

Defining child poverty in South Africa using the socially perceived necessities approach

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This paper describes an approach to defining child poverty in South Africa using a socially perceived necessities method which was conceived in Britain in the mid 1980s and subsequently developed. This approach, when applied to the measurement of child poverty, involves asking a representative sample of the (usually adult) population to state which of a list of items is essential for children to have an acceptable standard of living. It is then possible to measure in a survey how many children do not have the items defined as essential and can therefore be considered poor.

The paper begins with a discussion of general issues relevant to poverty definition, and describes the socially perceived necessities approach. A justification for the involvement of children in defining poverty, alongside adults, is put forward and the methodology used to do so in South Africa is described.

The definition derived from a survey module asking adults for their views on an acceptable standard of living is presented and compared to the views of children derived from focus group work. The paper concludes with a discussion of some of the challenges of applying this approach to a developing country context, particularly South Africa where the legacy of apartheid brings unique challenges. Both challenges in the definition process (by adults and children) and in the subsequent measurement of child poverty (not covered in this paper) are discussed.

Keywords: poverty, multi-dimensional, child, socially perceived necessities, South Africa

Introduction

Governments worldwide have committed themselves, to a greater or lesser extent, to tackling poverty, and in particular to addressing child poverty. Child poverty is generally considered unacceptable for two key reasons. The first is the long-term impact of poverty on child development, educational outcomes, job prospects, health and behaviour (UNICEF, 2007) and consequent intergenerational transmission of poverty: childhood poverty ‘condemns them to recurrent poverty spells or even a life full of hardship, increasing the chances of passing their poverty onto the next generation’ (Grinspun, 2004: 2). The second is the present experienced reality of poverty and the belief that childhood is important in its own right: ‘Meaning much more than just the space between birth and the attainment of adulthood, childhood refers to the state and condition of a child’s life: to the *quality* of those years’ (UNICEF, 2004: 3, emphasis in original).

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Since the advent of democracy in 1994, the South African government has committed itself to protecting child rights and reducing child poverty. The *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* has a specific section on child rights, which are in addition to the rights to which all South Africans are entitled. The government also ratified the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) in 1995 and the *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child* in 1999. In addition, the South African parliament has more recently passed new legislation, the *Children's Act*, which gives effect to some of the constitutional rights of children. To date, social assistance (known in South Africa as social grants) remains the main arm of the government's poverty alleviation programme, with the child support grant (CSG) the central mechanism for the alleviation of child poverty. Recent commitments include the extension of the CSG progressively from the current age threshold of 15 to include all low income children under the age of 18 (Motlanthe, 2009).

This focus on child poverty sits in the context of a broader government commitment to tackle poverty in South Africa. Poverty and its eradication have been a constant theme in the government since 1994. In the 2008 State of the Nation address, the then President Thabo Mbeki declared the need for a 'national war room' bringing together various government departments to fight a 'war against poverty' (Mbeki, 2008). One of a number of Apex Priorities declared in 2008 was the development of an integrated and comprehensive anti-poverty strategy (Mbeki, 2008; The Presidency, 2008) and a draft document has duly been produced (Government of South Africa, 2008).

While there is consensus about the gravity of poverty, particularly child poverty, and the imperative to act, there is some conjecture about the meaning of the term 'poverty'. It is used in many different ways to describe a range of different phenomena and to serve a range of different purposes (e.g. SPII, 2007). It is helpful to distinguish between concepts, definitions and measurements of poverty. *Concepts* of poverty are 'the theoretical framework out of which definitions are developed' (Noble et al., 2007a: 54). *Definitions* of poverty distinguish the poor from the non-poor, and *measurements* of poverty are the ways in which the definitions are operationalised, enabling the poor to be identified and counted, and the depth of poverty gauged (Lister, 2004). The focus of this paper is on the definition process and in particular, the application of the socially perceived necessities approach to the definition of child poverty in South Africa. Furthermore, the views of adults and the views of children are also compared.

Several issues arise during the definition process which result in the ultimate goal of distinguishing between the poor and the non-poor. First, there is the question of who should define poverty: should it be 'experts', the general population, poor people, or some combination? Second, a decision needs to be made about what to include within the definition, in terms of whether to use monetary resources or living standards or some combination. Third, and related to the second issue, a choice has to be made between a uni- or multi-dimensional approach. Lastly, a poverty threshold needs to be identified. The socially perceived necessities approach focuses on the importance of 'ordinary' people defining poverty, including both poor and non-poor individuals. Poverty is treated as an enforced lack of items that have been identified by the (often majority of the) population as essential for an acceptable standard of living. However, the approach does of course also involve the role of the researcher, as people's views are obtained within the context of the design of the research project. The socially

perceived necessities approach primarily focuses on living standards rather than on resources, and is explicitly multi-dimensional.

A fairly widely accepted meaning of poverty is that it is a condition characterised by an unacceptably low standard of living because of insufficient resources (income and other resources including assets and receipt of goods and services in kind). Children can be said to be in poverty when their standard of living is unacceptably low and this is because of insufficient resources in the households in which they live. Child poverty has been measured in South Africa relation to income (e.g. Barnes, 2009a; Streak et al., 2009), individual indicators of poor living standards (e.g. Pendlebury et al. 2008), and multiple deprivation (e.g. Barnes et al., 2009; Wright et al., 2009). Prior to this study, however, a general population-derived definition of child poverty has not been explicitly pursued. One of the strengths of the socially perceived necessities approach is that the people themselves (whether adults or children) can collectively determine the distinguishing features of an unacceptably low standard of living, by giving their views in a focus group or survey.

In fact, both adults and children were involved in the definition process described here, which to our knowledge has not been attempted previously when using the socially perceived necessities approach. The socially perceived necessities approach to defining poverty originates from the work of Mack and Lansley in the UK (Mack and Lansley, 1985; see also Gordon and Pantazis, 1997a), and has been applied in many other countries including Australia (e.g. Saunders et al., 2007), Japan (e.g. Abe, 2006), Sweden (e.g. Halleröd, 1994) and Vietnam (e.g. Davies and Smith 1998). Whilst many of the studies include only a small number of items that relate to children, the 1999 Millennium Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey (PSE) included a section that particularly focused on children, and asked about 23 items and 7 activities for children (see especially Lloyd, 2006). This drew on the work of Middleton et al. (1997) in the Small Fortunes Survey. A similar approach was taken in Northern Ireland (Hillyard et al., 2003) and Guernsey (Gordon et al., 2001), using almost identical sets of questions to the PSE Survey. Also, the Eurobarometer 2007 Survey contained a definition module (module no. 279 wave 67.1) with a special section on necessities for children, the possession of which is measured in Eurobarometer 2009 in its Community Statistics on Income and Living Conditions module (European Commission, 2007). However, these surveys are all targeted at adults, and so children themselves are not involved in the definition process.

Adults have a particular insight into children's needs, either as parents or caregivers or simply through their own experience of being a child. Children, on the other hand, are well informed about their lives and pertinent issues and they have 'their own set of opinions and judgements, which, while not always the same as those of adults, nevertheless have the same moral legitimacy' (Ridge, 2002: 7). However, the point made by Noble et al. (2006b) is acknowledged: there may be some issues where a child's view is inappropriate, and where an adult (caregiver) perspective may be necessary¹. Consultation with both adults and children is therefore important, especially when the subject being defined relates to children.

¹ Noble et al. (2006b) also make the point that normative judgements by professionals may be necessary in some instances.

Nevertheless, until recently the views of children have remained remarkably absent from studies of child poverty. Ridge (2002) states that generally adult perceptions of children's needs are used and there is little engagement with children themselves. However, the centrality of children's own perspectives to a study of child poverty is now beginning to grow in prominence. Two developments have been particularly important in this regard: the CRC and a change to the way children and childhood are viewed (Ben-Arieh, 2005)².

The CRC, adopted in 1989, states that children have the right to participate in and express their views about decisions affecting them and to freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds (United Nations, 1990: Articles 12 and 13)³. Concurrently, there has been a growth in the 'new sociology of childhood' which considers the life stage of childhood and emphasises child agency, with children portrayed as active participants in society rather than as passive subjects waiting to become adults. This in turn has led to numerous investigations of children's experiences and studies of children in their own right.

Moses (2008) states that although children in South Africa were recognised as having contributed in important ways to the country's social transformations, they are still not regularly consulted. The predominant view is one of marked disparity in power and status between children and adults, accompanied by conservative notions of children's abilities and rightful place in society (Moses, 2008). However, some research studies in South Africa have shown the importance of involving children:

[the studies] confirmed the value of engaging children as partners in decision-making [...] highlighted the insights that arise from considering a child's perspective [...] illustrated the feasibility of soliciting children's views on child rights and other issues, and emphasised the importance of hearing their voices and taking them seriously. (Berry and Guthrie, 2003: 7)

There has been very little research where both adults' and children's perspectives have been sought and compared, and none on this exact topic. Sixsmith et al. (2007), in their study of children's, parents' and teachers' perceptions of child well-being in Ireland, found that children and adults identified dimensions of well-being in different ways, and that children developed more complex schema of well-being than adults. Boyden et al. (2003) examined perspectives on poverty in five countries and report a number of differences between the perspectives of adults and children, for example children were more focused on how poverty affects them on a daily basis, whereas adults had a longer term perspective; adults emphasised a lack of material possessions, while children focused on social marginalisation; and in one country, matters of importance to children were often regarded as trivial by adults (e.g. toys, going to a disco, having nice clothes). Harpham et al. (2005) carried out a participatory child poverty assessment in Vietnam and found differences in adult and child perceptions of the poor and causes of child poverty. For example, adults

² Ben-Arieh (2005) actually notes four developments which have contributed to the growth of children's active involvement in the study of their well-being, additionally shifts in the field from survival to well-being, negative to positive, well-becoming to well-being and traditional to new domains; and the acceptance of the need for a 'subjective' view of childhood alongside an 'objective' measure.

³ Although as Feeny and Boyden (2003) point out, no children participated in the drafting of the CRC, immediately disregarding one of the articles contained within it.

mentioned poor drinking water, sanitation and dangerous spaces for children, whereas children did not mention any such health or environmental issues. Children mentioned child work far more than adults. These studies suggest that there are likely to be differences in adults' and children's definitions and that there is indeed justification for comparing and contrasting adult and child views to obtain a complete picture of an acceptable standard of living for children.

The next section of this paper provides details about the methodological approach that was undertaken in order to derive adult and child definitions of child necessities using the socially perceived necessities approach. The lack of some combination of the socially perceived necessities is regarded as a definition of child poverty. The findings for both the adult-derived and child-derived definitions of child poverty are presented and compared within the results section of this paper. This is followed by a discussion about the main challenges that arose in relation to the use of the socially perceived necessities approach to obtain a definition or definitions of child poverty, issues that arose when the two methods (of involving adults or children) were compared, and challenges that would need to be overcome if one was to attempt to *measure* child poverty using such a definition.

Methods

The definition element of the socially perceived necessities approach has two main stages: first, constructing a list of possible necessities for an acceptable standard of living (using expert opinion/researcher judgement and/or through focus groups with the general population); and second, exploring which items are defined as essential by the general population.

In terms of the first stage, a list of items and activities relating to a range of different standards of living for children and a variety of aspects of a child's life was drawn up using a combination of material from focus groups with adults about, inter alia, necessities for children (part of an earlier study – see Noble et al., 2004a; Barnes et al., 2007), focus groups with children (described below), previous studies which have used a socially perceived necessities approach (particularly the PSE Survey), and inevitably, a degree of researcher judgment. The domains suggested for a model of child poverty in South Africa by Noble et al. (2006b) were taken as a starting point for considering items across a range of different domains of deprivation. This list of items was then presented to adults in a module in a nationally representative survey and discussed with children through focus groups in two provinces of South Africa, in order to seek their views about whether the items are essential or not.

The items included are indicative rather than exhaustive as there were various constraints on the size of the module (i.e. available space in the survey, financial costs and concerns about respondent fatigue). In terms of the items included, the aim was to be child focused and so more general household items were not included. These types of item can be found in other household surveys and such items have been looked at in relation to the adult population of South Africa (Noble et al., 2007b; Wright, 2008a). Their exclusion from the list does not in any way reduce their importance; the items chosen are simply indicators of an acceptable standard of living and not a definitive list.

The adult definition of an acceptable standard of living for children was derived from a module in the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2007 which is run by the Human Sciences Research Council. Conducted on an annual basis, SASAS is designed to give a nationally representative sample of adults aged 16 and older in households geographically spread across the nine provinces. The sample is based on 2001 Census enumeration areas (EA) stratified by province, geographical sub-type and population group⁴. In total 3,464 households were randomly selected for the SASAS 2007; the realised sample was 3,164 people.

Adults were asked to say whether it is essential for every parent or caregiver to be able to afford each item or activity for children they care for in order for them to enjoy an acceptable standard of living in South Africa today. There were four options as responses: 'essential', 'desirable', 'neither' and 'don't know'. The first two of the four possible responses enable the respondents to distinguish between items that they think every child should have, and those which they think it would be merely nice, but not essential, for every child to have.

The child definition of an acceptable standard of living was obtained from focus groups, as it was not possible to undertake a survey with children for resource reasons. A series of focus groups were held with children in schools in the Western Cape and Eastern Cape provinces⁵. The aim was to include children from a variety of different backgrounds who would have different experiences of growing up in South Africa. The procedure for selecting schools involved the selection of possible areas and then the selection of schools from within these areas. Wards were selected from the 2001 Census based on area type (using an urban/rural classification at EA level), income level (using the PIMD income domain score⁶), and population group (wards had to have 80% or more from a single population group). Local knowledge within the research team was used to select broad geographical areas to visit, mainly with regard to accessibility. A choice of schools within the wards selected in the first stage was available from the Annual Survey of Schools database (available on the Western Cape Education Department website or supplied by the Eastern Cape Education Department) and one school was chosen using information contained within the survey as an additional guide.

Contact was made with the principal of the school who made arrangements with a class teacher for children to be released from their lesson and organised a room; the

⁴ The standard racial classification used in official statistics, which was generated during the apartheid era, but is still used to measure the dismantling of the apartheid legacy (Klasen, 2000). Statistics South Africa defines 'population group' as follows: 'A group with common characteristics (in terms of descent and history), particularly in relation to how they were (or would have been) classified before the 1994 elections. The following categories are provided in the census: black African, coloured, Indian or Asian, white, other.' (Statistics South Africa, 2004: 12).

⁵ Permission was obtained from the relevant provincial education departments and ethics approval was granted by the University of Oxford's Research Ethics Committee.

⁶ See Noble et al. (2006a). The PIMD is a ranking of all wards in South Africa, by province, in terms of various aspects of multiple deprivation, constructed from the 2001 Census. The PIMD income domain measures the proportion of people in a ward living in a household that has a household income (equivalised using the modified OECD scale) that is below 40% of the mean equivalent household income; or living in a household without a refrigerator; or living in a household with neither a television nor a radio.

school did not have any involvement beyond this. Both caregiver and child consent were sought. Caregiver consent was obtained through an opt-out consent form before the focus groups took place. Obtaining informed consent from participants is particularly important in a school setting where most activities are compulsory (Morrow and Richards, 1996). In order to ensure fully informed consent from the children, information sheets describing the study (in their spoken language) were supplied in advance of the research and the study was also explained verbally at the beginning of the session. Participants were then asked to verbally agree and sign their name on a sheet if they consented to taking part. Facilitators explained to children that they could refuse to participate in the research at any point without any negative consequences for them.

Fifteen large focus groups were conducted, involving almost 160 children. The aim of these focus groups was mainly to generate lists of items that children (all children, children of different ages, and boys and girls) need for an acceptable standard of living, for possible inclusion in the final list of items. Analysis of the findings of these large focus groups is presented in Barnes (2009c).

Five of the schools were revisited and smaller group discussions were held with the children who had participated previously. The schools were chosen partly with regard to whether the children were still at the school and partly to give a range of backgrounds, although admittedly, the coloured population is not well represented⁷. In total, 44 children participated, there were three or four children per group and 13 groups in total. There were roughly equal numbers of boys and girls, the age range was 11-16 and the majority had IsiXhosa as their home language⁸.

The children were asked for their views on whether the items on the list are necessities or luxuries. The items were taken one by one and the children gave their opinions and debated the issues.

Results: Defining socially perceived necessities

Adult definition

Having asked adults for their views on which items on the list are essential, it is then necessary to decide on the percentage of the population which must regard the item as essential for it to be classified as a socially perceived necessity (SPN), to compile a list of SPNs based on this threshold and to perform a reliability test on the set of items.

Table 1 shows the results from the SASAS module. The four items that were regarded as essential by the highest percentage of respondents were three meals a day, toiletries to be able to wash every day, all fees, uniform and equipment required for school and a visit to the doctor and all the medicines required (all over 87%). Three items relating

⁷ There is also no Indian/Asian representation because this would have been best achieved by undertaking focus groups in KwaZulu-Natal province, which was not possible due to resource constraints.

⁸ The focus groups were conducted in either English or IsiXhosa as appropriate.

to clothing were considered essential by fairly high percentages of respondents: clothing sufficient to keep warm and dry (85%), shoes for different activities (79%) and some new clothes (67%). Three-quarters of respondents felt that a bus or taxi⁹ fare or other transport (e.g. bicycle) to get to school was essential. At the other end of the scale, the three items that the smallest proportion of respondents considered essential were a hi-fi/CD player, a Play Station/Xbox and an MP3 player/iPod. This is unsurprising as they all represent more luxury items, which would require fairly high levels of disposable income to purchase. A similar result was found in questions asked about the whole population in SASAS 2006: satellite television/DSTV, a computer in the home and a DVD player were the items considered essential by the smallest proportion of respondents (Wright, 2008a).

Table 1. Percentage of adults defining an item as essential.

Item	Percentage saying essential ¹⁰
Three meals a day	91.2
Toiletries to be able to wash every day	90.4
All fees, uniform and equipment required for school	88.4
A visit to the doctor when ill and all medicines required	87.9
Clothing sufficient to keep warm and dry	85.1
Shoes for different activities	79.4
Bus/taxi fare or other transport to get to school	74.8
Some new clothes	66.8
Own bed	61.7
Pocket money/allowance for school aged children	58.9
Story books	50.2
A desk and chair for homework for school aged children	48.7
Educational toys/games	46.1
A school trip once a term for school aged children	45.0
Presents at birthdays, Christmas	39.9
Own room for children over 10	39.7
Leisure/sports equipment	33.5
Toys or materials for a hobby	32.7
A computer in the home for school aged children	32.3
Some fashionable clothes for secondary school aged children	31.8
A birthday party each year	30.1
Own cell phone for secondary school aged children	21.8
A hi-fi/CD player and some tapes/CDs for school aged children	14.4
A PlayStation/Xbox for school aged children	12.9
An MP3 player/iPod for secondary school aged children	9.0

Source: Own analysis on SASAS 2007.

⁹ In South Africa minibus taxis are regularly used as an inexpensive form of transport.

¹⁰ This takes into account the survey weights (i.e. it represents the total population aged 16 and over in 2007).

Determining the threshold by which an item is regarded a SPN is a contentious issue. As Mack and Lansley (1985) remark, any threshold selected is arbitrary, but argue that a straight majority (that is, any item which is defined as essential by 50% or more of respondents) is as good a threshold as any other. In common with many of the studies using a socially perceived necessities approach, a 50% majority is used as the threshold in the following analysis. This cannot be regarded as 'consensual' as there is only a true consensus when everyone has the same opinion: 'a consensus implies there are no objectors' (Veit-Wilson, 1987: 200). Pantazis et al. (2006) argue that consensus actually means 'agreement in the judgement or opinion reached by a group as a whole. It does not mean that there are no individual differences of opinion' (Pantazis et al., 2006: 113). This view holds more weight in situations where a group of people discuss an issue, weigh up different viewpoints and together reach an agreement; it is less convincing for a survey situation (see Walker, 1987 for a critique of the consensual survey approach in this regard). The 50% threshold can instead be regarded as 'democratic' (Noble et al., 2004b) or 'majoritarian' (Veit-Wilson, 1987).

Of the 25 items included in the questionnaire, only 11 were regarded as essential by 50% or more of the respondents and can therefore be considered to be the set of SPNs. Many of these items relate to basic needs, for example food, hygiene, health care, education and clothing, and these are defined as essential by the highest proportion. Those items which a lower percentage of respondents defined as essential are less basic, for example some new clothes, pocket money and story books. The 11 items can be mapped onto the domains of the child poverty model discussed above; the main themes that emerge are material deprivation, human capital deprivation and health deprivation.

Cronbach's coefficient alpha (Cronbach, 1951) is a technique that can be used to test the reliability of the set of SPNs. The scale reliability coefficient alpha measures the set of SPNs with all other hypothetical sets of items. The square root of the coefficient is the estimated correlation of the set of items with a set of errorless true scores.

For the set of SPNs the scale reliability coefficient alpha is 0.7703 and the square root of the coefficient is 0.8777. Nunnally (1981) argues that reliability coefficients of 0.7 or higher are sufficient, and therefore at 0.7703, the set of items can be considered reliable. If higher thresholds of two thirds¹¹ and three quarters¹² of respondents are used, the coefficient alphas are still above 0.7 at 0.7297 (square root 0.8542) and 0.7186 (square root 0.8477) respectively.

The average correlations between an item and the scale that is formed by all other items change little when a particular item is excluded. Furthermore, the coefficient alpha for the scale would not increase if one of the items were removed from the list of SPNs. This analysis further suggests that the set of indicators is reliable.

The validity of the socially perceived necessities approach rests on the assumption that there are not large or systematic differences in the definition of necessities amongst different groups in society (Gordon and Pantazis, 1997b), because otherwise the definition of a necessity would be the opinion of one group against another

¹¹ Eight items were defined as essential by 66.6% or more of respondents.

¹² Seven items were defined as essential by 75% or more of respondents.

(Pantazis et al., 2006). In the South African context it is particularly important to explore whether there is a common perception about what is necessary for an acceptable standard of living, given the great disparities between social, economic and racial groups.

Overall there is a common view amongst adults surveyed in SASAS 2007 of what is required for an acceptable standard of living for children. Table 2 summarises the responses of different sub-groups. The white population group defined the greatest number of items (17) as essential, including all the 11 SPNs, while several sub-groups defined only 10 items as essential, the lowest number. Story books was the SPN which consistently featured in the list of non-essential items. It may be that story books, which are usually written in English rather than Afrikaans or the different African languages, are not an item that is available or meaningful to large sections of the population.

Table 2. Summary of sub-group responses.

Sub-group	Number of items considered essential by majority (50% threshold)	Number of SPNs (out of total of 11)	Number of items in addition to SPNs
Male	12	11	1
Female	10	10	0
Black African	10	10	0
Coloured	12	9	3
Indian/Asian	12	10	2
White	17	11	6
Young (16-24 year olds)	12	11	1
Old (65 years old and over)	11	11	0
Urban	12	11	1
Rural	10	10	0
Not parent	12	11	1
Parent	10	10	0
No children in household	11	10	1
Children in household	11	11	0
Not poor	14	11	3
Just getting along	10	10	0
Poor	10	10	0

Source: Own analysis on SASAS 2007.

The Spearman's rank correlations between responses of the sub-groups (e.g. male compared to female, old compared to young) for all items are generally high – all over 0.9, and many over 0.95 (all significant at the 0.001 level) - and there is little disagreement in the items considered essential. However, for certain sub-groups, particularly different population groups, there are much greater differences of opinion when it comes to looking at the SPNs only. For example, the responses of black African and coloured respondents correlate 0.7636 and the responses of black African and white respondents correlate 0.7818 (both significant at the 0.001 level).

There is some evidence to suggest that the experience of poverty leads some people to adjust their desires, expectations and preferences to what is achievable within their limited means (McKay, 2004; Noble et al., 2007b). For all but one item – shoes for different activities - a higher percentage of the non-poor than the poor defined the item as essential. Similarly, a lack of services in rural areas may mean that some rural respondents adjust their views in line with the realities of everyday life. There was a large difference in opinion between urban and rural dwellers for transport to school (78% compared to 68%, $p < 0.001$). There may not be any buses/taxis in rural areas, so not having money to pay for them is an irrelevance (of course, it may also be that the roads are more dangerous in urban areas and so a safe means of transporting children to and from school is regarded as important). The large difference for a visit to a doctor (91% compared to 82%, $p < 0.001$) may similarly relate to a lack of services in rural areas. Similar findings in relation to adult necessities in South Africa have been reported by Wright (2008b).

The above analysis suggests that there is some variation in what people regard as necessary. Previous studies, including Wright (2008b) in South Africa, have shown that when possession of an item is taken into account, the differences between groups are less apparent. This suggests that sub-group differences are not driven by a fundamentally different view of what is an acceptable standard of living.

Child definition

This section considers the contributions from children in the small focus groups about the same set of items that adults were asked about in the SASAS 2007 module. The initial impression from the focus group material was that many children applied a very basic definition when asked to say what is necessary for an acceptable standard of living. It was clear that some – often the low income groups, but not always - were thinking only of things that are necessary for mere survival. For example, one child stated: 'It's a luxury because you can live without a radio and DVDs. All you need is food and water to drink, you can live your life without the rest'. Alternatively, these children perhaps took a very literal translation of the term necessity to mean 'I don't have it, but I'm okay, therefore it can't be a necessity'. As one child remarked regarding school trips: 'Here we are, alive and well but we've never toured with the school'.

Although the children overall defined a fairly large number of items as essential, they repeatedly stressed that only very basic versions are required:

P2: [...] But you do need stationery to, but you don't have to get, not like the proper stationery, like Tippex and those things.

P3: Ja, you don't need the best.

P2: You just need a pencil and a rubber. Ja, you don't need the-

P3: You need the basics.

(white, urban, high income)

The quantity (e.g. 'One or two books is a necessity, but if you have many more then it's starting to become a luxury') and cost (e.g. 'It's a necessity, but you don't need that expensive maybe 1000 rand jacket, you can just get some others that is also as

warm as that expensive one’) of items were important considerations for the children. Thus the answer to questions about necessities is not always straightforward and cannot necessarily be reduced to a simple binary response. It is not possible to say how children would actually respond when faced with a survey where there is no opportunity to qualify their choices. The SASAS module (and thus the questions asked of children) deliberately did not specify quantity or quality of items, but these were clearly concerns, and without that information, children may be more reluctant to define an item as necessary.

A practical justification was given for many items that were defined as necessities, for example story books (e.g. ‘I think it depends, you know if, if you buy books that has life skills in it, that can help you with your life in the future, but if it’s books that don’t really mean anything...’) and hobbies/toys (e.g. ‘Because your hobby may become a skill later, to earn a living’). The importance of education was also clearly expressed, and items other than school fees, uniform and equipment were justified as necessities in terms of their educational value, or conversely were argued to be luxuries because they might distract a child in school or when studying at home.

At either end of the necessity-luxury spectrum there were various items which were almost unanimously defined as such. These can be seen in the bottom half of Figure 1, which is an attempt to bring together the information from SASAS and the small focus groups in order to compare the views of adults and children respectively for all items. Each item is positioned on a scale ranging from necessity to luxury. It is easier to do this for the adult views where the actual percentage responding ‘essential’ is known. Given that the focus here is on necessities rather than luxuries, the discussion will mainly look at the items generally perceived to be necessities by children and the reasons given for this, particularly where this is at odds with the views of adults.

Six items – three meals a day, toiletries to be able to wash every day, all school fees, uniform and equipment, a visit to the doctor when ill and all medicines required, transport to school, and clothing sufficient to keep warm and dry – were regarded as necessities by most children in the focus groups. With the exception of transport to school, these are all items that adults regarded as particularly important. Children universally considered transport to school to be necessary for those children who live a distance from the school (some children live very close and are able to walk), as the following quote illustrates:

Facilitator: So is it a necessity or luxury to have taxi or bus fare?

All: Necessity.

P3: Otherwise you can’t come to school, it’s too far to walk.

P4: And if you are a girl you can’t be asking people for lifts, it’s dangerous you can lose your life. Train fare is important, I have to come to school.

P1: You can miss out on education if you can’t come to school.
(black African, urban, low income)

Other items which were much more favourably regarded by children than adults (and overall seen to be necessities by children but not by adults) include sports or leisure

equipment/toys or materials for a hobby¹³, a cell phone, educational toys and a school trip.

In terms of a school trip, the main reasons given were that it is important to see new places and meet new people (e.g. 'It's good to see different places, see where history took place'). School trips were, however, generally regarded as a necessity only if they are an educational experience: 'Once a year, I think it might be necessary once a year, but I mean you've got to learn something from the trip, you can't go for the fun of it'.

The main reasons given for a cell phone being a necessity were to do with safety, for use in emergencies, and for communicating with parents, as the quotes below demonstrate. It is interesting to note that children in rural groups talked about using a cell phone at home, presumably in the absence of a landline, whereas other groups gave examples of needing a cell phone when they are away from home.

P1: It's a necessity because when you are lost your family can reach you and also when your family doesn't know where you are they can find you.

P3: It also helps if your mother is away and needs to communicate with you when you are at home.

(black African, rural, low income)

P2: Not like a really expensive one, just to like be in contact like with your parents.

P1: Ja, necessity, but not one that's like 10,000 Rand, just like a little phone.

P3: Because you might need it for emergencies and things like that.

(white, urban, high income)

Having educational toys at home was simply seen as a way of improving performance at school. In terms of non-educational toys and materials for a hobby, one reason given in a few focus groups for hobbies being necessary was that it is important if your hobby becomes something you do as a job later in life. Toys and hobbies were also seen as important for keeping children occupied and out of mischief:

A necessity, like boys in particular, sometimes they need a hobby to keep them busy, like then they won't do bad stuff and steal. It will keep them busy and they won't, their attention will be at the hobby and not at other bad stuff. (white and coloured, rural, middle income)

However, many children remarked that it is not necessary to have expensive toys or hobbies, for example one child stated: 'So you get, ja, a ball, a simple ball. But I mean for girls probably crayons and a little bit of paper or just a book'.

On the other hand, there were items that adults considered necessary but children did not, for example new clothes and pocket money. Children frequently remarked that as long as clothes are in good condition (i.e. not torn and without holes) and clean then it is fine to wear them.

It can be a necessity or a luxury, but I think mostly it's a luxury, because if second-hand clothes are still good and there's not, it's not damaged or something, you can wear, there will be nothing wrong with it, at least you have clothes. But to buy new clothes every

¹³ Sports equipment and toys or materials for a hobby were listed separately, but it became apparent in the child focus groups that sport was often regarded as a hobby and therefore the two items were conflated.

time, and somebody gave you clothes and you don't want to wear it, it's a waste, and there are charities you can give the clothes to. It's not necessary to buy new clothes for every event. (white and coloured, rural, middle income)

However, some children did express the importance of having new clothes in order to present themselves respectably:

All: It's a necessity.

Facilitator: Why?

P1: Because if you need to go to *E* urgently, to the hospital for example, you need to wear a new jersey, you can't wear an old one.

P2: People will laugh at you if you wear a jersey that's handed down. They'll say you are wearing your big sister's jersey.

P4: You may not even like your sister's jersey but you end up being laughed at anyway. (black African, rural, low income)

With regard to pocket money, a number of focus group participants were concerned that children would buy things they do not need (ranging from sweets to drugs) and therefore it would be better for parents to buy items for them. The following quote illustrates this point:

P1: It's a luxury, your parents can get you what you need. You can get into all sorts with pocket money anyway, you can end up buying and smoking drugs.

All: True.

P3: Or buy cigarettes.

P1: Your parents won't see what you are doing with your money.

Facilitator: So it's better for them to buy things for you?

All: Yes.

P3: It's best if they ask you what you need and buy it for you. (black African, rural, low income)

Conversely, some thought that pocket money is a necessity in case of emergencies and some felt that it could be used to buy food. The latter comment was made in low income groups, where children linked pocket money to buying food. Other groups, however, in the main saw pocket money as something with which to buy 'treats'.

While the views of the children are very similar to those of adults in many respects, there are important differences. The children gave considered responses and reasoned sensibly, and their views on essential items for children are as valid as those made by adults. There were some differences of opinion within and between focus groups, but overall children had a fairly similar view of what is necessary for children to have an acceptable standard of living.

To conclude the definition process, it is necessary to decide on a poverty threshold that separates the poor from the non-poor. Using the socially perceived necessities approach this means deciding how many of the SPNs a person must be without to be considered poor, or calculating a weighted summary of lacked items (e.g. Halleröd, 1994). This is usually resolved through a statistical process as part of the measurement of poverty and is not discussed further here.

Discussion: challenges

There are numerous challenges in the application of the socially perceived necessities approach to South Africa, in the involvement of children in a quantitative survey, and in the measurement of the definition derived from a socially perceived necessities approach.

A priori, a key challenge of applying the socially perceived necessities approach to South Africa is that the high levels of income poverty and inequality in the country and low levels of possession of items may result in a threshold for an acceptable standard of living being artificially deflated. However, similar to Wright (2008a), this research demonstrates that the socially perceived necessities approach is feasible in such a highly divided and unequal society. South African adults have a remarkably common view about what it means to have an acceptable standard of living.

Carrying out a nationally representative survey in any country is a challenge, but particularly so in South Africa where there are nine official languages. Ensuring that the meanings of, for example, 'necessity', 'desirable' and 'luxury' are carried through adequately into each language is therefore particularly important.

The qualitative work showed the value of consulting children and from the above analysis it would seem that there are real differences in the views of adults and children about what is necessary for an acceptable standard of living for children. There is, therefore, some merit in taking account of the views of children.

However, in order to accurately derive a child definition and compare to the adult definition it would be necessary to carry out quantitative research with children. A nationally representative survey, perhaps using schools as a means of accessing children, is an important avenue for future research. This is not entirely unproblematic though, as those not at school, in many cases the poorest children, will be missed.

Involving children in the design of the quantitative survey and in the items to be included in the survey with adults and children would also be important. It was clear from the focus groups that some of the items included were inappropriate or the way in which the questions were phrased made them difficult to answer¹⁴. Consultation with children at an early stage would likely have avoided these mistakes. Indeed, it has been argued that a truly participatory approach involves children at all stages of the research project as co-researchers, and many child studies are heading in this direction (Ben-Arieh, 2005).

There are, however, two issues which have important implications for the involvement of children in defining an acceptable standard of living: adaptive preferences and children's ability to perform the task of defining necessities for *all* children.

¹⁴ For example, some questions were a combination of related items: three meals a day including at least one portion of fruit/vegetables and at least one portion of protein; a visit to the doctor when ill and all the medication prescribed to treat the illness and all fees, uniform and equipment required for school.

There were a number of instances where children were speaking from their own experiences of not having the item in question. Items were defined as non-necessities because children did not have them and their family could not afford them and would probably never be able to afford them. This does not just apply to more expensive items, but also to very basic needs such as food (e.g. 'It's a luxury because you don't always have money to buy fruit and vegetables.') and clothing:

All: It's [some new clothes] a luxury.

P3: Yes it's fine, but I don't want torn clothes.

P2: Even if it's torn, I mean what are you going to do, you have to wear it if you don't have an alternative.

(black African, urban, low income)

Various studies have shown how children from low income households avoid asking for items so as not to burden their parents (e.g. Ridge, 2002; Roker, 1998; Shropshire and Middleton, 1999; Van der Hoek, 2005). Ridge, for example, reports how children 'tried to rationalise their inability to have things in different ways: by trying to forget about things they wanted, by keeping quiet about it, by not bothering to ask, and by trying not to care when they could not have things' (Ridge, 2002: 98). Such behaviours were evident in the child focus groups, for example:

It's a luxury because it does happen that your family doesn't have the money to meet all those school needs. If you think it's a necessity you'll be bothering your mother and crying demanding those things and she won't have the money. (black African, rural, low income)

In a review of a number of studies with children in economic disadvantage, Attree (2006) concludes that 'evidence suggests that disadvantage in childhood can lead to the perception that economic and social limitations are 'natural' and normal, thus impacting on children's life expectations' (Attree, 2006: 61). In general, children from lower income groups (all black African) did appear to be more resigned and accepting of the status quo than their adult counterparts, perhaps feeling more powerless to change the situation, or less aware of how others live.

This has implications for the socially perceived necessities approach as there is a risk that children may only define a limited number of items as essential, and possibly only items which they possess.

The ability of children to look beyond their own age group and own experiences when defining child needs is an important (and related) consideration. The activity in the large focus groups showed that some children could produce incredibly detailed shopping lists for children of different ages, particularly babies, perhaps because they had younger or older siblings. However, it was apparent in the small focus groups that some children did have difficulty in deciding on the age when an item becomes important, and were often unable to look beyond their own age. It may be that children should only be asked to define items relevant to their own age group, or alternatively that the items have to be very general and applicable to all ages.

Assuming these issues can be overcome and an adult and a child definition (using quantitative rather than qualitative methods) obtained, the question arises as to how the two can be reconciled. Should both definitions be measured and the resultant child poverty rates compared? Should all the items defined as essential by adults and

children be included in a single combined definition? Should only the items defined as essential by both adults and children be included?

Those in favour of eliciting the views of children usually argue that they should be involved *alongside* rather than *instead* of adults. Thus separate measurements are not required, except to demonstrate the impact the child definition has on the measurement of child poverty. If the views of children differ from those of adults, the degree to which this alters the extent and distribution of poverty that is derived from an adult definition only can be explored.

Deciding between the other two options is not as straightforward. The threshold for an item being classified as a SPN was set at 50% or more of the population responding 'essential'. It is debatable whether this should be the survey population (adults and children separately) or the total population (adults and children together).

The SASAS, used to derive the adult definition, is representative of the adult population only, and the measurement questions about lack of child items were asked of caregivers only. Therefore, the only measure of child poverty that could be produced was the percentage of caregivers in poverty, based on a lack of child items (Barnes, 2009b). This is clearly far from ideal when measuring child poverty, where the unit of analysis should be the child.

To estimate the number of children in poverty using the socially perceived necessities approach, it is necessary then to have a survey that is representative of the whole, rather than adult, population where the (adult) respondent is asked which of the list of items all children in the household (or just a reference child) have, from which estimates of child poverty can be derived. Consideration should also be given to the inclusion of more general household items when measuring child poverty, a lack of which can be a serious deprivation. As identified by Bray and Dawes (2007) and others, there seems to be a pressing need for a survey which specifically examines the living conditions of children.

In summary, it is important to look beyond monetary resource definitions and measurements to explore the actual living standards of children. Furthermore, it is crucial to identify as poor those children who have an unacceptable standard of living *because their caregivers have insufficient monetary resources* - as the socially perceived necessities approach does.

Although there is a prescribed framework for this approach, the items are driven by the people rather than the researcher, and a poverty threshold set by the population at large is a very powerful bargaining tool in the policy arena.

There is scope to involve children in the definition process using the socially perceived necessities approach, which is not true of other approaches to the definition and measurement of poverty. Although children's participation is widely recognised as essential, it is sometimes the case that their involvement is tokenistic (Hart, 2001) and the information they provide cannot be put to meaningful use. Children can be involved in a very tangible way in defining child poverty using this approach.

There are numerous challenges in applying the socially perceived necessities approach to the measurement of child poverty in South Africa and elsewhere, and involving children in this process, but these can be overcome to produce a direct, child-focused and whole population-defined measurement of child poverty.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the children who participated in the focus groups, the school principals and other members of staff who allowed the research team to visit their schools and carry out focus groups, and the Western and Eastern Cape Education Departments for granting permission to conduct the research in schools. Professor Michael Noble, Director of the Centre for the Analysis of South African Social Policy is thanked for his oversight of the research project and comments on this paper. Benjamin Roberts at the Human Sciences Research Council is thanked for including the module for adults about child items within the South African Social Attitudes Survey 2007. Focus group assistance was provided by Lucie Cluver, Somaya Latief, Naema Latief, Nontobeko Mdudu, Phakama Ntshongwana, Nathi Sohaba and Judith Streak. The research project from which this paper draws was undertaken for the South African Department of Social Development (DSD) and was funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) Southern Africa.

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