concepts such as adaptive preferences, lowered expectations and future aspirations is required to describe and aid explanation for when and how these psychological effects occur.

### **3. Adaptive preference formation**

The literature on adaptation spans across a number of diverse disciplines including sociology, social psychology, economics and philosophy, with early discussions of adaptation being found in John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism* (1861) and Karl Marx's analysis of 'false consciousness' (Clark, 2007: 3). Qizilbash (2006) notes how Mill distinguishes between higher and lower pleasures and argues that human beings show a marked preference for enjoying higher pleasures. If circumstances were such that a person could not (and therefore learns not to) pursue these higher pleasures, settling for lower pleasures to which they have access, then they are not happy, even when they claim to be.

This resonates with the notion of 'false consciousness' which focuses on the power of capitalism to manipulate the working classes into accepting positions of unequal status and unfairness as legitimate and in their own interests. Accordingly, it is within the interests of the privileged minority to maintain these thoughts in order to maintain the system of domination. In other words, control by the ruling classes can result in the subjective belief that a person's disadvantaged situation is better than it actually is (Gramsci, 1971; Eyerman, 1981).

A more recent and familiar approach to the analysis of adaptation is that of Jon Elster in his seminal work which questioned the orthodox view that an action is the outcome of a choice, and looked at how preferences underlying a choice may be shaped by constraints (1983). He introduces the 'sour grapes' phenomenon by using Aesop and La Fontaine's fable of *The Fox and the Grapes* to draw attention to the shortcomings of utilitarian theory – the fox is hungry, sees the grapes high on a vine, is frustrated because he cannot reach them and convinces himself that they are sour anyhow so therefore not desirable. Hence, the fox has adapted his preference to what he believes is achievable. The proposition is that downward adaptation which reflects what is possible deprives individuals of the autonomy to make rational choices. A key component of a successful adaptation process that limits feelings of deprivation, argues Elster, rests on the adaptation happening unconsciously or as Halleröd (2006) describes it '*behind the back*' of the individual (2006: 377). The main point here is that adaptation is insidious in nature, developing so gradually that it is well established before becoming evident. In this way the theory of adaptive preference has clear resonance with the Marxist theory of false consciousness.

However, adaption and the lowering of expectations are not always viewed as a negative process. It is often discussed as a positive measure of resilience building – a form of self-preservation that helps people cope with adversity. Among several definitions of resilience, this concept has been defined as the '*dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity*' (Luthar et al., 2000). In this respect it could be seen as active agency on the part of the individual. Some psychologists believe that individuals have the capacity to adapt to almost any negative life event, returning to a natural 'set point' range thereby allowing them to function as best they can (Cummins et al., 2009). From this perspective adaptation could be viewed as a self defence mechanism – of which there are healthy ones, such as humour and altruism, and unhealthy ones such as alcoholism, drug addiction, paranoia, megalomania and neurotic defences like memory lapse, all of which help make life tolerable for the individual (Graham, 2011: 106).

Happiness studies from around the world suggest the high adaptability of people to adverse circumstances. Using South African survey data to study quality of life responses of crime victims, Powdthavee (2005) found that while victims of crime reported lower subjective well-being than non-victims, the negative effects to well-being were lessened if others in the area were also victims of crime. Graham and Chattopadhyay (2008; 2009) using Latinobarometro data from 1998 to 2008 across and within countries and over time, examined the extent to which people become more tolerant of crime and corruption. They

found that as crime increases, reporting rates decrease suggesting that people adapt to what they are used to and expect. Furthermore, findings strongly suggested that living in a society with a high crime rate lowered the adverse effects on well-being of being a victim of crime. Among explanations put forward was that the expectation of being a victim reduced the negative effect to well-being, rather than not expecting to be a victim, because some of the costs to well-being were offset by the expectation itself. Additionally, being a victim of crime in an area where it is the norm has less stigmatising effects than areas where it is rare. Repeating their work and looking at corruption, they found similar results – experiencing corruption was less damaging to well-being in areas where corruption is more common. As Graham (2011) points out, while such adaptation may be beneficial for individual well-being, it is more negative in a collective sense because it becomes more difficult to engender the social and political support needed to bring about policy development to achieve a reversal of the ‘norm’. Furthermore, when the personal costs to individual well-being is lower, people are more likely to tolerate or adapt to adverse circumstances, which then allows societies to *‘fall into and stay in very bad equilibrium...for prolonged periods of time’* (2011: 123).

There is a considerable body of literature which details how feelings of shame and humiliation are associated with people’s accounts of their experience of poverty (Sen, 1983; Beresford *et al.*, 1999; Narayan *et al.*, 2000; Lister, 2004; Ridge, 2007; Chase and Walker, 2012). Stigma and damaged self-esteem are also reported as part of the experience of living on a low income. Often, damage to one’s self-esteem results from the internalisation of the negative depictions and attitudes of people towards the poor (Batty and Flint, 2010; Flint, 2010; Bashir, *et al.*, 2011). One of the processes which drive these negative beliefs is what Ruth Lister calls ‘othering’ (Lister, 2004). By drawing distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’, the poor can be marginalised from mainstream society and viewed as different.

One way of coping with negative feelings and loss of self-esteem is for people to contrast themselves to others who they believe are in an inferior situation to themselves. There are a number of qualitative studies which report how people who are ‘objectively’ poor tend to deny it: poverty for them is an alien identity or, as described by Dean and Melrose (1999: 37) a distant object of wholesome horror. People on low incomes may compare themselves to an imaginary group, with people they have heard about, but do not personally know for the purposes of denying membership of this group (Lister, 2004; Flaherty, 2008; Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin, 2010). Other strategies to minimise negative emotions is to seek to

identify themselves as 'deserving' and therefore distance themselves from the 'non-deserving poor' or hiding aspects of their poverty from the non-poor (Reutter, et al., 2009, Chase and Walker, 2012).

Given the seemingly powerful social-psychological impact of 'othering' on feelings of stigma and shame, it needs to be acknowledged that expressions of adaptive preference may not necessarily be attributed to a 'subconscious' attempt to mitigate a sense of deprivation but, in some instances, as a conscious pretence through which to preserve a sense of dignity.

Elster (1983) himself makes a distinction between the negative 'sour grapes' mechanism and other problematic phenomena (like addiction), with what he sees as the non-problematic phenomenon of conscious character planning, that is, being aware of the limitations of one's options and setting realistic goals that can be fulfilled (Colburn, 2011). Elster asserts that the problematic feature of adaptive preference formation is the unconscious nature of the process whereby a person's autonomy is depleted, compared to the conscious and intentional property of character planning. However, as noted by Colburn (2011), adaptive preference formation and character planning appear very similar. Both processes involve an individual's preferences changing or reforming according to their available options.

From an anti-poverty perspective, the degree to which adaptation may lead to a form of compliance that diminishes peoples' sense of entitlement and their hopes for the future is a major concern. In this sense the relative deprivation perspective presents a strong challenge to subjective indicators dealing with the issues of poverty or inequality when they are based on a person's satisfaction or fulfilled expectations.

#### **4. Negative thinking and lowered expectations**

Investigating the interaction between expectations and public satisfaction with goods and services has been a long established strand of interest within the private sector, but much less important in the public sector until quite recently (Van Ryzin, 2004, 2006; Roch and Poister, 2006). The rise in interest in using consumer satisfaction as a measure of quality in public sector services gained momentum from the late 1980s onwards, when a new emphasis on choice in public services emerged in the UK. The choice agenda was taken forward by the Labour government, with subsequent measures aimed at imitating market processes in public service reforms, particularly in health care, education and housing. However, even though the causal link between expectations and satisfaction within public

services is taken as axiomatic (Thompson and Sunol, 1995), most research investigating satisfaction in public services has been carried out by public bodies themselves and used to inform managerial decisions, rather than addressing theoretical questions about expectations (James, 2007: 109). In fact, there has been little systematic empirical work on the interaction between expectations and satisfaction in the UK (Office of Public Service Reform, 2002; Crow et al., 2003; National Consumer Council, 2004; Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2004).

In one study analysing individuals' satisfaction and dissatisfaction with two services provided by local government in England (James, 2007), it was revealed that the probability of being satisfied with local public services rises when people's expectations of quality are met. However, the relationship was not found to be symmetric, with very high levels of expectations associated with the reduced probability of being satisfied, for example. The findings suggested a complex relationship between objective measures of satisfaction and actual performance, leading the author to conclude that:

*A strategy of lowering expectations might be especially attractive to local authorities as a way of avoiding blame, in the sense of avoiding dissatisfaction associated with the disappointment of expected standards of performance not being met. (2007: 119).*

The main point to draw from this is the notion that if expectations are seen to influence satisfaction, then there is an incentive to invest in a strategy that manipulates expectations, rather than improving people's objective circumstances. Building on this assumption, it is argued here that the Coalition Government's welfare reforms have been situated within an ideology of lowered expectations.

For instance, *'Things can only get better'* was the anthem adopted by the Labour party during their 1997 election campaign. At the same time, the Conservative party were running their campaign under the heading *'Time for change'* which included a commitment to fix 'Broken Britain'. A series of reports were published under a similar theme by Ian Duncan Smith through the Centre for Social Justice referring to 'Breakdown Britain' and 'Breakthrough Britain' between 2006 and 2008 (see [www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/publications](http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/publications)). The general premise was focused on the negative consequences for society at large brought about by family breakdown, lone parenthood, teenage pregnancy, chaotic families and so forth. The economic burden of poverty, welfare dependency and the pressure on the housing stock were some of the

practical considerations highlighted as areas of concern. The language of crisis, emergency and general negativity presented a readjustment of the customary terms of reference for pre-election campaigns. While the use of the phrase 'Broken Britain' was challenged by the opposition for deliberately depicting a false picture (Miliband, 2010), it set the tone for a form of negative thinking within British politics which encouraged a check on unrealistic expectations.

One of the first signs that lowered expectations would provide a philosophical underpinning for the coalition administration came just months after the 2010 election, when the universities minister David Willetts provoked fury when he suggested that school leavers who failed to secure a university place of their choice should apply to '*slightly less competitive*' universities next year, or consider other options such as applying to further education colleges (Lawson, 2010). The general secretary of the University and College Union was quoted thus:

*'I am appalled that the Government is now telling hardworking A-level students to 'aim lower', not higher. Asking some pupils to aim lower does not solve the problem of thousands of them missing out on university places, it just changes who might miss out.'* (Hunt, 2010)

From the point of view of introducing, and being able to maintain, a strategy of intensifying fiscal austerity on a grand scale, there is much to be gained from the lowering of expectations. As Runciman wrote in the 1960s, people will be less discontented if they have no reason to expect, or hope, for more than they can achieve. But, when expectations are heightened, they will remain discontented until they catch up. This is what Runciman referred to as the 'revolution of rising expectations' (1966: 9).

There are also advantages to be achieved from setting out the frame of reference whereby one's expectations are gauged. For example, when David Cameron made his speech on welfare reform two years into the coalition's administration, he very clearly set out two separate reference groups – those inside the welfare system and those outside it. Comparators were drawn between a couple both working full-time with a take home pay of £24,000 and who cannot afford to start a family (the outsiders,) with a couple 'down the road' who have not worked for a number of years and have four children and get more than £27,000 per year of benefit income (the insiders). The prime minister explained:

*What these examples show is that we have, in some ways, created a welfare gap in this country between those living long-term in the welfare system and those outside it. Those within it grow up with a series of expectations: you can have a home of your own, the state will support you whatever decisions you make, you will always be able to take out no matter what you put in. This has sent out some incredibly damaging signals. That it pays not to work. That you are owed something for nothing. It gave us millions of working-age people sitting at home on benefits even before the recession hit. It created a culture of entitlement. And it has led to huge resentment amongst those who pay into the system, because they feel that what they're having to work hard for, others are getting without having to put in the effort. The system is saying to these people:*

*Can't afford to have another child? Tough, save up.*

*Can't afford a home of your own? Tough, live with your parents.*

*Don't like the hours you're working? Tough, that's just life. (Cameron, 2012)*

The success of activating low expectations and adaptation to straightened circumstances is predicated on the belief that things are not as bad as they could be, or have been in the past. This requires a constant frame of reference that triggers gratefulness and contentment for existing circumstances. The set of circumstances do not need to be much better, they simply need to be not as bad. Thus, insignificant improvements, no matter how minor, can be presented with a degree of confidence that would in other circumstances have proved difficult to justify.

Drawing on the Conservative party conference in October 2013 for example, the reference point was unmistakably marked when David Cameron set out the party's achievements and plans for the future:

*'In May 2010, the needle on the gauge was at crisis point.'*

Having set the frame of reference, the next step was to deliver the information whilst maintaining a check on future expectations:

*'Our economy may be turning the corner - and of course that's great. But we still haven't finished paying for Labour's debt crisis. If anyone thinks that's over, done and dealt with - they're living in a fantasy land.'* Cameron, (2013).

## 5. Overview

This chapter has described subjective relative deprivation as a concept evolved from a desire to understand better the external effects which shape emotions and behaviour at an individual level. It has set out the significance of reference group theory and the practices of social comparison for making us more aware of the complexity of the link between people's objective circumstances and their perception of such conditions.

Being able to differentiate between egoistic and fraternal relative deprivation can be a key factor in understanding social comparison processes. The direction of the social comparisons people make is also an important consideration in the assessment of relative deprivation. Several studies have shown that comparisons can be upwards or downwards with differing negative and positive psychological consequences. This emphasises the need to study relative advantage, as well as disadvantage, to gain a fuller understanding of relative deprivation and draws attention to the paucity of such research.

Central to the study of relative deprivation is the concept of adaptive preference formation and the degree to which people adjust their expectations and aspirations to that which is deemed possible. While adaptation is not always perceived as a negative process, it is highly problematic if it results in a form of compliance which diminishes people's sense of entitlement and/or leads to the espousal of unhealthy adaptations. Furthermore, the degree to which adaptation may lead to an acceptance of the *status quo* makes the task of anti-poverty consciousness raising extremely difficult.

Runciman's seminal work on relative deprivation revealed a gap between the existence of social injustice and associated feelings of discontentment and grievance which such injustices deserved. Furthermore, subjective opinion was believed to be a poor reflection of objective disadvantage. It is work along these grounds that prompted a move towards objective measures of disadvantage such as Townsend's approach to relative deprivation. This is discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

## Chapter Four - Objective relative deprivation

The aim of this chapter is to set out how Townsend's (1979) concept of relative deprivation differs from the subjective concept associated with Runciman (1966) and the impact this approach has had on poverty measurement ever since. The chapter discusses how objective relative deprivation shifted the focus from a philosophy of basic need, to people's exclusion from a minimum standard of living which is customary in the society in which they live. In so doing, relative objective needs became the central point of interest, rather than subjective feelings of deprivation.

A number of prominent critiques which Townsend's initial work invoked are examined and assessed in terms of the extent of conceptual overlaps and conflict. This is followed by an assessment of the main modifications made by subsequent research, namely the consensual method developed by Mack and Lansley (1985) which is based on the 'enforced lack' of socially perceived necessities.

This work has also been subject to review, with a common criticism being that by incorporating a choice between not wanting a basic necessity and not being able to afford it, introduces a subjectivity whereby the respondent must feel poor before they report the lack of a necessity through unaffordability (McKay, 2004; Halleröd, 2006). Hence, the enforced lack method is charged, by some, with being susceptible to adaptive preference formation and lowered expectations, as people will be unwilling to admit unaffordability, or will lower their aspirations in order to avoid subjective relative deprivation. In this regard, the material deprivation measure is being critiqued along similar lines as subjective well-being has been.

The chapter argues that this contention needs to be investigated further – particularly in light of the increasing significance being attributed to material deprivation and subjective well-being in the implementation and assessment of current policies.

### 1. Absolutist needs

Early poverty research, such as Charles Booth's study of poverty in London (1886-89) and Seebohm Rowntree's study of poverty in York (1899-1900), was based on a calculation of the number of people whose income was insufficient to meet an absolute minimum set of standards. Charles Booth carried out a large scale investigation into the extent and distribution of poverty in London. His work focused on the lives of the people who lived

there through an examination of quantitative data like census records, together with notes on the conditions of people's homes, work places, their urban environment and so forth. The data were used to generate statistical evidence of the living and working conditions of Londoners. Booth distinguished the poverty of 'feckless' casual earners from the 'ordinary poverty' of those whose means were insufficient to meet the basic needs of food, shelter and clothing according to normal standards.

Seebohm Rowntree collected detailed information about families in York. He defined families who could not afford to obtain the minimum necessary for 'merely physical efficiency' as being in 'primary poverty'. He based his calculations on the average nutritional needs of adults and children and translated these needs into quantities of different types of food. A price was then attributed to the amount of food required for family survival. Added to these costs were minimum amounts for clothing, fuel and small household items according to the size of the family. A family was regarded as being in poverty if their income (less housing costs) fell below this line (Townsend, 1979).

This 'subsistence level' of living was the definition of poverty used by William Beveridge in his 1942 report *Social Insurance and allied Services*. The 'Beveridge Report', as it became known, was used as the blueprint for the establishment of the UK welfare state in 1945. A national assistance rate was calculated by costing a minimum basket of goods that would cover a person facing a short period of hardship. An additional six per cent was added to this in consideration of inefficiencies in spending patterns. It was a minimum budget standard designed to maintain physical functioning during an emergency and not designed to avoid poverty over a longer period of time. However, the rates became enshrined in the social security legislation (Gordon, 2006: 32), with the rationale for the levels of benefits paid being based on Rowntree's notion of subsistence.

Rowntree carried out further work in York in 1936 and 1950 which extended his basic subsistence approach to include the cost of necessities beyond food and shelter. However, this standard was said to be based on a narrow criteria of need which only took into consideration the actual expenditure of a selection of poor families who spent the least and made no allowance for the customs of ordinary life (Townsend, 1979: 32). By 1950, the final Rowntree report on poverty showed that the overwhelming majority of people could afford the 'basics of life' and even some consumer goods.

## 2. Relative deprivation

The move beyond quantifying poverty in terms of absolute basic needs is attributed to the work of Abel Smith and Townsend (1965) and Townsend (1979). The central theme of this approach is that poverty is about more than simply a lack of income and includes the exclusion of people from a minimally accepted way of life. Townsend's concept of relative deprivation involved the use of measures of different kinds of social activities and material circumstances, in order to derive a direct objective measurement of poverty based on the level of deprivation of these items.

In Townsend's *Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living 1967-1969* (Townsend, 1979) most of the important aspects of living standards were covered. These included items relating to diet, clothing, shelter, education, health, environment, family activities and social relations. A binary score was created based on having, or not having, a specific good, in order to produce a summative score. From an initial set of 60 items chosen by Townsend, he identified twelve as key indicators of deprivation. People who were missing five out of these twelve key indicators were classified as living in deprivation. An income threshold was also derived based on the level below which deprivation increased disproportionately. Townsend concluded that a hierarchy of standard of living existed, reflective of differences in people's access to resources. Thus, as access to resources diminish, people's living standards fall below that of a common national average. A poverty line was identified by relating household incomes (adjusted for household size) to the degree to which households lacked the items in the deprivation index. It was Townsend's contention that poverty measured in this way was free from 'value judgements' and was both objective and scientific in nature.

*Poverty can be defined objectively and applied consistently only in terms of the concept of relative deprivation...The term is understood objectively rather than subjectively. Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities (Townsend, 1979:31).*

This initial work was not without criticism – namely that the selection of indicators was *ad hoc* and to a certain degree prescriptive and that the indicators failed to separate choice from constraint (Piachaud, 1981; Wedderburn, 1981; Sen, 1982; Hemming, 1984). A very prominent critique by David Piachaud (1981) not only cast doubt on the relevance of some components of the deprivation index and their links with poverty, it was claimed that a crucial element had been omitted from the definition, that of choice:

*To choose not to go on holiday or eat meat is one thing: it may interest sociologists, but is of no interest to those concerned with poverty. To have little or no opportunity to take a holiday or buy meat is entirely different. (Piachaud, 1981: 421)*

Notably, Piachaud claimed that it was not scientifically possible to measure poverty, since what constituted poverty for an individual or society collectively would always involve a value judgement. Furthermore, to try to do so was morally wrong. He went on to question Townsend's 'bold claim' of objectivity.

*We can learn much from the attempt, which is in line with Peter Townsend's massive contribution, over the years, to understanding social policy. But he has not substantiated his claim of scientific objectivity, any more than the knights of old found the Holy Grail. (Piachaud, 1981: 421)*

The fact that Townsend strongly defined relative poverty objectively can be explained by the emphasis he placed on the importance of distinguishing between 'actual' and 'perceived' need. However, by aiming to exclude value judgements from the assessment of need, Townsend defined his index strictly on what he claimed was ordinary living patterns of society. In doing so, he left himself vulnerable to claims that the index was prescriptive. According to Mack and Lansley (1985) it was the exclusion of value judgements that resulted in a concept of need that was hard for people to interpret:

*The items in his 'deprivation index' have not been chosen because they fit in with a generally accepted view of need. The result of taking a concept of 'need' that is outside people's feelings and experiences is that the consequent 'deprivation' suffered from these unmet 'needs' is outside people's comprehension. In short, observation of facts about the distribution of resources and the distribution of standards of living tells us a great deal about inequality and about the social structure of society, and as such is extremely important. But it tells us nothing about*

*poverty. This, in essence, is at the heart of Piachaud's criticisms of Townsend's work.*  
(1985: 36)

Townsend's interpretation of human needs was based on the belief that all needs are conditioned by social, historical and cultural context (Lister, 2004). Therefore, it was his contention that a more preferable use of the concept of relative deprivation would be to focus on the actual *conditions* of deprivation relative to others rather than *feelings* of deprivation. Here, he notes the differences between objective actuality and subjective perception and the fact that differences in conditions between people may be obscured by social belief (Townsend, 1979: 38). This is the fundamental difference between Townsend's concept of relative deprivation and that of Runciman (1966). It is asserted here that Townsend placed high value on Runciman's findings of a lack of resentment by disadvantaged individuals at their precarious circumstances hence his strong defense of objectivity.

Another public criticism of Townsend's early work came from Amartya Sen (1983) who challenged such a relativist definition of poverty on the grounds that its application in extremely poor countries, where the majority of the population lack adequate resources, would result in only people at the very bottom being classified as poor (Lister, 2004: 28). Sen argued that on its own, relative deprivation would not capture most of the poverty existing in the Southern developing countries:

*'there is ... an irreducible absolutist core in the idea of poverty. If there is starvation and hunger then, no matter what the relative picture looks like – there clearly is poverty.'* (Sen, 1983: 159).

Examples of this absolutist core were described by Sen as the need *'to meet nutritional requirements, to escape avoidable disease, to be sheltered, to be clothed, to be able to travel, to be educated ... to live without shame.'* (1983: 162-3 quoted in Gordon, 2006).

In response, Townsend (1985) debated the relativist side of the argument, claiming that even this absolutist core was relative to the society in which one lived. He claimed that Sen was endorsing a narrow subsistence conception of poverty dominated by meeting the most basic nutritional requirements (Lister, 2004). The disagreement appears to rest on the different meanings given to the terms 'absolute' and 'relative'. As explained by Gordon (2006: 34), much of the debate was a 'question of semantics'. In a follow up paper to Townsend's response, Sen (1985) explained how his definition of absolute differed from the

conventional meaning of subsistence level and referred instead to lacking basic opportunities. However, while he criticised Townsend's belief that a purely absolutist notion of poverty was unjustifiable, Sen also acknowledged the social nature of needs. Thus, Sen's concept of absolute poverty conforms to Townsend's relative concept.

In fact, their beliefs are closer in other discernible ways. For example, Townsend defended his position on objectivity on similar grounds to the Marxist theory of 'false consciousness':

*It seems to me quite crucial to try to separate subjective (in both the individual and collective senses of that term) from objective aspects of deprivation in identifying and measuring poverty. People may be in poverty when they believe they are not, and vice versa. Or people may be in poverty when interested others – such as Governments, or the public at large or even the economic and sociological professions – believe they are not, and vice versa. Perceptions which are filtered through, or fostered by, the value or belief systems of sectional groups, the State or whole communities can never be regarded as sufficiently representative of 'reality out there'. There have to be forms of 'objective' social observation, investigation and comparison against which they may be checked (even if those standards remain necessarily incomplete as well as necessarily creatures of socially produced modes of scientific thought). (Townsend, 1985b: 660)*

Here, the comparison with Runciman's subjective relative deprivation concept is clear. The main point being made by Townsend appears to relate to how personal perception is framed by social forces. The danger for Townsend lies in a person's subconscious acquiescence of their disadvantaged position and their subsequent lower expectations.

However, a similar comparison can be drawn from Sen's hypothesis that people who have never known anything other than material deprivation may not be dissatisfied with their disadvantaged situation.

*A thoroughly deprived person, leading a very reduced life, might not appear to be badly off in terms of the mental metric of desire and its fulfilment, if the hardship is accepted with non-grumbling resignation. In situations of long-standing deprivation, the victims do not go on grieving and lamenting all the time, and very often make great effort to take pleasure in small mercies and to cut down personal desires to modest – 'realistic' – proportions. The person's deprivation then, may not at all show up in the metrics of pleasure, desire fulfilment, etc., even though he or*

*she may be quite unable to be adequately nourished, decently clothed, minimally educated and so on'* (Sen, 1990: 45).

At least in terms of the risk posed by adaption processes and lowered expectations; both Townsend and Sen appear to be in agreement. But conversely, this risk is one of the main reasons put forward by Sen for departing from economic frameworks for conceptualising and assessing human well-being and progress in favour of a capability approach. While Townsend is concerned with people's command over resources, Sen (1985, 1992) takes the alternative view that knowing whether people have, or do not have, certain material items, or take part in social activities, or use particular services, does not matter in it's own right. According to Sen, economic resources and the goods and services they can buy are only secondary to what a person actually manages to do, or be (their functionings) and what they actually can do, or be (their capabilities) given the opportunities available to them (Lister, 2004). The focus then should be on removing any obstacles which stop people from taking the opportunity to enjoy a good quality of life and be, or do, the kind of things they have reason to value (Robeyns, 2004).

According to Lister (2004: 17), the capability approach focuses on the positives (achieving a life that is valued), rather than on the negative (a lack of material resources which prevents people from achieving this). This framework evaluates individual well-being and social policies on whether or not the conditions are available and individuals have the opportunity to choose the life that is of value to them. In this way, a multi-dimensional view of well-being is incorporated into the approach as all areas which affect people's quality of life are considered – for example, health, education and employment. The approach has been more significant in an international development context within poorer Southern countries, but is becoming increasingly more influential in richer developed countries.

A notable example is the presence of the capability approach within the Stiglitz report (2009)(discussed in chapter two) of which Amartya Sen was one of the three authors. For example, in chapter two of the report 'Quality of Life' it is noted that while objective resources which individuals have command over (such as income, assets, goods and service), are important, they are insufficient in themselves to measure human well-being. This is defended on the grounds of adaptive preferences; the unequal accessibility of resources among individuals; that many of the determinants of human well-being are not monetary but aspects of people's life circumstances; and because resources are transferred into well-being by people in different ways, thus:

*People with greater capacities for enjoyment or greater abilities for achievement in valuable domains of life are better off even if they command fewer economic resources. (2009: 144).*

However, it has been proposed that people's capabilities can also adapt to straightened or worsening circumstances (Qizilbash, 1997; Clark, 2002; Clark, 2007). Qizilbash (1997) has argued that people may go on to develop 'compensating abilities' in the face of adversity, for example women working longer hours than men to achieve the same recognition and pay. Consequently, defending the capability approach on the grounds of adaptive preference formation in these circumstances appears both misguided and unreliable.

### **3. Conceptual poverty**

Subsequent research by Mack and Lansley (1985) developed further Townsend's approach in the Breadline Britain surveys in 1983 and 1990 by introducing the notion of a 'consensual' standard of living approach. This was developed by asking people to identify those items they regarded as essential (as compared with those that were 'desirable' but not essential for modern living). Uncertainties surrounding whether lack of a necessity might reflect choice rather than hardship were addressed through development of the concept of 'enforced lack' (1985: 36). Individuals were thus held to be deprived of a necessity if they wanted it but did not have it because they could not afford to have it. Those who were deprived on three items were classified as poor. The Breadline Britain surveys did not collect income data.

Their aim was to relate the definition of poverty to an objective consensus of public opinion and reduce the role of the 'expert' in defining poverty.

*...we have aimed to exclude our own personal value judgements by taking the consensual judgement of society at large about people's needs. We hope to have moved towards what Sen describes as 'an objective diagnosis of condition' based on 'an objective understanding of "feelings"'. (1985:46)*

However, the researchers' assertion of a consensus of general opinion without expert judgement was questioned and said to be a majoritarian opinion as opposed to a consensus (Veit-Wilson, 1987) and as such, biased towards individual preferences (Piachaud, 1987; Halleröd, 1994).

In the original Breadline Britain surveys, Mack and Lansley divided those who had the item into two categories for 'have/could not do without' and 'have/could do without'. Those that had and could not do without an item were more likely to class it as a necessity for everyone. The next group most likely to classify an item as a necessity was the group who did not have the item because they could not afford it. Following this, the third group most likely to classify an item as a necessity was the group who had the item but said they could do without it. The least likely group to classify an item as a necessity was the group who said they did not have the item because they did not want it. Similar results were obtained when the survey was repeated in 1990 (Gordon and Pantazis, 1997). As van den Bosch (2001) points out "*This finding shows that not only objective circumstances, but also subjective wants strongly influence perceptions of necessity.*" (2001: 79). Halleröd (1994) elaborated on the Mack and Lansley method for measuring direct consensual poverty by refining the technique which would, it was claimed, address some of the criticisms identified. His approach was similar to Mack and Lansley in that poverty was still seen as a lack of socially perceived necessities defined by public opinion. The main difference between the two approaches is that Halleröd did not discard the items that less than 50 per cent perceived as necessary.

All items in the original set were kept and weighted according to the proportion of the population which regarded the item as a necessity. That is, the higher the percentage of respondents who think that an item is necessary to have a decent standard of living, the higher the weight that is attributed to that indicator. Thus, this *Proportional Deprivation Index* (PDI) claimed Halleröd, lessened the significance of the randomness of the selection of necessities. Further adjustments were made to accommodate any significant differences in the consumption preferences of particular social, demographic and geographical groups in terms of their perception of necessity. Halleröd's PDI approach is said to offer a theoretically more robust index of deprivation (Eroglu, 2007). Weighting the items did reduce the significance of the arbitrary nature of what made it into the deprivation index and what was discarded. However, the initial list of consumer items that people were given to choose from was decided upon in advance by Halleröd. Thus, the effect of subjectivity might have been lessened, but was definitely not removed (Van Den Bosch, 2001).

There was a consistent correlation between people living below the poverty line and the incidence of experiencing reported hardship. However, the correspondence was not completely direct. For example, approximately half the respondents classified as poor were either satisfied or very satisfied with their material living standards. About 30 per cent of

the non-poor reported some difficulty making ends meet. This is an aspect of the research that the author recognises when he explains, *“The roles of aspirations and expectations are, of course, important considerations here...”* (Hallerod, 1994:20). When household income was compared to levels of deprivation, a strong correlation was found. Similar to earlier studies of Mack and Lansley (1985) and Townsend (1979), the degree of deprivation was greater at the lower end of the income scale, accelerating when income fell below a certain level. Despite the strong relationship between income and deprivation there were a number of people in the poor group who had high incomes and a number of non-poor with low incomes. The comparison of Mack and Lansley’s original approach with the alternative method proposed by Halleröd using data from a 1992 Swedish representative sample survey showed very little differences and were consistent in their results (Halleröd, 1994). This work has added confidence in a direct measure of poverty. It strengthened the findings of Mack and Lansley (1985) and Townsend (1979) in that the extent to which people experience deprivation intensifies when income falls below a certain level.

#### **4. Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE)**

The approach to measuring poverty by deprivation of socially perceived necessities was developed further in the Millennium Survey of Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) in Britain in 1999 (Gordon et al., 2000). This method considered income levels along with levels of deprivation, and set a poverty threshold by relating the number of necessities lacking in a household to the incomes of households, adjusted to take into account household composition and size (see also <http://www.poverty.ac.uk>). A range of sequential statistical procedures were carried out to test the validity, reliability and additivity of the deprivation items. The study also employed a method of ‘subjectively assessed poverty’ (2000: 11) to estimate how much money would be needed to avoid absolute and overall poverty. It also attempted to measure social exclusion in the area of impoverishment, labour market exclusion, service exclusion and, uniquely, exclusion from social relations. This was also the method upon which the Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland study was based (Hillyard et al., 2003), as well as the most recent PSE UK wide study in 2012 (see <http://www.poverty.ac.uk>).

The relative deprivation approach has influenced poverty measurement locally, nationally and internationally. In Ireland for example, attention is given to those falling below relative income levels and reporting ‘economic strain’ as captured by a small set of eleven specific non-monetary indicators. A measure of ‘consistent poverty’ is constructed based on the

combination of the enforced lack of two or more items from the index together with falling below a range of relative income poverty lines (Whelan, 2007).

A number of UK official statistics of poverty now report on low income and levels of deprivation. From 2004/5 the Family Resources Survey (FRS) incorporated a suite of deprivation questions relating to adults and children which have since been improved and developed. For children, the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) analysis looks at how families with children respond to the questions according to the level of household income then reports on whether the children have material deprivation items and services, and whether their parents have the material deprivation items and services.

Moreover, in 2010 the UK government announced its intention to use a combined measure of low income and material deprivation to monitor progress towards the eradication of child poverty by 2020. At a national level, this is one of the most important pieces of legislation as it established four separate child poverty targets which the UK government must meet by 2020:

1. Relative poverty – to reduce the proportion of children who live in relative low income (in families with income below 60 per cent of the median), to less than ten per cent.
2. Combined low income and material deprivation – to reduce the proportion of children who live in material deprivation and have a low income, to less than five per cent.
3. Persistent poverty – to reduce the proportion of children that experience long periods of relative poverty, with the specific target to be set at a later date.
4. Absolute poverty – to reduce the proportion of children who live below an income threshold fixed in real terms, to less than five per cent.

(Child Poverty Act 2010, see <http://www.legislation.gov.uk>)

This Act effectively enshrines in law the combined low income and material deprivation measure and requires the UK government to publish a UK Child Poverty Strategy, to report annually on progress in implementing that strategy and to set up a Commission as an independent and statutory body to monitor and report on progress.

In the EU it was agreed at a special European Council meeting in Lisbon in 2000 to adopt a strategy for eradicating poverty and social exclusion. The agreement took the form of four commonly agreed objectives and the preparation of national action plans and periodic

reporting and monitoring of progress. A set of common statistical indicators of social exclusion and poverty were endorsed at the Laeken European Council in December 2001 (known as the Laeken indicators). These covered the period from 2001 to 2010 and included monetary indicators and a set of non-monetary indicators covering employment, education and health. To complement the monetary indicators, a new indicator of material deprivation was added in February 2009 which would better reflect actual living standards across the EU (Eurostat, 2010). The material deprivation rate provides a headcount of the number of people who cannot afford at least three of nine items.

Developments on the setting of targets for the eradication of poverty since Lisbon 2000 have been slow. However, at the European Council meeting in June 2010, a new ten year growth strategy was announced called Europe 2020 (see [http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm)). The strategy set out five key targets to be met by the end of the decade one of which relates to social inclusion and poverty reduction:

*To lift at least 20 million people in the EU from the risk of poverty and exclusion by 2020.*

To monitor progress towards this target a new poverty measure was developed based on a combination of three indicators:

- The 'at-risk-of-poverty' (less than 60% national median equivalised income)
- Severe deprivation (the enforced lack of four out of the nine deprivation items)
- Jobless household measure (a complex measure of joblessness and work intensity)

Households/people in the EU are now defined as poor if they are either in low income or severely materially deprived or in a jobless household. The Council also decided that the mid-term review of the EU target in 2015 would include a review of these three sub-indicators. Additionally, it stated that the mid-term review of the EU target should intensify work on improved measures of material deprivation. What this work points to is the growing significance being attached to deprivation indicators based on the enforced lack criteria.

## **5. Adaptation and the measurement of poverty**

The way in which the concept of relative deprivation has been refined and developed has itself become the subject of debate. In particular, deprivation measures and the

construction of the deprivation index continue to divide opinion. The question of how individual preferences and adaptation to financial constraints affect direct measures of poverty forms a large part of the discussion.

A prominent critique of the consensual deprivation approach by McKay (2004) presented two key arguments based on his re-analysis of the 1999 Omnibus Survey of the Office for National Statistics and the Millennium Survey of Poverty and Social Exclusion. Firstly, McKay argued against the existence of a general public consensus, claiming that levels of agreement were relatively weak and a large amount of variation existed among different groups of people in what they believed to be a necessity. Secondly, the author called into question the measurement of what people cannot afford as a true representation of deprivation on the grounds of adaptive preferences:

*...we cannot assume that lacking particular items through being unable to afford them is synonymous with deprivation rather than choice – in other words, it can be preference rather than poverty. Virtually everyone willing to say they are unable to afford a ‘necessity’ (as judged by 50 per cent of wider society) has one or more non-necessities. Often, they have quite a few non-necessities. This suggests that their personal ranking of items is rather different from the average. Let us assume that people buy first what they regard as necessities, then move on to luxuries until funds restrict choice. Among those people whose consumption patterns are most like the average, the items they will be unable to afford will largely be ‘luxuries’. But those whose consumption preferences are rather different may buy ‘luxuries’ before what wider society regards as ‘necessities’. It is therefore their particular choice of consumption profile that makes them appear poor, not their resources. (2004: 204)*

It was claimed that older people were more likely to say they did not want an item through choice, rather than say they could not afford it, while younger people were more likely to say they wanted it but could not afford it. According to the writer, the difference by age was not simply explained by differences in income, but rather by the introduction of a subjectivity which required respondents to feel poor. Older people did have lower incomes than younger people but were more likely to say they did not want the item, possibly due to younger people's higher expectations and aspirations and older people's adaptation to previous experiences of poverty and/or affluence. Such a process it was claimed distorted the results because more younger people than older people were being classified as deprived thus leading to an underestimation of poverty among older people. The lack of

correspondence between low income and material deprivation among older people has been recognised: the Department for Work and Pensions commissioned a series of studies examining this occurrence (Berthoud et al., 2006; Dominy and Kempson, 2006; Finch and Kemp, 2006). Government concern regarding the under-reporting of poverty rates for older people prompted the commissioning of further research to establish a different set of deprivation indicators for older people (Legard et al., 2008; McKay, 2008). The FRS included a specific set of 'pensioner deprivation items' in 2010 to address the problem of adaptive preference, together with people's low expectations and acquiescence.

One conclusion drawn out by McKay was to suggest that an index based on the enforced lack of an item or activity was more closely related to subjective deprivation, whereas an index based on the simple absence of deprivation items was more closely linked to objective deprivation. Furthermore, such a simple 'don't have' index may be preferable to a more complex index that distinguishes enforced lack from choice. However, recent work by Hick (2013), which drew on data from the British Household Panel Survey<sup>9</sup> to test whether or not the enforced lack criterion should be used when using deprivation indicators to measure poverty, found no grounds for abandoning this criterion. The work replicated that of McKay and explored in particular, the questioning of the relationship between enforced lack and objective deprivation. Tests of reliability and validity were carried out on indices of deprivation *with and without* the enforced lack criterion. Using a broader range of dimensions, together with what Hick claims is a more appropriate method of analysis<sup>10</sup>, the author arrived at '*quite a different conclusion*' (2013: 47).

The enforced lack index was found to be more reliable and valid than an index based on a simple 'don't have' principle. Furthermore, the enforced lack measure was much more effective than the simple 'don't have' measure in discriminating between levels of both subjective and objective deprivation. For example, respondents who said they found it 'quite, or very difficult to manage financially' had between 8.5 and 12.8 times greater odds of reporting a simple 'don't have' response, but between 82.2 and 91.9 times greater odds of claiming an enforced lack of deprivation items. The enforced lack measure distinguished well between objective measures such as whether households were saving, between employment status, income quintile and extent of housing problems. One exception was ill health, with little variation between enforced lack and simple absence of the deprivation

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<sup>9</sup> The 2006-07 BHPS, Wave 16.

<sup>10</sup> Hick uses Odds Ratios in preference to the analysis of variance conducted by McKay for two reasons: (1) the substantial number of zeros in the data which do not reflect 'true' scores (2) it provides a focus on how the measure identifies different households (2013: 42).

item. However, this was itself explained by the connection between age and ill health and the greater tendency for older people to experience health problems. Once age of household was controlled for, the enforced lack index was again found to discriminate better than simply 'don't have' responses.

One interesting finding to emerge from this study was the fact that while household income was an effective discriminator, it worked best at the higher income levels; only half of respondents in the bottom quintile said they did not have an item because they could not afford it. Although here too, age had a significant impact as the percentage reporting enforced lack of items increased when the age of household was lowered. However, it does raise a question about whether poorer people are more vulnerable to adaptive preferences irrespective of age. This is a particular issue, since studies discussed earlier suggest the greater tendency for those on higher incomes to make comparisons in an upward manner with those in a more affluent position than themselves, therefore engendering feelings of subjective relative deprivation, as opposed to people on lower incomes who are more inclined to make comparisons with those closest to their own situation and economic position. Nevertheless, this work supports the notion that enforced lack of deprivation items can distinguish between poverty and preference.

Concern regarding subjective relative deprivation is reflected in the work of Halleröd (2006) who expressed a fear that people may adapt their preferences by arguing they do not want consumption items they cannot afford '*in order to avoid the subjective feelings of relative deprivation*' (2006: 376) thus leading to an underestimation of poverty. Using data from Statistics Sweden's annual Survey of Living Conditions from 1998, Halleröd (2006) developed a set of three hypotheses and sub hypotheses to test both the objective relative deprivation and subjective relative deprivation theory, in relation to access to economic resources and reported deprivation. The hypotheses were based on the assumption that adaptation of preferences is a long-term process. Therefore, an age effect should be expected as older people will have had more time to adapt to the consequences of economic constraint; so, too, will people who have experienced long-term spells of poverty and deprivation adapt to their circumstances. Meanwhile, if people's circumstances improve and expectations and aspirations rise, this may imply an increase in reported subjective relative deprivation by people who may respond that they 'cannot afford', but may not be objectively deprived.

The research found that people with limited access to economic resources did adapt their preferences and were more likely to report they did not want an item, or carry out an activity, thus challenging the objectivity of the measure. Age did have an effect, with the frequency of 'do not want' responses increasing as people got older. Furthermore, older people with limited access to economic resources were more inclined to respond this way rather than with a 'cannot afford' reply. In addition, the findings indicated that experiencing long-term economic constraint encourages adaptive preferences. However, the association was weaker than expected. Even so, Halleröd's analysis supported the subjective theory of a close connection between economic circumstances, choice of reference group and consumption preferences, which has the possibility of underestimating the prevalence of objective relative deprivation (2006: 388).

A recent contribution to the debate concerning the way in which adaptation mechanisms and social comparison processes affect poverty indicators demonstrates how adaptation biases vary considerably among different measures. Crettaz and Suter (2013) used five waves of the Swiss Household Panel study (2006-2010) to examine whether, and to what extent, indicators of material deprivation, subjective poverty and subjective well-being are affected by adaptive preferences. The researchers' main focus was on the cohort of people who experienced poverty over this five year period (household income below 60 per cent of median income). They hypothesised that if the phenomenon of adaptive preferences exists, then those experiencing long-term poverty would adjust their preferences to their material situation. This would be reflected in their perception of their financial situation at the end of the five year period (2013: 143). The researchers are also of the opinion that indicators of material deprivation which ask people whether they lack certain goods because they cannot afford them, have a subjective element making them vulnerable to adaptation. Various types of regression models were used to analyse the phenomenon of adaptive preferences from the perspective of relative deprivation, respondents' perception of their financial situation and reported well-being.

The researchers tested deprivation in a number of ways: lacking three or more items because of limited financial resources controlling for the number of items not possessed; lacking three from a set of nine items (similar to the EU approach); not being able to afford an increased number of items (without setting a deprivation threshold); lacking items for whatever reason (similar to Townsend's original approach); and lacking items weighted according to the importance attributed to each item by the general public (Halleröd's PDI approach).

Controlling for household equivalised income, educational level, gender, household size and composition and employment status, the researchers found that for each year of living in relative poverty, the odds of a respondent reporting enforced lack (that is, saying 'I cannot afford it') decreased. The authors claim that when 'the subjective component is removed' (2013: 146), the number of years spent in poverty had very little impact (the approach closest to Townsend). They also reported that the PDI measure did not seem to be affected by the number of years spent in poverty claiming '*it is remarkable that over a 5-year period this indicator shows the consistently negative impact of poverty spells*' (2013: 146). The impact of the number of years spent in poverty was further tested across a number of subjective outcomes including satisfaction with income, having income necessary to 'make ends meet' and satisfaction with life in general.

Findings relating to the individual's financial situation revealed that each additional year spent in poverty increased the odds of being more satisfied with individual and household income. In contrast, the odds of being more satisfied with life in general did not change at all; a finding that Crettaz and Suter attribute to the fact that life satisfaction is correlated with more life domains than simply the material dimension.

Their research is relevant here because it contradicts the findings of Hick (2013) and suggests that indicators based on the 'enforced lack' criteria are very vulnerable to adaptive preference formation. In contrast, Townsend's original approach which counted items missing regardless of the reason seems only weakly affected by this phenomenon and Halleröd's PDI showed no bias to adaptive preferences. Regarding the subjective measures, results indicated strong impact of adaptive preferences on income satisfaction and ability to 'make ends meet'. General life satisfaction seems to have been unaffected by adaptive preference processes.

Such analyses and developments are relevant in two main respects: Firstly, the application of non-monetary indicators of material deprivation to complement income measures of poverty has increased substantially over the past decade both in the UK and the EU. However, if the enforced lack approach is vulnerable to adaptive preferences and lowered expectations, as some researchers argue, then this could have serious implications for a measurement of poverty based on this method. In addition, if as Runciman argues, there is a strong connection between periods of social and/or economic change and subjective relative deprivation, there is a strong possibility that people may have lowered their expectations in the current economic climate, preferring to say they do not want to have

items or carry out activities they can no longer afford in order to avoid experiencing increased perceived hardship. Subsequently, this could affect their response to the necessities questions by increasing the number of 'do not have but don't want' responses. If so, then the extent of deprivation based on this measure could be an underestimation, particularly acute during times of economic recession.

Conversely, it could also mean the non-poor being captured in a poverty measure because; as Runciman points out, relative deprivation should be understood as a *sense* of deprivation and can be found in people who are not poor as well as those who are:

*Relative deprivation should always be understood to mean a sense of deprivation; a person who is 'relatively deprived' need not be 'objectively' deprived in the more usual sense that he is demonstrably lacking something' (Runciman, 1966: 12)*

Therefore, a person could objectively have a high standard of living but feel relatively deprived if they compare themselves to their more wealthy neighbours, thus over-estimating levels of poverty. This seems a reasonable assumption as existing research, quoted in earlier chapters, suggests the greater propensity for higher income groups to underestimate their actual position in the income hierarchy and to make upward comparisons with richer members of their comparative reference group. It is also the hardest to prove or disprove as research focusing on the rich in this area is extremely rare (Leach et al., 2002; Barnard et al., 2007).

Secondly, as chapter two has documented, there has been a discernible shift towards alternative, subjective measures of progress based on emotions, feelings and experiences. Within UK policy this has been most prominent in the development of a National Well-being Index together with widespread acceptance of reflective assessments of life satisfaction and the mainstreaming of subjective well-being indicators through UK government policy.

Resistance to the inclusion of subjective perceptions of well-being within the broader conception of social progress is based mainly on the grounds of adaption processes. When this is adjoined with the speed at which alternative subjective measures of progress have been embraced since the global financial crisis and subsequent fall in living standards, it fosters some suspicion that it may be more than simply a coincidence, and, is actually politically convenient (Burchardt, 2013: 4).

However, this partiality cannot be vindicated without addressing similar criticisms levied at the objective relative deprivation measure.

## 6. Overview

The work of Townsend (1979), Mack and Lansley (1985) and Gordon et al. (2000; 2012) has proved the driving force for extending poverty measurement beyond income alone to include deprivation and exclusion from a decent standard of living. These approaches are generally believed to be methodologically objective in nature. However, some critics hold that subjective influences are interwoven within the approach, especially when choices have to be made between lacking a socially perceived necessity through preference or poverty. In this respect, the relative deprivation approach developed from Townsend's initial work attracts the same type of criticism as that raised against the use of subjective well-being – that of adaptive preferences.

Some qualitative studies in the area of poverty have reported how people rationalise their life on a low income by drawing comparisons between current circumstances compared to past experiences of harder times, or through comparisons to those who they view to be worse off than themselves (Hill, et al., 2007; Flaherty, 2008). However, much of the qualitative work examining the concept of adapted preferences within the poverty literature do so from the viewpoint of coping mechanisms and strategies employed to 'get by' on a low income. Such practices are often viewed as positive examples of resourcefulness and agency amidst persistent pressures and strains (Kempson et al., 1994; Kempson, 1996; Dean and Shah, 2002; Scharf et al., 2002, 2005; Orr et al., 2006; Flint, 2010).

How respondents approach their situation and how they seek to take charge of it is a central component of agency (Lister, 2004) and an important example of capability. However, fewer qualitative studies have examined the extent and intensity of adaptation and the degree to which reference group choices affects people's experience of this phenomenon. Moreover, empirical evidence on how poverty indicators are affected by these processes is *'still surprisingly scarce'* (Crettaz and Suter, 2013: 140).

This thesis seeks to partly address some of this information deficit by using a subjective relative deprivation framework to analyse qualitative interviews undertaken with low income households in Northern Ireland as part of the PSE NI 2012 study. The intention is to shed light on reference group theory and the relationship between reference group

choices, adaptive preference formation and the intensity of subjective relative deprivation. The analysis is strengthened by the fact that the interviews were carried out during a period of deep recession (as explained in detail in chapter five) giving the occasion to examine whether, during a period of adverse economic change, feelings of relative deprivation decrease because people do not expect to achieve what they desire. Or, alternatively, if it leads to increased feeling of relative deprivation because people compare their situation with how it used to be.

The qualitative data will be augmented by quantitative analysis of the PSE NI 2012 Living Standards Survey, in relation to reported levels of deprivation and overall well-being. This work forms the basis of chapters six, seven and eight. The methods used to carry out the analysis are set out in detail in the following chapter.

# Chapter Five – Methodology

This chapter describes the research design, data and the methods used to achieve the overall aims of the thesis detailed in chapter one, that is, to investigate the degree to which subjective relative deprivation and adaptive preference may lead to a form of compliance that diminishes people's sense of entitlement and to highlight the possible implication of such processes on the accurate measure of social progress.

The chapter also discusses the analysis of data and the sample selection and characteristics. The advantages and disadvantages of the particular analytic techniques employed are explored and limitations of the study are identified. Ethical issues relevant to the study are considered and include access and consent, risks and benefits to participants and privacy and confidentiality. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the social and economic context within which the data was collected drawing comparisons with a decade earlier, as it is acknowledged that such factors may impact on people's attitudes and perceptions. The following chapters will look at the findings emanating from the methods and techniques used.

## 1. Research design

The research design is based on a framework which considered three aspects:

1. The theory of knowledge that informs the research.
2. The strategy that will dictate the approach to the research.
3. The specific method of data collection and analysis.

(Creswell, 2003)

The first step involved a search plan to conduct the literature review, which established the background of the research cited in the first four chapters and to contextualise the findings in the final chapter.

### I. Literature review

Existing literature on poverty and social exclusion is vast. In order to make the research more focused and manageable it was decided in the first instance to take the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as a starting point. This was when social survey research became better established and the period which gave rise to the social indicators movement. Secondly, a focus was

given to specific objective and subjective aspects which informed the method of measurement and which were discussed by the author/s.

Appropriate search engines and databases were used to inform the literature review. These included:

Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA)

Google Scholar

Ingentaconnect

Scopus

Social Science Citation Index

Sociological Abstracts

Zetoc: Electronic Table of Contents

Key research terms included:

Poverty measurement, relative poverty, subjective poverty, objective poverty, subjectivity, objectivity, deprivation, social exclusion, social indicators, subjective well-being, societal progress. The basic operators of AND, OR, NOT and WITHIN and NEAR were used where appropriate.

The review was further informed by searching working papers and research reports of large research centres known for their high quality research investigating the root causes of poverty and inequality, and their impact on people, such as:

Economic and Social Research Council

<http://www.societytoday.esrc.ac.uk>

Economic and Social Research Institute

<http://www.esri.ie>

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu>

Joseph Rowntree Foundation

<http://www.jrf.org.uk>

Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative

<http://www.ophi.org.uk>

The Poverty Site

<http://www.poverty.org.uk>

## II. Research strategy

This study uses a mixed methods approach to data gathering and analysis using both qualitative and quantitative data to acquire the knowledge to answer the research questions posed in chapter one. The way people view the social world (ontology) and the method of gaining information about social reality (epistemology), vary widely among people. Some researchers, whose ontological stance is one of realism, believe that there is an external reality which is shaped by laws and regulations and only methods connected with the natural sciences are appropriate for the investigation of social life (Snape and Spencer, 2003). Importance is given to the principle of deductivism whereby hypotheses can be tested and explanations of laws can be assessed (Bryman, 2008). Associated with the epistemological position of positivism, it is believed that the researcher and the research subject are separate entities and it is possible to carry out independent and objective value free social research (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Richie and Lewis, 2003).

In contrast to positivism, interpretivism puts forward the notion that the social world is not governed by laws and regulations and it is through understanding human behaviour that we gain our knowledge. The emphasis on 'understanding' rather than 'explaining' is consistent with the stance of Max Weber who makes reference to the '*interpretive understanding of social action*' (Weber, 1947:88, quoted in Bryman, 2008). Here, the researcher and the social world are not viewed as independent of each other, and so the methods associated with the natural sciences are not regarded as appropriate. Emphasis is placed not only on the importance of interpreting the social world from the participant's perspective but understanding how the research is affected by the interpretation of the researcher.

Some researchers argue that by choosing a certain method of investigation a commitment is made to an ontological and epistemological position (for example, social survey research which is traditionally linked to a natural science epistemology and qualitative interviewing traditionally linked with an interpretivist epistemology). The very different ontological and epistemological bases of the qualitative and quantitative models are often viewed as presenting too much of a challenge for the effective combination of both methods in one study (Richie, 2003: 38). Therefore, the contention put forward is that mixing two separate methods with different beliefs on what it is possible to know about the world and how social reality should be studied, is neither feasible nor desirable (Smith, 1983; Guba, 1985; Morgan, 1998).

However, the integration of quantitative and qualitative research has become more widely used and accepted in recent years. In fact, it has become so conventional that it has come to be viewed as a distinctive approach in its own right (Bryman, 2006). From a practical level, a key influence in the acceptance of this approach has been the notion of pragmatism and the view that choosing the appropriate method for addressing the research question *per se*, takes precedence over an uncompromising focus on the underlying philosophical debates (Seale, 1999 cited in Richie and Lewis, 2003).

In terms of approach, this research study has been influenced largely by the ontological and epistemological perspective which supports the view that qualitative and quantitative approaches are not mutually exclusive, such as that of Richie and Lewis (2003). The argument that it is possible to transcend the philosophical debates by adopting aspects of the scientific method to suit the nature of qualitative data in a way that best answers the research questions, has proved a persuasive one, particularly in the field of evaluative research (Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). Within social policy research, the potential for combining the two approaches is thought to be considerable (Depoy and Gitlin, 1998). The role this model currently plays in appraising the quality of qualitative evaluations concerned with the development and implementation of social policy has specific relevance for this thesis (see Spencer et al., 2003a), as drawing out policy implications is one of the intentions of this research.

In light of the above considerations a mixed methods approach is believed to be highly appropriate and is the chosen research strategy, consisting of in-depth qualitative interviews and quantitative analysis of a large social survey dataset which address the stated thesis objectives. The ontological stance follows that of Snape and Spencer (2003) which adheres closely to Hammersely (1992) of 'subtle realism', where the critical importance of the personal interpretations of the respondent's viewpoint and the researcher's interpretation of that view is acknowledged. A subtle realist approach, as explained by Hammersely (*ibid*), recognises that we cannot be absolutely certain about the truth because we have no independent access to reality. He explains:

*Given that this is the situation, we must judge the validity of claims on the basis of the adequacy of the evidence offered in support of them. (1992: 69)*

The concept of 'adequacy' is not, as Hammersley points out, in itself simple. If the notion of an external reality existing independently of our beliefs or understanding is rejected, then

judgements on the truth of knowledge rest on assumptions, many of which are made subconsciously. Therefore all evidence should be challenged and rechallenged.

In terms of epistemology, the thesis draws on aspects of the scientific method and strives to be as objective and neutral as possible. It endeavours wherever possible to demonstrate reliability and validity which, akin to the epistemological position of Snape and Spencer (2003), are considered not only important features of qualitative research, but attainable aspirations.

In combination, it is believed that the different types of data can give a better sense of the whole, particularly as the different methods share the same issue of investigation (poverty measurement) and theoretical orientation (relative deprivation).

## **2. Reliability and validity**

In quantitative research the processes most often used to make a study credible are reliability and validity. Reliability refers to how consistent the research findings are when the study is repeated under the same conditions using a similar method. Three principal factors are involved when considering whether a measure is reliable (Bryman, 2008: 149). Firstly, *Stability* refers to how stable the measure is over time and the amount of variation in result if a measure is repeated. One way of testing for the stability of a measure is the test-retest method which involves administering a test or measure to a group at one point in time and then repeating the test or measure at another time to assess the strength of relationship between the two results. High test-retest correlations indicate a more reliable measure (Pallant, 2007). A second factor is *internal reliability* which concerns the degree to which multiple-indicators measures such as a scale or index (where respondent's answers to each question are aggregated to create an overall score) are all measuring the same attribute. For example, Cronbach's alpha is a common test used to establish internal reliability. This test provides an indication of the average correlation among all the items that are in the scale. Values range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater reliability. In general, the minimum acceptable level is taken to be 0.7 (*ibid*: 6). Thirdly, *Inter-observer consistency* refers to the level of consistent agreement between two or more observers of the same phenomenon in how it should be coded. Cohen's kappa is a measure of the degree of agreement and is recommended to be applied for textual information (Bryman, 2008: 265). Similar to the value ranges for Cronbach's alpha, the closer to 1 the more reliable the result.

Validity refers to how well the study reflects or measures what it claims to reflect or measure. Two dimensions of validity are often referred to. *Internal validity* refers mainly to the issue of causality and the degree of confidence in conclusions that propose a causal relationship between two variables is true (*ibid*: 32). A second dimension is *external validity*. This refers to the extent to which results of a study can be generalised to other groups within the population or to other contexts or settings (Lewis and Richie, 2003). It is this issue, argues Bryman (2008), that highlights the importance of research sampling methods and makes external validity one of the main reasons for the focus on generating representative samples within the quantitative model.

These processes, as they are defined in quantitative terms, are considered by many qualitative researchers as inadequate and not applicable to the qualitative research paradigm (Smith, 1983; Smith and Heshusius, 1986).

Again, viewpoints differ along ontological dimensions – one position discusses incorporating reliability and validity into qualitative research but without the emphasis on measurement (Mason, 1996). LeCompte and Goetz (1982) discuss reliability and validity as having direct relevance for qualitative research and suggest ways of introducing strategies to increase reliability, such as members of a research team agreeing on what is found and coded and agreement on theoretical ideas.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that research cannot be valid if it is not reliable, and so demonstrating validity is enough to confirm its reliability. They are critical of a realist ontology that holds that a single external reality exists and discuss terms such as ‘trustworthiness’ and ‘authenticity’. Within trustworthiness, they put forward four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability as ways of establishing the quality of qualitative research (quoted in Bryman, 2008: 377). In terms of authenticity, they focus on the importance of representing different views fairly and whether the research can be informative and promote change within the social setting in which it takes place. According to Bryman (2008) the term ‘authenticity’ has had less influence than ‘trustworthiness’. They further propose that the repeatability of results based on complex social phenomena is not only ill-advised, but not very probable (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

A number of strategies have been suggested for increasing validation within qualitative research. In terms of internal validation for example, Clayman and Maynard (1994) draw attention to the significance of analysing and not ignoring ‘deviant cases’ that do not appear to fit, as this can provide an important source of information in theory

development. In terms of external validation, the practice of triangulation, which involves examining evidence from other sources of existing information, can help improve the accuracy of research findings. It is a notion similar to that of writers like Webb et al. (1966), who state that confidence in the development of concepts can be increased by cross referencing findings from studies using different approaches. In this way it is thought to provide greater reliability and validity and hence has been traditionally associated more with quantitative research strategies (Bryman, 2006). However, it is increasing used as a means of verifying qualitative findings although the extent of verification it offers has been subject to debate along ontological and epistemological grounds with its value being viewed as extending, rather than confirming, our understanding of social phenomenon (Richie, 2003). For Mason (2006: 6) it is used to provide completeness in the belief that each method is best suited to its own specific part of the problem and can each address the research questions.

Strategies for increasing internal and external reliability also include the consistency of research practices between researchers. For example, inter-rater reliability refers to the extent to which the research findings are agreed or replicated between researchers. It is considered good practice by some researchers to be reflective about the methods they use, their individual values and biases that their own histories may introduce into the study, and be aware of the degree to which this may affect the very knowledge of the social world they produce (Seale, 1999). The importance of reflexivity during data collection and analysis is noted by Corbin and Strauss (2008) who discuss how emotions of the interviewer are conveyed to participants and in turn, how participants react to researchers' responses by adjusting their views as the interview or observation continues, much of which happens on an unconscious level (2008: 31). Thus, writes Chesney (2001), it is important to examine the researcher's influence on the research process:

*I support the autobiographical analysis of self, not as separate from or in competition with the ethnographic words of the women but as a nurturing bed to place the research finding in and as part of the transparency of the research process. Reflecting honestly and openly has helped me retain some integrity and develop insight and self-awareness, and it has given me a certain self-confidence.* (2001: 131, quoted in Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 31).

Greater awareness and acknowledgement of the role of the researcher as part of how knowledge is constructed mirrors the attitude within postmodernism, which is highly

critical of the notion that a researcher is someone who extracts knowledge from participants and then translates this knowledge to others (Bryman, 2008). However, the extent to which reflexivity is used by researchers as an analytic function varies, with some researchers viewing it as an integral part of the interpretation and others making scant reference to the process (Spencer et al., 2003b).

According to Bryman (2008), reflexivity is ‘a notoriously slippery concept’ (2008: 683) which the author advises needs to be used with a degree of caution. However, for Snape and Spencer (2003), reflexivity is important in striving for objectivity and neutrality. In this case, the authors endorse reflecting upon ways in which bias might enter qualitative research practice and the importance of acknowledging how researchers’ own backgrounds and beliefs can be relevant. The advice is as follows:

*It is therefore important that researchers provide as much information as possible, in terms of both technical details of conduct and potential bias, so that others can scrutinise the ‘objectivity’ of the investigation. (2003: 20)*

While there may be inconsistent agreement among qualitative researchers on the criteria for establishing research quality, Lewis and Richie (2003) contend that strong agreement exists on the need for very clear description and documentation of the research methods and findings within qualitative research, as a means of allowing the validity of research to be evaluated by others.

In the following sections, clear documentation on data collection, analysis, limitations and ethical considerations is detailed. Space is given for reflexivity and triangulation of other sources is used in order that the findings may be mutually corroborated (Bryman, 2006) and to check the accuracy of inferences drawn from the data.

### **3. Data collection**

This research study is based on data originating from the Poverty and Social Exclusion Study (PSE) 2012. All the empirical data analysed in this thesis emanated from the qualitative and quantitative components of the Northern Ireland PSE (PSE NI) and refers to adults (aged 18 years and older) living in Northern Ireland. Chapters six and seven investigate in greater detail one of the themes from the qualitative study – how families compare with others. Chapter eight examines the findings from these two chapters quantitatively, through analysis of the PSE’s Living Standards Survey.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the PSE was a major collaboration between six universities: University of Bristol, University of Glasgow, Heriot-Watt University, The Open University, Queen's University Belfast, and the University of York.

The core aims of the PSE research were:

1. To improve the measurement of poverty, deprivation, social exclusion and standard of living.
2. To assess change in the nature and extent of poverty and social exclusion over the past ten years across regions of the UK.
3. To conduct poverty-relevant analyses of outcomes and causal relationships from a comparative perspective.

To achieve these aims, the PSE methodology carried out a major population based survey of living standards in 2012 across regions in the United Kingdom (Living Standards Survey). The task of assessing the changing nature and extent of poverty and social exclusion over the past ten years was aided by the collection and analysis of qualitative evidence on how low living standards and social exclusion have shaped the lifestyles of families, households and individuals. Two major qualitative in-depth studies were carried out, one in Britain and one in Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland study focused on the role and significance of family in a context of poverty and low income. The main interests included attention to the interior lives of families with children and how these are impacted upon by poverty and the family-related implications of living on an inadequate income. How family life and relationships are managed and how the family is publically represented in circumstances of poverty were major points of interest. In terms of UK social policy, increasing attention is being paid to the family as a legitimate focus for government intervention. Since New Labour came to power in 1997, family-centred policies and practices focused on encouraging positive and responsible parenting. In relation to providers of adult and children's services, the advice from government was to 'think family' (Cornford et al., 2013: 1). New Labour reforms included childcare and early education, financial support for families with children and family orientated work-life flexibility. This was balanced by an expectation of responsible parenthood through increased parental employment and good parenting practices (Daly, 2010). Since the coalition government came to power in 2010, a family-focused policy

emphasis remains. The role of 'the family' has extended into the public sphere manifested through the array of public services planned and delivered via family partnerships thus placing a new depth of responsibilities on families (Cornford et al., 2013). A notable shift has been the concern about children and families 'at risk' and families with specific problems that pose a threat to themselves and others. For example, the Troubled Families Programme was set up by the Department for Community and Local Government (DCLG) in 2011 to provide an intensive form of joined-up departmental intervention to a targeted number of troubled families who were defined by their chaotic lifestyles, anti-social behaviour and the cost to public services.

David Cameron announced the extension of the Troubled Families Programme in August 2014, setting out a range of initiatives to 'help support and strengthen family life in Britain'. This includes a pledge to ensure all domestic policies pass 'the family test' in terms of impact on the family. At the core of the initiative are plans to strengthen the relationships upon which families are built. This involves heavy investment in relationship counselling, together with policies aimed at tackling issues believed to put pressure on relationships. In a revival of the 'Broken Britain' pre-election discourse, relationship strains singled out for action include unemployment, low income, parental style and a benefit system which, it is claimed, introduces a 'couple penalty' by favouring single parenthood (Cameron, 2014).

Notwithstanding the academic criticism the Troubled Families strategy provoked (see Levitas 2012; 2014), one of the main difficulties about planning services and practices around family is the various implicit assumptions about what a family means to policy makers. As Morris (2012) notes, a review of the literature used to inform the government's 'think family' policy revealed that many of the family initiatives were primarily concerned with parents and children or vulnerable adults with little attention to extended family networks. The major implications of placing the family unit at the focal point for policy delivery is the perception that the family is willing and able to fulfil the major functions this new depth of responsibility requires. Such functions include the provision of care to the most vulnerable family members and exercising social control over other family members. A professional understanding of the capacities of families to carry out these tasks is hindered by the lack of agreement on whom or what constitutes a family.

How to conceptualise the family has always been a difficult endeavour, not least because of the complex and contested nature of the concept itself. As society's norms change, so does

existing notions of family. Rather than view family as a fixed structure, recent perspectives emphasise the family as a set of family practices and relations (Morgan 2011; Dermott and Seymour, 2011). While the conceptualisation of the family presents a number of specific challenges, the PSE family and poverty study produces useful insights which help advance a better understanding of family and family life in a context of poverty and bridges the gap between individual and collective well-being (Daly and Kelly, forthcoming 2015).

## **I. Qualitative data**

### The sample

The initial sampling frame was based on respondents from the Family Resources Survey (FRS) in 2009/2010 who had given their permission to be re-contacted by another research organisation and who had answered suitable screening questions.

The Northern Ireland FRS collects detailed information on the incomes and circumstances of private households from April to March each year. Prior to 2002/03 the survey only covered Great Britain; from 2002/03 the survey was extended to include Northern Ireland. The fieldwork for the survey in Northern Ireland is managed by the Department for Social Development (DSD) and is currently carried out by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). Data collected by the survey includes information on income and state benefit receipt; savings and investments; tenure; carers and disability; occupation and employment; and household characteristics. The FRS uses a stratified random sample drawn from the Land and Property Services Agency's (LPSA) list of domestic addresses. A random sample gives each person an equal chance of being included in the sample. The LPSA addresses are sorted by district council and ward, so the sample is effectively stratified geographically. The sample size for the FRS in Northern Ireland is 3,600 households. The overall response rate for Northern Ireland FRS in 2009/2010 was 65 per cent (DSD, 2010).

Before interviewers make contact with the selected addresses, a letter is sent to the occupier, explaining that they have been chosen for the survey and that an interviewer will call. Data is collected by personal interview using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI), and the interviews are spread equally over the twelve months from April to March, with 300 addresses being allocated in each of the twelve months.

The FRS asks respondents if they would be willing to be contacted again for a follow up study either by the Department for Social Development or by another researcher. The

follow-up question is asked of all respondents who complete a personal interview. The wording of the 2009-10 follow up section was:

*Sometime in the future there may be a follow-up study to this. Such a study would be agreed with the Department for Social Development. Would you be willing to be contacted again, so either we or another approved social research organisation can carry out the study? We may not contact you again but, if we do, you will still be free to decide whether you wish to participate in any follow-up study.*

Respondents who agreed to be re-contacted formed the basis of the sampling frame for the qualitative study. As the main focus of interest was on family and poverty, two criteria were set for screening purposes: low household income calculated on the basis of household income below 60 per cent of the median and a household with at least one dependent child (aged up to 16 years or 19 if in full time education).

Because the FRS collects such comprehensive income data alongside personal household information, it was believed this would provide the most comprehensive and rigorous sampling frame possible. Also, it would be unique as no previous study of this nature has been carried out in Northern Ireland.

## **II. Achieved sample**

A total of 90 respondents matched the study criteria of families with at least one dependent child and living on a low income and who had given their permission to be re-contacted. A letter inviting people to take part in the study was sent to each of the 90 respondents, together with an information sheet, researcher contact details, a consent form asking permission to contact and a stamped addressed envelope. A £15 shopping voucher was offered as an incentive to each family that took part in the study. Financial incentives are commonplace in quantitative social research surveys mainly as a means of increasing response rates. For example, Edwards et al. (2002: 1183) reviewed 292 randomised control trials that used postal questionnaires and found that a 'monetary incentive' more than doubled the odds of a response.

According to Head (2009) the regularity of offering financial incentives and the issues surrounding the role and impact this has on qualitative research, is less transparent than it

could be in the literature (although financial incentives play a central role in focus group recruitment processes).

In the PSE study the incentive had two main objectives – to ensure the target sample size was achieved and as a way of saying ‘thank you’ to the participants for taking part. It was not made as a payment for the participant’s time but, as was described in the information sheet, as a ‘*token of our appreciation*’. The amount was set at a sum the researchers believed was practical in terms of the project budget but not so low as to be an insult to the participants (Krueger and Casey, 2009).

Following the mail shot and one follow-up contact either in person or by phone call, a total of 14 interviews were achieved from this sampling method (16 per cent). The low response rate was believed to be due mainly to the economic and political climate at the time, which was characterised by aggressive social security welfare reforms and publicised plans to reassess every claimant of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) with the intention to reduce the claimant rate by 20 per cent in Northern Ireland alone. This was accompanied by government rhetoric and negative press coverage criticising the “out of control welfare budget” and the “benefit lifestyle” of those in receipt of social security benefits (see for example Belfast Telegraph, 2010; Levitas, 2012). Both factors in tandem were strongly believed to have led to a culture of fear and suspicion of discussing personal and financial issues with strangers. A further contributing factor was the fact that follow-up contact of non-responses was restricted by DSD to one further contact only.

The original method had to be abandoned due to the low response rate and the voluntary and community sector (of which the PSE NI team had close contacts) were approached for help with recruitment. That way, potential interviewees could be assured of our impartiality by a trusted intermediary. In total, a further 36 families were recruited to the study by this method. Four pilot interviews were carried out bringing the total study sample to 54 families.

The topic guide was tested in four pilot interviews to ascertain its ability to capture participants’ full accounts of the central issues. Piloting is a useful method of highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the interview questions and provides an opportunity for refinement at an early stage. Unlike quantitative research, the pilot interviews can be included in the data set provided they do not change too much from the original direction or coverage of the study (Arthur and Nazroo, 2003).

The interview schedule was amended in accordance with the findings of the pilot interviews. This resulted in some questions being removed and some others reworded. All four interviews were included and the overall achieved sample was 54. However, during interview three proved unsuitable because the respondent did not match the criteria – in all cases they did not have a dependent child living at home. This brought the final sample size to 51. Details of respondent characteristics are given in table 2 below.

**Table 2: Respondent characteristics**

	All (n)	Couple family (n)	Lone- parent family (n)
Family type	<b>51</b>	30	21
Gender			
Male	<b>5</b>	4	1
Female	<b>46</b>	26	20
Age group			
18-24	<b>4</b>	1	3
25-44	<b>37</b>	22	15
45-64	<b>10</b>	7	3
Location			
Urban (large city)	<b>32</b>	15	17
Urban (town)	<b>10</b>	7	3
Rural	<b>9</b>	8	1
Number of dependent children per family			
1	<b>19</b>	7	12
2	<b>18</b>	11	7
3 or more	<b>14</b>	11	3

### **The Interviews**

Between autumn 2011 and spring 2012 interviews were carried out with 51 respondents from low income families. An investigation of the nature and significance of family in a

context of poverty and low income was the central tenet of the study. Therefore, the main theoretical influences which guided the original PSE qualitative study were family and poverty. A pragmatic decision was taken to interview the person who could provide the most comprehensive and rich information. By virtue of the relationship with the research questions, in most cases the respondents were mothers. In this regard, the respondent is providing their individual perception of the well-being of the family.

As stated earlier, the study had a key interest in how poverty or low income is mediated by family considerations, practices and relations. The study had an interest in family culture in the sense of family-specific practices and beliefs, and family as a resource or constraint (to help cope with, increase or exacerbate poverty and income shortages). A guiding concept included that of capacities in relation to the resources and dispositions available to people to take action. It has affinities with Amartya Sen's (1984) theorisation of capabilities – the freedom that people have to do what they want to and be who they want to be. The study therefore was concerned empirically with how a series of family-related factors and beliefs contributes to and shapes the experience of living with poverty. These were among the main sets of ideas which set out the conceptual view of the study and defined key aspects of its approach.

One focus was on the cultural meanings people gave to 'this' family and the general set of family values. Theoretically, the meaning and value of family is understood to vary not necessarily by societal standards but by how individuals and groups value and view family. Hence, family is constructed as much through cognitive and cultural processes as economic and political processes. The narratives of 'this' family were of primary interest – how people describe their family, especially in terms of the characteristics of family life which they identify as positive and negative. This was investigated empirically by examining, among other things, how the 'good name' of the family was constructed and represented. The interview schedule was influenced by these interests and constructed to reflect the theoretical framework of the study.

Interviews were carried out in a semi-structured format. The interview schedule had a list of topic headings with a set of principal questions which were guided strongly by the theoretical underpinnings of the PSE study, particularly family solidarity, family practices and capabilities and included questions on reciprocity, family support and money management. This was augmented with key phrases and probing adages. Not all key questions were asked of all respondents because some related to the experiences of being

in a partnered relationship and were not relevant to lone parents. In the majority of interviews, questions were asked in the same sequence but the interviewer had freedom to alter their sequence and probe for more information if deemed appropriate. In some cases the respondents' replies determined the sequence of topics during the course of the interview. A combination of open and closed questions was asked. Information on the number of dependent children is an example of a closed question.

The interviews were carried out face to face either in the respondent's own home or in the premises of the community group. The choice of location was based on respondent comfort and convenience.

Interviews lasted approximately one hour. A digital voice recorder was used to tape the conversation with the signed permission of the respondent. Field notes were written within a short period of each interview. The interview recordings were downloaded onto a password protected secure server. All interviews were anonymised and assigned a code number. No identity information (for example, names and address) were stored with the interview files and identity records, such as signed consent forms, were kept separately from other interview material.

Of the 51 families, 30 were couple families and 21 were lone parent families. Mothers dominated the respondents, with only 5 male interviewees. We did not specifically set out to recruit mothers. Our ideal respondent was someone who could speak about family practices. It may be that women are over-represented as respondents because of their greater engagement in the community sector which we targeted for accessing respondents.

#### **4. Qualitative data analysis**

Less than half of the interviews were transcribed by a private transcriber. The majority were transcribed by the researcher (this author). All interview transcripts were read by the researcher and the Principal Investigator and agreement was reached on the main themes and sub-themes.

The interview information was analysed using a 'thematic framework' approach, which is a matrix based method for ordering and synthesising data (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). This approach involved developing a thematic frame from the interview information. Analysis

adhered closely to the analytic hierarchy set out in Spencer et al. (2003b) which relates to the thematic analysis based on interpretations of meanings and comprised three stages:

### **I. Data management**

This involved developing an index with an individual code number attributed to each interview. The socio-demographic characteristics of each participant were categorised as follows:

Area (city, town, small village, hamlet)

Family type (couple family, lone parent)

Sex

Age (banded)

Children's age

Age of other non-dependent children in the household

Income (approximate household income per month)

Employment status of adult household members

Main source of household income (for example, from work or tax credits or out of work benefits etc.)

Tenure (home owner, private renter, social housing renter)

Self-reported general health

Children's health

The next step was familiarisation with the raw data, listening to the interview recordings and reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts. This was followed by an initial descriptive 'coding' stage applying a set of themes, sub themes and concepts. Initially these themes and concepts were closely aligned with the participant's own language, with a view to modifying the thematic framework in the light of emerging findings. Data management was assisted by the use of Microsoft Excel 2010 and Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software Nivo 10.

An index was developed based on the recurring themes that were noted during transcript reading and re-listening of the interview recordings and issues introduced through the topic guide. The main themes were identified with recurrent sub-themes sorted and grouped under each main category.

The next stage involved setting up thematic charts for each main theme and the associated subtopics. Each separate interviewee was allocated to an individual row. The first few columns of each chart were assigned to the reference number of each interviewee and relevant demographic characteristics (gender, age and family type). At a later stage different index categories would be included within one chart. For example, employment details (attachment to the labour market/no attachment to the labour market) was believed to hold significance and had to be considered alongside other themes for more detailed analysis. The thematic charts contained summarised key points of data and all efforts were made to ensure that the content and context was not lost during synthesis (see Appendix 2 for an example of a thematic chart used in this thesis for the investigation of social comparisons and relative deprivation).

## **II. Descriptive accounts**

Following refinement of the thematic framework, a more in-depth conceptual analysis of the interconnections between key questions, themes and dimensions of analysis was undertaken. This allowed the information to be sorted and categories to be identified and refined.

Typologies relating to identified categories were developed. Typologies contain two or more different dimensions which aid a more refined description of a particular belief or characteristic. As each dimension is independent, a person cannot be assigned to more than one category which further aids differentiation and refinement. They can be ordered in various ways, for example in terms of severity or extent of experience and be used to describe any type of phenomena. The power of a typology, according to Richie et al. (2003b), lies in its ability to place each interviewee in a series of related but independent categories. However, the authors also point out that not all qualitative studies are suitable for this type of descriptive account. Typologies proved a very effective tool at this stage of the analysis as will be demonstrated in the following chapter.

## **III. Explanatory accounts**

At this stage, patterns of association were looked for together with regularities and irregularities of association which aided interpretation and suggested possible explanations for the patterns found. Typologies developed in the descriptive stage of the analysis can be very informative during this stage to show associations between, for example, different

views of experiences which may be linked to different sections of the population (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). A useful way of searching for linkages is through the development of central charts or smaller summary charts which list each phenomenon identified for each individual case. A number of small summary charts were created for this investigation into social comparisons and relative deprivation, which proved very beneficial in the search for linkages or other patterns of association and speeded up the process. In some cases one word was used to describe the theme. For example in relation to satisfaction with standard of living, feelings were described as either 'contentment' or 'discontentment'. By reading across the data for each individual case it made the process less overwhelming (see Appendix 3 for an example).

Identifying linkages requires further exploration and explanation of why they exist. It may be that respondents give specific reasons for their thoughts or feelings or actions and such like. These may be used by researchers in their explanatory accounts. Implicit accounts may be inferred by the researcher through drawing on patterns in the data, using common sense to reach explanations and paying attention to what is not said in addition to what is said. For example, if some respondents report information that appears important as a way of explanation but it is missing from others' accounts, there may be benefit in investigating the cases where the information is missing (Richie et al., 2003b). In regard to this thesis, the effects of situational factors such as family situation, labour market attachment and caring responsibilities were important factors in the explanatory stage of the research, especially in the connections between these factors and people's feelings and attitudes.

The analytic process was not linear, and required movement both up and down between the different steps, but the specific structure of the analytic hierarchy made it easier to do this. For example, the category of 'children's health' in the index developed in stage one was included after it was identified during stage two as an important family characteristic.

## **5. Generalisability**

Chapters six and seven present a detailed analysis of this section of interview data from which generalisations are drawn.

Variations in opinion exist as to the extent to which generalisations and inferences can be made from qualitative research largely due to the different ontological and epistemological viewpoints. In the opinion of Lewis and Richie (2003), generalisations can be made but the

framework from which this happens must be clear. They see generalisation as involving three linked but separate concepts: *representational generalisation* which refers to whether the study findings are representative of the parent population (for example, is what is reported in chapter six and seven true of all low income families?). Secondly, *inferential generalisation* asks whether findings can be inferred to other settings (for example, can the findings be inferred to all families and not just low income families?). Thirdly, *theoretical generalisation* which means can the findings contribute to social theories (for example, can the interview data here contribute to the theory of adaptation and relative deprivation?).

It is the position of this investigator that drawing wider inference from qualitative research is possible on condition that the key principles of validity and reliability are adhered to. These include making full and appropriate use of the original data and not ignoring diverse perspectives. All attempts were made to explain the range and diversity of feelings and opinions and ensure the untypical view was included and reported alongside the more recurrent themes (White et al., 2003).

## 6. Quantitative data

The PSE quantitative research was based on a two-stage methodology. Stage one involved an attitudes survey, asked as a component of an Omnibus survey, which sought to establish public perceptions of what constitutes the basic necessities of life. Stage Two involved a larger main stage survey of a representative sample of the general public to ascertain lack of ownership of these socially established necessities because of a shortage of income.

The research method involved three steps:

### STAGE ONE

1. An attitudes survey identified what the population as a whole think are 'necessities': things that everyone should be able to afford and which no one should have to go without. A list of potentially necessary items and activities was developed as a result of discussions with 14 focus groups based in Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales. In total, 76 items and activities for adults and children were agreed and selected. The agreed list of items and activities was then included in a module as part of the Omnibus survey in June 2012, to ascertain people's views on the necessities of life. The Omnibus survey is carried out by the

Central Survey Unit within the Northern Ireland Statistical and Research Agency (NISRA). The survey is based on a random sample of addresses, drawn from the Land and Property Services Agency list of private address. Everyone in the survey was presented with a set of cards covering 76 adult and children's items and activities, and were asked to sort the items into two piles, 'necessary' and 'desirable, but not necessary'. A 'necessary' item was defined as one which 'all adults should be able to afford and which they should not have to do without'. The cards were shuffled such that the items and activities were presented in a random order. A total of 2,200 addresses were selected for interview achieving a response rate of 53% of eligible households.

## STAGE TWO

2. A living standards survey discovered who has and who does not have each necessity. It allows a distinction to be drawn between those lacking individual necessities by choice (preference) and those who lack them because they cannot afford them. Only those who cannot afford a necessity are included as being deprived.
3. Deprivation counts identify how many people cannot afford groups of these necessities and an overall multiple-deprivation count identifies how many cannot afford these necessities to the point that affects their whole way of life. Only items seen as a necessity by the majority of the population are included.

The Living Standards Survey from stage two was divided into a household questionnaire (answered by the Household Reference Person) and an individual questionnaire (answered by all adult household members aged 18 and over). It included questions in relation to each 'necessity' (identified in stage one) as to whether the individual adult or child, or household, had the item or carried out the activity in question. Respondents were asked to say whether this was by choice or financial constraint by choosing the answer that applied to them. In relation to items, respondents were asked to choose from:

*Has*

*Lack, but does not want*

*Lack, cannot afford*

In relation to social activities, respondents were asked to choose from:

*Do*

*Do not do, does not want to do*

*Do not do, cannot afford to do*

*Do not do for another reason*

Further sections of the main questionnaire explored a range of other dimensions of deprivation and social exclusion:

### **I. Household questionnaire**

Fuel poverty

Area deprivation

Local services

Finance and debts

Gifts

Education and parenting

### **II. Individual questionnaire**

Employment and working conditions

Health and disability

Time

Social networks and support

Necessities

Intra-household poverty

Poverty over time

Satisfaction (Subjective well-being)

Harm, crime and criminalisation

Critical life events

Social and political engagement

Self-completion section which included questions on:

General health (including mental health issues)

Support from others

Sexual identity

Cutting back practices

Violence and sexual harms

Child school experience

Experiences of the Troubles in Northern Ireland

National identity/Political opinion/Religion

### **III. Sampling Frame**

The sampling frame for the PSE NI 2012 Living Standards survey also consisted of people who took part in the FRS and who gave permission to be re-contacted again regarding a follow-up study. This stage of the research used respondents from the FRS carried out from January 2010 until March 2011.

Of the 2,484 households who took part in the NI FRS between January 2010 and March 2011, 1,702 included households where at least one adult member of the main Benefit Unit (either the Household Reference Person or their partner, where applicable) gave permission at the FRS interview to be contacted regarding a follow-up study. These 1,702 households then formed the sample for PSE (NI) 2012. The final eligible sample size achieved in Northern Ireland was 61 per cent – 988 households and 2,311 individuals (624 children under 18 years old and 1,687 adults).

Low income households were over selected, that is, households below a certain level of income had a greater chance of being selected in the sample than others. It is often the case that sample strategies for surveys are deliberately designed to over-sample or under-sample some groups (Miller et al., 2002: 94).

### **IV. PSE Deprivation index**

Once the data had been collected, a poverty threshold was developed based on counts of how many people cannot afford necessities and an overall multiple-deprivation count was derived to identify how many cannot afford these necessities to the point that affects their whole way of life. The identification and selection of an optimal sub-set of deprivation items involves four steps. Only deprivation items that pass these four steps can be considered for inclusion into a deprivation index:

#### **Step 1 – Consensual support**

Only items which received 50 per cent or more support from the general public in terms of being a ‘necessity of life’ but were lacked by people because they could not afford them are used as a basis for assessing the range of deprivation.

#### **Step 2 – Validity**

These items were tested to ensure that each item showed statistically significant relative risk ratios with independent variables known to be correlated with deprivation, for example subjective poverty and health status (controlling for age and gender).

### Step 3 – Reliability

Items were then tested to ascertain whether they were reliable – that is, if the measurement was repeated, would the same results be obtained. Analysis was based on Cronbach’s Alpha and a Classical Test Theory framework. This reliability analysis of the index as a whole was tested further using Item Response Theory.

### Step 4 – Additivity

All remaining items were checked for additivity, that is, to ensure that the deprivation indicator’s components add up, for example, to check that someone lacking four necessities is in reality worse off than someone lacking two necessities.

This four-step process confirmed deprivation as lacking three or more socially perceived necessities because of unaffordability – this is the ‘enforced lack’ method upon which the PSE measure is founded.

(Gordon et al., 2002; Hillyard et al., 2003)

## 7. Quantitative data analysis

The quantitative analysis in this thesis was carried out using logistic regression to predict the probability of experiencing the following set of circumstances from a set of independent variables which are composed of both subjective and objective measures:

1. ‘Enforced lack’ of socially perceived necessities (lacking three or more basic necessities because of unaffordability).
2. ‘Simple lack’ (simply lacking three or more basic necessities except those who gave a specific reason).
3. ‘Lacking all’ (simply lacking three or more basic necessities regardless of the reason)
4. Low life satisfaction (scoring 0-6 on the overall life satisfaction question).

Chapter eight describes in detail the conceptual rationale for the choice of variables used in the regression models. This chapter focuses on the technical features of the approach and data manipulation.

Regression analysis is a technique used to explore the relationship between one dependent variable and a number of independent variables or predictors. It is based on correlation but

makes available a more sophisticated investigation of the interrelationship among a set of variables (Pallant, 2007: 146). There are a number of various regression techniques that can be applied to a data set and it is the procedure's flexibility that makes it a popular technique in many disciplines (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2001).

One such technique is logistic regression which allows the prediction of a distinct outcome from a set of variables that may be continuous, discrete, dichotomous, or a mixture of all (ibid: 517). It allows the researcher to assess how well the set of predictor variables predicts or explains the variable of interest (the dependent variable) and can give an indication of the relative importance of each predictor variable. Logistic regression is said to be the most popular regression method for modelling dichotomous dependent variables (Kleinbaum et al., 1998).

For example, Whelan (2007) used logistic regression to develop and update the original eight item basic deprivation index which was used in conjunction with low income to calculate Ireland's 'consistent poverty' measure. The author explored the association between income and respective measures of economic strain, distinguishing between the initial eight item index originating from the Living in Ireland Survey and new items incorporated into an eleven item set from the EU's Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (SILC). Using odds ratios to test the strength of association of the separate measures with household income and selected characteristics of the household, a stronger relationship between the relevant socio-economic characteristics and the new EU-SILC11 measure was revealed. Ireland's revised consistent poverty measure was changed to reflect this finding and the contents continue to be used as targets in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Hick (2013) used logistic regression to test measures of material deprivation using data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) 2006-2007 (wave 16). His investigation centred on testing the validity of measures based on the enforced lack of basic necessities and measures of simply lacking basic necessities, in other words were these indexes measuring what was intended to be measured (material deprivation). Using odds ratios, the author concluded that the enforced lack criterion did help to distinguish between poverty and preference.

Following Whelan (2007) and Hick (2013) the aim here was to test the validity of measures of objective deprivation and overall subjective well-being by comparing their association with other variables that are known or assumed to be related to the construct of interest.

The independent variables chosen are those expected to be related to the reporting of deprivation and well-being according to the literature and analysis of the qualitative data.

There are three major types of logistic regression: direct, sequential and stepwise. With direct logistical regression, all predictor variables are entered into the model simultaneously. This would be the chosen method if there are no specific hypotheses about the significance or the order of importance of predictor variables. Sequential logistic regression differs in that the order of the predictor variables is specified by the researcher. In stepwise logistic regression, inclusion and removal of predictors from the model is based on purely statistical grounds. For this reason Tabachnick and Fidell advise that stepwise logistical regression is best viewed as a 'screening or hypothesis-generating technique' (2001: 535).

### **I. Data preparation**

To use logistic regression, consideration must be given to the size of the sample. For example, if the sample size is small and there are a large number of predictor variables being used in the model, there may be too few cases in each category for meaningful analysis. To account for this, frequency counts of variables were carried out to check cell sizes. Where necessary, the categories of such variables were collapsed into fewer groups.

Further consideration needs to be given to the issue of multicollinearity where two or more independent variables are closely correlated with each other. Preferably, predictor variables will be strongly associated to the dependent variable but not to each other. Multicollinearity can cause unusual results such as wide confidence intervals. There is no formal way in the logistic regression procedure of SPSS to test for multicollinearity but a collinearity diagnostics test was carried out using a linear regression procedure. Outputs from this test report tolerance values. Tolerance values that are very low (less than .1) indicate that the variable in question has high correlations with other variables in the model (Pallant, 2007: 167). In this case, consideration may be given to the removal of the highly intercorrelating variables. All variables used in the models had very high tolerance values and were considered appropriate for use (see Appendix four).

To make sense of the results of logistic regression it is advised that the coding of responses to each variable is set up carefully. According to Pallant (2007) the dichotomous dependent variable responses should be coded 0 and 1 – the value of 0 should be designated to lack or absence of the characteristic of interest. The author advises a similar approach to coding the independent variables. For continuous independent variables, high values should

indicate more of the characteristic of interest (2007: 168). For categorical variables with more than two categories, each category is compared with the reference group. This is usually the group coded with the lowest value, if set up in this way when defining categorical variables for use in logistic regression procedure in SPSS. The variables used in the analysis were re-coded according to this system.

## II. Using SPSS

The next step was to enter each model into SPSS. The particular logistic regression technique used in this thesis is direct logistic regression. In this approach, all predictor variables are tested in one block to assess their predictive ability, while controlling for the effects of other predictors in the model (Pallant, 2007: 166). This was the method of choice as there was no prior hypothesis on the order of importance of the predictor variables.

SPSS provides a large amount of information in the output. The Case Processing Summary table provides information on the sample size. This is important information as it is necessary to ensure the expected number of cases is actually included in the analysis. Information is provided on the frequency counts for each independent variable and is an important consideration as groups with small numbers are not desirable. The results of the analysis without any of the predictor variables provide the opportunity at a later stage to compare the accuracy of the model when the predictor variables are included. These results can be compared with the Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients which gives an indication of how well the model performs. This is referred to in statistical texts as the 'goodness of fit' test (*ibid*: 174).

The Hosmer and Lemeshow Test is a formal test for evaluating goodness of fit. However, in this case, a good model will produce a non-significant result, that is, a significance value greater than .05 (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2001).

The Cox and Snell R Square and the Nagelkerke R Square values are important sources of information on the amount of variation in the dependent variable explained by the model. Outputs from these values can be used to explain the amount of variability that is explained by the set of variables used.

Information on the contribution that each independent variable makes to the overall model is provided by the Wald test. There are other types of tests available to assess the contribution of an individual predictor variable but the Wald test is said to be the simplest (*ibid*). While some doubt has been expressed about the use of the Wald statistic and the

increased risk of making a Type II error (for example see Menard, 1995), it is the default option in SPSS.

Other crucial information is provided in the SPSS output Variables in the Equation table. In particular, the odds ratio for each of the independent variables indicates the odds or probability of being in the category of interest. Odds ratios greater than 1 indicate the increase in odds of an outcome of 1 (the 'response' category); an odds ratio less than 1 indicates the decrease in odds of that outcome. For example, an odds ratio of 1.5 shows the outcome of 1 is 1.5 times more likely (or 50 per cent more likely). An odds ratio of 2 would indicate twice the likelihood or probability, an odds ratio of 0.8 indicates that the outcome of 1 is 0.8 times likely (or 20 per cent less likely) and so forth (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2001; Gordon, 2012).

Confidence intervals for the odds ratios are provided by SPSS. Confidence intervals provide information about the range in which the true value lies with a certain degree of probability. Thus a 95 per cent confidence interval will include the 'true' value 95 per cent of the time (Gordon, 2012).

Further information is provided about cases in the sample for whom the model does not fit well. Cases with ZResid values above 2 are displayed. According to Pallant (2007) cases with values above 2.5 or less than -2.5 may require more attention as these are regarded as outliers. The advice is to consider removing any cases with very large ZResid values from the data file and repeating the analysis (2007: 177).

Chapter eight presents the analysis of the PSE dataset using the logistic regression technique. The results of the tests discussed above are presented and their implication on the analytic findings is considered.

## **8. Possible limitations of the study**

The original study design for the qualitative research presumed that the method of selection would render a high response very likely. This was based on the assumption that as the list of the population of interest represented only respondents who gave their permission to be re-contacted by another researcher, they would be more inclined to co-operate with the survey. This was not the case and an alternative method of sampling had to be introduced. This was based on a method of non-probability purposeful sampling, whereby the voluntary and community sector were asked to act as a point of contact at the

recruitment stage. The strength of the original design was initially thought to rest on the fact that as the FRS is specifically designed to collect detailed information on household income, the low income status of participants would be 'officially' confirmed (provided their circumstances had not recently changed). By changing the sampling method the participants were evidencing their low income status by way of benefit receipt, which could be viewed as 'unofficial' and a less rigorous estimation.

Nevertheless, it is believed that it is a fair representation of household income as many of the families with similar household formations and structures, for example a lone parent with one child in part-time work or a couple family with two children not in paid work, reported very similar incomes, with identical primary sources of income. Also in general, families who were reliant solely on benefit income had reported household income which corresponded with current government benefit levels on an after housing costs basis.

Another factor for consideration is the self-selection basis on which just under two-thirds of the qualitative sample was composed. Self-selection signifies the possibility that certain distortions could occur in the data, for example, respondents who put themselves forward for interview may hold more extreme views than others (Robson, 1995). However, the profile of the qualitative sample matches closely the profile of families classified as at risk of poverty according to the HBAI published by government sources. For example, there was a higher number of lone parents in the sample, reflecting lone parents' greater propensity to be in low income.

In terms of the FRS (a probability random sample survey) self-selection bias was not an issue that required consideration. But, conversely, it could be argued that the sample gained from the FRS itself, for the Living Standards survey, was partially self-selecting in that the sampling frame was based only on respondents who had given permission to be re-contacted regarding participation in a follow-up study.

Another factor to consider is that low income households were over selected. However, weighting is a common procedure often carried out to make generalisations computed from the data more representative of the general population and acts as a counter to this issue. NISRA applied a weighting strategy to the PSE NI dataset which involved generating a household weight so that the weighted household-level estimates from the PSE NI survey matched the corresponding weighted estimates in the FRS – the latter being treated as population estimates. The individual weights were generated by assigning each individual their household weight, and then adjusting so that the weighted distribution of age group

and sex matched the 2011 Northern Ireland Mid-Year Population Estimates (based on the 2001 Census). This would appear to address both the self-selection and over-sampling issues.

In terms of reflexivity, it is held that this investigator's professional background bears relevance. Poverty has been the main focus of her research for the past 15 years. In addition, it is thought relevant to acknowledge the author's personal background. Financial hardship formed the environment in which the author grew up. Intermittent spells of low income and social security benefit receipt were part of life experiences. Voluntary work in the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) in the late 1990s exposed the author to the consequences of social policy shifts towards ideas of individualisation, conditionality and benefit sanctions within vulnerable communities. It is accepted that this background could have produced a bias regarding what was heard and the way it was reported (for example, an affinity with respondents that would result in a reluctance to show participants in a negative light). However, it is believed that an awareness of issues like poverty and the effects it can have on the lives of individuals and communities helped to bring a richness to the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, and a greater depth of information was achieved.

## **9. Ethical considerations**

The initial project upon which this thesis draws data from was granted ethical approval by the University of Bristol which was the lead university. In addition, each university involved in the project gained individual ethical approval from their own organisation, including Queen's University Belfast. The School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work has developed a comprehensive code of practice relating to research ethics<sup>11</sup>. Further permission to access and link to the FRS NI was agreed by the DSD following acceptance of a detailed research protocol document.

All the ethical documentation set out issues of concern relating to ethics and how each concern would be addressed. These included issues of informed consent, confidentiality of research subjects, security of stored data and the transfer of data between sites and the security of researchers. Concern was also documented regarding the sensitive nature of

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofSociologySocialPolicySocialWork/Research/EthicsCommittee/>

questions enquiring about financial constraints and living on an inadequate income and the possible anxiety and stress this might evoke.

The manner by which these concerns would be addressed was accepted, as is evidenced by the ethics approval. For example, in relation to the quantitative data, respondents giving their initial permission to participate in the FRS NI gave further permission to be re-contacted by either NISRA or another approved research organisation. Permission was granted again when people agreed to take part in the Living Standards survey.

Likewise, in relation to the qualitative survey, respondents giving their initial permission to participate in the FRS NI gave further permission to be re-contacted. Permission was granted again when people agreed to take part in the qualitative component of the PSE NI.

For the quantitative and qualitative components of the PSE research, all respondents received an information sheet giving full details of the study advising that their participation was voluntary, that the interviews would be recorded and they were told that they could withdraw from the research at any time. Participants were given a contact list of organisations offering practical and emotional professional services should people feel the need to avail of such help or advice.

One implication of the code of practice developed by the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work is that all research projects in the School, including student research projects, have to be fully documented and subsequently scrutinised and approved by the School's Ethics Committee (at least two members of the committee are obliged to read the proposal). This research study using the PSE NI data has received ethical approval from the School. As this research is based on secondary analysis of the PSE NI 2012, most of the ethical issues arising from this thesis relate to good standards and obligations to adhere to the standards set out in the code of practice.

## **10. The social and economic context between 2002 and 2012**

Any assessment of relative deprivation requires a better understanding of the external effects which shape emotions and behaviour at an individual level. Chapter six sets out the significance of reference group theory and the practices of social comparison for making us more aware of the complexity of the link between people's objective circumstances and their perception of such conditions. Therefore, it is necessary to appreciate the contextual setting during which the research was carried out.

Within a decade (from 2002 to 2012), the social, economic and political situation of Northern Ireland changed quite dramatically. In 2002, Northern Ireland was emerging from over thirty years of conflict. Employment levels were rising and incomes were increasing, the housing market was buoyant and indications of a sense of optimism and hope for the future were recorded.

For example, in Spring 2002 the Northern Ireland unemployment rate (ILO) was 5.4 per cent of the total workforce. The United Kingdom/Northern Ireland unemployment gap stood at 0.3 percentage points, this represented the smallest difference between the UK and the regional unemployment rate since the current measure began – see Table 3.

**Table 3: Unemployment rate for UK and NI at Spring 1984 and 2002**

<b>Unemployment rate</b>	<b>UK</b>	<b>NI</b>
<b>Spring 1984</b>	11.8%	16.8%
<b>Spring 2002</b>	5.1%	5.4%

Source: Labour Force Survey quoted in DEL (2002: 42)

A good reflection of the state of the economy is average house prices. Increasing levels of employment and rising household incomes were key factors in the rise in confidence of the Northern Ireland housing market since the late 1990s (NIHE, 2013 ). In 2002, Northern Ireland had the third highest house price increase since 1993 of any UK region (see table 4); this was well before the boom in the property market which peaked in 2007.

**Table 4: House Prices: 1993=baseline 100; 2002 Quarter 1**

<b>Region</b>	<b>2002 (Q1)</b>
<b>London</b>	227
<b>East</b>	222
<b>South East</b>	211
<b>South West</b>	201
<b>East Midlands</b>	174
<b>West Midlands</b>	169
<b>North West</b>	145
<b>Yorkshire/Humber</b>	142

<b>North East</b>	140
<b>Wales</b>	168
<b>Scotland</b>	146
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	211

Source: Economic Trends, August 2002 quoted in DEL (2002: 44)

## 11. Political stability

Efforts to bring about a political settlement and an end to more than 30 years of conflict culminated in the bi-lateral paramilitary ceasefires in 1994 and eventually to the signing of a peace agreement (the Good Friday Agreement) in 1998. Since the very beginning of the Northern Ireland Peace Process, decommissioning of paramilitary weapons was one of the main points of contention. Failure to reach agreement on decommissioning hindered the devolution of power from Westminster to Stormont, blocking the formation of the new Northern Ireland Executive and the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. The first act of decommissioning began late 2001 with repeated acts following. This signalled an important turning point in the advancement of the peace process overall (see <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/>).

There was an indication of changing attitudes around this time. For example, when asked in 2002 to think about their feelings on what would happen in the next few years regarding the search for peace, 41 per cent of people felt confident or optimistic. Although 39 per cent had mixed feelings, less than a fifth (19 per cent) said they were worried about the future (ARK, 2003).

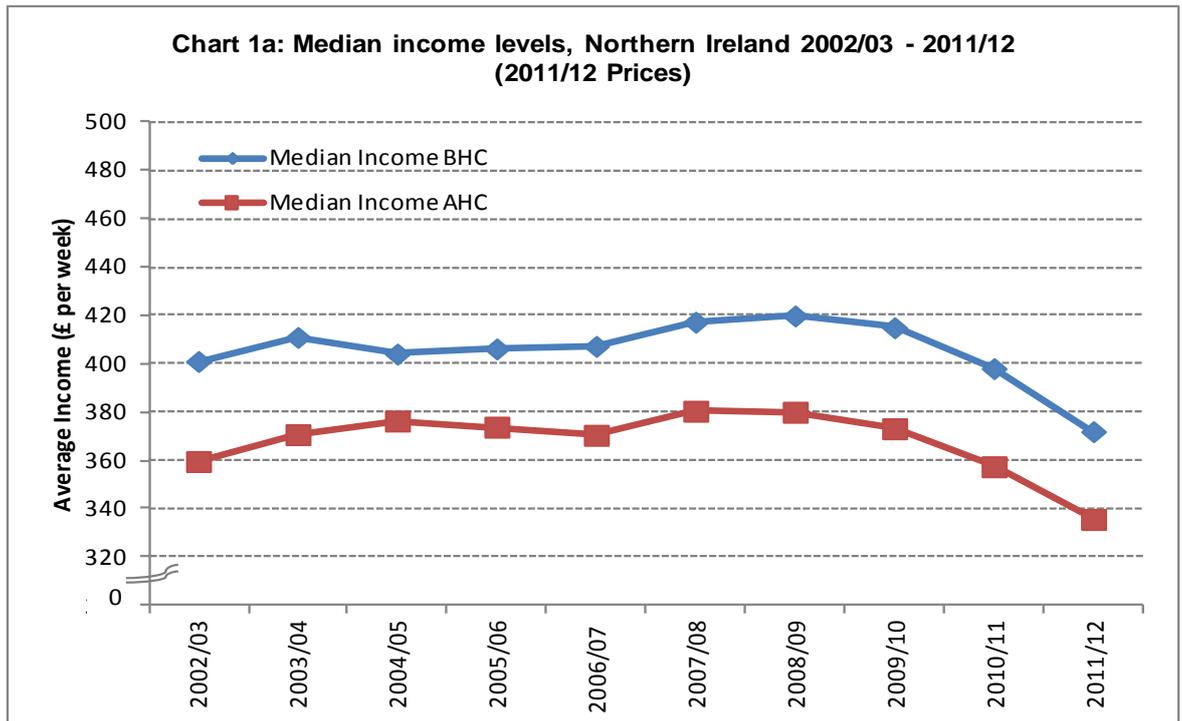
Analysis of responses to a Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey over a six year period (from 1996 to 2002) on what people considered being '*the most important problem in Northern Ireland*', the four most frequent responses were: the Troubles/political instability, crime, drugs and unemployment (Kennedy, 2002). The most notable change over the period was the decline in the perception of 'the Troubles/political instability' as being the most important (from 51 per cent in 1996 to 29 per cent in 2002). The decrease was evident for both Catholics and Protestants. Increases were noticeable in the relevance attributed to crime and drugs but also a decreasing trend in the perception of unemployment as the most important problem (26 per cent in 1996 to 16 per cent in 2002).

It is reasonable to conclude that these factors contributed to a feeling of normalisation and optimism for the future. Thus, ten year projections made in 2002 forecast little change in the rate of unemployment for the next decade, either in Northern Ireland or the UK. A decrease in the manufacturing, textiles and clothing sectors was forecast alongside an increase in jobs requiring higher skills. Job increases were predicted in sectors which require fewer qualifications such as personal services and sales (DEL, 2002: 79).

However, since the recession in 2007/2008, unemployment has increased steadily: the unemployment rate was 6.7 in Spring 2012 (DETI, 2012). Other comparable changes since the recession are reflected in the housing market – compared to the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland recorded the most significant falls in value resulting in the region having the lowest average house price in the UK – 39 per cent below the UK average (NIHE, 2013). Statistics on repossessions show the number of writs and summonses relating to mortgages rose rapidly from 2007 (DSD, 2011). Furthermore, in 2011 approximately 23,000 households were in negative equity where the estimated market value of their property was lower than the outstanding amount owed (NIHE, 2013). The waiting list for social housing increased substantially between March 2002 – when it was approximately 25,900 – to almost 40,000 in March 2011 (NIHE, 2013). In April 2000, the homeless figure was 12,694, in 2010/11 this had risen to 20,158 (an increase of 59 per cent) (*ibid*).

In 2002/3 median weekly household income levels were approximately £400 before housing costs and £360 after housing costs. By 2011/2012, levels had decreased to £372 before housing costs and £336 after housing costs, both of which are the lowest level in real terms since the introduction of the FRS in Northern Ireland (DSD, 2013).

Table 5: Trends in median household income levels



Source: DSD (2013: 6)

In assessing the impact of the combination of these factors on the research findings, three issues need to be considered. First, the reduction in people's disposable income and spending reduces demand in the economy with particular impacts on local shops and services. This makes the effects of a recession very visible in local neighbourhoods. The second consideration is that with lower household budgets, views on what constitute necessities as opposed to luxuries can change as expectations may be lowered. Thirdly, people may be more grateful for what they have in comparison to others who are in a less fortunate position.

All these factors should be taken into consideration when assessing the accuracy of the research findings in the following chapters.

## 12. Overview

The way research is carried out is guided by different perspectives on the nature of social reality and how social knowledge can be attained. Some researchers argue that quantitative and qualitative methods of investigation cannot be used together because they originate in opposing ontological and epistemological positions. However, within a pragmatist paradigm it is possible to use a range of different methods which are

appropriate to answer the research questions. This research has been influenced by such an approach and concurs with the view that choosing research methods that contribute to an understanding and insight of the social world is more helpful than observing only those research methods which are viewed as philosophically consistent (Snape and Spencer, 2003: 22).

That is not to deny the importance of processes used to make a study credible and which may be more affiliated with one model over another, such as reliability and validity. Strong agreement exists within the pragmatist paradigm on the need for reliability and validity to be built into research methods, so the research findings can be evaluated by others. There are a number of strategies by which this can occur and which have been discussed above.

This chapter has strived to display clear documentation of each stage of the research design. It has acknowledged the need for reflexivity and triangulation of different sources of information, in order that the findings may be mutually corroborated. Consideration has been given to the ethical concerns and limitations to the study have been identified. The following chapters report on the findings of the study.

## Chapter Six: Social comparisons

Earlier chapters have discussed the increasing shift towards subjective measures of societal progress, manifested by the emphasis now placed on individuals' subjective assessments of their well-being and the planning of public policy informed by the manipulation of human behaviour. Yet since the early work of Runciman in the 1960s, research has shown how individuals' beliefs and opinions are influenced by their aspirations, expectations and comparative social reference groups leading to the phenomenon of adaptive preference formation.

From a social policy perspective, the possibility that people's perceptions of their situation may not accurately reflect their current objective circumstances presents a major challenge for assessing the success or failure of related anti-poverty and social inequality policy measures using subjective well-being indicators. This is particularly significant for area based or group specific targeted public policies if, as previous research suggests, adaptation processes are more likely in disadvantaged individuals who make downward comparisons with others in similar economically precarious situations.

Due mainly to the increasing availability of more sophisticated panel data there is an expanding literature on the occurrence of adaptation and the choice of social reference groups in relation to people's consumption behaviour and broader decision making in other spheres of life. However, empirical evidence on how quality of life and poverty indicators are affected by these processes is 'surprisingly limited' (Crettaz and Suter, 2013: 140).

Chapter six aims to contribute to this knowledge gap by exploring the extent to which people make comparisons, how these comparisons are made and the choice of social reference groups. It does so by analysing qualitative interviews undertaken with respondents from low income families in Northern Ireland.

It begins with a short background summary describing the context whereby people discussed making comparisons. This is followed by a categorisation of the nature of the comparisons made with the data presented according to four classifications identified.

The chapter concludes by confirming the frequency by which people compare themselves to similar others, with the majority of contrasts being made in a favourable manner. It argues that lack of resentment at financial constraints lessens feelings of relative

deprivation and questions the influence this has on the accuracy of subjective assessments of objective conditions.

## **1. Background context**

The qualitative study was part of a larger UK wide study of poverty and social exclusion. The main aim of the qualitative component was to ascertain the role and significance of family in a context of low income and material deprivation. As stated in chapter five, the study had a key interest in how poverty and low income is mediated by family considerations, practices and relations. How people described their family, especially in terms of the characteristics of family life, formed an important point of interest. The analysis presented here and in the following chapter is based on a specific theme within the data which relates directly to the process of social comparisons. That is, whether and how people compare themselves to others and the impact such comparisons have on individual's sense of contentment and life satisfaction.

## **2. How families compare with others**

One area of enquiry was to ascertain how people thought their family was faring in comparison to others. The topic was initiated by the interviewer by asking this open-ended question:

*How does your family compare to other families do you think?*

Responses were analysed to discover the ease with which people were able to make comparisons with other families and, if they did compare with others, in what areas of life would these comparisons be made. For example, would comparisons be made with families in the local area or would the comparative reference point be wider? Would they be favourable or unfavourable? Would they be compared along material or non-material aspects of life? Would comparisons be made in an upward or downward manner? Or, alternatively, would people be unwilling or unable to make social comparisons with others?

The majority of interviewees had little difficulty whatsoever in making social comparisons with others and expressed a willingness to talk openly about their family. In fact, less than a tenth of the sample expressed any hesitancy or problem responding to this enquiry.

Overall, the nature of the comparisons made between the individual respondent's family and other families fell into four categories of comparison. These are summarised as follows in order of their frequency of occurrence and dominance overall:

1. *Better off*: here the perception was that the family were lucky because they were faring better than other families they knew. This was mainly attributed to perceived good family support and a strong close social network which respondents believed was not always evident in other families. Very little comparison was made across materialistic positions.
2. *No different*: the general feeling is that everybody is struggling more or less to the same extent and most families they know face similar problems. Here, comparisons were made in a combination of material and non-material ways.
3. *Worse off/Different*: here some people felt they were worse off than other families because of their restricted financial circumstances. Others felt different because of their specific family structure which was uncommon to other families.
4. *Don't know*: People did not know how to make comparisons or who they should compare with.

However, the first two classifications (*Better off* and *No different*) stand out as the categories which the majority of respondents identified as. Each category is now explained in more detail using a selective number of verbatim quotes to amplify and extend the understanding of the research evidence (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

### **I. Better off**

Just over 40 per cent of respondents expressed the belief that their family were in a better position than other families that they knew. Responses were analysed to discover why this should be the case. The reason for this thinking can itself be subdivided into a set of explanations, all of which are primarily non-monetary, being mostly emotional, relational, practical and psychological in nature. An overarching aspect of this set of explanations was the common expression that people felt '*lucky*' because of their specific situation compared to others:

**Table 6: Reasons for believing family is ‘better off’**

L U C K Y	<i>Close family unit/support</i>
	<i>Parents still together</i>
	<i>Good children/parenting skills</i>
	<i>Being happy</i>

People spoke about being lucky because their family was close knit compared to other families they knew. References were also made to being lucky because they were still in a relationship compared to others that they knew. The expression of being fortunate also accompanied accounts of children’s commendable behaviour in comparison to other people’s children. Some people felt lucky if they were happy.

The following quote is from a lone parent with two young children who is making reference to the family support network available to her. Importantly, she draws a distinction between the type of support by referring to the way her family help her emotionally:

*I’m not sure like, everybody has their own problems, issues, but I am lucky because I’ve met people who don’t have good family support, you know. I think I’m lucky that way that I have my family to help me out with emotional things and things like that there.*

The distinction between emotional and financial support is important because while all the families who participated in the study were living on a low income, analysis of respondents’ available household income revealed that lone parent families had generally lower incomes than couple families. This is also confirmed by official UK government statistics showing the higher proportion of lone parents in poverty compared to other family types (HBAI, 2012). Yet, it is emotional support that is underlined here as being of significance in terms of the comparison made.

A close bond with immediate family and the way family members look out for each other was spoken about in very positive terms. This set of circumstances brought with it a sense of pride. In the following excerpt, the parent of two dependent children is referring to the

way all family members help one another, he is including his non-dependent children in the example:

*We are a very close family like. Well we help one another, if one gets into trouble...just help one another.*

References to the closeness of a respondent's family were recorded in other interviews. For the following widowed mother of three, the way her family 'back each other up' appeared to instil an enhanced sense of pride and legitimised the interviewee's expression of being 'better off' than other families.

*We'd be close, back each other up, stick together definitely...not everybody's like that. I know different families and it's wild.*

Making social comparisons in a favourable way by referring to the closeness of the family unit, was a view shared by this partnered mother of three children who explained her feelings in the following way:

*To me, some houses don't feel like a family unit so they don't, compared to what I see my family as. I'm not knocking anybody or whatever, it's whatever way people bring up their own and that.*

An interesting point to note from this quote is the respondent's reference to other families as 'houses' whereas she describes her own family as a 'family unit'. The distinction implies an inferior type of family construction formed in a physical or structural way, as opposed to the close emotional and relational formation of her own family.

Intimacy, closeness, togetherness and love and affection have been identified as family strengths in other studies looking at how families with young children cope with the stresses of living in poverty (Vandsburger et al., 2008). The strength of parental intimate relationships also emerged in the current study as an intense form of comparison with other families. For interviewees who were in a partnered relationship, remaining together as a couple featured very strongly as a positive family attribute which set their family apart from others, particularly when close friends and neighbours had separated. The following account from a young woman with two children establishes the importance for her of maintaining her partnership, particularly for her future aspirations of staying together:

*I think a lot of families recently our age, like all my friends have all been sort of splitting up so I think we've a good strong bond. I think we can see ourselves*

*together for the rest of our lives. I think in that way I feel blessed too, you know. Because most of my friends are sort of separated so I think that there, I think.*

So too for this next respondent, who viewed the positive aspects of a stable relationship in terms of providing a secure upbringing for children. This was a mother of two who was not in paid employment and whose husband was long-term unemployed. Here, parallels are drawn with 'broken down families' against whom the respondent feels very fortunate.

*...there's the broken down families that you feel sorry for, them that don't get along, I would say we're lucky, you're lucky to have a mammy and daddy because there's other wee ones out there maybe they died through illness, car accidents or just general everyday abuse, I think it's wild sad.*

The excerpt below from a partnered mother with three dependent children echoes the perception of being 'better off' because of a stable personal relationship and the importance of such a situation to the successful foundation of a family. However, it is unusual within this category because it is one of the very few interviews which included a financial attribute within social comparisons. Nonetheless, as is suggested from the citation, financial support is supplementary to the emotional support she gets from her partner in dealing with the difficulties brought about by living on a low income.

*I would actually say we rate OK because a lot of families sort of, a lot of my friends are separated and they're not getting any sort of emotional or financial help from partners so they lose out on that part I think big style and the kids lose out, where they [pointing to her own children] have both. We might not have much but they have both of us and we're together and we sort of... we always wanted the same things in life so we can always sort of pull, when we know we can't have them we can pull together and just deal with what's here.*

An enhanced sense of self-esteem in relation to parenting skills and children's behaviour was evident throughout the interviews, where people believed their family composition made them 'better off' compared to other families they knew.

The following statement is characteristic of the view that was held by participants making social comparisons with the way other people interact with their children and how their children are being raised. It was common for further evidence to be provided as a means of reiteration, as the example below shows, where the parent (a partnered mother with three

children) went on to explain how her children's friends were welcome in their home although this was not the case in other families:

*I don't want to knock anybody's families but I really...I think it's cause I'm open with my kids too and I try my best for them to be honest so I do, and a lot of people don't. A lot of people don't be honest with their kids even and it shows and all. And then people running in and out of houses. My kids know this is their home and they can bring their friends in, I don't have a problem with them bringing their friends in, you know that way where a lot of people's homes they're not allowed to bring people in and then their own families are running in and out and that.*

For some parents, such as this lone mother with three dependent children, comparisons were made based on highlighting distinctions between their children's more respectable behaviour and the behaviour of other children in the local area which was deemed less proper.

*They never brought no trouble till me, till the door. They grew up good. They wouldn't be running about like half them round here doing drugs or anything. Good kids like, compared to what you see round here.*

Children's perceived higher educational ability compared to other children, was a further source of pride and acted as a source of social comparison for a number of participants. This is the views of a lone parent who recently came to live in Northern Ireland from Eastern Europe. She is explaining how her five year old child is at a more advanced stage educationally than that of her friend's child:

*You know I can just give example, let's say me and my daughter are going to my friend's house that's the same age as my daughter and for example, we were talking that my daughter is five now and she can write all the letters and she can almost read and write her name and what time she's going to bed and all every day stuffs and she say 'how is that possible, my daughter can't even write her first name and yours can write her full name and know to write all the letters and everything?*

A psychological perspective formed the basis of comparison for a very small proportion of participants in the 'better off' category. Here, people spoke about being happy or discussed their positive outlook on life. This is a quote from an unemployed man who is in a partnered relationship, and whose wife is employed full-time. When discussing how he thought his family compared to other families, he believed they were lucky. He then went

on to describe himself as a 'very happy man', this was in spite of not having a steady job and having had more than one recent close family bereavement.

*I think we're lucky in a way, I'm happy, I have my wife and wee ones, a nice house, my health, I don't have a playstation 3 but I'm happy (laughs), bar my own bereavements this year I'm a very happy man. I know I'm not working steady or nothing but life hasn't treated me that bad.*

This raises an interesting question, given that biological factors have been closely linked with a sense of well-being (Ebstein et al., 1996; Hamer, 1996); studies with sets of twins suggest that happiness is inherited to a significant extent (Lykken and Tellegen, 1996; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005) and personality type has a significant impact on how people respond to questions on subjective well-being (Diener, et al., 2003; Gutiérrez et al., 2005). Would this man's wife have equally described her family as 'lucky' given the difficulties the family have faced recently? If responses to 'happiness' questions are made by one member of the household, can they be taken to represent others in the household?

This issue is broached in recent guidelines produced by the OCED on measuring subjective well-being, where a strong case for including additional psychological variables such as personality type, alongside measures of subjective well-being, is made (OECD, 2013). What is also of interest, in terms of this study, is that the OECD guidelines go on to acknowledge the significance of expectations and reference groups in the analysis of subjective well-being data:

*Aspirations and expectations, which form part of the frame of reference that individuals use when evaluating their lives or reporting their feelings, are also of interest when analysing data on subjective well-being...information on people's aspirations and expectations would be useful for investigating this relationship. There are no standard approaches to measuring aspirations and expectations, so it is not possible to be specific as to best practice in approaching measures of this sort. However, this area is one where further research would be of high value (2013: 150).*

While positive personality type was not a common form of comparison, it is important to illustrate the range of factors that can influence a person's choice of reference group, as this can aid explanation for the direction of the comparison. For example, the youngest person in the sample was a married mother aged 21 years of age with a young baby. She

also had one of the lowest incomes of the entire sample. English was not her first language and none of her immediate family lived in Northern Ireland. Her husband's family lived about 100 miles away. She gave an account of how her family's positivity and confidence sets them apart from other families she knows. This is how she explained it:

*Well at the moment... that's a hard question... not an ordinary family at the moment I'm sure, in a positive way the way we are such positive thinkers. Sometimes things seem to be impossible to sort out but somehow we always manage and we always do it and it makes us confident as well, we don't walk around or talk to family being negative or cry over the phone, we are not like that. We always try our best and just get there, that's a positive way, we are confident, compared to another family. I think we are more tougher because of the way we lived and learned.*

When prompted to explain further what she meant by 'the way we lived and learned' she discussed the difficulties the family had faced in the very recent past. These included homelessness, unemployment, indebtedness, marital separation and then eventual reconciliation.

However, she viewed this experience as a positive factor, something that she and her husband learned from; hence her family's enhanced capacity to cope with adverse situations. In that sense, she believed her family was 'better off' because they were equipped mentally to manage the current financially constrained situation. It is also interesting to note that further on in the interview, she discussed how her culture was different from Western culture in that dependency on the state was looked upon in a shameful manner in her own country. If her comparative reference point had been her extended family or country of birth then it is reasonable to assume that being in receipt of social security benefits would have made her feel different in a negative sense. As it was, the respondent felt positive and exhibited a high sense of self-respect and confidence which is argued here to be due to her comparative reference point being the recent difficulties the family experienced and the fact that she and her husband had reconciled.

One striking feature of the category of participants who perceived themselves as 'better off' was that the vast majority had at least one family member who was attached to the paid labour market in various degrees of employment (part-time, full-time, short-time). Yet there was little mention of employment status or financial circumstances in respondent's explanations for their belief of being 'better off'. One explanation could be the fact that the

kind of jobs people were employed in were characterised by low pay, part-time and/or irregular hourly contractual agreements. Thus, being in paid employment provided no protection against financial hardship or insecurity. The point of interest here is the fact that all favourable comparisons have been made in relation to non-material dimensions, with the respondent's perceived social standing of the family being given prominence over and above any materialistic factors.

One theme to emerge from these responses was a sense of enhanced self-esteem. Whether it was apportioned to the perceived envy of others regarding close family networks, or high moral standards compared to others, the belief appears to have minimised the experience of feeling relatively deprived. That is, no cognitive appraisal was made that led the person to believe their family was at a disadvantage in comparison to other families. The drivers of self-esteem are said to be drawn from aspects of people's lives that include more than simply their financial circumstances. Bashir et al. (2011) assert that the factors which determine and lead to self-esteem are complex and note that previous studies on poverty may have understated positive sources of esteem in low income households (2011: 8). It could be argued that the common occurrence witnessed in this study, of making favourable comparisons according to the perceived enhanced family structure, may be a form of self-evaluation and a way of enhancing self-esteem.

## **II. No Different**

The second most common form of response to how people thought their family compared to others was that there was no difference; they were all basically the same. Almost a third of participants expressed this belief. Phrases such as '*we're just the same as everybody else*' and '*we're not that different*' were very typical. One very common phrase and one which sums up this category well, was being '*in the same boat*' as everybody else, as the following mother with three small children explained:

*The more you talk to people the more you realise everybody is in the same boat.*

Two main points distinguishes this set of replies from those in the 'better off' category. Firstly, here people were inclined to use material dimensions together with non-material aspects of social comparison. Secondly, the majority of participants had no family member in paid work. Only one quarter of people who expressed feelings of 'no difference' had some attachment to the paid labour market, unlike the 'better off' category where the majority of people had an attachment of some kind.

Many of the comparisons made along material and/or economic grounds made reference to the realities of managing family life on a restricted income. It was common for people to mention the economic recession and the effect it was having regarding the management of household budgets. Statements like these were usually followed up by asserting how other people were experiencing similar situations. For example, the couple with two children who explained it thus:

*"You manage day to day, week to week, that's the way it is for us and I would say we're not the only ones."*

No suggestion of resentment is evident here. It could be argued that lack of resentment is due to the belief that their own family experiences are the same as other families and, while they may not be in a better situation, at least their circumstances are no worse than other families.

This assertion is strengthened by the thoughts of a lone parent father who has been long-term unemployed and has custody of his eight year old daughter. He does not have close family nearby but lives in a tightly knit community with good neighbourhood support. When discussing how his family compares with other families he makes parallels with his neighbours who all face similar difficulties to his own. He continues by giving examples of how he and his neighbours all help each other out through the mutual practice of borrowing and lending small cash sums and child minding. The reference made to his financial circumstances strongly suggests that because he knows people who are worse off than him and his neighbours, his situation by comparison is satisfactory:

*OK. We're not rich but we're not poor. We're doing OK. We're not the worst. We live in a lovely house with good neighbours who look out for each other.*

The main implication appears to be that there is no resentment by the interviewee at not being financially well off, as long as he is at least no worse off than his comparative reference group (his close neighbours who are in similar circumstances).

This is echoed to a degree in the following excerpt from a mother with two small children, both her and her husband are unemployed. She expressed the view that her family were similar to others. In this case similarities were drawn in a material way regarding the difficulties of families struggling to 'get by' day to day on a low income.

*I would never say I'm any better than anybody or any happier, everybody has their own happiness, I don't know, just the same as everybody else just trying to get by day to day life.*

Shortly after she added that she felt lucky because things could be worse:

*You just think to yourself you could be a hell of a lot worse, I've two healthy kids, I have a lovely husband, it could be a lot worse. Yes, you have money worries but there's people out there and their kids are special needs. We've got each other, where people may be coming up to Christmas don't, so you just think yourself very lucky.*

This time the source of the comparison was based on her family's health and personal relationship status. While the respondent felt no worse off compared to her reference group, she felt much better off than 'people out there' who she was not associated with and from whom she distanced herself.

The contention that people make comparisons with similar others is a theme that is typified through the views of another lone parent, a young lone mother with a five year old son. Her personal circumstances were extremely challenging. A few, but not all, of her difficulties included homelessness after the breakup of her relationship with an abusive partner; isolation from family and friends; addiction to heavy painkillers and medical intervention for severe depression. The poverty literature details precisely the pathways into and out of poverty or social exclusion. Transitional events include external factors that people have little control over including relationship breakdown, the onset of ill health, isolation and exclusion and the experience of crime among many others (Kempson, 1996; Scharf et al., 2005; Dominy and Kempson, 2006). However, it is fair to assume that experiencing these events in their entirety is not an overly common occurrence among people in general. Yet, the young mother still believes her family is not so different from other families. This is because her comparative reference group comprises other mothers she has met through her involvement with a local women's group. The group was set up to help women overcome educational, financial, emotional and personal difficulties and, as she explains below, they have many issues in common:

*I think my family is like others, just trying to get by day to day and we all have the same things because we go to the women's groups and we talk and everybody has*

*the same issue. If one person says this - it's like "I remember that". I think we're all on the same big boat trying to stay up.*

However, a sense of inconsistency about all families being in a similar position was present in at least one family interview within this category. For example, this is how the family was described by a mother with three small children where both parents were unemployed:

*I think the majority are generally like mine, I always think that. Maybe they're not. I always think everybody is in the same boat as ourselves, the majority of people. There is people that have more luxuries and things but I would say we're brave and similar.*

The respondent begins with the assertion that the majority of families are like her own. But there is a slight hesitancy where she doubts the claim for a moment. However, she returns to her belief but then acknowledges that there are other families that have more luxuries than her own, although there is no suggestion of any resentment at this. While the dominant message is the belief that most families are going through similar experiences, notable ambivalence is demonstrated representing a tension between wanting (or perhaps needing) to believe this is the case and speculating whether or not it actually is the case.

For those few participants who did have attachment to the labour market, there was no indication of any perceived difference from other families. Similar to families in the 'better off' category, the type of work that people in this group were involved in was also characterised by short-term, part-time or low paid employment. Only one person in this group of people had someone in the household in full-time employment. This set of circumstances again suggests that the type of work, rather than work itself, may make a difference to people's attitudes and how they compare with others.

This is exemplified in a quote is from a parent who had been long-term unemployed and was on a six month government Back-to Work scheme:

*I don't think it would be much different to other families and their situation; we probably wouldn't be too much different I would think. You would have the same sort of things like, you'd have your families and all to rely on and stuff like that, so I don't think it would be too different.*

While this respondent was employed, no mention is made of comparisons along financial or employment status grounds. Here, the comparison is made with the level of family support

his family has compared with other families. The time limited nature of the respondent's employment may have had a bearing on his attitude, as during the interview he made reference to not knowing what was going to happen after the six month period expired.

A common theme within the literature on the experience of poverty and social exclusion often refers to the stigma attached to low income neighbourhoods by way of the prejudices of others and the negative labelling of those living in such communities (Young Foundation, 2009; Lupton, 2003). However, other studies suggest that those living in a low income community draw comfort from the fact that they know others in similar situations. For example, in Hooper et al (2007) stigma attached to living in poverty was found to be widespread, but it was proposed to be more acutely felt by low income families living in more affluent areas. Evidence so far from the discussions regarding social comparisons does seem to concur with the finding that stigma is eased when people know others in similar situations.

### **III. Worse off/Different**

A small number of families (8 respondents) expressed the belief that circumstances made them either worse off than, or in some way different to, other families they knew. Of those who believed they were worse off, all related the cause to materialistic aspects such as their straightened financial circumstances compared to others. Only two out of the eight people in this category thought they were different because of their specific family structure.

Unfavourable comparisons made on a financial and/or material basis were very interesting because they were split between passive acceptance of knowing they had less than others and anger at the situation. Those who displayed passive acceptance were lone parents with long-term detachment from the paid labour market. Those who were angry at their situation were either currently attached to the labour market, or had just recently been in paid employment. This time, employment status was a significant influential factor in the choice and direction of the social comparisons generated.

Firstly, for those who appeared more accepting of the perceived negative difference, one common factor was that they seemed to have adjusted to a situation of lone parenthood, with the strong belief that this was to the psychological betterment of their children.

Speaking about the difficulties of bringing up a large family without a partner, this young mother explained how her family was now worse off financially, compared to how they

used to be before the divorce. The reference point here is her previous marital situation and joint household income. However, by shielding her children from an aggressive atmosphere she believes she has given them a better life. This has helped to diminish feelings of relative deprivation because the disadvantage is not viewed with angry resentment:

*...before [the divorce] our wages would have been shared together and went in together so the kids did get more holidays and more luxuries and more things, where now that I'm a single parent, financially we're worse off. But it's not the worst in the world, we're happier. There's families out there who are married or maybe struggling with emotional and physical bickering and fighting and not as close to their mum and dad whereas OK my family is struggling financially, but you know what? We're happy.*

However, for one woman with two small children, the financial strain was so severe that passive acceptance was intensified by a lack of acknowledgement that things should be any different. This is how the young woman explained it:

*We haven't got as much as what everybody else has and I wished that I did. I wished I was able you know speaking for myself as a parent, I do see other families getting on extremely well and I feel as though I would love to be at that particular place in life where I might be able to provide as much as I can, but it's all down to money. It's all down to the financial state that you're in and financially you can't do it, so (shrugs shoulders).*

What was very poignant in this case was the negative effect this view had on the woman's self-esteem and aspirations:

*I can't see nothing in the future at the minute, no. I'm just trying to live each day as it comes and take each day as it comes because you can't plan, well I can't see myself planning a future, I can't see a future at all. As I say, try to work out my financial status so I can see a future then but sitting talking now, I can't see nothing for the future.*

In stark comparison, those who displayed the most resentment at their family's perceived unfavourable financial position compared to others, were adamant that things should be different. As mentioned previously, these were families either in work, or very recently detached from the labour market. For example, one respondent whose partner and she

were both working showed bitterness towards families not in paid employment that she perceived to be better off financially. At the core of this discussion was the fact that their joint income just brought the couple above the threshold cut-off for social security benefit assistance. The belief expressed was that working families were being unfairly treated in comparison to non-employed families who, in the eyes of the respondent, received more favourable treatment by way of entitlement to non-working benefits such as free school meals, access to the Social Fund, free dental care and housing benefit, all of which convinced the respondent these other families were in a more advantageous position financially. This is articulated clearly in the following quote:

*You know, you find yourself worse off and you do begrudge people then and you sort of think to yourself well you know, why? But at the same time you've just got to get on with it. But I'd say we're atypical, you're worse off if you work, you're worse off if you're not on benefits you know. Your kids don't get priority for schools even attending...I mean I go to the hospital once every three months for me never mind for [son] it costs me my petrol, it costs me my parking. If I was on benefits I could claim that back, at least some of it back, but you can't because we're in employment.*

Likewise, in the following interview with a young partnered mother of one child, the respondent forcefully asserted her annoyance at what she believes is unjust treatment. Her anger is fuelled by the fact that she and her partner are both working but are earning a minimum wage. They were unable to afford childcare so the woman had to reduce her full-time hours to part-time. This resulted in her demotion to a lower level position and a reduction in rate of hourly pay. They are now unable to cover household bills. She believes that other people she knows who do not work are in a better position because they do not have these worries. This is how she explains it:

*I feel because I'm working and I'm not earning as much, at the minute I'm not earning as much as I was and people on the dole are getting more than me, it's frustrating. It's like, hold on a second, you're doing nothing all day long, you aren't sitting worrying who's going to take him tomorrow for me to go and do a 12 hour shift or who's going to cover this while Martin goes to work and your main priority right now is getting your carry out. That sounds like I'm tarring everybody with the same brush but everybody that I know that's in that situation, that's what they're doing. You know, so it's very frustrating.*

Reference to the prioritising of a 'carry out'<sup>12</sup> by those she knows claiming unemployment benefit, is used to underscore perceived unacceptable behaviour. In this way, the respondent appears to be justifying her moral judgement, whilst proving she is not making over-generalised statements.

As explained earlier, this category does not represent the views of the majority. It does however represent a particular negative opinion towards people claiming benefits, which is an increasing phenomenon. Recent attitude survey data confirms attitudes have hardened towards claimants, particularly in the last decade (Park et al., 2012). At the core of this lie arguments concerning the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor and the general belief that welfare benefit spending increases dependency. This view is shared by a wide spectrum of the population and not contained to sectional groups traditionally supportive of welfare spending contraction. This can be explained in part by the rise in the number of people in poverty across all households where at least one adult is in paid work. This means that half of children in poverty in Northern Ireland live with at least one adult in paid work (JRF, 2014). The group of people who find themselves in this situation has become known as the 'working poor'. Previous qualitative research has reported a similar antipathy by the 'working poor' towards those not in employment, for believed dependency on benefits and their reluctance to find work (Crisp, et al., 2009: 17).

The point is articulated succinctly by the same respondent in her use of the expression '*in the same boat*' which was applied in directly the opposite meaning to those who used it in the 'no different' category:

*I'm sure by all means everybody's in the same boat, everybody's struggling at the minute because of the way things are with money, but it doesn't help when people are saying to you 'everybody's in the same boat, we know what you're going through' and I'm like 'does nobody else notice this boat's fucking sinking, we're going nowhere, hello people we've no money, what are we going to do, we've got to do something.*

Expressions of anger were palpable in two interviews where both respondents (early middle aged women both previously employed in high end retail trade but with different companies) had recently experienced redundancy, with a resultant dramatic drop in financial stability. Here, their comparative reference group was most definitely the world of

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<sup>12</sup> Euphemism for alcohol purchased from an Off Licence.

paid work from which they had been forcefully removed. It should be noted that both respondents' jobs were of high quality with good terms and conditions and rates of pay – a fact that was reiterated by both women throughout interview. Both respondents discussed how well-paid their previous job had been, the level of responsibility they had enjoyed and their position within the organisation. In both these cases, the change in social reference group has led to heightened levels of subjective relative deprivation because both respondents miss who they once were. They feel they have entered into a different world which is alien to them. The following sentiment is given by one of the women but is reflective of both respondents' views:

*You lose all contact with the people you knew because they're all still working and you lose your social contact because you can't afford to go out and you just come into a whole different world and it's hard, it's a big adjustment.*

Finally, in this section there were two people who perceived their difference as relating to family composition. This included one woman who explained the difference by way of having no close relatives living in Northern Ireland. She believes her family is dissimilar because she does not have the level of family support that others enjoy. This is an interesting case because she went on to compare her current situation relative to her previous environment in which she grew up:

*I'm a bit broken, my family would be in [name of country] so I'm not like everybody else where they would have their immediate family all around them, all the support, where I wouldn't, I'm basically standing on my own two feet. Somebody said 'well you're settled here now you're in Northern Ireland how long?' and I went 'yeah 11 years'. I'm probably what I would call settled, I do love it here, some people probably can't see that but if they were from where I grew up they would realise what they have here, I think they take it for granted sometimes, what they've got here.*

In this instance, the main point of reference is the woman's previous environment in which she grew up. A further point of interest is that she has lived in Northern Ireland for 11 years and claims she is beginning to feel settled, yet she still feels different. From the quote above, it is clear that her reference point is still firmly fixed on past experiences. This runs contrary to the majority opinion that people eventually adjust to their circumstances – if this was the case then the respondent would have adapted to life in Northern Ireland.

#### IV. Don't Know

Only three people in the entire sample said they did not know how to make comparisons with other families or how their family compared. However, these cases are equally as important in the overall analysis as they make us aware that the process of making social comparisons is not completely universal. A short excerpt from each interview is given below as a way of demonstrating how the individual perceived the question. It is followed by a brief profile of the respondent, constructed according to the data file.

The first example is a lone parent whose teenage son has mental health problems. She also has an older non-dependent daughter living at home and the respondent has been detached from the paid labour market for 18 years. She lives in a large city. From the interviewee profile, the respondent is described as very independent, a person who prefers to keep herself to herself, very self-reliant. She does have extended family close by, but is not in close contact with them. Neither does she interact with neighbours. Her independent nature may in part explain why she does not know how or who to make comparisons with. As the following quote illustrates, the perception of being 'lucky' features in her account of her close nuclear family relationships.

*I don't know how or who to compare it to, you know. I suppose you always think people's better off than you, the other man's grass is always greener – no it's not really, and I think myself quite lucky that we all sort of get on quite well together. They seem happy enough, they're well fed, they're clothed. I suppose at the end of the day, what can you really ask for...they're healthy enough, we all are. Apart from my son, he has his problems but general health we're all sort of quite good.*

The second example is from a father of a young child. He is currently unemployed and his partner works one day a week. The respondent lives in a rural location with only a few neighbours closeby whom he describes as being very much older. His parents do not live in Northern Ireland but he is close to one sibling who he also describes as being a lot older than him.

*It's sort of hard to know. You probably think that Mr and Mrs Bloggs are great, sitting grand and things are good but sure how do you know? They're probably sitting saying the same things, 'look at him and her everything's great with them and they're not working' but...it's sort of hard to answer like.*

Perhaps living in an isolated area, with the few neighbours they have being described as 'a lot older', contributes to the respondent's difficulty in identifying a comparative reference group. It could be argued that detachment is a common feature of both interviews (although the circumstances differ between choosing social detachment and being socially separated by environment circumstances) and this influences people's ability to make social comparisons. However, this explanation does not stand up in the third case where the young lone mother with two small children lives in close proximity to her large extended family and with whom she is in daily contact.

*"Every family's different isn't it? I don't really know what's in other families."*

While these cases were very much the exception, they verify that the process of making social comparisons maybe widespread but is not absolute. However, as the majority of respondents had no difficulty in making social comparisons with others, it is reasoned that this confirms other work suggesting social comparisons are a common form of human behaviour (Festinger, 1954; Runciman, 1966).

### **3. Overview**

The main aim of this chapter has been to investigate whether people do make social comparisons with others and if they do, with whom and in what direction are comparisons most likely to be made.

Analysis of the interview data confirms that most people can and do compare themselves with others. Such comparisons tend to be made with those closest to their own circumstances and are made laterally or in a downward fashion with people in less favourable situations, as opposed to upward comparisons. In the majority of cases, comparisons were made in a non-material way.

All interviews were carried out with respondents from low income families so it can be said that the financial circumstances of each respondent was precarious. Yet, in the majority of cases no resentment of a person's economic circumstances was apparent. As long as no existing inequality was perceived between themselves and their social reference group, an acceptable equilibrium appears to be reached. It is proposed that lack of resentment is caused by the likelihood of adaptation processes as a result of subconscious adjustments to material and financial constraints which lessen feelings of dissatisfaction.

Perceived disadvantage was evident in only a few interviews. Of the small number of people who made adverse comparisons, all were made along materialistic grounds. For those described here as passively accepting their situation, it is proposed this too is caused by the likelihood of adaptation whereby people have become accustomed to their situation, subsequently setting their expectations and aspirations to what they have come to expect, thereby avoiding disappointment and frustration.

For the small minority of people who expressed dissatisfaction with their situation in relation to their comparative reference group, and voiced angry resentment at their worsened situation, it is proposed that subjective relative deprivation is experienced. Only in these instances have the conditions required for subjective relative deprivation to exist been met, that is:

1. There must be comparisons made by the individual.
2. A cognitive appraisal must be made that leads the individual to believe that the individual or in-group is at a disadvantage.
3. The perceived comparative disadvantage must be considered unfair and viewed with angry resentment.

(Smith et al., 2010: 204)

In the majority of cases, being in paid employment did not have a major influence in the way people made social comparisons. But it was of huge importance within the category of people who believed they were 'worse off'. This was particularly evident where external circumstances resulted in the loss of a well-paid job, or demotion to a lower level position. It was also evident in families where both partners were working but whose joint income just put them over the threshold for assistance. Here, employment status impacted significantly on their sense of deprivation. This concurs with findings which suggest that it is not work *per se*, that makes a difference to people's attitudes, more importantly it is the nature and conditions of work that appears to have the greatest bearing (Tomlinson and Walker, 2010).

It is argued here that the choice and frame of social reference is pivotal to the experience of perceived deprivation. This assertion supports Runciman's theory that levels of satisfaction result from comparisons with similar others, with people being content with their situation as long as it is no worse than the perceived circumstances of their reference group, and discontent when it is otherwise.

This poses an important question: If people are more likely to compare with similar others and comparisons are subconsciously made to lessen feelings of discontent, to what extent will this influence a person's subjective assessment of their actual living standards and their well-being or quality of life? The answer is important given the faith being placed on subjective measures of a person's welfare or well-being. The following chapter attempts to respond to this query by examining people's attitudes and views of their living standards and their quality of life in an attempt to substantiate further the findings from this chapter.

## Chapter seven - Subjective assessment

The previous chapter has shown how people's subjective assessments of their situation are highly influenced by the choice of social reference groups, previous experiences and expectations. Central to this is the assertion that an individual's comparison with others in a similar or worse situation leads an individual to adapt to what they have come to expect. It is argued that this is a strategy subconsciously employed in order to avoid, or diminish, feelings of subjective relative deprivation (Runciman, 1966).

This chapter aims to investigate further the factors that would influence subjective assessments of objective circumstances. It does so by analysing respondents' views of their family's quality of life alongside evaluations of their current living standards. The purpose is to ascertain the extent to which satisfaction with quality of life influences the accuracy of such judgements.

Section one discusses the way in which people evaluate their quality of life according to a five-point scale with most people believing it to be '*high*' followed by '*average*'. Only a very small number of respondents felt their quality of life was '*low*'. This is because the vast majority of people appraised life quality in terms of their relationships with other family members which, as we have seen from the previous chapter, are perceived as generally very good. Thus, the choice of comparator has a significant influence on where a person places themselves on the scale of quality of life.

Section two sets out how people appraise their standard of living according to where they believe they fit along a similar five-point scale. In contrast to quality of life, the majority of people believed their living standards to be '*average*', followed by the perception of having '*low*' living standards. A very small minority of people felt they enjoyed a '*high*' standard of living. Each of these categories is examined to ascertain levels of satisfaction with perceived standard of living. An important theme to transpire is the level of contentment that accompanied the majority judgement of being '*average*' or '*in the middle*' of the scale. This is similar to the notion which emerged from the previous chapter of being '*in the same boat*' as everybody else, thus reinforcing the belief that people adapt to their material and financial constraints through lowered expectations.

When standard of living and quality of life evaluations are analysed together, section three reveals mostly average or low evaluations of living standards commonly reported alongside high quality of life assessments.

The chapter concludes with the assertion that a person's contentment with their standard of living is influenced, not only by comparison with similar others, but with their satisfaction with personal relationships. Both factors are argued to diminish feelings of dissatisfaction and instil a sense of acquiescence.

## **1. Subjective assessments of quality of family life**

The sequence in which questions are asked can affect the study outcome and researchers are advised to be sensitive to the effect of preceding questions on answers to subsequent questions (Bryman, 2008: 204). However, while a lot of research has been carried out in the general area of questioning ordering, few consistent effects on people's responses have been revealed (*ibid*). When the original qualitative study was being planned, it was decided that, as far as possible, the more potentially sensitive question about standard of living would follow the quality of life question. It is accepted that this might have influenced the way in which standard of living was evaluated.

Quality of family life was interpreted according to the psychological well-being approach to measuring quality of life, based on personal feelings and subjective experiences and separate from materialistic measures such as income. Respondents were asked where they believed their quality of life would be on a scale ranging from 1 to 5. To aid respondents' interpretation of the term, quality of life was described by the researcher as 'the non-material aspects of life, things that do not cost money'. Respondents were asked the following:

*How would you rate the quality of family life in this family on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being poor and 5 being excellent) – not talking about the things that cost money?*

Often, people would go on to elaborate on the reason for their choice of scoring and if they were not forthcoming, the interviewer would prompt for amplification by asking 'why's that?' or 'what makes you say that?' or similar words to that effect. Scores were interpreted thus:

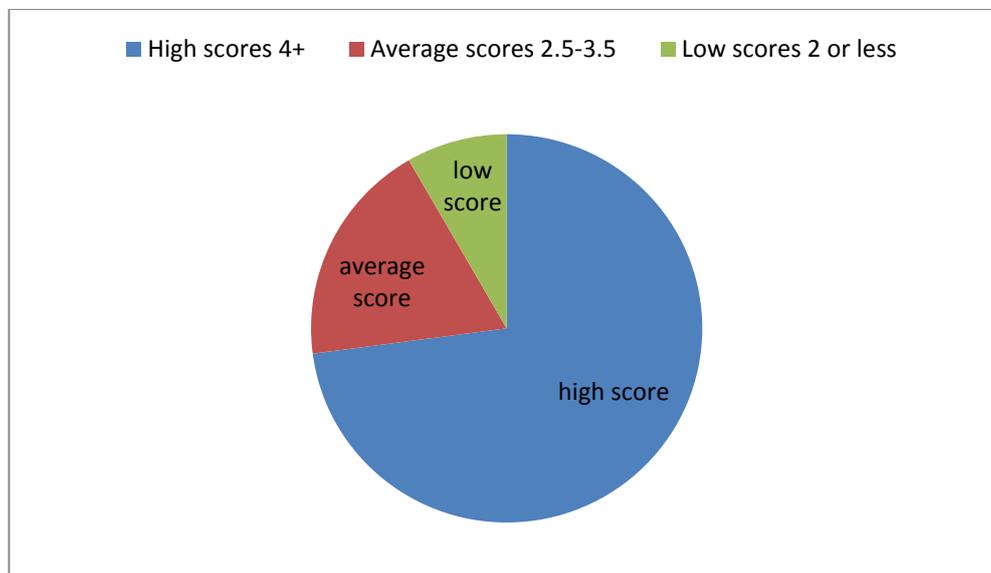
**Table 7: Quality of life classification**

Quality of family life classifications	Scoring from 1 to 5
<i>High</i>	4 or 5
<i>Average</i>	2.5 - 3.5
<i>Low</i>	2 or less

In the few cases where respondents straddled two categories, the highest score was accepted as the final ranking. For example, if a respondent replied ‘three or four’ then four was taken as the definitive mark.

The widely held belief of those responding was one of enjoying a high, or very high, degree of life quality, giving scores of 4 or 5. Close to three quarters of the sample answered in this way. Almost a fifth of people thought their quality of life was ‘average’ (scoring it 2.5 to 3.5) and only four people believed they had a ‘low’ quality of life with their scores being 2 or less. Figure 1 is used simply to elaborate the strength of opinion and each rating is described in more detail below.

**Figure 1: Subjective opinion on quality of life**



## 2. High quality of life scores

For the majority of all participants who perceived their quality of family life as high, the concept was understood very much in terms of the affective sphere, of relating to loving and supportive personal relationships. The following short quote from a mother with one teenage son is indicative of these sentiments:

*Well I would say 4, as quality of life as in plenty of support and whatever, yeah I would say 4.*

The concept of 'love' featured very strongly in people's reasons for their choice of assessment. This can be demonstrated by the enthusiastic verdict of one respondent who judged his quality of life to be 10 on a scale of 1 to 5. This was a person who was long-term unemployed and disabled and who expressed a lot of dissatisfaction with the neighbourhood in which he lived. However, his perception of life quality was expressed strongly in terms of the emotional bond with his extended family<sup>13</sup>.

*Oh my standard of living is brilliant, give it ten. It is alright, honest, great. Because I've the love round me, my kids and my grandkids round me and my wife...ack it's great.*

Even in interviews where relationship problems between certain family members were evident, as long as there was at least one good loving relationship in existence, this appeared to have just as high a significance on people's perceived quality of family life as having many loving relationships.

Often, expressions of love were accompanied by an emphasis on the non-necessity of material goods for having a good quality of life. However, in some cases a sense of ambivalence can be detected. For example, this is a citation by a mother of four children who, like all respondents was struggling financially to pay household bills and cover general expenses. In addition, her personal situation was aggravated by the poor health status of more than one member of the family. Here she is making a clear distinction between material and non-material aspects of well-being:

*Respondent: I think we've a good quality, I'd say 4.*

*Interviewer: Why's that?*

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<sup>13</sup> Although the respondent mentions 'standard of living', analysis of his interview transcript shows clearly that he was referring to 'quality of life' as his answer to the life quality question makes direct reference to lack of income.

*Respondent: Because you don't need material things to have a good quality of life, it's what you do together that matters you know, so I would say we're close and we love each other so anything else is just secondary. If we've enough money, we've enough money, if we don't, we don't. As long as there's food, heat and a roof over your head, you've very little to worry about.*

While the respondent prioritises the non-material aspects of life such as love and closeness over the non-essential '*material things*' necessary for a good quality of life, there is some inconsistency portrayed in the last sentence as the necessity of food, heat and housing is acknowledged to be of primary importance. This suggests that only when these fundamental needs are filled can the non-material aspects of life be given priority.

A similar account of the significance of loving relationships for a good quality of life is given by the following mother with two children. Both parents are in paid employment although both have had their working hours reduced, which has impacted negatively on their ability to manage the household budget. While recognition is given to financial constraints, contentment is apparently achieved by the love they have for each other which helps them to '*get by*'.

*As long as we have the love for each other and the support for each other but I think there is maybe barriers as you say like money problems. Sometimes money would stop us from doing stuff but as long as we have each other and the family you know, we sort of get by anyway.*

Being happy with personal relationships was a major feature of people's responses.

The frequency by which people used the emotional closeness of family, and the loving and supportive nature of their family relationships, as clarification of a high quality of life, reinforced the strength of influence the affective sphere has on levels of satisfaction. It also shows how a close family network is regarded as highly valuable.

It was not common for people to attribute materialistic aspects to high quality of life perceptions. However, in the very few cases where it did occur, it accompanied comparisons with others less fortunate, such as the respondent below whose husband and she are in full-time employment. They have three young children:

*I could always have a bigger house but what I have is nice compared to what some people have so I'm not that badly off.*

This perception coincides with Runciman's position that comparisons with those worse off instil a sense of contentment.

### 3. Average quality of life scores

The second most common response was to score quality of life in the middle (between 2.5 and 3.5). Most people who expressed an average mark tended to interpret the concept in a more materialistic way, such as is demonstrated by the following explanation from a lone parent with two dependent teenage children:

*Well, we aren't rich for a start; we'd just be below border line.*

The fact that being below a 'border line' is accepted as average suggests contentment with quality of life. Another interviewee explained her average score in terms of not being able to afford family outings. She had four children all at different stages of development. The respondent felt that lack of money stopped them from doing things together as a family because, if they were better off financially, it would be easier to afford an outing suitable for the whole family. In this case, lack of finances is attributed to an average quality of life:

*A two or three. Like I say, because I don't feel we do enough as a complete family... financially it's hard as well because you could probably find something no problem, if you had the money to be able to not worry about it, or budget for what you're going to be doing.*

The following account also attributes lack of finances with quality of life however; it differs in the sense that the respondent feels that the quality of her family life has been enhanced by financial constraints. In discussing how they 'get by', she proposes that it is a good thing for her children to be exposed to the harsh realities of life on a low income. Scoring quality of family life a three, she explains it further:

*Because we're not poor and we're not rich we're just getting by... I like my kids knowing that they have to save up for something. It's balancing them out and making sure that people have to work for what they can have, they can't just have it put in their hands. Basically I prefer to be a three than a five if I'm being honest.*

Also apparent within this category were comparisons with previous adverse experiences, highlighting the importance of this aspect as a key frame of reference. This is demonstrated

in the following interview with a young mother who had experienced marital breakup the previous year but who has since been reconciled with her husband.

*Umm now, just in the middle. Last year I was at the bottom.*

#### **4. Low quality of life scores**

Only four people interviewed believed they had a low quality of family life (scoring 1 or 2). Of the limited number of respondents who answered this way, two explanations are evident – recent involuntary unemployment (redundancy) and long-term caring. In relation to respondents who blamed redundancy for their low quality of life, these people also believed they were ‘worse off’ than other families they knew (discussed in the previous chapter). This provides an important context for understanding the extent of distress expressed by these participants, at what has been interpreted here as income decline exacerbated by an accompanying loss of identity.

In this case, the comparative reference group is the group of well-paid worker. According to Runciman (1966), where a comparative reference group is ‘positive’ (where a person wants to share the situation with another group, not dissociate from it) then a feeling of relative deprivation is provoked. Runciman explains further that ‘*only comparative reference groups are bound up by definition with relative deprivation*’ (1966: 12). Throughout interview with both mothers, several references to their previous role as an employee were made, stressing their work ethic and the fact that they had been in a job which had been well-paid. References were also made to what they used to do, or have, in their previous role and what they now do. Both interviewees demonstrated a strong sense of worth and status which had been attained from the role of employed worker. As other research has shown, paid work outside the home had provided an important framework for positive personal identity (Jahoda, 1982), as can be detected from the following accounts.

*Respondent One:*

*...I’ve worked all my life. I’ve worked from I was 17. You know that’s something I was very proud of and I was on very good money and I was able to just go out and get myself whatever I wanted and now I have to think about it and say well ‘how much do I really need it’ you know. Because my kids come first and my bills come first. Now I can’t get things I just wanted. I just used to take it for granted you know.*

*Respondent Two:*

*I haven't been out of work since I was 16 and I'm 48 this year...I lived for my job, to having nothing has been the most massive kick in the teeth ever and the hardest thing to adjust to because no matter what anybody tells you, it is not easy to sort out the benefits, to understand it, and they don't make it easy in any way.*

Both respondents' recent loss of identity has been a major contributory factor in their perception of poor life quality. In addition to experiences associated with financial strain, these participants talked extensively about the shock of unexpected redundancy, embarrassment at not being in paid work, the worry attached to not being able to meet commitments and being 'blacklisted' or being known as a 'bad debtor', constantly reiterating their previous work record and salary. Another common thread was anger at a perceived lack of respect manifest either through numerous unsuccessful job applications, or job interviews where the outcome was not communicated, or from treatment received when negotiating the benefit system.

Here is Respondent Two again explaining her confusion surrounding the exact information required for an application for Housing Benefit:

*There's no willingness by the government bodies to inform people of their rights, what they should and shouldn't have, the help they can and can't get. They do make you feel stupid. You know when I'm sitting in there and I'm going 'I don't understand what you want to know here' and he's looking at me as if I'm some kind of muppet. And then you sort of lose a lot of confidence in yourself, in your own abilities, and I'm sitting looking at forms going 'I can't do this, I just can't do it.'*

Lack of respect is a process that has been identified as a lived experience by many people on low income, the outcome of which compounds existing feelings of low life quality (see for example, Beresford et al., 1999; Daly and Leonard, 2002; McIntyre et al., 2003; Hooper et al., 2007; Fahmy and Pemberton, 2008).

Other expressions of a low quality of life were made in a non-materialistic way by two respondents who were providing extensive long-term care to a close family member. Here, reports of stress, anxiety, worry, depression, fatigue and isolation were the main features of related experiences. In these instances, people's role as full-time carer had a major impact on how satisfied they were with their quality of life. Scoring her quality of life a '2', the following mother clarified how the provision of extensive care at both ends of the

spectrum – to her daughter and her mother was an influential aspect of where she saw herself on a scale of 1 to 5:

*Respondent: I would say a 2, and that's the truth.*

*Interviewer: Why would you say 2?*

*Respondent: Just simply because of the pressure. My life just feels like its flittered away you know from I've turned 25 even. I can't remember it sort of going if you know what I mean and I'll be 50 in another couple of years and it's just gone and what have I to show? I've cared as well as I could for my disabled child and my mammy you know, you do your best for her as well.*

Similar perceptions are evident in a second case with the respondent explaining the harm such long-term care giving has had on her mental health and how her physical health has deteriorated from sheer exhaustion.

The vulnerability of long-term carers to ill health, poverty and discrimination are well documented (Evason and Whittington, 1995; Evason, 2004). Evidence provided here echoes that of a high percentage of carers themselves who report how their demanding role has negatively impacted on their physical and mental health (Ferguson and Devine; 2011; Carers UK, 2012).

## **5. Section Two- Standard of living**

As this was a study of how families cope with the realities of managing family life on a restricted household budget, one main criterion for sample selection was low household income. As explained in chapter five, household income is extremely difficult to calculate, even through the use of large scale surveys specifically designed to collect income data (Micklewright and Schnepf, 2010). However, the fact that only three respondents relied on employment alone for their main source of income, without the need for social security benefit supplements, confirms the precarious financial situation of almost the entire sample. Yet, as will be demonstrated by the following analysis, the majority of participants believed their standard of living to be average.

Subjective perceptions of a family's living standards were established by asking respondents to place their standard of living on a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being poor and 5 being excellent. To aid interpretation, the term was described by the researcher as 'the

more material aspects of life, things that do cost money'. This is how the topic was usually initiated:

*How would you rate the standard of living in this family on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being poor and 5 being excellent) – this is more material things?*

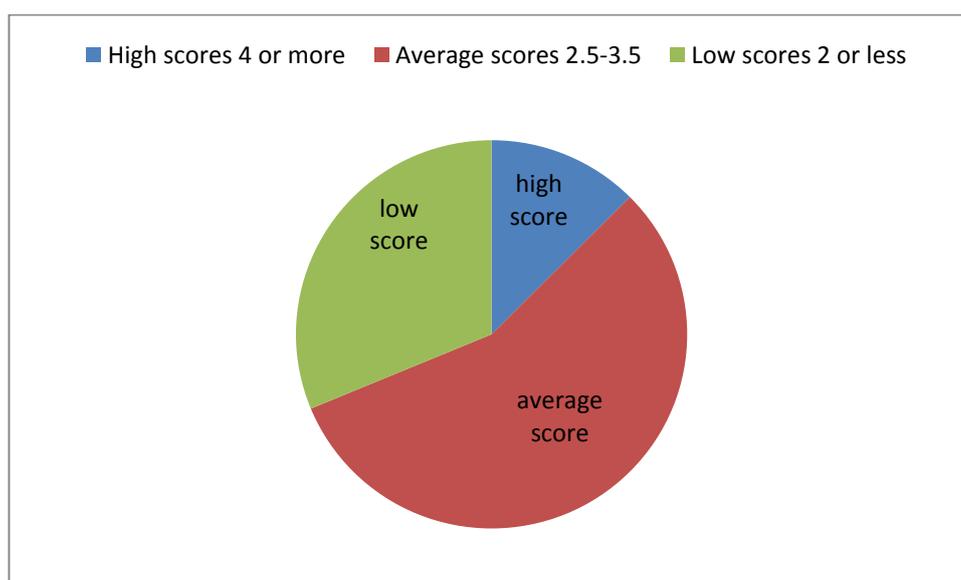
In many cases, respondents elaborated on their answer but if none was forthcoming, the interviewer prompted the respondent to give a reason for their belief using similar terms as in quality of life. Scores were also attributed in the same way, as set out in table 8 below.

**Table 8: Standard of living classification**

Standard of living classifications	Scoring from 1 to 5
High	4 or 5
Average	2.5 - 3.5
Low	2 or less

Regarding standard of living, the general tendency was for people to describe themselves as being 'in the middle' (with approximately half the sample scoring themselves between 2.5 or 3.5). This was followed by low scores. High scores for standard of living were uncommon. Figure 2 below is used simply to demonstrate the range of opinion.

**Figure 2: Subjective opinion on standard of living**



## I. High standard of living scores

It was very rare for people to express the belief of having a high standard of living (scoring it a 4 or 5). Interestingly, the same respondent who said she did not make social comparisons believed she would be a '4' on a scale of 1 to 5. The reason being that she did not know who to compare living standards with because she said she was a very private person and did not socialise widely. She took no interest in other people's lifestyles and was content because she had the basic essentials of shelter, heat and food. The perception of being 'lucky' appears here too, as it did in the previous chapter, suggesting and reaffirming the notion of gratefulness for not being worse off.

In another case, the respondent had experienced a previous dire financial event which made her present situation appear comfortable in comparison. Both she and her partner were recovering from a health condition, plus one son had recently overcome an addiction problem. Giving her standard of living a five, she explained:

*Because I have everything I want, I have my family and at the minute I have everything – there's nothing that I would pray for that I want really, I'm happy with the way things are going at the minute.*

Oddly, in the cases where standard of living was perceived as high, there was little connection to financial attributes. For example, having the basic necessities featured again in the following interview as a prime reason for the perception of high living standards. But in particular, being able to provide a good standard of food for the family featured very strongly. This is how it is explained by a mother with three small children:

*We eat well, there's good food put on the table, we don't live out of processed foods, basic foods are good so umm about 3 or 4. I remember asking my daddy one time when I was a kid 'why can we not go to Spain?' and he lit on me. He absolutely went berserk and I thought 'bloody hell what's his problem' and his attitude was – 'we have decent dinners in this house, there's many a person will be eating crap just to save the money to go on holidays'. So I guess I get a bit from him, from his attitudes towards eating well, doesn't matter about all the riches as long as there's that sort of a good standard of living on a day to day basis.*

As is clear from the above excerpt and with the respondent's own admission, her answer has been influenced by her father's notions about the importance of good food. The main point of reference here is her childhood experiences. However, another interesting feature

is the centrality of food in the perception of what constitutes a high standard of living. It serves to highlight the current relevance of individuals' need to obtain the customary or encouraged 'types of diet' which featured in Townsend's definition of poverty (Townsend, 1979: 31).

In another case where standard of living was considered high, the expressed view was that material things did not matter. However, even though the point was said in jest, by noting that her car was the exception the interviewee suggests more ambivalence than perhaps would like to admit. The fact was, her husband had lost his job and they had fallen behind with credit repayments. She had had to sell her car to cover existing debt and also because she could not afford to pay petrol and insurance costs. The loss of her car had been a major wrench, but selling it brought relief from the worry of unmanageable debt.

*Oh material things don't really matter that much to me to be honest with you. My car does (laughs) but I don't mean like, certain things you were saying like named things all them things don't matter to me at all so they don't. Ack I would say a 4 then, definitely a 4.*

Like the majority of respondents in this study, this participant was a highly articulate woman with astute financial management skills. Throughout the interview she described in detail the various coping strategies that were employed to keep the family running on an even keel. What was significant in this interview was the high value placed on her family's credit worthiness and the pride taken in having a good credit rating. So, when faced with an ultimatum, the car had to be forfeited for the sake of the family's 'good name'. It could be said that a trade-off had been made between the lesser of two evils. The quote suggests that at the heart of the negotiation was a judgement as to what would lessen feelings of disadvantage. This has strong resonance with the notion of adaptive preference formation and the way in which people's choices are altered in light of the options they have available to them (Colburn, 2011).

## **II. Average scores**

Expressions of being 'in the middle' were mostly accompanied by feelings described here as 'contentment' – that is, there was little evidence of dissatisfaction at perceived living standards. These views also resonate most strongly with expressions of being 'in the same boat' as everybody else which emerged from the previous chapter.

The reasons for contentment are mainly practical and psychological in nature. They include:

1. Being the same or no worse than anybody else
2. Being '*happy enough*'
3. Love

Despite the fact that many people were able to identify a lack of certain goods within their depiction of their current living standards, the overarching belief was one of being 'in the middle', or having living standards typical of most other families. Only a very small number of people showed a sense of discontentment at their situation. The following quote from a mother with one child is indicative of these opinions:

*Emm...probably a 2 or 3. We wouldn't be sort of top end but it's not 'oh my god we've nothing', if you know what I mean. We just sort of have the normal if you know what I mean, nothing extravagant.*

It was common for people to acknowledge lack of basic necessities in parallel with their belief of being average, such as the following family where both parents were unemployed. They have two dependent children:

*About 3. I just think I would like the heating increased, that I could afford to put my heating on a bit more because I have to balance my heating and my electric because the winter is coming in now and you like to have it on a bit more because, if you have it on longer, the house feels warmer. But switching it on and off and on and off you're only getting the value when the heating is on and when it cools down it's back to cold again.*

Likewise, the following lone parent with one child who is expressing gratefulness at having the absolute necessities like gas, electric and food in her justification for the choice of scale point:

*Probably 3, I would have the gas, the electric and the food and stuff like that but I wouldn't have just enough money to throw about on anything you know, so about a 3.*

For another lone parent with one young child, having a TV is a very significant element in the assessment of her living standards. She suffers from nervous anxiety, depression and agoraphobia and has difficulty leaving the house. Therefore, her physical and social world is extremely restricted because a lot of her time is spent at home. This is in addition to her

restricted financial situation. All these factors make the television a fundamental household item. This concurs with research detailing how the television repeatedly emerges strongly as an essential item for people on low income, compared to people in high income brackets who rank the item of much lower importance (Pantazis et al., 1999; McAuley et al., 2002., Kelly et al., 2012; Kelly and Tomlinson, 2013a, 2013b). When describing standard of living, references to a holiday suggests this is an aspect the respondent considers a necessary item for others, but not herself. Her main requirement is her TV and as this need is fulfilled, no discontentment is expressed.

*I would say a 3. I have my TV and everything in my living room or my house like, but I just don't like the thought of going on holidays no, I booked a holiday...and whenever it come the time I never went because I couldn't get on the plane, the more I sat in the house and thought about it, the more it was doing my head in.*

For many respondents the television played an integral role in assessing living standards and it is not difficult to see why. It is a relatively inexpensive form of entertainment that all members of the family can enjoy. A television can be purchased through a consumer credit agreement and a TV licence can be paid for by way of savings stamps, purchased weekly. This makes it a viable commodity for households where budgets are constrained. This is an important fact to highlight as the 'poor families with big TVs' (Oliver, 2013) and other such clichés increasingly form part of the rhetoric in 'troubled families' debate (see Levitas, 2012, 2014).

Other expressions of contentment were aligned with references to respondents' own preferable situation, compared to the situation of others. Thus further weight is added to the assertion that people will commonly compare their own situation with those similar to, or worse off than themselves, feeling less aggrieved so long as they do not believe they are worse off than comparable others. The following excerpt is indicative of this:

*I'd say 3 because it could be a lot better but then again it could be a lot worse so it's closest to the middle.*

(Couple family, both employed, 5 children)

A further influence in being content with living standards was with expressions of being happy or 'happy enough' with one's situation. The frame of reference that individuals use to make reflective assessments of their life overall has been shown to be affected by expectations and aspirations (Kahneman, 1999), but there is less evidence with respect to

how aspirations impact on measures of affect or eudaimonia (OECD, 2013: 150). In relation to affect, it may be the case that individuals lower their expectations of being happy in a similar way to their satisfaction with life overall. Analysis of this interview data to date strongly suggests that being '*happy enough*' implies satisfaction with what is adequate to meet an absolute basic need – be that need material (such as a home, food or heat) or relational (in terms of maintaining a personal relationship).

For example, in rating her standard of living a three or three and a half, this young lone parent describes her home as happy, going on to explain that they have the basic necessities:

*Well, my house is a home for the kids; I would give it about three, three and a half really. It's a happy home and I have everything for a home, you know what I mean, beds and everything for them.*

Love was also a strong feature in respondent's accounts of their living standards. In some cases respondents spoke about happiness and love together. As section one of this chapter points out, being happy with personal relationships and having a loving, supportive bond with others, were major influences in satisfaction with quality of life. The same influences are apparent in the accounts of living standards for a sizeable number of respondents.

One respondent with a two year old child described her standard of living as being average, adding:

*I'm happy enough with that now.*

When asked why, she explained it in the following way:

*Because I kinda know he loves me [partner]. Does that make sense? I know he's alright with it and I know he's OK with the idea that we're not sitting with millions in the bank, crystal glasses and all that there. That's fine, I'm alright with the idea that we have B & M cutlery but as long as he loves me, you know what I mean, it sounds corny but it's true.*

She continued:

*I'm not asking to win the lotto, I'm not asking for loads of money. I'm asking that me, Jim and the two kids are, god spares us, happy enough. I don't want big things, I'm not looking for grand gestures, I'm looking for enough to cover my bills, that's it.*

In some interviews the concept of happiness was intertwined with knowing that others are worse off than oneself. Here is one lone parent's account of her rationale for believing her standard of living is average:

*Well, I don't think I'm the poorest one, I can sort of manage anyway, I know it's hard but I'm just a person who is happy with what I have and just don't want to go on the streets and beg. I mean I'm doing my best, I have my work and my child is happy enough so I can't say I'm the worst one.*

While not a common response among survey respondents, personality traits may account for the lack of dissatisfaction in some cases. For example, here the respondent referred to not having 'wee luxuries' but despite the difficulties, he advocates staying positive. Here, his positive attitude appears to be the main influencing factor for his satisfaction:

*Because you just simply can't afford the wee luxuries. Even a DVD or popcorn on a Saturday night or renting a game out for the wee girl's Wii, sometimes you just don't even have the money to do that. It's difficult sometimes that, but as I say, stay positive.*

(Couple family, one child)

The socio-economic status of families who believed their living standards were average was split almost evenly between families with some connection to paid work and families with no connection to the labour market. Yet almost no references to contentment were attributed to economic aspects. Only in one interview did the respondent discuss the extra money he received from his job as a reason for being satisfied. In giving his standard of living a three, he explained:

*...with that extra bit of money coming in you can do a bit more with it.*

The respondent was on a time limited back-to-work scheme which was due to end three months after the interview. When asked how he felt about this, he exhibited an optimistic attitude which may be attributed to his positive personality type (which resonates with the debate over the biological determinants of well-being discussed earlier), or a form of adaptation to the prospects of unemployment. However, as discussed in chapter four, most research on adaptation to major life events suggests that unemployment is the one event that people do not fully adapt to over time (Lucas et al., 2004; Clark et al., 2008; Rudolf and Kang, 2011), suggesting that personality type does play an influencing role in this case.

*I don't really feel anything, I'm just happy enough with the way I am at the minute and I'm working, so no point in sitting being depressed that you're going to be out of work in 3 months' time.*

There were however a small number of cases where people scored their standard of living as average, but did indicate signs of discontentment. In all cases, people spoke about wanting more for themselves and their children. A commonality between these respondents is noteworthy here – all interviewees were engaged in some form of self-development. One woman was undertaking a university degree, the others were members of a women's community development group and were taking part in numeracy and literacy courses, computer awareness classes and personal development courses. This suggests that where an individual is on a positive trajectory of change, their aspirations for a better future influence their subjective contentment with current circumstances. In the case of the following lone parent with a young child, giving her standard of living an average score (a three) was not, from her perspective, a good thing. When asked to say why she believed it was a three, she explained it negatively in terms of the problems of not having a home of their own and the difficulties of saving up money to provide her son with the kind of stability she believes he should have.

*Because at the moment we don't have our own home and trying to get money together for me to be able to provide a home is a bit hard and that we have no personal space. My work with Patrick as a mother suffers because I live in somebody else's [home]...which isn't stable I think for Patrick.*

Again, this concurs with Runciman's notion of subjective relative deprivation, that a person's satisfaction is conditioned by their expectations.

### **III. Low scores**

The second most common reply was to communicate standard of living with a low score (1 or 2). Just under one-third of the sample fell into this category. Closer examination of these cases reveals how low living standards were mainly associated with not being able to afford certain material items, or carry out specific social pursuits, mainly in relation to children's activities. Examples include wanting, but being unable to afford, to decorate the house, have a family day out, or have modern technological gadgets. For the majority of this group, awareness of low living standards was accompanied with a sense of discontentment. For example, the following respondent was a lone mother with three dependent children. Her health was very poor and she did not leave the house very often. The standard of her

home decoration was a major source of discontent, exacerbated by the fact that the majority of her time is spent at home. Plus, a link was made between the materiality of household goods and the ability to socialise, as she felt she could not invite people round to visit. Giving her standard of living a 2, she explained:

*I don't even bring people in now cause I don't have the money to do the house up.*

There is substantial agreement among the general public regarding the importance of 'Enough money to keep home in a decent state of decoration'. In a 2012 Omnibus opinion survey, 77 per cent of adults in Northern Ireland claimed this was a basic necessity (Kelly and Tomlinson, 2013a). This confirms and reinforces earlier findings on public attitudes on the necessities of life (Gordon et al., 2000; McAuley et al., 2003; Kelly et al., 2012). The link made between the material condition of the home and social participation is an important one, as these attitude studies persistently show that life's necessities comprise material and social items.

In fact, the linking of material needs and the ability to carry out social participatory activities that are viewed as essential to family life, featured in many of these responses, demonstrating that minimum standards are not just about subsistence. They include, as Townsend claimed, the social activities, living conditions and amenities that are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which people belong (1979: 31).

The high value attached to having material and social living standards common in the lives of the average individual or family, is demonstrated in the citation below from a parent with four children in her consideration of where her living standards fall:

*I would say two. We just don't have enough money. The house is damp. We don't have the choices to go on holiday; the kids miss out so you know.*

Of particular interest here are the personal circumstances of the majority of this group who expressed dissatisfaction. Some were in employment, or had had recent attachment to the labour market, and, similar to those who assessed their standard of living as average but were discontent, were currently participating in some form of educational and/or personal development. In these instances there was a strong sense of the anticipation of a better future, lending further weight to the notion that when expectations have been heightened, the scope for experiences of subjective relative deprivation is greater.

However, for a small minority of people who scored their living standards low, there was no evidence of discontentment. In some instances, reporting low living standards was not viewed in negative terms, because standards were being compared to more adverse circumstances. For the participant below, (who had had to sell her house the previous year and move to rented accommodation because of unmanageable debt) her current standard of living was reported as low, but her current situation was framed in the context of her daughter's sudden recent illness which, she said, had made her reassess her priorities as is evident in the statement below:

*I would say maybe a 2, 1 or 2. You could live a better life if there was more money but there isn't more money. The way I look at it, you just have to live life by every day now. If you had have asked me this time last year I would probably have said a 1 and it's awful but now I've more priorities than money because of what's happened.*

Despite being realistic of their financial situation, this suggests that people's perceptions are tempered by comparison to previous, worse circumstances.

In other instances where no discontentment at reported low living standards was apparent, there was evidence of becoming used to the situation, as demonstrated in the following excerpt from an interview with a lone parent in long-term benefit receipt:

*...we don't have this lovely big house, I mean I'm in rented accommodation because I'm single and separated, I don't have a mortgage the way I used to, I don't have a good car that I can run about in, I can't run out and get a settee on credit and say this and that. Basically materialistic things can go when you're on benefits; you don't have the things that you can have.*

In the main, such responses lend further support to Runciman's assertion that:

*People's attitudes, aspirations and grievances largely depend on the frame of reference within which they are conceived (1966: 10).*

## 6. Comparing perceptions of living standards with quality of life assessments

### I. Average standard of living and high quality of life

When perceptions of families' living standards and the quality of family life are analysed together, the most consistent pattern showed average evaluations of living standards reported alongside high quality of life assessments. This is because the majority of people evaluated their quality of life according to satisfaction with personal relationships with, or between, family members and these were mostly considered to be good, or very good. On the other hand, perceptions of living standards were mostly based on assessments with similar others and generally believed to be average, or at least no worse than that of their social reference group. There was also a tendency for people to make comparisons in a downward manner, contrasting with disadvantaged families worse off than themselves, occasioning feelings of gratefulness at having the basic essentials. Assessments of average living standards often contained references to the lack of financial and/or material resources yet, in the majority of these cases, objective circumstances did not engender feelings of dissatisfaction. The implicit assumption was that this was a normal standard for everyone and did not warrant resentment.

However, there were a few exceptions to this position where people expressed high quality of life status, but with detectable discontentment at their average living standards. These are very important to draw out because in all circumstances these participants were engaged in personal self-development endeavours. Here, there was tangible evidence of high expectations for the future and a belief that things can and should be better. One young woman's account can demonstrate this well. This was a lone parent whose previous partner had left her, setting up home with another partner. She is now caring for her two children alone, with no financial or practical help from the children's father. The woman suffered badly from depression and was directed by a health practitioner to a local women's centre for help and advice. From there, she undertook several personal development courses, then educational courses, which led to a university access course. The sense of aspiration is tangible in the way she explains her journey and her plans for the future:

*I remember the first day sitting there in [university] and going 'I can't do this' and then come July we were all graduating in the Waterfront Hall and you're like 'I can't believe I did that', you just feel like... and I miss it, I actually miss learning.*

She then added:

*I definitely want it more now because in school I didn't really do well and then because I had my first daughter quite young I sort of just give up on myself I suppose. But now I really just want to go and do it.*

Together with her own personal aspirations, there was discontent evident in her consideration of her average standard of living as she expresses a desire for children's items and activities that the general public have deemed necessary for a basic standard of living by today's standards – enough bedrooms for children of a certain age and participation in children's clubs and activities:

*About 2.5 or 3. I would love them to have a room of their own. I would love to get Jane into gymnastics and let Alice start a wee drama group – but then it's all money.*

## **II. Low standard of living and high-average quality of life**

The second most common formation was to have low evaluations of living standards alongside high, or average, quality of life evaluations. This time, feelings of discontentment were present in the majority of instances. Most respondents in this group displayed a heightened awareness that things could be different. This group included people in paid employment, or with recent labour market attachment, and, like the few examples above, people on a trajectory of self-development. Here too, respondents exuded a definite sense of expectation and aspirations for the future.

However, not all participants with perceived low living standards expressed feelings of discontentment. For these people, it was common to make comparisons to a previous negative life event from which they had overcome, or with which they were learning to cope, like divorce, or separation, or sudden illness, thus diminishing dissatisfaction with current circumstances, which were acknowledged to be low but perceived to be better than before.

## **III. High standard of living and high quality of life**

It was unusual for people to express the belief of having a high living standard and a high quality of life. This small group included people who had experienced a previous financial difficulty that they were overcoming, or personal family problems which were being tackled. It also included the respondents who were unsure with whom they should be

making comparisons. Rating standard of living highly suggested high satisfaction with objective circumstances.

#### **IV. Low standard of living and low quality of life**

A very small number of people (three) believed both their living standards and their quality of life to be low. There were two major factors which accounted for this – sudden job redundancy and long-term caring for a disabled family member. This group consisted of the two respondents who had experienced recent redundancy and one of the two respondents who were engaged in long-term care giving. In all three cases, these circumstances appear to have impacted negatively on close family relationships. For example, one respondent explained how her recent job loss and decreased income was causing tension between herself and her partner:

*Well, I think it hasn't brought us closer together. I think it's causing more arguments because we're always squealing 'get the lights out' 'get this out, get that out' you know, and I think there's more arguments and he's shouting 'you better get a job'. I mean the jobs just aren't out there.*

The respondent who was care giving, was looking after her disabled partner, who had received brain damage as the result of an unprovoked attack. She admitted that the strain of trying to keep things normal for the sake of her children was becoming too much. There was also a sense of resentment towards her partner, because she had been left to take on the sole financial burden of running the home. There was also a sense of hopelessness evident at the inescapability of her situation.

This concurs with other studies which reports how the impact of hardship and deprivation has been found to decrease the level of available social support, as relationships may suffer due to financial pressures, as found in Green (2007) and Orr et al., (2006).

Although this particular group constitutes a small proportion of the overall sample, the combination of low quality of life with low living standards deserves attention, primarily because it demonstrates how the interaction between long-term caring, job loss, financial constraint and dissatisfaction with personal relationships, pose risks of serious damage to mental health. Of these three respondents, two had reported experiencing a mental breakdown. One of these two respondents had also previously attempted suicide.

## 7. Overview

The majority of respondents framed quality of life in terms of personal relationships and good support networks. Most relationships were good and very few people thought their quality of life was poor. Of those that did, recent redundancy and long-term caring were believed to be major influences for this view.

Most respondents considered their living standards to be average or '*in the middle*'. While people could identify the lack of financial, and/or material, resources as reasons for this assessment, this was often accompanied by expressions of appreciation at having the absolute basic necessities such as heat and food. All these thoughts contributed to a lack of resentment at their situation and engendered feelings of what is described here as 'contentment'. Those few who expressed discontentment with living standards were on a positive trajectory of change.

Taking the findings from this chapter and the previous chapter into consideration, two main conclusions can be drawn: Firstly, a person's contentment or satisfaction with their quality of life is influenced primarily by the quality of personal relationships and the perceived closeness of social support networks. Although not universal, satisfaction with relationships appears to diminish feelings of dissatisfaction with living standards and instead, instil a sense of acquiescence.

Secondly, people's evaluation of their subjective living standards is often not an accurate reflection of objective material conditions, as it is influenced in a number of complex ways which include not only current circumstances, but previous experiences. In the main, a pivotal role is played by the choice of comparative reference group and the tendency for people in disadvantaged circumstances to make comparisons with others in a similar precarious situation, or in a downward manner with those worse off. Such comparisons not only give rise to contentment, but also engender feelings of gratefulness at having the basic essentials. As a result, expectations are lowered with aspirations and preferences being adapted to people's material and financial constraints.

These findings have particular implications for the consensual measure of poverty, as people may be more inclined to say they do not want an item or activity, rather than admit to not being able to afford it, in order to avoid the harsh realities of feeling relatively deprived. The findings also have specific bearing on the UK government's programme of measuring individual well-being as measures of life satisfaction increasingly become viewed as metrics of social progress. Reliance on indicators that are vulnerable to adaptation

processes could result in a distorted interpretation of the well-being data, with ill-informed policy priorities a possible outcome.

These two chapters represent an analysis of adaptation using the views from a sample of 51 respondents from low income families. The following chapter widens the analysis on adaptive processes further, to include a representative sample of the general population. It uses the 2012 PSE data set for Northern Ireland to assess the impact of a range of factors, to predict the likelihood of reported deprivation and low overall life satisfaction.

## Chapter eight - logistic regression

Chapters six and seven analysed data from interviews carried out with 51 respondents from low income families. This analysis showed that people can and do make social comparisons. Such comparisons were most often made with others in similar circumstances or with people worse off than themselves. This frame of reference proved significant to how evaluations of current situations were interpreted. Specifically, this was because subjective perceptions of living standards were in many cases not substantiated by objective conditions.

Previous experiences were also found to be relevant in how people made life evaluations. References to prioritising the basics, over and above any type of luxury, in chapter seven provides one possible indication that 'wants' or 'desires' are being either regulated, or suppressed. This is suggestive of adaptation processes. with the subsequent lowering of (or controlling of) expectations as a way of avoiding the experience of subjective relative deprivation.

Such a position would support Runciman's theory of relative deprivation and, as concluded in chapter six, present challenges to the consensual measure of poverty based on the 'enforced lack' of socially perceived necessities.

A recurring theme from the previous two chapters however, is the fundamental role that the condition of family relationships play in how living standards and quality of family life is evaluated. It is argued here that this has such a strong impact on reflective evaluations of life, that it presents a serious challenge to the measure of well-being based on subjective evaluations of life satisfaction, upon which government policy is increasingly relying.

The aim of this chapter is to augment the findings from the qualitative analysis. It uses direct logistic regression analysis to test whether, and to what degree, indicators of material deprivation and subjective well-being are affected by the process of adaptation.

The first section presents three regression models used to assess the impact of a number of factors on the likelihood that respondents report enforced deprivation. Model one predicts the odds of wanting socially perceived necessities, but lacking them because of a shortage of money (the PSE consensual deprivation measure). Model two is used to predict the odds of simply lacking three or more basic necessities (excluding respondents who gave a specific reason for non-participation in social activities). Model three similarly looks at simply

lacking basic necessities, but includes respondents who gave a specific reason for non-participation of activities.

The second section presents a fourth regression model, assessing the impact of the same independent factors on the likelihood of individuals reporting a low score on the overall life satisfaction index. A summary of the main findings is provided in the concluding section, highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of each separate approach.

## **1. Predicting the likelihood of reported enforced deprivation**

As explained in chapter five, this chapter analyses the phenomenon of adaptive preferences from the perspective of relative deprivation, by examining closely levels of reported material deprivation and overall life satisfaction.

Four dependent variables are examined:

1. 'Enforced lack' of socially perceived necessities (lacking three or more basic necessities because of insufficient money). This is a measure of all respondents who answered 'lack, cannot afford' or 'do not do, cannot afford to do' to at least three items and/or activities.
2. 'Simple lack' (simply lacking three or more basic necessities excluding those who gave a specific reason for not participating in activities). This is a measure of all respondents who replied 'lack, but does not want' or 'lack, cannot afford' and/or 'do not do, does not want to do' or 'do not do, cannot afford to do'. It excludes those who responded 'do not do for another reason' in relation to social activities.
3. 'Lacking all' (lacking three or more basic necessities including those who gave a specific reason for not participating in activities). The third measure is called here 'lacking all' and is the same as 'simple lack' except in this case it includes those who gave a specific reason (other than unaffordability) for not engaging in activities. That is, it includes those who responded 'do not do for another reason'.
4. 'Low life satisfaction': this counts all respondents who scored 0-6 on the overall life satisfaction question.

Logistic regression models have been used in this analysis (see Chapter five for a more detailed description of this technique). All these variables represented the characteristic of interest and therefore all negative responses were recoded 0 and positive responses recoded 1. This is set out in table 9 below, together with frequency counts.

**Table 9: Dependent variables, coding and frequency**

<b>1</b>	<i>Enforced lack</i>	0 = no 1 = yes	33.8%
<b>2</b>	<i>Simple lack</i>	0 = no 1 = yes	59.3%
<b>3</b>	<i>Lacking all</i>	0 = no 1 = yes	62.7%
<b>4</b>	<i>Low life satisfaction</i>	0 = no 1 = yes	26.4%

## **2. Independent variables**

The selection of the independent variables has been informed by the literature review and more specifically by the information gained from the qualitative interview data. The rationale for each independent variable is explained below. Details of how each variable was re-coded for analysis are also given.

## **3. Variable 1: Regularly lived in poverty in the past**

The subjective relative deprivation literature proposes that a sustained period of hardship may result in a process of adaptation, whereby individuals become so accustomed to straitened circumstances that aspirations and desires are lowered as a means of limiting feelings of deprivation (Runciman, 1966; Elster, 1983; Sen, 1984; Halleröd, 2006). From this perspective, adaptation is viewed as a negative process. The theory of homeostasis puts forward similar notions, arguing that individuals will eventually adapt to almost any negative life event and return to their natural 'set point range' which ensures proper functioning of the body. In this instance, adaptation is viewed positively as feelings of resentment are left behind, instilling a sense of positive well-being (Cummins et al., 2009). Such processes are also said to be natural 'self-defence' mechanisms and as such, are viewed in a constructive light by proponents of adaptation as a form of resilience (Luthar et al., 2000). Whether positive or negative, the 'enforced lack' criterion for poverty measurement has been critiqued along these grounds and charged with introducing a subjectivity by asking respondents to distinguish between items and activities that are not possessed because of unaffordability or through choice (Halleröd, 2006).

Crettaz and Suter (2013) consider how the issues of adaptation mechanisms have been widely discussed since the 1960's, yet empirical evidence on how quality of life and poverty indicators are affected by these processes is still scarce. The authors attribute this to the scarcity of the demanding and high quality data necessary for examining such issues, and

propose that longitudinal panel data are needed in order to assess whether or not respondents subconsciously adjust their preferences to their material situation over time (2013: 140). When Crettaz and Suter used longitudinal panel data to examine the impact of the number of years spent in income poverty on reported levels of deprivation, they found a marked existence of adaptive preferences. In particular, they found that the odds of a respondent saying they wanted an item, but could not afford it, reduced by each additional year spent in relative poverty.

While the PSE survey is a cross-sectional survey and not a longitudinal survey, it was designed to capture poverty retrospectively. As such, the survey included a question asking respondents whether they believed they had sometimes, or regularly, lived in poverty by the standards of that time. The exact question wording was:

*“Looking back over your life, how often have there been times in your life when you think you have lived in poverty by the standards of that time?”*

1. Never
2. Rarely
3. Occasionally
4. Often
5. Most of the time

This variable was recoded into a dichotomous variable, with category 1 and 2 being attributed a 0 for lacking the phenomenon of interest. Categories 3, 4 and 5 were combined and attributed a 1 to indicate having regularly lived in poverty in the past.

If the assertions in the literature are correct, then individuals who, on reflection, believe they have regularly lived in poverty, should be more likely to be affected by adaptive preferences than respondents who have never had this experience. Therefore, it would be expected that those respondents would be less inclined to claim they do not have items because they cannot afford it. It is also reasonable to assume that they would also be more likely to be captured using the ‘simple lack’ measure of not having at least three or more socially perceived necessities.

#### **4. Variable 2: Long-term illness or disability**

There is a substantial amount of studies that demonstrate the impact of deprivation and poverty on a person’s deteriorating health status and disability (Commission on the Social

Determinants of Health, 2008; Gordon et al., 1999; Leon and Walt, 2001; Shaw et al., 1999; Wilkinson, 1986, 1999).

However, disability and ill health are known to increase with age. Therefore, the more a deprivation measure can discriminate between people with an illness or disability and those with no illness or disability, controlling for other factors including age, the greater the power of the measure.

The question wording was:

*'Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting, or expected to last, for 12 months or more?'*

1. Yes
2. No

Positive responses were recoded as 1 with negative responses recoded 0.

### **5. Variable 3: Age**

Criticism of the 'enforced lack' method has focused primarily on the belief that older people are more likely to say they do not want an item through choice, rather than say they cannot afford it, while younger people are more likely to say they want it but cannot afford it. (McKay, 2004; 2008; 2011; Legard et al., 2008). Halleröd (2006) proposed a link between the gradualness of adaptive preference formation and the greater likelihood of an age effect, with older people having had more time to adapt to the consequences of economic constraint.

In response to this concern, a set of pensioner specific questions now accompany the existing adult and child questions in the FRS and which are also reported in the HBAI. The pensioner material deprivation analysis is used as an additional way of measuring living standards for pensioners. This indicator measures how many pensioners are in material deprivation and the reasons for lacking access to the goods, services or experiences. According to the HBAI the indicator is also used '*to explore a broader definition of pensioner poverty*' and captures both the financial and non-financial reasons for being in material deprivation (NISRA, 2013: 130).

Age was broken down into six categories to further test this theory. If age is a factor in predicting the likelihood of reported deprivation then it would be expected to reveal the greater probability of older people not being captured in an 'enforced lack' measure, compared to younger people. Age categories were coded thus:

1. 18-34 years
2. 35-44 years
3. 45-54 years
4. 55-64 years
5. 65-74 years
6. 75+ years

## **6. Variable 4: Any spells of unemployment over the past five years**

The qualitative data revealed that respondents who had recently become detached from the labour market had a strong sense of resentment at their situation and demonstrated feelings of anger at their acknowledged deprivation, compared to their previous situation. On the other hand, respondents who had been unemployed for a longer period of time showed signs of resignation at their situation. This pattern is confirmed by much of the literature on adaptation that suggests that the longer a person is unemployed, the more they get used to their situation (Jahoda, 1982; Warr, 1987). However, other research also suggests that unemployment is one major life event that is so powerful it proves resistant to adaptation (Clark and Georgellis, 2013).

Using information on spells of unemployment over the past five years can differentiate between respondents who have experienced a spell of short-term unemployment (up to twelve months) and those experiencing longer term unemployment (twelve months or more). If information from the qualitative interviews is correct then people experiencing a short-term spell of unemployment should be more likely to report enforced deprivation than those experiencing long-term unemployment. In other words, long-term unemployed people will have become used to their situation and adjusted their aspirations and expectations in a downward manner by choosing not to report wanting an item but not being able to afford it, in order to avoid feelings of deprivation. If, on the other hand, unemployment is resistant to adaptation, then there should be no difference between the findings for short-term and long-term unemployed respondents.

The exact question wording was:

*'Looking back over the last five years, have there been times when you have been unemployed, that is, not in paid work or self-employed, but wanting to work and available to work?' A follow up question asked 'For how long were you unemployed?'*

The existing variable in the PSE dataset is coded

1. None
2. Up to 12 months
3. 12 months or more

This categorisation remained unchanged and was not recoded as it was deemed appropriate for the reference group to be people with no unemployment spells in the past 5 years (that is, the most advantaged group).

## **7. Variable 5: Satisfaction with personal relationships**

As in any research using secondary data analysis, the research is constrained by the available variables in the dataset (Tomlinson et al., 2008). This research is no exception. Therefore, the selection of 'satisfaction with personal relationships' was selected to reflect as closely as possible the findings from the qualitative data regarding the significance of personal relationships in how quality of family life was perceived. In general, respondents who enjoyed good personal relationships were more inclined to believe that their life was good overall. The qualitative analysis concluded that having strong personal connections went some way to providing a form of defence against feelings of relative deprivation. This is a finding that is confirmed by other research such as Whelan (1992) which discusses the 'buffer effect' of social support networks in mediating psychological distress.

In light of these findings it would be expected that various levels of satisfaction with personal relationships would be a strong predictor of reporting enforced lack of basic necessities. Thus, respondents with low levels of satisfaction would be more likely to report being deprived of three or more items, than those who expressed good or high levels of satisfaction with personal relationships. Judging by the qualitative findings, good personal relationships also impact significantly on how individuals perceive their satisfaction with life overall. In other words, people enjoying good personal relationships will report high life satisfaction scores.

The question wording was *'How satisfied are you with your personal relationships?'*

1. Very satisfied
2. Fairly satisfied
3. Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
4. Slightly dissatisfied
5. Very dissatisfied

Descriptive statistics revealed a low number of responses in categories 4 and 5. The variable was then recoded into three categories: very or fairly satisfied which was the reference category and coded as 1, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied coded as 2 and slightly/very dissatisfied coded as 3.

## **8. Variable 6: Income quintile**

There is strong evidence that poverty is not just about low income, but includes experiences of being excluded from traditional norms of the society in which one lives (Townsend, 1979). However, income is still a key component of poverty measurement. One of the main reasons for using the overlaps of income and deprivation is that it can overcome situations where people may be income poor but not deprived, for example because current income does not capture their command over resources (from savings, gifts, borrowing, assets). In addition, it can capture people who are not income poor but are, nevertheless, deprived – again because current income does not capture their command over resources (impact of debts or high expenses) or through choice (Bradshaw, 2013).

The importance of income is endorsed by the inclusion of relative and absolute income measures in the Child Poverty Act (2010) along with the material deprivation and low income combined measure and persistent poverty. Relative and absolute income provides two important measures to act as a proxy for material living standards. Relative income poverty provides a measure of whether the incomes of those in the lowest income households are keeping pace with the growth of incomes in the economy as a whole. Absolute income poverty is a measure of whether those in the lowest income households are seeing their incomes rise in real terms.

In addition, the inclusion of income as an independent variable in this analysis has been influenced by findings which suggest that those with the highest incomes are more inclined

to make social comparisons in an upward manner, comparing themselves to those in more favourable positions, thereby increasing the likelihood of feeling deprived by comparison (Toynbee and Walker, 2008; Lansley, 2009). If this is the case, then higher income groups may show a greater propensity for reporting enforced lack of material necessities which would make the 'enforced lack' measure counterproductive.

This variable was based on individual income quintiles with 1 being the lowest income group and 5 being the highest income group.

This variable was recoded in reverse so that the highest income category would be coded as 1 (the most advantaged) and become the reference group, with 5 being the lowest income category.

## **9. Variable 7: Social and political engagement**

Involvement in community and civic life has become increasingly associated with the notion of social capital. The concept itself has multiple meanings and is not without controversy (see Defillipis, 2001; Gillies, 2005), but in general, the term is meant to put more focus on, not so much the resources that people have available, but the way in which these resources are used and with what consequences.

It is a term popularised by American political scientist Robert Putman (1993, 2000), who identifies the two main components of social capital as 'bonding' and 'bridging' capital. Bonding capital refers to the interactions between people who are like minded, or similar, and is therefore inward looking and is more likely to enable people to 'get by' (Gosling, 2008). Bridging social capital refers to the vertical links between people who are not similar and other outside groups, and is more likely to enable people to build connections that allow them to 'get on' (Blackshaw and Long, 2005).

In this regard the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital is important. As applied to the qualitative data, people who were connected to outside associations or groups (most often it was women's groups) had a stronger sense of entitlement than those who were not connected to such groups. Those who were involved in further education, for example, had higher expectations and aspirations than other respondents in similar financial circumstances. Therefore, it could be said that this represented a form of bridging social capital with raised expectations. If this is so, then people active in social or political engagement activities may have a higher probability of expressing an enforced lack of

socially perceived necessities, than others who are not so actively engaged. The PSE survey data includes a question asking about current memberships of organisations. Responses were used to create a variable based on active membership of at least one or more organisations, compared to no active membership.

Respondents were presented with a card listing 13 different types of organisations (including an 'other' category). Each adult was asked:

*'Are you currently a member of any of the kinds of organisation on this card?'*

Responses from adults indicating they were not a member of any organisation were coded as 0 and replies indicating membership of at least one organisation were coded as 1.

## **10. Variable 8 – Gender**

Because poverty is measured at the household rather than individual level, official statistics can often obscure the full extent of women's individual poverty. For example, the most recent government statistics for Northern Ireland (NISRA, 2013) show a negligible difference between working-age males and females and proportions in low income households. However, on further analysis, there is a noticeable difference for both single males and single females when comparing those in work to workless. Unemployed single males were over three times as likely to be in poverty households as those in work (BHC and AHC). For single females, those who are unemployed were approximately four times as likely to be in poverty households as those in work (BHC and AHC).

Women are also more reliant on income from social security benefits and tax credits and are therefore more vulnerable to cuts in welfare benefits. For example, women, particularly single parents and single pensioners, were reported to have lost much more than men from cuts to benefits and public services brought about by the recent welfare reform changes (WBG, 2012).

In addition, women's poverty is further concealed by the assumption that household income and resources are distributed equitably. Official surveys do not gather information on intra-household sharing of common assets and resources; and there is no agreed method for determining how equally individual members enjoy a household's goods and services (Botti et al., 2012; Bennet et al., 2010). Moreover, the fact that women are more likely to make financial sacrifices for the benefit of other family members, exacerbates the problem of women's hidden poverty (Daly et al., 2012).

A further consideration for including gender is the latest findings from the ONS on the association between gender and national well-being measures. Differences in 'personal well-being' between men and women were small, but when holding other factors equal, women rated their levels of 'life satisfaction', 'happiness yesterday' and 'worthwhile' higher on average than men (Oguz et al., 2013).

Male was coded 1 and female was coded 2. SPSS treats the variable with the lowest value as the reference group. Therefore, in interpreting the analysis, male is used as the reference group.

## **11. Variable 9 – Religion**

In Northern Ireland, socio-economic inequalities are an objective reality; 15 of the top 20 most disadvantaged wards have a majority Catholic population, while only six of the 20 least disadvantaged wards have a Catholic majority. Deprivation indices show that 24 percent of Catholics live in households experiencing poverty, compared to 20 percent of Protestants (NISRA, 2013). Meanwhile, Catholics continue to enjoy greater educational success than Protestants, and working class Protestant males continue to underachieve (DENI, 2013; Nolan, 2014). However, the way these disadvantages are subjectively perceived is reported to be different between the two communities, with the nationalist narrative being positive, while the unionist narrative is one of loss (Nolan, 2013; 2014). This resonates strongly with Runciman's fraternal relative deprivation theory.

The religion variable had 15 categories altogether. This included 'None' 'Catholic', 'Protestant' (including the separate churches) and 'Other'. Due to small numbers in individual categories, this variable was recoded into the following three groupings:

1. All Protestant
2. All Catholic
3. None/Other

## **12. Model One – Enforced lack**

Model one assesses the impact of a number of factors on the likelihood that respondents report enforced deprivation. Deprivation is measured according to the PSE method and uses the lack of three or more socially perceived necessities to represent this phenomenon. Not only has each individual deprivation item been subject to a series of rigorous tests of validity, reliability and additivity (described in the methodology chapter), but the PSE

methodology uniquely identifies the optimal poverty threshold, that is, the equivalised household income line and deprivation threshold which best separates the poor from the non-poor. Therefore, using a cut-off point of lacking three items or more is methodologically robust and suitable.

Each of the tables that follow present significance levels, odds ratios and confidence intervals for each of the models tested.

**Table 10: Odds of being deprived of 3 or more necessities (Enforced lack)**

<b>Model 1</b> Enforced lack			Confidence Intervals for Odds Ratio		
			Significance level	Odds Ratio	Lower
Independent variables					
Regularly lived in poverty in the past	.000	3.46	2.58	4.64	
Long-term illness or disability	.000	1.90	1.38	2.60	
Age:					
18-34 (ref)	.000				
35-44	.000	0.42	0.29	0.62	
45-54	.000	0.49	0.30	0.67	
55-64	.000	0.21	0.13	0.34	
65-74	.000	0.17	0.10	0.29	
75+	.000	0.18	0.09	0.39	
Number of months unemployed in the last 5 years:					
None (ref)	.000				
Less than 12 months	.016	1.83	1.12	2.99	
More than 12 months	.001	2.18	1.40	3.39	
Satisfaction with personal relationships:					
Very/fairly satisfied (ref)	.000				
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	.017	1.86	1.12	3.11	
Slightly/very dissatisfied	.000	3.20	1.72	5.97	
Income quintile:					
Highest (ref)	.000				
Second highest	.008	1.85	1.17	2.93	
Middle	.000	4.02	2.58	6.27	
Second lowest	.000	5.01	3.12	8.05	
Lowest	.000	7.14	4.55	11.22	
Social and political engagement:					
Yes, member of organisation/s	.001	0.60	0.46	0.79	
Female	.107	1.25	0.95	1.64	
Religion:					
Protestant (ref)	.026				
Catholic	.037	1.36	1.02	1.81	
None	.273	0.77	0.48	1.23	

The Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients gives an overall indication of how well the model performs. This is known as 'goodness of fit test' (Pallant, 2007). The full model containing all predictors was statistically significant,  $p < .000$ , chi-square value was 509.30 with 19 degrees of freedom. This indicates that the model was able to distinguish between respondents who reported and did not report, enforced deprivation. The model as a whole explained between 30 per cent (Cox and Snell R squared) and 41 per cent (Nagelkerke R squared) of the variance in experiencing deprivation of three or more items and/or activities and correctly classified 77% of cases.

Results for the Hosmer and Lemeshow Test (another test of model fit) demonstrated the 'goodness of fit' with a Chi-square value of 15.21 and a significance level of .06 (in this test a good model will produce a non-significant result, that is a value greater than .05).

As shown in table 10 eight of the independent variables made a unique statistically significant contribution to the model. Gender was not significant as it had a value greater than .05 (p value .107) and did not contribute to the predictive power of the model.

For model one, income is the strongest predictor of enforced deprivation. A good measure of material deprivation should discriminate clearly between advantaged and disadvantaged groups, and the greater the odds ratios between the least advantaged and most advantaged groups, the greater the discriminatory power of the measure (Hick, 2013: 44). The results from table 10 show that the 'enforced lack' measure discriminates strongly between the lowest and highest income brackets. For example, the odds of respondents in the lowest income quintile reporting an enforced lack of three or more basic necessities are 7.14 times those of the highest income group. For people in the second lowest income quintile, the odds of not having necessities because of lack of money are 5 times that of respondents in the highest income group.

People who have lived in poverty repeatedly or for a long period will have experienced a depletion of assets, savings and so forth and are objectively more likely to suffer an enforced lack of necessities; and Model one is successful in confirming this condition. Strongly associated with the 'enforced lack' of necessities is having lived often or most of the time in poverty over the course of a lifetime. Those who reported this experience were 3.46 times more likely to be deprived of socially perceived necessities as measured by the 'enforced lack' approach.

Both these findings undermine the argument that the 'enforced lack' measure of deprivation introduces a subjectivity that leads to a process of downward adaptation among disadvantaged individuals whereby expectations are lowered and aspirations and preferences are adapted to their material and financial constraints. If this were the case, then the difference between the highest income group and the lowest income group would not be so great. Equally, people who had often lived in poverty in the past would have become used to their situation and less inclined to feel relatively deprived, that is to say, they would be less likely to declare they lacked an item or activity because they could not afford it.

Age was a significant factor. The odds ratio for all age categories was less than 1 and as age increased, the odds ratio decreased. This indicates that the probability of reporting 'enforced lack' of necessities decrease with age. Older people aged 65 to 74 and 75 years and over were the least likely to report deprivation. This appears to be in accordance with the work of McKay (2004) and others, which point to the reluctance of older people to say they cannot afford basic necessities and hence the under-representation of older people when the 'enforced lack' measure is employed.

Respondents who report being fairly or very dissatisfied with their personal relationships were over three times more likely to report deprivation than those who were satisfied with their relationships, controlling for all other factors in the model (an odds ratio of 3.20). Table 10 shows that as satisfaction with personal relationships decrease, levels of reported enforced deprivation increase. This appears to concur with the qualitative findings, that having good personal relations may help to either mitigate feelings of deprivation, or provide a buffer whereby support received from close family helps to alleviate levels of deprivation.

Unemployment is a well-known high risk factor for experiencing deprivation and poverty and as model one confirms, the odds of lacking three or more basic necessities because of a shortage of money are significantly higher for people who have been unemployed in the past five years, than those who have not. People who reported a spell of unemployment lasting twelve months or less were almost twice as likely to experience enforced deprivation, than those not unemployed in this period (odds ratio of 1.83). Those reporting longer-term unemployment had a slightly higher tendency to report enforced deprivation, than those with a shorter term spell of unemployment (an odds ratio of 2.18). As discussed in chapter two, some studies on adaptive preference processes suggest that the longer a

person is unemployed, the more they become resigned to their situation and the less likely they are to feel deprived. If this was the case, then a lower likelihood of enforced deprivation would be expected. It is argued here that the similarity in results for short-term and long-term unemployment confirms the notion that unemployment is such a distressing experience it is indeed resistant to adaptation processes.

The enforced measure was also able to discriminate between those with a long-term illness or disability and those without, with an odds ratio of 1.90, which indicates that disabled people have almost twice the odds of being deprived than those without the presence of an illness or disability. This situation is also substantiated in the literature on the impact of deprivation and poverty on a person's deteriorating health status and disability (Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, 2008; Gordon et al., 1999; Leon and Walt, 2001; Shaw et al., 1999; Wilkinson, 1986, 1999).

For people who were socially and politically active and engaged, that is people who were involved in, or a member of, a range of social interest groups, the odds ratio was less than 1 indicating they were less likely to be deprived than those not involved under the enforced measure (odds ratio of 0.60). Using the information from the qualitative data, it was thought that people who were active in this way might be more inclined to report enforced deprivation, but that is not borne out in this case using this type of model. However, the qualitative data sample consisted only of respondents from low income families. It may be the case that in the wider general population, people who can take advantage of this type of bridging social capital have more opportunities for increasing their financial well-being by having connections to employment prospects, for example. Therefore, it would be reasonable to expect they would not feature highly in a population wide poverty index.

Catholic respondents were almost one and a half times more likely than Protestants to be deprived according to 'enforced lack' model (risk ratio of 1.36). The category of 'none' was not significant as the significance level was greater than 0.05 ( $p=0.27$ ).

**Table 11: Odds of lacking an item or activity (excluding those with a specific reason)**

<b>Model 2</b> Simple lack			Confidence Intervals for Odds Ratio	
Independent variables	Significance level	Odds Ratio	Lower	Upper
Regularly lived in poverty in the past	.000	2.04	1.50	2.78
Long-term illness or disability	.000	2.45	1.79	3.36
Age:				
18-34 (ref)	.000			
35-44	.000	0.24	0.16	0.35
45-54	.000	0.32	0.22	0.48
55-64	.000	0.22	0.15	0.34
65-74	.002	0.47	0.29	0.75
75+	.030	0.49	0.26	0.93
Number of months unemployed in the last 5 years:				
None (ref)	.000			
Less than 12 months	.003	2.48	1.36	4.54
More than 12 months	.001	2.47	1.42	4.31
Satisfaction with personal relationships:				
Very/fairly satisfied (ref)	.006			
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	.009	2.22	1.22	4.02
Slightly/very dissatisfied	.048	1.98	1.01	3.90
Income quintile:				
Highest (ref)	.000			
Second highest	.000	2.41	1.68	3.46
Middle	.000	3.54	2.40	5.23
Second lowest	.000	4.16	2.71	6.41
Lowest	.000	5.61	3.66	8.59
Social and political engagement:				
Yes, member of organisation/s	.000	0.43	0.33	0.56
Female	.441	0.90	0.70	1.17
Religion:				
Protestant (ref)	.000			
Catholic	.000	2.05	1.53	2.73
None	.190	1.33	0.87	2.05

### 13. Model two – Simple lack

Model two is an assessment of the impact of the same factors on the likelihood that respondents are lacking three or more necessities. The variable does not include respondents who gave a specific reason for not doing the activity other than lack of income (see chapter five for a detailed explanation).

The full model was statistically significant at the .001 level; Chi-square value was 489.33 with 19 degrees of freedom. This indicates that the model was able to differentiate between those who had and did not have, three or more basic necessities. The model as a whole explained between 29 per cent (Cox and Snell R squared) and 39 per cent (Nagelkerke R squared) of the variance in having and not having an item or activity, and correctly classified 77% of cases. Results for the Hosmer and Lemeshow Test demonstrated the 'goodness of fit' with a Chi-square value of 7.56 and a significant level of .477.

Here too, the strongest predictor of not having socially perceived necessities is income. The lowest income quintile has an odds ratio of 5.61, indicating that people in this income band are 5.61 times more likely than the highest income quintile to be captured under the 'simple lack' measure of deprivation. While still strong, it is less powerful in terms of its discriminatory power of distinguishing between the most advantaged and the least advantaged income groups, than the 'enforced lack' measure in model one.

Living in poverty in the past, while still significant, is somewhat weaker in its predictive power of experiencing deprivation than was model one, with an odds ratio of 2.04.

In model two, the odds ratio for all age categories was less than 1 however, in this model, younger people were the least likely to be captured under the 'simple lack'. As age increases, the probability of being deprived under this model increases, controlling for other factors in the model. Again, this strengthens McKay's (2004) argument.

Regarding short-term and longer-term unemployment in the past five years, people who have experienced a short-term spell of unemployment in that period (12 months or less) have an odds ratio of 2.48, indicating that they are two and a half times more likely than those with no unemployment to be in the 'simple lack' category. They also have a very similar odds ratio of being deprived under this measure to people with longer-term unemployment (odds ratio of 2.47). If the theory of subjective relative deprivation held up, then the odds ratio for people experiencing longer-term unemployment should have increased as this is a count of people who simply do not have three or more basic

necessities. However, they were almost equal, which reaffirms the notion about unemployment being resistant to adaptive preferences.

Model two discriminates between people who have poor health and/or a disability and those without a poor health condition, in terms of being deprived, slightly better (odds ratio of 2.45) than the 'enforced lack' measure (odds ratio of 1.90 in model one). This means that if using a simple count of people who do not have three or more socially perceived necessities (except for those with a specific reason) long-term sick or disabled people would be 2.45 times more likely to be classified as deprived, than those without a long-term illness or disability (although the difference between the two models is small). People who were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied and those very dissatisfied with their personal relationships, were more likely to be deprived than those with good personal relationships (they had similar odds ratios – 2.22 and 1.98 respectively).

Respondents who were engaged in social or political organisations were again less likely to report lacking basic necessities (a risk ratio of 0.43). As in model one, gender was not found to be significant in this model (sig level of .44) and did not add to the predictive ability of the model.

Catholics were more than twice as likely as Protestants to be included as deprived in model two, with a risk ratio of 2.05. Having 'none' or 'other' religion was not a significant factor.

**Table 12: Odds of lacking an item or activity (including those with a specified reason)**

<b>Model 3</b> Lacking all			Confidence Intervals for Odds Ratio	
Independent variables	Significance level	Odds Ratio	Lower	Upper
Regularly lived in poverty in the past	.000	1.95	1.42	2.67
Long-term illness or disability	.000	2.30	1.68	3.17
Age:				
18-34 (ref)	.000			
35-44	.000	0.27	0.19	0.40
45-54	.000	0.40	0.27	0.60
55-64	.000	0.24	0.16	0.37
65-74	.004	0.51	0.31	0.81
75+	.064	0.54	0.28	1.04
Number of months unemployed in the last 5 years:				
None (ref)	.000			
Less than 12 months	.002	2.75	1.45	5.21
More than 12 months	.002	2.43	1.38	4.27
Satisfaction with personal relationships:				
Very/fairly satisfied (ref)	.000			
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	.004	2.46	1.33	4.54
Slightly/very dissatisfied	.001	4.79	1.98	11.61
Income quintile:				
Highest (ref)	.000			
Second highest	.000	2.26	1.58	3.22
Middle	.000	3.58	2.42	5.28
Second lowest	.000	3.94	2.55	6.01
Lowest	.000	4.49	2.95	6.84
Social and political engagement:				
Yes, member of organisation/s	.000	0.49	0.37	0.63
Female	.875	1.02	0.79	1.32
Religion:				
Protestant (ref)	.000			
Catholic	.000	1.86	1.34	2.48
None/Other	.145	1.38	0.89	2.13

## 14. Model three – Lacking all

Model three is an assessment of the impact of the same factors on the likelihood that respondents are lacking three or more necessities. This time it includes those respondents who gave a specific reason why they did not participate in a social activity.

The full model was statistically significant at the .000 level, Chi-square value was 443.37 with 19 degrees of freedom. This indicated that the model was able to differentiate between those who had and did not have, three or more basic necessities (including those who gave a specific reason). The model as a whole explained between 27 per cent (Cox and Snell R squared) and 37 per cent (Nagelkerke R squared) of the variance in being deprived of three or more basic necessities and not being deprived. The model correctly classified 76 per cent of cases overall. The Hosmer and Lemeshow Test of goodness of fit again clarified support for the model producing a Chi-square value of 10.28 and a significance level of .246.

Once again, income is a strong predictor of the dependent variable. The model discriminates well between those in the most advantaged income group and those in the least advantaged income band. Individuals in the lowest income group have an odds ratio of 4.49, indicating they are 4.49 times more likely to lack socially perceived necessities. However, model three's discriminatory power in terms of income is weaker than that of model two (where the lowest income band had an odds ratio of 5.61) and much more weak than model one (where the lowest income group had an odds ratio of 7.14).

In model three, the strongest predictor of lacking necessities for any reason was the condition of personal relationships, with those least satisfied with their relationships being almost five times more likely to be deprived under this measure (odds ratio of 4.79).

Respondents who had lived in poverty in the past showed slightly less likelihood of being deprived in this model (odds ratio of 1.95) compared to model two (2.04). The odds of being deprived were also very similar for people reporting a long-term illness or disability in this model (2.30) than they were in model two (2.45).

Age showed a similar pattern to model two – risk ratios are less than 1, indicating the greater likelihood of a negative response to this question. However, as age increases, the odds ratios also increase. For example, compared to the youngest age group, 73% of 35 to 44 year olds will probably report no deprivation (a risk ratio of 0.27). Meanwhile less than half of those aged 75 and over will report no deprivation (a risk ratio of 0.54).

Results for respondents who experienced a spell of unemployment in the past five years compared to those who did not experience this event were very similar in this model than they were in model two. The same pattern emerged – people who had a short term spell of unemployment in the past five years (up to 12 months) had an odds ratio of 2.75 indicating they were 2.75 times more likely to be lacking three or more basic necessities. People with longer term spells of unemployment in the past five years (12 months or more) an odds ratio of 2.43.

For individuals with current social and political engagement, the odds ratio is less than 1 (0.49) indicating they are half as likely as those with no current social and or political involvement, to be captured under this measure. By including all respondents, even those who gave a specific reason for not participating in social activities, the findings are similar to model one (odds ratio of 0.43) and model two (odds ratio of 0.60).

Once again, gender was not significant with a value greater than .05 (significance value of .875). Religion proved a significant factor in this model also, with Catholics being almost twice as likely as Protestants to report lacking three or more socially perceived necessities (risk ratio of 1.86), controlling for other factors in the model. The variable of showing 'None/Other' religion was not significant.

## **15. Model four – Low overall life satisfaction**

Model four assesses the impact of the same factors on the likelihood that respondents report low overall life satisfaction from a scale of 0-10. Differentiating between high and low life satisfaction is based on the same calculation stipulated in the Public Health Outcomes Framework (DH, 2012b), as a way of evaluating the success of public health initiatives. The framework calculates low well-being based on responses to the set of four ONS well-being questions, one of which is:

The percentage of respondents scoring 0-6 to the question: *“Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?”*

The significance of this calculation is manifested through the Department of Health’s plan to use the information on well-being as part of a needs assessment blueprint.

*Local data on well-being is likely to be a key component of local Joint Strategic Needs Assessments and form an important part of the work of local Health and Well-being Boards. (DH, 2012b: 75)*

It is important to know then whether a reflective measure like life satisfaction is vulnerable to the phenomenon of adaptation, that is, where people rate their satisfaction relative to their own past experience. According to Burchardt (2013) the concern is that someone who has been long-term deprived may report high levels of satisfaction, while a wealthier person who experiences a temporary setback might report lower life satisfaction, '*with the paradoxical implications for policy priorities.*' (2013: 4).

Findings from the qualitative data strongly suggest that a number of factors are major influencing elements in the perception of life satisfaction, not least having good personal relationships and a sense of agency. The qualitative findings are also endorsed by the literature on adaptation and aspirations and expectations. If this is the case, then there would be serious implications for any policies that use well-being data to calculate objective needs assessments.

Logistic regression was performed to assess the impact of the same set of predictive independent variables used in models one, two and three, with responses to the overall life satisfaction question as the dependent variable.

The full model was statistically significant at the .000 level, Chi-square value was 297.20 with 19 degrees of freedom. This indicated that the model was able to differentiate between those who had a low life satisfaction score and those who had a higher life satisfaction score. The model as a whole explained between 19 per cent (Cox and Snell R squared) and 28 per cent (Nagelkerke R squared) of the variance in being deprived of three or more basic necessities and not being deprived. The model correctly classified 79 per cent of cases overall. The Hosmer and Lemeshow Test of goodness of fit again clarified support for the model producing a Chi-square value of 8.89 and a significance level of .352.

**Table 13: Odds of reporting low life satisfaction**

<b>Model 4</b>			Confidence Intervals for Odds Ratio	
Low life satisfaction				
Independent variables	Significance level	Odds Ratio	Lower	Upper
Regularly lived in poverty in the past	.000	2.48	1.86	3.31
Long-term illness or disability	.000	2.50	1.84	3.38
Age:				
18-34 (ref)	.000			
35-44	.997	0.99	0.67	1.49
45-54	.018	1.61	1.08	2.39
55-64	.813	1.05	0.68	1.63
65-74	.009	0.49	0.29	0.84
75+	.037	0.44	0.20	0.95
Number of months unemployed in the last 5 years:				
None (ref)	.003			
Less than 12 months	.001	2.30	1.40	3.81
More than 12 months	.697	0.70	0.59	1.43
Satisfaction with personal relationships:				
Very/fairly satisfied (ref)	.000			
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	.000	2.90	1.83	4.58
Slightly/very dissatisfied	.000	8.68	4.79	15.73
Income quintile:				
Highest (ref)	.010			
Second highest	.058	1.51	0.99	2.30
Middle	.673	1.10	0.70	1.72
Second lowest	.008	1.85	1.17	2.93
Lowest	.004	1.89	1.22	2.93
Social and political engagement:				
Yes, member of organisation/s	.030	0.73	0.55	0.97
Female	.009	0.69	0.53	0.91
Religion:				
Protestant (ref)	.469			
Catholic	.324	0.86	0.64	1.16
None/Other	.341	0.79	0.48	1.28

Table 13 above shows that the strongest predictor of reporting low overall life satisfaction scores was the poor status of an individual's personal relationships, recording an odds ratio of 8.68. This indicates that respondents who were (slightly or very) dissatisfied with their personal relationships were almost 9 times more likely to report low overall life satisfaction than those who were (fairly or very) satisfied with their personal connections. Even people who were ambivalent about their personal relationships (they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied) were almost three times more likely than those with good social connections to report low overall life satisfaction (odds ratio of 2.90). This result reflects the findings of the qualitative data in that people hold great sway with the status of personal relationships. It was one of the main findings to emerge from the qualitative data and resonates with this outcome – people whose personal relationships are unsatisfactory have a much greater tendency to report low satisfaction with their life overall.

Those respondents with a long-term illness or disability had an odds ratio of 2.50. This was the second strongest predictor of low life satisfaction, indicating that ill or disabled respondents were two and a half times more likely than people without a poor health condition to report low scores on the overall life satisfaction scale.

Respondents who, on reflection, believed they had occasionally, often or most of the time lived in poverty by the standards of that time had an odds ratio of 2.48, indicating that people in this situation were almost two and a half times more likely to report a low overall life satisfaction score than those who had never had this experience. In this case, the ONS question discriminated quite well between individuals who had experienced regular spells of poverty and those who did not. However, it was not as powerful a predictor as it was in model one (odds ratio of 3.49).

The age categories of 35-44 and 55-64 were not significant. Compared to younger people, individuals aged 45-54 were more likely than other age categories to have a low life satisfaction score (odds ratio of 1.61). The oldest and second oldest category were the least likely to have low overall life satisfaction scores with odds ratios of 0.44 and 0.49 respectively. This means based on this measure, older people (aged 65 and over) would be highly under-represented.

When examining the views of life satisfaction of respondents with short-term and long-term spells of unemployment compared to respondents with no experience of unemployment, only short-term unemployment was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ), with an odds ratio of 2.30. People who had been unemployed for less than twelve months in the

past five years were more than twice as likely to report low life satisfaction, as those who had no unemployment spells in the past five years. The level of significance of long-term unemployment was greater than .05 (p value = .60) meaning that this variable made no unique statistically significant contribution to the model. This too is also indicative of the findings from the qualitative data in that people who were currently unemployed, but had recent connection to the paid labour market, were more discontented than respondents who were unemployed longer term. It also corresponds with much of the research in the area of subjective relative deprivation and adaptation. It suggests that the life satisfaction question *per se*, may be more vulnerable to the processes of adaptation, than questions enquiring whether a person has or does not have certain items or activities.

Income quintile was not a strong discriminator between the most advantaged and least advantaged income groups in terms of low and high life satisfaction scores. The highest income bands made no significant contribution to the model (the second highest income group had a significance level of .058; the middle income group had a significance level of .673). Only the second lowest and lowest income bands were significant. Individuals in the lowest income band had an odds ratio of 1.89 indicating they were 1.89 times more likely to score low on the life satisfaction scale than the highest income group, controlling for other factors in the model. Odds ratios for the second lowest income had a very similar ratio of 1.85, indicating they were 1.85 times more likely to score low on the life satisfaction scale than the highest income group.

In this model, levels of social and political involvement made a statistically significant contribution to the model, with respondents who were engaged in this way having an odds ratio of less than one (0.73). This means they are 27 per cent less likely to have a low life satisfaction score, than people who are not socially or politically engaged.

In this model gender did make a statistically significant contribution to the predictive power of the model. When compared with men, women were 31 per cent less likely than men to report low life satisfaction (an odds ratio of 0.69) controlling for other factors. Thus, on a measure of overall low life satisfaction, women would be under-represented.

## **16. Summary of significant findings**

To facilitate presentation, table 14 below brings together the odds ratios for all four models with significant findings shaded in grey.

**Table 14: Odds ratios for models 1, 2, 3 and 4**

Independent variables	Model 1 OR	Model 2 OR	Model 3 OR	Model 4 OR
Regularly lived in poverty in the past	3.46	2.04	1.95	2.48
Long-term illness or disability	1.90	2.45	2.30	2.50
Age:				
18-34 (ref)				
35-44	0.42	0.24	0.27	0.99
45-54	0.49	0.32	0.40	1.61
55-64	0.21	0.22	0.24	1.05
65-74	0.17	0.47	0.51	0.49
75+	0.18	0.49	0.54	0.44
Number of months unemployed in the last 5 years:				
None (ref)				
Less than 12 months	1.83	2.48	2.75	2.30
More than 12 months	2.18	2.47	2.43	0.70
Satisfaction with personal relationships:				
Very/fairly satisfied (ref)				
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	1.86	2.22	2.46	2.90
Slightly/very dissatisfied	3.20	1.98	4.79	8.68
Income quintile:				
Highest (ref)				
Second highest	1.85	2.41	2.26	1.51
Middle	4.02	3.54	3.58	1.10
Second lowest	5.01	4.16	3.94	1.85
Lowest	7.14	5.61	4.49	1.89
Social and political engagement:				
Yes, member of organisation/s	0.60	0.43	0.49	0.73
Female	1.25	0.90	1.02	0.69
Religion:				
Protestant (ref)				
Catholic	1.36	2.05	1.86	0.86
None/Other	0.77	1.33	1.38	0.79

Having regularly lived in poverty in the past; having a long-term illness or disability; age groups 45-54 and 65-74; short-term unemployment in the past five years; satisfaction with personal relationships; lowest and second lowest income band and social and political engagement were the independent variables which were consistently significant across all models.

While the 45-54 age group were less likely to report going without socially perceived necessities (odds ratios of less than 1 in models one, two and three), they were more likely to report low life satisfaction (an odds ratio greater than 1 in model four). Meanwhile, those aged 65-74 were less likely to report deprivation or low life satisfaction (odds ratios of less than 1 in all models).

The religious category described as 'none' proved non-significant across all models.

## **17. Overview**

This main aim of this chapter was to extend the findings from the qualitative data analysis, where it was found that the frame of reference of social comparisons and previous experiences were important factors in people's evaluations of their current situations. It was anticipated that this quantitative analysis would shed further light on whether objective material deprivation and subjective assessments of life satisfaction are affected by the process of adaptation.

There are a number of important findings from this chapter which, both augment the outcomes from the qualitative data analysis, and refine the conclusions drawn from the interview material regarding these issues.

Firstly, in terms of measuring material deprivation, people who had occasionally or regularly lived in poverty over the course of their lifetime were shown to be more likely to report deprivation than those who had not had this experience, whilst controlling for other variables. The model which proved the strongest predictor of capturing this group was model one (the enforced lack of socially perceived necessities). This finding appears to contradict the assumptions of the adaptation and subjective relative deprivation literature which proposes that people who have been exposed to periods of hardship learn to adapt their expectations and aspirations in a downward manner as a form of self-protection in order to avoid the harsh realities of feeling deprived. If this were the case then model one, which is predicated on respondents admitting they do not have the item or carry out the

activity because they cannot afford to, should have been the weakest model in respect to this variable instead of being the strongest. In this way, the findings undermine the criticism levied at the enforced lack measure on these grounds.

Secondly, there was little evidence to suggest that adaptation processes were at force in respect of respondents who experienced a long-term period of unemployment over the past five years. If there had been, then the enforced lack measure should have revealed a much smaller likelihood of long-term unemployed people, compared to shorter-term unemployed people, reporting enforced deprivation. As it was, the odds ratios for these two groups were very similar.

Thirdly, income was one of the strongest predictor variables in relation to lacking three or more necessities across the three models examining deprivation. However, it was model one which proved the best overall, in terms of the discretionary power of household income to differentiate between the least disadvantaged groups and the most disadvantaged groups.

Fourthly, in model one, older people had a greater probability than younger people of not being captured in an 'enforced lack' measure. In models two and three, this risk decreased. This concurs with the findings of McKay (2004) and Halleröd (2006) in their critique of the enforced lack measure and the under-representation of older people.

The fifth important finding is the relevance of the status of personal relationships in all models, but most particularly in model four. In relation to overall life satisfaction, those who were slightly or very dissatisfied with their personal relationships, were more than eight times more likely to have low scores on the life satisfaction scale. Of course, the experience of living with financial hardship can itself place severe pressure on relationships, sometimes leading to partnership breakdown due to financial difficulties and worries (Kempson, 1996; Orr, et al., 2006; Green, 2007). For example, not only the existence of debt, but partner's different attitudes to debt was found to be a source of conflict between couples in Hooper et al. (2007). Having insufficient income to socialise outside of the home has been identified as a further source of relationship strain when partners are required to spend long periods of time in the home (Kempson, 1996). Therefore, it is possible that dissatisfaction with relationships is a reflection of severe financial disadvantage.

However, the findings from the qualitative data which found that those with poor relationships evaluated their life in negative ways, supports the relevance of social relations

as an independent variable.

Finally, a sixth significant finding is the likelihood that women and older people are less likely to have low life satisfaction scores and therefore, less likely to be captured under any measure which uses the overall life satisfaction question.

The concluding chapter provides an overall summary of the study and considers the implications of these findings in relation to current debates on the best way to measure societal progress.

# Chapter nine – Conclusions and recommendations

## 1. Introduction

In this final chapter, the main findings will be discussed within the context of the existing literature and current debates. The implications of the study are outlined in terms of the measurement of societal progress. The chapter draws on the key themes to have emerged from the study and discusses the original contribution this information makes to existing research knowledge in this area. Finally, some general observations are provided which include recommendations for further research and reflections on the strengths and limitations of the study.

Until recently, official statistics of poverty relied primarily on objective measures of relative income alone. This was based on people or households below particular income thresholds, adjusted for household size and composition, using specific equivalence scales. In the past decade, developments at UK and EU level have resulted in complimenting indirect measures of poverty (income) with more direct measures (deprivation). This is reflective of the growing acceptance that relative poverty incorporates more than a lack of money and involves the enforced exclusion from a minimally accepted way of life that is the norm in the society in which one lives. The extensive use of direct measures of poverty has resulted in deprivation itself taking on a new significance.

The importance of this development is manifested at UK level by the passing of the Child Poverty Act 2010. This enshrined the legal status of adult and child deprivation, as measured by the enforced lack of basic necessities when they became part of that Act. It also reinforced the role of enforced material deprivation and low income combined, by setting both these measures as official targets in the legislation.

However, criticism of the child poverty measure was levied by the UK coalition government soon after coming to power in 2010, for being exclusively focused on income related targets. Subsequently, a new multi-dimensional measure was proposed based on a large number of highly subjective dimensions (DWP, 2012).<sup>14</sup> Almost simultaneously, the coalition government set up a National Well-being Index for the UK which has been heavily influenced by the emergence of happiness discourses and is reliant on a significant number of subjective indicators of the quality of life (Tomlinson and Kelly, 2013).

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<sup>14</sup> The proposals by the DWP have since been blocked by the UK Treasury in February 2014. A new UK Child Poverty Strategy was published on 27<sup>th</sup> February, 2014 and is currently out for consultation.

This is unusual because up until now, such subjective indicators have rarely been used as official measures of societal progress. Economists, psychologists and sociologists have all examined the notion that subjective assessments can be heavily influenced by an individual's previous experiences, their social reference groups and their expectations. In other words, one of the principal arguments against their use has been the concept of adaptation and lowered expectations.

However, resistance to subjective measures, in favour of an objective measure of deprivation, is difficult to defend because the efficacy of the enforced lack criterion has itself been questioned on these very same grounds – that asking respondents to distinguish between items that are lacking because of a shortage of money and items that are lacked through choice, introduces a subjectivity that means answering this question honestly makes people feel their poverty more sharply. Therefore, in order to avoid the unpleasant feeling of poverty, people will make subconscious adjustments and lower their desires and expectations by declaring that the items and activities are lacked through choice.

The overall aim of this study was to investigate the concept of adaptation through the lens of subjective relative deprivation. It did so by examining the degree to which an individual's perception of their current objective circumstances is influenced by their expectations, previous experiences and social reference groups. This was investigated through the following research questions:

1. Do people make social comparisons and if so, how and with whom do they compare?
2. How does the choice of social reference group influence a person's subjective assessment of their living standards?
3. How do subjective perceptions of quality of life influence contentment with objective standards of living?
4. Do people adapt to their circumstances by lowering their expectations?
5. Could the process of adaptation influence the degree to which people report objective relative deprivation and overall well-being?

These research questions were investigated using a mixture of in-depth qualitative interviews and a quantitative method consisting of logistic regression modelling. The interviews were based on a sample of 51 respondents from low income families living in Northern Ireland. The quantitative analysis was carried out using the PSE Living Standards

Survey for Northern Ireland and focused on adult respondents (aged 18 and over) numbering 1,687.

## **2. Discussion and summary of the main findings**

Each research question is taken in turn to discuss and summarise the main findings of this thesis. This is followed by an acknowledgement of the strengths and weaknesses of the study, together with implications and recommendations. The contribution to knowledge and plans for future research bring the thesis to an end.

## **3. Research question one**

In relation to the first research question, analysis from the qualitative interviews revealed that people do make social comparisons and these are made on a frequent basis. Such comparisons tend to be narrow in scope being made with those closest to people's own circumstances. Comparisons were commonly made between, either other family members, or people in the neighbourhood. It was unusual for people to compare themselves with others outside of their social network. When comparisons were drawn, they tended to be made laterally, with others in similar situations, or in a downward fashion with people they believed to be in less favourable positions than themselves, as opposed to upward comparisons.

When comparisons were made downwards, with others believed to be worse off, the common comparator was non-material and emotional in nature, typically involving the strength of personal relationships and social support. The emphasis on good family support and close relations was viewed as a very desirable thing, a thing to be proud of and something from which people gained much pride. The envy of others was an emotion referred to in many interviews when people were contrasting their family with others that they knew.

Drawing comparisons in a lateral manner more often involved a material dimension. The phrase '*being in the same boat*' emerged as a common expression to describe the interviewee's situation with others that they knew. This expression made direct reference to the financial circumstances of both the respondent and the family or person they were making comparisons with. The overarching message portrayed by respondents was that knowing others were experiencing similar experiences brought a sense of contentment.

It is proposed here that this is in accordance with the writings of Runciman (1966) and lends weight to his thoughts on the limited range of social reference groups in which people in general engage. Furthermore, it substantiates his contention that using a narrow range of reference groups means that people are often not consciously aware of the extent of inequality in society, thus being more complacent at their current income situation. Runciman's study was carried out with a sample of the general population, so he was able to conclude that this phenomenon was more prevalent at the lower end of the income distribution. As the interview data analysed for this thesis was carried out with respondents from low income families only, it cannot compare between people at different levels of income. It can however, confirm a similar pattern of contentedness among respondents whose current circumstances were financially precarious.

This finding contradicts the assumption that factors such as globalisation, consumerism, advances in communication technology and widespread access to virtual community forums and networks have widened people's scope by which to make comparisons socially (Schor, 1998; Hamilton 2003; Delanty, 2010). There was little evidence to substantiate these claims, at least within communities at the lower end of the income spectrum.

#### **4. Research question two**

The choice of social reference group was found to be key in how people evaluated their living standards and ultimately their quality of life. In answering question one, the most pertinent finding was that making downward or lateral comparisons helped to instil a sense of equilibrium. However, when comparisons were made in an upward direction and in an unfavourable manner, that is, when people felt worse off than their chosen reference group *and* were angry at this perceived difference, this had a direct negative bearing on how living standards were assessed. This set of circumstances was not a common occurrence across the sample study, but it was a very important finding in its own right. That is because it substantiates Runciman's claims that in order for subjective relative deprivation to be experienced, a person must perceive the comparative disadvantage as unfair and view it with angry resentment.

For example, three main features can be identified in the accounts from respondents who expressed discontentment with their current standard of living:

1. heightened expectations brought about by self-development endeavours
2. enforced detachment from the paid labour market

### 3. feeling worse off financially in paid work compared to those not in paid work

However, in this study discontentment on its own was not enough to evoke feelings of subjective relative deprivation. Being aware of a disadvantage had to be accompanied with an angry resentment that things should be different.

For respondents with heightened expectations, their aspirations had been raised due to the external stimulus of educational improvement and confidence building. There was anticipation that efforts in self-development would open up the likelihood for financial improvement, for example through greater employment opportunities. Although discontentment was expressed, not all respondents in this category expressed the angry resentment necessary to engender feelings of relative deprivation.

The greatest resentment at current living standards was expressed by the small number of respondents who had recently been made redundant from their job. Even though this represented a very small proportion of the overall sample, it epitomises the degree to which enforced removal from one's normative reference group (the group from which a person takes their standards and the group to which they believe they belong) engenders subjective relative deprivation. It is further proposed that the degree of deprivation experienced among this group was more severe because the paid work in question had been well-paid with good working conditions. In these instances, respondents spoke about entering a new world away from the one they had known but to which they no longer belonged. Angry resentment was palpable and feelings of relative deprivation were obvious.

Being in a job that offered little status or financial reward was a key component in the reasons for discontentment with living standards for some people. For these respondents, their membership reference group (the specific role a person has in mind in the context of the perceived inequality) was as a low-paid worker. Their comparative reference group was people not in paid work and in receipt of social security benefits, that were perceived to be better-off financially. In these instances, it is argued that subjective relative deprivation was present. Again, this did not represent a high proportion of the overall sample but it is an archetypal example of how reference groups can either intensify or weaken the perception of inequality and the level of relative deprivation experienced. It supports Runciman's claim that relative deprivation should always be understood to mean a 'sense' of deprivation (1966: 10).

## 5. Research question three

All interviews were carried out with respondents from low income families so it can be said that the objective circumstances of each respondent was one of financial precariousness. Yet, in the majority of cases, no resentment of a person's objective living standards was apparent. It is argued here that the perceived quality of a person's life had a direct influence on how their standard of living was thought to be. When people were asked to assess their quality of family life, the majority of respondents referred to it in a similar manner to the way they made social comparisons – primarily in a non-material way and within the affective sphere, typically drawing on the condition of their personal relationships with close family members.

The main message to emerge from this section of interview data was that if personal relationships were good (and in most cases they were) then this acted as a type of buffer against the harsher realities of objective deprivation. The following quote was made by a respondent whose husband had lost his business due to the recession. The family had had to give up their home and were heavily in debt. She was reflecting on her feelings about their current situation:

*I would say we're a happy enough wee family, we're all quite contented when we're all together.*

It is proposed that resentment is diminished to a certain degree because good close personal relationships have the power to divert attention away from the realities of objective hardship. However, personal relationships in themselves cannot address the difficult objective circumstances that people and families living on low income face. There is substantial evidence which shows clearly that a household's financial resources makes a difference to children's outcomes and protecting household income needs to be a central part of government efforts to promote children's opportunities and life chances (Cooper and Stewart, 2013: 7). Lack of love in the families of respondent's that participated in the research was not evident, yet people's objective circumstances remained blighted by precarious financial constraints. This seriously calls into question the assumption that investment in relationship counselling on a large scale can address substantive material inequalities.

## 6. Research question four

The clearest evidence for concluding that people do adapt to their circumstances by lowering their expectations comes from the small number of participants who described their living standards as low, yet expressed no dissatisfaction at this situation. It is in these examples where Runciman's assertion that reference groups have different possible essences and need not be a 'group' at all becomes an important factor. That is because the point of reference in these small number of cases alludes to previous adverse circumstances or experiences which, on reflection, made the respondent's current situation seem less bad by comparison. The main implication to emerge here was a sense of gratefulness at having 'got over the worst'. Although the numbers being referred to are very small, it is still a demonstration of the power of past experiences to inform current perceptions.

Further suggestions of adaptation to one's circumstances by the lowering of expectations is situated in the notion of being 'happy enough', so long as the most fundamental essentials like heat, food and shelter are fulfilled. Yet, it has long been established that poverty is about more than simply a lack of primary needs required to keep a person alive. Since the early work of Townsend (1979) and Mack and Lansley (1985) it has been established that a reference point for poverty is when people are deprived of the living standards which are customary, or accepted by the society to which they belong. In Northern Irish society today, those standards have been firmly established as including not only material necessities but also the ability to participate in different kinds of social activities (Kelly et al., 2012; Kelly and Tomlinson, 2013a; Kelly and Tomlinson, 2013b).

The most plausible explanation for the difference of opinion between what the public believe constitute basic essentials (the things that people should have in today's society and should not have to go without because of lack of income) and life's basic necessities as explained by the respondents, is the notion of lowered expectations. In other words, a lowered expectation is a main mechanism of adaptive preference formation.

However, this outcome is not universal. Neither is it suggested that adaptation is an uncomplicated act of simple passivity. On the contrary, some comparisons can be drawn with the concept of resilience in the sense that the 'if you didn't laugh, you'd cry' attitude could be deemed a well-reasoned positive adaptation, in order to maintain acceptable levels of mental well-being and make life tolerable, such as is referred to by Graham (2011).

While not disputing the positive value of resilience *per se*, the difficulty from an anti-

poverty perspective arises when resilience to disadvantage becomes so entrenched it begins to mask levels of inequality, leading to an unhealthy acquiescence that diminishes an individual's sense of entitlement.

## 7. Research question five

Logistic regression models were used to examine the power of a number of independent variables to predict the likelihood that respondents would report the existence of a specific phenomenon of interest (the dependent variable). There were four separate phenomena examined:

1. The likelihood of reporting enforced deprivation of three or more necessities
2. The likelihood of reporting lack of three or more necessities (excluding respondents who gave a specific reason for not carrying out the activity)
3. The likelihood of reporting lack of three or more necessities (including respondents who gave a specific reason for not carrying out an activity)
4. The likelihood of reporting low life satisfaction

The predictor variables used in the analysis were a mixture of subjective and objective indicators. Their selection was informed by existing literature on adaptive preference formation, subjective relative deprivation and also from the findings of the qualitative data. For example, it was hypothesised that a person who had lived all the time, or sometimes, in poverty in the past would be more susceptible to adaptation, as would those experiencing long term spells of unemployment. This was based on the assumption that a sustained period of hardship presents the right conditions for this process to take hold, as the longer the period of hardship, the more time a person has to become used to their situation.

The first three models had particular measures of deprivation as the outcome of interest. A good measure of deprivation should be able to discriminate clearly between the most advantaged and the least advantaged groups. The greater the odds ratios between these two groups, the greater the discriminatory power of the measure (Hick, 2013: 44). In relation to objective factors (household income quintile), the model which discriminated more effectively between the most advantaged and the least advantaged, was the enforced lack of necessities (model one). The odds of respondents in the bottom quintile reporting deprivation were 7.14 times those of respondents in the top quintile. The measure which discriminated least effectively in terms of income, from models one, two and three, was model three, which included those who gave a specific reason for not carrying out

activities. Here, the odds of respondents in the bottom quintile reporting deprivation were 4.47 times those of respondents in the highest income group.

The likelihood of reporting deprivation for respondents with a long term illness or disability remained quite steady across all three models. Older people were less likely than younger people to be captured under the 'enforced lack' measure (model one), which supports claims that older people are more likely to be under-represented in a measure of this type (for example, McKay, 2004; Halleröd, 2006). Gender was not statistically significant in any of the three models.

The perceived condition of personal relationships proved an important factor in predicting the likelihood that respondents would report deprivation. Those who were slightly or very dissatisfied with their social relationships were more likely to report deprivation in all three measures, but more so in model three, which was a count of all those reporting deprivation.

Evidence of adaptive preference formation appeared to be least evident in the enforced lack measure (model one).

Within the fourth measure (low overall life satisfaction), income displayed the weakest discriminatory power between the most advantaged and the least advantaged in the likelihood of reporting low overall life satisfaction scores. The factor that had the strongest impact on the probability that respondents would report low overall life satisfaction was the status of personal relationships – people who were slightly, or very, dissatisfied with their personal relationships were almost nine times more likely to be dissatisfied with life overall, than those who were very or fairly satisfied with their personal relationships (risk ratio of 8.68). Even respondents who were ambivalent about the status of their personal relationships had almost three times greater probability of reporting low life satisfaction (an odds ratio of 2.90). This confirms the qualitative data findings, reaffirming the importance of good relationships in people's evaluations of life's quality.

People aged 65 and over were the least likely to report low life satisfaction. This means that based on this measure, older people would be highly under-represented.

Unlike models one, two and three, in this case gender did make a statistically significant contribution to the predictive power of the model. When compared with men, women were 31 per cent less likely than men to report low life satisfaction (an odds ratio of 0.69), controlling for other factors. Thus, on a measure of overall life satisfaction, women would

be under-represented.

## **8. Strengths and weaknesses**

The methodological limitations of the study are presented in detail in chapter five. It is further acknowledged that the qualitative focus on respondents from low income families may not have been fully counterbalanced by the quantitative analysis of the wider population survey sample. Particularly so as wealthy individuals are less inclined to participate in research and may be under-represented in general population surveys (Barnard et al., 2007).

Nevertheless, it is argued here that the strengths of this thesis rest in having had the opportunity to carry out secondary data analysis of the PSE's qualitative family study and the quantitative Living Standards Survey. The comprehensiveness of the Living Standards Survey, reflected in the coverage of a wide range of dimensions of deprivation of poverty and social exclusion, allowed issues which emerged through the qualitative data (such as long-term unemployment and personal relationships) to be investigated further through quantitative analysis. In combination, the different types of data have given a better sense of the whole, particularly as the different methods shared the same issue of investigation (poverty) and theoretical orientation (relative deprivation).

The research is further strengthened by the uniqueness of the PSE methodology, which provides a consensual rather than administrative basis for the identification of material and social necessities for both adults and children (see Chapter five). Many countries across the world, particularly in the EU, have followed the PSE methodology, developing the idea of publically agreed necessities of life.

This thesis has also benefited from the generosity of the 51 families who took part in the study. They gave up their time and spoke openly and honestly, giving an insight into the phenomenon of adaptive preferences and social comparisons. Their input has facilitated a deeper understanding of the way in which aspirations and expectations form part of the frame of reference for people's social comparisons. This information makes an important contribution to an area where the OECD notes '*is one where further research would be of high value*' (2013: 150).

## **9. Implications and recommendations**

Measures of material deprivation that are predicated on the individual revealing that they

want an item or activity but do not have it/do it because they cannot afford it (enforced lack) are increasingly being used to measure social progress both within the UK and Europe. In particular, since June 2010, the importance of multiple deprivation indicators has grown significantly, when the 'Lisbon Strategy' was replaced by the new 'Europe 2020 Strategy' on smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, with five 'headline targets' to be achieved by 2020 (European Council, 2010).

At the same time, non-material measures of social progress describing well-being in terms of the experience of individuals' happiness and satisfaction have become conventional metrics of life's quality. Particularly influential in this regard has been the Stiglitz report (Stiglitz et al., 2009) which stressed the importance of alternative subjective measures of social progress and the development of the UK National Well-being Index which took up this challenge. If a person experiences their life as good and desirable, then it is taken for granted that they have a good quality of life.

However, both these measures have been critiqued for being susceptible to the phenomenon of adaptive preference formation, with the inference being an under-reporting of disadvantage or dissatisfaction by certain groups said to be vulnerable to this process, such as older people and economically disadvantaged individuals. From a social policy perspective, this poses a serious problem because effectively, material deprivation measures and subjective well-being measures are now being used for assessing the success, or failure, of related policy interventions and programmes (Crettaz and Suter, 2013).

This thesis aimed to investigate the extent to which people actually do reference their own situation with that of similar relevant others, adjusting their expectations and preferences to what they have come to expect. It further investigated whether and to what degree, indicators of material deprivation and subjective life satisfaction assessments are affected by such processes. This study has concluded that people do adapt to their precarious situation as a method of avoiding the harsh realities of disadvantage and the experience of relative deprivation. The 'enforced lack' measure of deprivation appeared to be the most robust in terms of increasing the probability of measured deprivation in the most disadvantaged income group.

On the other hand, the overall life satisfaction measure was found to be vulnerable to subjective perceptions of personal relationships. People with good relationships scored highly on the life satisfaction scale and people with bad personal relationships scored low, controlling for other factors in the model. Although the overall life satisfaction question is

only one of a set of four questions incorporated into the Personal Well-being domain within the UK's National Well-being Index, chapter two has demonstrated that the questions are being used in a variety of ways. Some surveys use all four questions; while others use variants of the questions. Therefore, if the life satisfaction question is to be used as a proxy for objective need, then, according to the findings here, it would be biased against those less likely to score low – older people and women.

DSC is the Northern Ireland Executive's framework to provide a sustained reduction in poverty and associated issues across all ages. The DSC for Children and Young People consultation document (OFMDFM, 2014) has a strong focus on tackling 'multi-generational' cycles of poverty which is reflected in an emphasis on early years and family and parenting intervention programmes within Key First Actions. This in itself raises complex questions as the whole concept of 'multi-generational poverty' is highly sensitive with opinion strongly divided (Gordon, 2011). Chapters six and seven evidenced how relationships with close family members can in many cases, mitigate the harsh realities of financial constraint, with evaluations of life satisfaction being vulnerable to adaptation processes. However, objective hardship within respondent's families remain firm. In light of these findings it is proposed that the DSC does not devote sufficient attention to benefit income levels and their role in child poverty. Adequate social security income supports for families with children are an essential element of the architecture to reduce child poverty. Substantial evidence exists which shows clearly how the financial resources of the household impact on a child's future opportunities and life chances. Family interventionist support *per se* is not and cannot be an alternative to measures to reduce substantive material inequalities.

In conclusion, the analysis leads to two main recommendations:

1. The enforced lack measure of material deprivation proved to be a robust measure that could discriminate well between the most advantaged and disadvantaged. Furthermore, it was the measure that showed the least vulnerability to the phenomenon of adaptation. It is recommended that it should remain as a poverty reduction target, in particular within the Child Poverty Act 2010.
2. On its own, overall life satisfaction is not an accurate measure of objective need. If subjective well-being measures continue to be used they should be used with caution and as a complement to more objective indicators such as material deprivation.

## 10. Contribution to knowledge

The findings have a valuable contribution to make to the methodological discourse regarding poverty measurement, in particular, the measure of deprivation which is predicated on the 'enforced lack' (Mack and Lansley, 1985) of socially perceived necessities. In terms of its discretionary power to differentiate between the most advantaged and least advantaged, the 'enforced lack' measure proved the most robust. The study's findings undermine the argument that the 'enforced lack' measure introduces a subjectivity that leads to downward adaptation among disadvantaged individuals.

A further contribution to knowledge is the additional information provided to aid the interpretation of measures of subjective satisfaction levels. It provides evidence which strongly supports the belief that what forms people's choice of reference group has significant relevance on how they make judgements about their lives or feelings. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis, the study highlights some of the complexities of the process of adaptation and social comparisons. Specifically, that people's perception of how others live, and people's own prior experiences, can influence the basis on which judgements are made about objective circumstances. In so doing, it contradicts the notion that the expanse of social media, and access to mass media channels, has widened people's social reference groups by opening up virtual communities whereby social comparisons can be easily made (Delanty, 2010).

This is important to bear in mind since the evidence to date suggests that indicators of subjective well-being and/or happiness will become a commonplace measure for use in the evaluation of social policies. For example, OFMDFM are currently advising government departments on the use of common metrics, including well-being, in the evaluation of the DSC Signature Programmes (Doran et al., 2014). The Northern Ireland Executive has invested great confidence in the ability of the DSC framework to provide a sustained reduction in poverty and associated issues – not just to children and young people, but across all age groups in Northern Ireland. Findings from this study which show that, controlling for other factors, women and older people are less likely to report low life satisfaction, and the propensity for downward adaptation in disadvantaged individuals, highlight the need for cautious monitoring of any evaluative process, particularly one with an anti-poverty remit.

Currently, the contribution to knowledge made by the study is evidenced by the publication of a peer reviewed journal article (Tomlinson and Kelly, 2013) which discusses the main

intellectual influences behind the emergence of subjective well-being indicators. Furthermore, initial findings from the study have been presented at the Irish Congress of Trade Unions biennial conference in April 2014, as part of a motion to promote 'The living wage'. Further dissemination is being planned through journal articles in the first instance.

## 11. Future research

The process of adaptation is said to be a more common occurrence among disadvantaged individuals (Runciman, 1996; Sen, 1984; Lansley, 2009). It is also asserted that a proper understanding of relative deprivation requires an understanding of advantage as well as disadvantage (Townsend, 1979; Dean and Melrose, 1999; Leach et al., 2002). However, with a few notable exceptions, for example, Dean and Melrose (1999) there is a dearth of information on the rich, partly because the sampling and recruitment of wealthy individuals is very problematic. The conclusion from a feasibility study carried out by the National Centre for Social Research (Barnard et al., 2007) on the possibility of interviewing wealthy individuals helps explain the situation:

*'...there remains the deep-seated reluctance of very wealthy individuals to take part in the research, based on a powerful desire for their affairs to remain private. It is not clear how this challenge could be addressed.'* (2007: 19)

Ideally, a qualitative study involving rich individuals would prove an informative compliment to this research, shedding further light on the concept of adaptive preference formation, relative deprivation and reference group theory. It is proposed here that this is not an insurmountable challenge. The intention is to use these findings to strengthen the case for support in a research council funding application in the very near future.

A second area that is planned for further investigation is the concept of 'happy enough' which emerged in Chapter seven. The main focus of this thesis has been on adaptation and its impact on responses to the more cognitive evaluative approach to overall well-being. While this study has provided further evidence that life evaluations are affected by aspirations, there is claimed to be less evidence with respect to how aspirations impact on measures of affect or eudaimonia (OECD, 2013: 150). Being 'happy enough' suggests a form of contentment with what a person has come to expect and a blurring of the distinction between the affective and cognitive components of SWB. This is an area that deserves more attention in the debate regarding the phenomenon of adaptation.



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# Appendix 1

## Surveys using ONS's four SWB questions as at September 2013

<i>Surveys using all four SWB questions</i>	<i>Surveys using variations of the questions</i>
Crime Survey for England and Wales	EU SILC
Civil Service People Survey	Family Resource Survey
Wealth and Assets Survey	UK Household Longitudinal Study
Life Opportunities Survey	Health Survey for England
Armed Forces Continuous Attitudes Survey	Public Attitudes and Behaviours towards the Environment
Families Continuous Attitudes Survey	Health Behaviour in School Aged Children Study
Impact of FE Learning Survey	Survey of Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use
National Survey for Wales	Community Learning Learner Survey
Community Life Survey	British Social Attitudes Survey
Labour Force Survey	
Annual Population Survey	
Opinions and Lifestyle Survey	
Living Costs and Food Survey	
Taking Part Survey	
National Citizenship Survey	
English Longitudinal Study of Ageing	
English Housing Survey	
Quarterly National Household Survey	

## Appendix 2

### Thematic chart - 3. Employment

Employment	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.4
<p><b>Int 2</b></p> <p><b>Couple family</b> <b>Female</b> <b>24-44</b> <b>large town</b> <b>£751-1000 pm</b></p> <p><b>2 dep ch (4 &amp; 14)</b></p>	<p>Self and partner in paid work</p> <p><b>PAID WORK/LABOUR MKT ATTACHMENT</b></p>	<p>Both work p/t. Partner was taxi driver but had to reduce hours – nobody wants taxis anymore. Nobody has money to go out. Resp hairdresser. Only works 1 day pw. Haircut a luxury. No demand.</p>	<p>Partner wants secure job with secure hours. Needs regular hours to know how much money will be getting. Resp wants to be youth worker. Can't afford uni fees. Doesn't know if she would get grant or not. Doesn't know who to ask or how to find out.</p>	<p>Recession – no demand for service industry – no money spent in local economy.</p> <p>Lack of information – this info should be easier to find.</p>
<p><b>Int 14</b></p> <p><b>Lone parent</b> <b>Female</b> <b>24-44</b> <b>city</b> <b>£1000-£1500 pm</b></p> <p><b>3 dep ch (13,9,7)</b> <b>1 non dep (18)</b></p>	<p><b>NO LABOUR MKT ATTACHMENT CARER</b></p>	<p>F/t mum plus carer to disabled son.</p>	<p>Loves looking after family. Feels needed. Their needs come first. Relieved to get CA for son as this means she doesn't have to 'sign on the bru' – "they can't touch me till next Dec" (p14)</p>	<p>Carer status – son's condition is long-term and degenerative yet CA time limited.</p>

## Appendix 3

### Summary Chart

Respondent	Ref group	How compares?	Why	Q of L	S of L	Feelings about S o L	Any labour mkt att in family?	How long no attachment
<b>Int 22</b> <b>Female</b> <b>25-44</b> <b>Couple fam</b> <b>City</b> <b>£1000-£1500 pm</b>  <b>2 dep ch (&lt;17)</b> <b>1 non-dep</b>	neighbours	better off	knows people that are worse off	high	medium	content	<b>Yes</b>  Resp p/t work, husband disabled	
<b>Int 34</b> <b>Female</b> <b>24-44</b> <b>Lone parent</b> <b>City</b> <b>£1000-15000</b>  <b>4 dep ch (2,6,13,17)</b> <b>1 non-dep (&gt;18)</b>	Families where the parents are in conflict	better off	Was in abusive relationship. Kids better off now. Happier than when they were together. No fighting.	high	medium	content for now	<b>No</b>	long-term

# Appendix 4

## Collinearity Statistics

**Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model 1	Collinearity Statistics	
	Tolerance	VIF
lived in poverty in past	.877	1.141
long term illness/disability	.847	1.180
Months unemployed in last 5 yrs (3 bands)	.870	1.149
Satisfaction with personal relationships	.921	1.085
Social/Pol engagement	.914	1.094
Sex of respondent	.987	1.013
income quintile	.853	1.172
religion	.960	1.042
agebands	.853	1.173

a. Dependent Variable: Enforced Lack

**Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model 2	Collinearity Statistics	
	Tolerance	VIF
lived in poverty in past	.877	1.141
long term illness/disability	.847	1.180
Months unemployed in last 5 yrs (3 bands)	.870	1.149
Satisfaction with personal relationships	.921	1.085
Social/Pol engagement	.914	1.094
Sex of respondent	.987	1.013
income quintile	.853	1.172
religion	.960	1.042
agebands	.853	1.173

a. Dependent Variable: Simple Lack

**Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model 3		Collinearity Statistics	
		Tolerance	VIF
1	lived in poverty in past	.877	1.141
	long term illness/disability	.847	1.180
	Months unemployed in last 5 yrs (3 bands)	.870	1.149
	Satisfaction with personal relationships	.921	1.085
	Social/Pol engagement	.914	1.094
	Sex of respondent	.987	1.013
	income quintile	.853	1.172
	religion	.960	1.042
	agebands	.853	1.173

a. Dependent Variable: Lacks All

**Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model 4		Collinearity Statistics	
		Tolerance	VIF
1	lived in poverty in past	.877	1.141
	long term illness/disability	.847	1.181
	Months unemployed in last 5 yrs (3 bands)	.870	1.149
	Satisfaction with personal relationships	.921	1.086
	Social/Pol engagement	.914	1.094
	Sex of respondent	.987	1.013
	income quintile	.853	1.172
	religion	.960	1.042
	agebands	.853	1.172

a. Dependent Variable: Overall life satisfactiion