A Disruption to Poverty Paradigms: *Emotionalism* and the Shaping of Women's Lives

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Abstract

This study aims to amplify the voices of women who have grown up poor, and legitimise their experiences in the context of a profusion of literature, research, and rhetoric which has endeavoured to speak on their behalf. It develops a conceptual framework that situates women as emotional and agentic decision-makers within an overwhelmingly structural and causational body of extant poverty literature, and in opposition to pathologised and blame-laden popular discourse. Through life-history narrative interviews and journalling, I have worked with a small group of women who have childhood histories of poverty, to gain a deep contextual understanding of their experiences.

These women have encountered the structural, material, and discursive actualities of poverty; however, the way they have experienced these differ. Therefore, as agentic but marginalised human beings, the nuances of these experiences should be foregrounded, to develop understandings of how their encounters with poverty contribute to, or conflict with, poverty as a wider structural phenomenon beyond the narratives of blame and responsibilisation. Through this study I have developed the concept of *Emotionalism*, which I propose as a practice - or praxis: the act of emotional decision-making that shapes women's lives. By understanding the ways in which women are limited by, or leverage their internal and external resources through emotional decision-making, we can move beyond current understandings of poverty as a ubiquitously constraining force, and understand the empirical ways in which women negotiate this difficult terrain.

Keywords
women, poverty, emotions, emotionalism, decision-making, life-course

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Introduction

Living a life affects considerable activity and meaning, the more marginalised (and epistemologically smaller) the life, the less it is visible and knowable; this study moves towards redressing that balance. There are many definitions available to conceptualise poverty and other social divisions which are often contested and unstable (JRF, 2015; Walter and Saggers, 2007; Pakulski, 2005). In this paper, I conceptualise poverty as a visceral and contextual experience of disadvantage, that contours and distorts a life across space and time for valuable and experiencing human beings. This research is not bounded within the sociology discipline, and instead it draws from different branches of psychology to develop a new concept which I term *Emotionalism* - the practice of emotional decision-making, to develop a comprehension of the mutual and generative relationship between women and poverty.

This research has been done in the context of a very real social problem with deep historical roots. There are now around 14.5m people (around 22% of the population) living in poverty in the UK (JRF, 2021), and there are significantly more women in the UK experiencing poverty than men (22% of women and 14% of men) (WBG, 2018; WRC, 2022; NEU, 2019). The North East England (henceforth the North East) is in particular a post-industrial economy that has suffered advanced levels of deprivation, economic disadvantage, and is the third highest low-income region (House of Commons, 2020; Metropolitics.Org, 2014). Women are disproportionately responsible for dependents (Millar, 2010), and in the North East, they further struggle for adequate wages, job security and are also subject to 80% of the Austerity burden, with cuts to welfare and services (North East Women's Network, 2018; The Socialist Review, 2020).

This study was conducted with a small group of women in the North East in 2022, using life history interviews and journaling methods. The overarching rationale for this study was to understand how women have lived and continue to live in this context. The vast majority of literature relating to women's poverty tends to focus upon their material disadvantages and constraints (Brady and Kall, 2008; Chant, 2006), and yet the Lankelly Chase Foundation (2015) found that when researching with women, they often did not focus on the practical and material realities of poverty, but were more likely to emphasise their emotional consequences. Women in the North East have been vastly under-researched, as has the emotional realities of disadvantaged women more generally. Therefore, this study will contribute critical new knowledge by understanding the ways that women's emotional decision-making shapes their lives to inform policy agendas which have the capacity to constrain or enable their endeavours. The concept of *Emotionalism* can represent a new perspective to fertilise future research which focuses on the position of the marginalised, and supports their struggles.

This paper first offers a conceptual framework outlining the prevailing literature on how poverty is experienced structurally by women as they negotiate their lives; how this manifests through public and policy discourses and how this is assumed to constrain their lives. Crucially, I will introduce cross-disciplinary theories and conclude by synthesising these various ideas into a conceptual framework of *Emotionalism*, which will be applied in the discussion section to elucidate the potential value of this idea. Importantly, I write this paper from the perspective of a woman with lived experiences of poverty herself. While this is extremely rare in current literature (Lister, 2004; Shildrick, 2018), the aim is to contribute to poverty literature and literature on women more broadly, through knowledge that is created from my own lived experiences as well as from the lived experiences of the women in my study.

Poverty and 'Emotionalism'; A Conceptual Framework

Introduction

Beginning with the idea that poverty is a viscerally and complexly contextual personal experience, which shapes women's ways of being, knowing and doing as they negotiate their lives, this review will traverse the prevailing literature that connects to, and in partial ways, explains this idea. Poverty is a deeply entrenched historical problem in the United Kingdom (Local Histories.Org, 2022; The British Academy, 2019). Just as there are many ways it manifests in the social world, there are a plethora of ways that it has been under- stood, conceptualised, and explored. This forms the broad ideas, or the 'poverty paradigms' which run as strands through

an extensive available literature. These dominant poverty paradigms have applied 'lenses' to explore and explain poverty as a phenomenon, comprising a 'patchwork' of theories, concepts, and evidence, none of which can fully explain how this is experienced in a woman's life. Instead, there is a tendency to constrain women within a deterministic trajectory of their poverty experience. As Adamkovic and Martoncik (2017) convincingly argue, poverty is not a 'one-off' state, but is complex and subject to temporal and geographical changes. Poverty research and literature can often obtusely misinterpret the ways that individuals experience it and understand themselves to be poor. As these paradigms offer only a partial view, I present an alternative concept - *Emotionalism*, and how this connects women to their poverty experience agentially through decision-making. By applying this concept empirically to real women's lives, this research will advance existing ideas of poverty amongst women.

The feminisation of poverty

Dominant poverty conceptualisations sit firmly within an objective, macro perspective. The most influential and widely accepted accounts are proffered by materialist and neo-materialist scholars, who assume that poverty is caused by a series of structural barriers which limit and constrain life opportunities (Gibb et al., 2012; Spicker, 2007; Holman, 1978). This may not accurately represent how women actually consider themselves to be poor in their own lives as contextual, experiencing beings (Adamkovic and Martoncik, 2017).

A significant body of literature discusses what is known as the 'feminisation of poverty' (Veeran, 2000). Materialist accounts developed through Marxist Feminism explore the gendered way in which poverty manifests at a structural level. Thinkers such as Walby (1990) developed the 'Patriarchy' concept to explain women's marginalisation through social and governmental structures that systematically exclude women. Further literature based on this theorise the gendered relationship between waged and unwaged work to analyse and problematise women's economic marginality (Ferguson, 2020; Toupin, 2018; Fakier et al., 2020; Millar, 2010; Millar and Glendinning, 1989; Pillinger, 1992; Lewis, 1993).

Poverty measurements are problematic in that they tend to use household or family income to calculate the extent of poverty, without comparing the different circumstances or obligations of individuals *within* households (Alcock, 2006). This has made 'invisible' the differential experiences, as well as the unequal distribution of resources, between men and women and (Millar and Glendinning, 1989; Farthing, 2017, Middleton et al., 1994). Within households experiencing poverty, women are more likely to experience prolonged periods of chaos and domestic violence, as poverty acts as a fuel for this type of conflict. Low-income women are more susceptible to domestic violence as they have no means to escape their circumstances, and many women are caught in a cycle of either evading poverty or evading dependence (Slabbert, 2016). Many women accept and maintain potentially dangerous men in their lives in order to have their needs met, and women with low incomes may face job losses, loss of income, housing, and social support when leaving domestically abusive partners, rendering them dangerously vulnerable.

Women's identities and roles are overwhelmingly associated with being a caregiver for the family. This is done within the context of harsh labour marker constraints, where women are more likely to be perceived as a 'reserve resource' in employment, which is typically low-paid and concentrated in low-skills sectors based on gendered stereotypes (Narayan, 2000; Lewis, 1992; Abdallah, 1989; Shildrick et al, 2012; Dickerson and Taylor, 2000; Pillinger, 1992; Lewis, 1993; Tilly and Scott, 1987; Mason et al., 2008; The UK Low Pay Commission, 2009). Women are also subject to what is known as 'the motherhood penalty', as they are more likely to have periods in their life that are disrupted and complicated by childbearing and child-caring responsibilities (Miller, 2010). This discrimination in the mainstream labour market has forced women into the informal economy in large numbers, thereby exposing them to additional risks such as sporadic, low paid employment, minimal employment rights and poverty (Narayan, 2000; The Fawcett Society, 2012).

An increase in divorce and lone parenthood has led to family diversification (Scott, 2017) and the vast majority (92%) of lone parent families are headed by women (Farthing, 2017). For lone-parent families, these effects can be particularly severe; lone mothers suffer disproportionately when attempting to juggle employment, education, and childcare responsibil-

ities (Farthing, 2017). Research evidences that the effects of separation are more profound for women and children as both fare worse than men after relationship breakdown (Moore, 2016). Lone parent families rarely manage to escape poverty; around half of lone-parent families are estimated to be poor (Millar, 2010; Isaacs et al., 2015).

While this body of literature explains the ways that the structural and material mechanisms of poverty for women are maintained, it does not explain the ways that women may internalise their early experiences of poverty to reinforce these structural constraints. To develop these ideas further, we must turn to a body of literature that contours poverty's stigmatising influences.

Discourses of poverty; adult exposure to stigma

Within existing poverty literature, the dominant means to understand the relationship between structures and individuals is the analysis of discourses and stigma. The structural substantiality of poverty gives rise to discourses that percolate through social dialogue and interactions. This is useful to highlight the interplay between material realities and individuals, but is limited in the extent it explores the implications for both.

Spicker (2007) draws our attention to a discourse that emerged in the 1980s, based upon the work of political scientist Charles Murray, wherein a stratum of society in the UK could now be understood as an 'Underclass': work-shy, feckless, and immoral. Moral condemnation of the poor (Spicker, 2007; Joseph, 1972) resulted in a discourse of the poor preferring worklessness, welfare dependency, and seeing 'unemployment as a life-choice' (Shildrick et al, 2012:27). Characteristics were projected on them based upon ideas of genetic, psycho- logical or personality deficits (Alcock, 2006). 'Deserving' and 'undeserving' narratives have permeated and continue to permeate public and policy discourse (Alcock, 2006).

Lister (2004) draws upon Goffman's work (1968) to understand the impacts of poverty upon individuals. They are perpetually exposed to stigmatising images and language, and where stigma is internalised, the resulting consequence is shame with pernicious implications. Walker (2014) suggests that poverty is taken as a visible marker of failure, thus 'branding' an individual as a failed person. Tyler (2020) extends this further to argue that the use of stigma and shame is a widespread, crafted mechanism to control behaviour and reinforce social divisions. Such literature suggests that these discourses come to be internalised as a fundamental principle in individual's lives.

For women as mothers, they are subject to the 'nostalgic myth' of the nuclear family. For lone mothers, the stigma of lone motherhood works in concert with stigmatising discourses of the 'underclass,' positioning them as morally dissolute, socially corrosive and 'wilfully single' (Nunn and Biressi, 2010; Chadha, 2016; Adair, 2014; Hawkin and Kettle, 2000). Skeggs' (1997, 2002, 2004, 2009, 2011; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012) significant research highlights how women's respectability is deeply rooted in their ability to exhibit appropriate 'middle-class' norms and values, specifically through motherhood and labour market participation. Evans (2022: also, Brah et al., 2015) notes that discourses of the devaluation of women is tied to the devaluation of their caring labour, the belief that their dependency on welfare is undeserving, and is based around the concept of 'bad motherhood'.

Stigma and shame, however, are not necessarily the only emotions associated with poverty, and neither is there a necessary dichotomy of responses to poverty; on the contrary, there are potentially multifaceted, multi-layered, and nuanced responses and reactions to poverty amongst women. Moreover, this literature feeds directly into further literature that attempts to draw out the consequences of this process of shame and stigma which places women on a 'doomed' trajectory with minimal agency. Thus, we turn to the final paradigm that remains the only means within extant poverty literature to explain experiences and life-outcomes for women who have experienced poverty.

Deterministic outcomes; the psychosocial consequences

There is significant literature that has attempted to engage with the consequences of poverty at the micro, individual level, to explain its persistence within social structures through a process of rational internalisation. There is a growing body of literature that explores Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (Maguire-Jack et al., 2019), household chaos (Garrett-Peters et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2005), and their implications for life experiences and outcomes (Metzler et al., 2017). The starting point for this literature, however, accepts these phenomena as social problems without accounting for the intersection of context-based poverty across the life-course. Very little work has been done to explore the long-term wellbeing of children growing up in poverty (Avison, 2010), and even less its gendered effects (McFarland, 2017; Lacey et al., 2020). Wider literature explores the psychosocial consequences of poverty without connecting it in any meaningful way to the influences of these negative childhood experiences.

Poverty and deprivation are understood to be associated with poor emotional regulation, and with greater difficultly modulating emotions such as fear, anger, or sadness (Lambert et al., 2017; Javanbakht et al., 2015; Raver et al., 2015; Taylor and Brown, 1988; Dunn et al., 2018; Visser et al., 2016). McFarland (2017:744) proposes a 'chains of risk' model, which suggests that problems resulting from an exposure to poverty, will continue even in the absence of future poverty through a process of cognitive internalisation.

There is also significant literature that explores the relationship between poverty, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Mutlu, 2020). Frankham et al. (2018) highlight the ways in which poverty creates long-term stressors that may promote fear, hopelessness, erode self-es- teem, and generate a sense of powerlessness for individuals to exert control over their circumstances. Rosenberg (1965) defines self-esteem as 'a person's sense of value and worth based on self-evaluations' (as cited in Frankham et al., 2020: 405). This is based upon ideas and judgements they imagine others make of them, and by how others actually treat them, giving rise to feelings of worthlessness and inferiority (Emler, 2001; Brown and Mankowski, 1993; Sadaat et al., 2012; Prince et al., 2010). However, across literature, this is typically positioned as a reaction to stigmatising practices and there is limited development of the context-based interactions that women would experience within their own lives. The psychosocial literature places a heavy emphasis upon self-esteem for governing actions and behaviours that can shape, limit, and constrain an individual's social reality. Baumeister et al. (2003:2) argue that individual's self-evaluations based upon external judgments of them can become a 'self-fulfilling prophesy.'

Whilst this literature usefully includes adverse experiences to explain the persistence and resilience of poverty beyond the structural governing powers, it contains no emancipatory conditions for women to escape these experiences; they are 'locked-in' to a life that is inherently deficient with predetermined trajectories. It is also predominantly oriented towards rational explanations, and does not address how the underlying emotions of poverty are operationalised within actual decision-making, or how women are enabled or constrained by their context-based circumstances. It is therefore necessary to move be- yond the prevailing poverty literature, and cross disciplines towards work that has attempted to explain human behaviour outside this context.

Emotions and decision-making; poverty as a viscerally personal experience

Emergent literature within the sociology of emotions has begun to explore the role of emotions in human experience, and Barbalet (2002) argues that without an appreciation of this, our understanding of the social world will only ever be limited and partial. Leavitt (1996; also, Fan and Zietsma, 2017) convincingly argues that emotional dynamics are not merely rational, as is overwhelmingly proposed in extant literature, but involve both physical and mental processes that connect the individual to their social world. Turner and Stets (2005:215) note that 'it is somewhat surprising that sociology, as the discipline concerned with the dynamics of social structures, has developed relatively few theories on how social structures determine the arousal and flow of emotions.' Yet more surprising, this has been neglected in the study of poverty which is so deeply concerned with negative life experiences.

Outside of sociology, there is a significant body of research from behavioural psychology that has identified the connection between emotions that strongly and routinely influence decision-making (Damasio 1994; Greene and Haidt, 2002; Winkielman and Trujillo, 2007). Barrett et al., (2007:377) argue that emotions influence praxis and agency, by shaping the way in-

dividuals interpret their environment and their relative position within it. Decisions imply a cleavage, a 'breaking off' of many alternative possible futures (Anderson, 2007:183), and can be viewed as a conduit through which emotions guide everyday attempts at avoiding negative feelings (e.g., shame) and increasing positive feelings (e.g., pride and happiness), even when this is done without awareness (Keltner & Lerner 2010; Loewenstein & Lerner 2003).

Baumeister et al. (2007) propose that actors will employ both cognition and emotion to arrive at a decision which is a layered, complex, and nuanced process. They argue that instead of emotions causing behaviour, behaviour pursue emotions, and that emotional regulation is a guiding principle behind most of our behaviour. Lybbert and Wyddick (2018:710) point towards 'promising strains' of new literature within psychology, that depart from conventional economic concepts to understand the movement out of poverty, through studying factors that stimulate internal motivation. Such directions in poverty research, however, remain underdeveloped within sociological poverty literature.

Where the emotions of poverty are addressed within sociological poverty literature, it typically explores shame, based on representations and relational interactions (Tangney & Dearing, 2002; So et al., 2015; Bateman and Engel, 2016; Engel, 2017). However, this effectively positions individuals with experience of poverty, as 'experiencers' of shame emotions with limited capacity to understand, process or resist this negative emotional reality imposed upon them. Martin de Holan et al. (2017; also, DeLongis et al., 1982; Holmes and Rahe, 1976) argue that while marginalised and low-power actors do possess a degree of agency, their capacity to think and act beyond this oppressive context, and to exert influence upon the structures around them and society at large, is limited (Cohen, 2005). Within this there is no discussion of how individuals may not conform to these agentic constraints.

Refreshingly, Roger-Dillon (1995) argues that while the negative effects of poverty can be profound, not all individuals will react in the same way and its effects can depend on the situation. Furthermore, as Watson and Tellegen (1985) point out, individuals can experience both negative and positive emotions at the same time in any given situation, which adds a complex dimension to decision-making junctures. Further to this, researchers have identified a process in human behaviour known as 'the incidental carry-over of emotion' (Bodenhausen, 1993; Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003) where pre-existing emotional conditions can influence and shape future emotional states. Therefore, emotions can accumulate over different life periods and have implications upon decision-making across the life-course. Guyon-Harris et al. (2017) argue that an important area for critical enquiry is the examination of adaptation and change over time; which adversity has the most negative impacts, and which offers the greatest support, protection, or opportunities for emancipation. Paternoster and Pogarsky (2009) argue that individuals do not simply respond to the roles and institutions with which they are involved; instead, they act with human agency to make choices and enforce these choices upon the world. Creed et al. (2014) call for a greater need to understand how people make sense of themselves within their relative contexts as socially and emotionally embedded beings.

Summary: poverty and 'Emotionalism'; an alternative narrative?

Prevailing sociological poverty literature offers limited explanations of how individuals actually *experience* poverty during their lives, and only partially addresses this question through psychosocial explanations of lowered self-esteem and self-efficacy. Within this literature, women remain 'trapped' in a trajectory of poverty and constrained lives, and there is an extremely underdeveloped coverage of how women negotiate, resist, and leverage experiences of poverty. This creates a duality of positions that is not necessarily useful, whereby individual agency, choices, and behaviour (praxis) are only considered where apportioning blame; outside of this, they are absent and merely a 'passenger' of structural forces. The sociology of emotions, indeed, offers a useful lens to begin unpacking this. However, as a relatively new sub-discipline, it is yet to tackle issues of poverty to a meaningful degree. It is further limited in exploring how behaviours and decisions are shaped by women's emotional contexts, and how these in turn shape their lives.

It is only by blending together these ideas and research from across various disciplines, that a   better picture can begin to emerge. By understanding how emotions shape behaviours and decisions, we can move towards reorienting the positionality of the embodied experiences of actual women, away from pathologised blame. Such a conceptual framework constitutes the new concept of *Emotionalism* which I develop in this paper, as the praxis of emotional deci-sion-making of marginalised groups situated within the context of structural problems.

Methods

This research was conducted with a small group of women in the North East during the sum-mer of 2022. A definition of poverty was not imposed upon these women and instead, they were asked only to identify themselves as having had childhood histories of poverty. The wom-en participants that I worked with in my research were recruited through my employment at a local children's charity, and I spent some time getting to know these women and developing a relationship with them. They were fully aware of the purpose of the study and that ethics approval had been granted by Newcastle University. They were also provided a draft copy of the manuscript and given the opportunity to comment on their contribution. It is not my in-tention for this study to be generalisable to all women, but instead, it is to give an insight into the lives of women who would not be researched otherwise; to explore the complexity of their experiences, and to understand the ways in which the literature that claims to speak for them fails to fully capture the experiences and meanings that these women hold.

Biographical interviews

My primary data collection was done through conducting biographical life-history interviews to elicit information about participant's lives, and the changes and processes underpinning their experiences (Bryman, 1988; O'Leary, 2004). These interviews were guided by broad and open 'topic' questions, with specific guiding prompts, enabling an exploration of associations of meaning, and to reveal thinking processes, cultural patterns and the determinants that dominated experiences (Sarantakos, 2005). Participants were asked to elaborate on key life stages and transition moments, and encouraged to explore how the emotional backdrop throughout the life stages and transitions motivated behaviour and decision-making. In con-versations after the interviews, participants expressed the value that they had gotten from the interview; they valued the chance to tell their story, and while some had found it difficult (and others not), they found the process healing. Interviews were broken up into a series of shorter sessions in order to develop relationships with the participants, and to also prevent the inter-views from becoming over-taxing. A supplementary 'emotional vocabulary' list was provided to help participants identify complex and nuanced feelings.

Journalling

Biographical interview data were complemented by an initial journalling process, which as a method within the social sciences is relatively underexplored. Participants were given journals to write in, and asked a series of open, reflective, and exploratory questions. This provided opportunities for them to explore their own thoughts and feelings, while also mitigating my own interference. Participants were encouraged to write as much or as little as they preferred, as even summary statements could support the analysis. This aspect allowed participants the opportunity to gather their thoughts, reflect on memories, and re-engage with events, feelings, and circumstances that they have encountered through-out their lives prior to the interviews (Tuckett and Stewart, 2004). During repeat visits, par-ticipants already began talking about how they had approached the journalling, the value that they gained from it, such as 'getting it out of my head', and about connecting things in ways they had not thought of before. Through these journals, participants facilitated a co-production of their personal narratives in their own reflective space (Bazely, 2013; Schreier, 2012; Janesick, 1998). In addition, participants were offered other options to record their journal entries, and encouraged to deviate from the questions posed if they

felt that there was a topic more relevant to them and their lives. Some participants asked if they could keep a copy of the journal after the research was conducted, demonstrating that the process clearly had some value for them.

'Emotionalism' in the Lives of Women

Early childhood experiences, relationships and the emotional burden

The most notable finding from this study, was how rarely participants connected their life experiences to their experiences of poverty. They were asked to tell their life stories, but not to specifically focus on issues of poverty. This was done purposefully to avoid limiting participants only to this narrow frame of reference. They were however aware of this study's purpose, and made passing references to poverty, nevertheless, I had a sense that this was for my benefit, rather than a concern that was significant to them. Where poverty was discussed, it was something that was often described as 'normal,' or part of their reality that they were not aware of at the time, or do not remember.

Poverty itself appears more like a 'white noise' in the background of their lives, demonstrating that they are not simply experiencers of poverty, but, in fact, experiencers of a life *shaped* by poverty. This aspect is entirely neglected in every poverty paradigm, which presents this circumstance as the absolute, defining, and overarching feature of a person's lived experience, without contending with the fact that they are also simultaneously living, experiencing beings. Also, largely absent from my findings, is the effects of the stigmatising shame of poverty. There is an undercurrent of the effects that shame may have on them (in terms of managing or limiting their own behaviour), but it is not framed or generally understood as shame by the women participants, and it is not connected to their poverty experience. Perhaps this reflects the limited extent to which they have experienced the structural stigmatisation of poverty as a fundamental principle within their lives (Alcock, 2006), and how their everyday relational interactions determine their self-judgment, which is far more pervasive than shame alone (Baumeister et al. ,2003).

When recounting their childhood experiences, far more significant for the women were their primary relationships, such as parents, and the ecology of their home environment. This was described by participants in a number of ways, including, 'unstable,' 'toxic' and 'unpredictable.' Multiple reasons were cited, such as alcohol abuse, parental conflict, and variations in their parents' emotional states. Multiple outcomes were also expressed, such as physical, emotional, and verbal abuse, feeling like they 'meant nothing', 'being guilt tripped', and feeling like they received no warmth or love.

The women expressed developing a kind of 'hyper-vigilance,' or heavy reactivity to their home environment; a sense of 'walking on eggshells' and being extremely alert to their parents' emotional state. For instance, Eva expressed this as living 'for the next 5 minutes', responding to what was happening in those 5 minutes, and demonstrating a missing sense of security in what to expect at home, which also ultimately cascaded into school life. Importantly, this was never separate from their experiences of the relationships around them. What was most important to the participants were affective expressions of love, care, and attention. For example, Lilly felt the lack of a loving parental relationship as something which other children have, but was not available to her:

> "I mean, lots of children have stable, loving relationships with their father and have a strong patriarchal role model in their life. But that...wasn't something that was ever the case for me."

A significant feature of a loving home is kindness, and for Eva she had to learn what this was by watching characters on TV:

> "Yeah I knew what kindness was because... when I watched TV, I used to take in how they were acting, although I knew they were acting I still took it very serious, and so I knew what kindness was."

Instead of experiences of kindness to strengthen their emotional bonds with the significant adults in their life and other members of their family, to create emotions of love, happiness and contentment during their childhoods, these women more frequently described emotions of aggression and hostility. These engendered feelings of fear, anxiety and worry in their young emotional world. Evans et al. (2005) and Garrett-Peters, (2016) argue that childhood adversity can begin to breed a sense of helplessness and limited agency, as children struggle to perceive that they can effect change in the world around them. However, there is limited understanding of how this manifests in adulthood or how this can evolve over time. From the discussion so far, we can start to build a picture of the early childhood experiences of the women participants, which contextualised their lives and planted seeds that would continue to grow as they matured. This constant and consistent bombardment of messages impacted their ways of being outside in the world. For example, Eva talked of the ways this affected her in school, the image she was presenting to the world, and the way she was perceived by others around her as a 'troubled kid.' She expressed a sense of powerlessness over this, of 'trying to change,' but seeing 'no point' when this just created suspicion from others.

Also underdeveloped in the literature, is the way these early childhood experiences shape the sense of self. For example, Lilly discussed issues with her sense of self, and never feeling that she was 'good enough.' For Eva, this was being told that she was 'nothing,' 'meant nothing' and 'nobody really cared.' The participants expressed either feelings of numbness, or a sense of trying to feel loved and safe as they began to enter adulthood.

This has left a lasting legacy in the emotional worlds of these women, on where they belong in this world and what they can expect from it. As we can see from these findings, experiences of early childhood for these women are far more complex than what is captured in the various strands of literature, which acknowledges that children in poverty may experience multiple stressors across life-domains (Evans, 2004), but has done very little to connect or contextualise them. Women's early emotional context has shaped their template of the world, what they can expect from it, and what they mean to it. This is far more harmful and capillary-like in its functioning than what the literature would suggest, invading every aspect of their internal and external reality, not at any one given point in time, but potentially across the course of their lives (Alcock, 2006). Little is known of the long-term wellbeing of children who have experienced poverty (Avison, 2010), and even less so, of girls who grow up to be women, and the complexity of their gendered experiences (McFarland, 2017; Lacey et al., 2020). By following the narrative of the women's life experiences in my study, this paper begins to uncover this and move towards a new dimension of poverty research.

Negotiating adulthood in context

As my women participants entered adulthood and began to engage with the structures of society, and make decisions which would shape their lives, they carried their childhoods with them through what Bodenhausen (1993) identifies as the 'incidental carry-over' of emotions.

As with childhood experiences, the dominant element emphasised by women participants about their lives as they entered adulthood, were their relationships and the choices that they made around these relationships. This was experienced by the women in different ways. For Lilly, this was experienced as a sense of emotional obligation to her abusive and unstable father, the damaging effects that this continued to have on her life, and the ways in which this also continued to limit her. The other women began to form romantic relationships after they left their childhood home.

As Slabbert (2016) exposes, many women will entertain relationships with potentially dangerous men to have their needs met. However, within literature this is positioned as a desire to meet their financial needs, with limited discussion of the emotional needs that these women are trying to fulfil, of how they may develop a sense of obligation to fulfil the needs of others, and how this may change over time. These relationships were abusive and isolating, and women were often coerced into decisions without any real discussion. The women often lacked a sense of any alternative possibilities for themselves. This was not simply an avoidance of further financial vulnerability (Slabbert, 2016), or a deficiency of self-efficacy (Frankham et al., 2018), but it was expressed more as a sense of *naivety;* a limited understanding of what else

was available to them, or what they should expect or deserve. Within structural literature, this is posited as a structural system of adulthood dependence and systemic exclusion (Walby, 1990). However, I argue that the ways in which this is lived is in fact much more complex. For example, for Eva, this unfolded as an unbroken timeline of undesirable circumstances, where her abusive childhood overlapped with her abusive relationship; she described this as being 'stuck,' in a 'home from home.'

The other women also expressed how their reality in childhood continued to influence their reality in adulthood. For Lilly, this was the chaos and instability of her childhood, continuing to shape her reality as she negotiated adulthood with financial fragility and making decisions in a climate of anxiety. For the women who formed early relationships, these decisions were based heavily upon need, either the need to be loved and to be wanted, but increasingly as time passed, the need for financial security and material protection, especially as they entered a state of increased dependence during motherhood. Over time, this developed into a sense of being 'stuck' in their circumstances, of having no ability to change their predicament without exposing themselves to increased financial risk, ultimately leaving them to choose between an increasingly smaller range of undesirable options, accompanied by the fear of the implications of each. Literature discusses the increased vulnerability for women ending relationships, as women are exposed to a greater risk of poverty (Millar, 2010; Isaacs et al., 2015), but it does not explore the ways in which women may reach this state through their earlier experiences. 'Stuck' was a word that was used probably more than any other throughout all of our conversations. This shaped a state of dependence for some of the participants, where they were emotionally debilitated, materially imprisoned, and not in a position to change their situation. For instance, as Kay shares:

> "Yeah, I felt stuck. I felt like there was nothing I could do... like I didn't have the fundsto do anything... I thought he was doing the right thing, just doing it for is. But really,it was making is reliant, not being able to do it, and having to learn everything again."

Emotionalism is an axis that goes both ways; women's decisions are shaped by their emotional realities, and their realities in turn are shaped by their material and relational circum- stances. Therefore, women have the ability to make decisions at any given juncture, but *Emotionalism* acknowledges that women can continue to be materially constrained while simultaneously internally constraining themselves, based on their emotional realities. Not making decisions to change something is still a decision; it is a decision to not change, and it has its own emotional underpinnings. Breaking out of this 'stuck' state requires intense personal struggle, risk and sacrifice, but as women participants will demonstrate, it is possible.

The prevailing literature on women's poverty has focussed on a series of barriers and hurdles which limit women and place them in close proximity to financial vulnerability, and this has certainly been the case for this study's women participants too. However, what these women emphasised, and what this study also argues, is that the closer the women get to necessity, the less 'time' or 'space' is available for them to consider their lives in any meaningful way, and the less familiarity they have with respect, worthiness, and with healthy and supportive relationships on which they could draw and build upon the framework of their lives.

Internal resources: pivotal moments of decision-making

Throughout our long conversations, each of the women participants demonstrated moments of admirable internal resources, despite the context and content of the lives that they had lived so far. For example, Eva, in the context of her abusive and oppressive relationship, held a core sense of herself as someone who deserves respect. She has taken moments of adversity and challenge, to teach herself things that would enable her life, such as teaching herself how to drive after her son broke his leg, and teaching herself how to read and write to set an example for her daughter.

As Paternoster and Pogarsky (2009) argue, individuals are human agents who make choices, and enforce those choices upon the world. Whilst this may be significantly more difficult for women with personal histories of poverty (and as we have seen, all that it entails), it is possible. For instance, Rosi expressed a strong development of her own personal strength and resourc-

es as she talked of the 'driving force' and motivation behind her life now, which is the desire to create a better life for herself and her children. Lilly made the difficult decision to move away from her abusive father, which meant even further vulnerability and financial uncertainty, but also allowed for other possibilities to develop in her life:

> "And I think the other thing as well was that I geographically moved away from my dad..., I moved to London, and...being out of that toxic dynamic with him.... So, I started to realise that instead of my life being about him, which it had been up until that point, that my life needed to be about me. And that was what I wanted to do. And so, I did it."

Similarly, other participants talked of the moments they decided to end their relation- ships. For Eva, this required her to go and get her own phone, something she had never had before, and which she had to learn how to use. She described the moment when she decided to assertively end the relationship by declaring, 'we're leaving, I'm leaving. I'm breaking up with you. We're not together.' This was echoed throughout our conversations, that making choices to better their circumstances required a learning of new systems and processes, a navigation of new environments and contexts, and an unlearning of old habits, behaviours, ways of being and seeing the world. Whilst it is certainly possible for women without personal histories of poverty to experience this naivety and struggle, the risks of making significant changes are likely to be far less 'cliff-edge,' and they are also likely to have a greater pool of resources to draw upon, both materially and emotionally.

Some of the participants discussed experiencing moments of seriously considering ending their lives, but choosing not to do so out of love and concern for their children. Instead, they used these moments to propel themselves forward, and to make changes to their lives for their own benefit which cannot be explained by rational decision-making alone. As we can see from these findings, women live complex emotional lives in context, and therefore the decisions they make are also complex, with complex emotional underpinnings. Each of them discussed ways they had found a better trajectory than the one they were previously on. For example, Rosie expressed a sense of pride of where she is in life now and what she has achieved:

> "But yeah, I'm really happy that...I've achieved something for myself with my name on it without anybody...I'm happy. I'm proud. I'm proud of how far I've come."

All the women participants of this study expressed continued struggles, whether this be with trust, self-trust, decision making, self-love, or their role as a mother. However, despite these continued struggles, these women have faced difficult challenges, undone years of abuse and neglect, made difficult and risky choices to change their circumstances, and built a life which is worth living, not just for themselves but also for their children. They are not simply 'low-power' actors with an inability to shape the world around them, or the society at large (Martin de Holan et al, 2017); they shape their own lives, and are not confined within what has been predetermined by society. As experiencers of poverty, they have not all reacted 'in the same way' (Roger-Dillon,1995). On the contrary, there is a multiplicity of outcomes dependent upon their circumstances, and their internal and external resources.

However, they have not done this alone; it is important to acknowledge that while women make emotional decisions based on their internal resources, they still do this in context, and emergent literature is only beginning to understand this (Evans, 2022). Often what is required is based on luck; the development of a supportive relationship or the connection with a facilitating agency. However, these women still make these decisions on their own and they are not without struggle, during, or after. The next section will look at the crucial nature of external resources in facilitating this decision-making, which dislodges women from their 'doomed' trajectory to build a life which is liveable.

External resources: the value of supportive relationships and interactions

Throughout the stories of women participants' lives, the thread which runs concurrent to their experiences and which is an important aspect of their emotional reality and decision-making, is the external resources, and the supportive relationships available to women. Women require supportive relationships and connections to make important decisions that shape their lives, to legitimise them as 'non-failures', and to re-construct themselves as persons of value. These relationships can often be pivotal and transformative due to the absence of these experiences for women with personal histories of poverty in their earlier lives. Being believed, supported, and valued can make a significant difference.

There is limited evidence throughout the childhood relationships of the women participants, that there existed in their early lives any real external resources or support. Where these did exist, it was in the form of either relationships, or sometimes spaces of refuge. For example, Eva discussed what school meant to her as a child, a safe space in her very unsafe world. For Kay, this was in the form of a supportive relationship with the mother of a childhood friend, which gave her 'comfort' and a positive relationship outside of her home, where she was 'listened to,' and it is a relationship that she continues to value. This relationship also helped her reflect on what was missing from her life, and what she was trying to create as she entered adulthood:

> "I think that's how I sort of ended up with me ex, he sort of made is feel loved and wanted."

Lilly cited her 'constant supportive' relationship with her mother where she feels loved 'unconditionally,' as a significant factor behind the decision to move away from her abusive father:

> "And I remember asking my mum if she thought it was the right thing for me to do. And if she had said no, I probably wouldn't have done it. But she said yes, I think it's an excellent idea, get as far away from him as you possibly can. And so that's what I did."

Support has come for these women in multiple ways. For example, it came in the form of a romantic partner for Eva. This relationship has enabled her to travel, helped her to access education, and supported her through a difficult court process. It has been invaluable in helping her change her life for the better. For Kay, this has come in the form of friendships that she has made through accessing education, which gave her someone to talk to, share with, and a sense of safety in the knowledge that there are people in the world that care about her.

Some of the women participants talked about the crucial role of opportunities such as volunteering and education, in helping them build confidence and strength, and to begin to see themselves as a person of value. For Lilly, this was going to university, which was the thing that finally 'broke that toxic relationship' with herself. Supportive relationships and interactions were emphasised by all of these women - either at specific junctures, or as a continuous and significant source of support. Many of their decisions were made based on a complex set of circumstances, and often, they were required to summon significant internal resources to make these decisions. However, the role and value of the external resources is significantly underexplored. It is only by investigating decision-making junctures in an emotional and relational light, that this can become apparent, and the influence that it has in shaping women's lives.

Conclusions

This study has set out to explore the significant lenses, or 'paradigms' surrounding poverty, and the extent to which these can fully encapsulate the lived reality of women with personal histories of poverty. Through taking a qualitative, life-narrative approach, I have been able to apply distinct strands of this literature to women's lives, to explain certain aspects of their experiences, and identify gaps in knowledge where existing poverty literature cannot explain their lived experiences, or their life trajectories. Women who have personal poverty histories are not simply experiencers of this material entity, but they lived complex lives shaped by their poverty experience. Therefore, *Emotionalism* proposes that women experience the context-based emotions of poverty, and make decisions based on this emotional reality. These can either be further life-limiting, or life-enabling, and women are not eternally constrained to

a doomed trajectory of living a life overshadowed and constrained by poverty. *Emotionalism* allows for a deeper, but also a more complex understanding of the shaping of women's lives who have experienced poverty. It also explains in a far more detailed way, the relationship between the material and the personal.

By conceptualising poverty as something which is viscerally personal to women in the complex tapestry of their lives beyond the material, this paper has challenged, extended, and developed the existing body of literature whilst retaining what is valuable, and offered an alternative to draw it all together. Poverty is a significant social problem and one that many women continue to be constrained by. By understanding the ways in which women negotiate and circumvent this experience, we can begin to develop a means to support such women through policy, practice, and a strengthening of the resources available to them both internally and externally. Most importantly, by shifting attitudes away from women either being 'passengers' of their poverty experience, or being the cause of its continuance, we can begin to understand women as agentic beings that think, feel, and do in the context of their lives as they negotiate structures. As a small-scale study, this research has not been able to capture more widely the experiences of women with personal histories of poverty. The field of sociology would therefore benefit from further qualitative research along a similar vein, to understand in a deeper and richer way, how poverty is experienced across a life.

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