POVERTY IN ST. LUCIA:
A WEALTH OF RESPONSES

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Introduction

A major agenda of development studies is the persistent problem of poverty. While much has been said and done on poverty, this social disease continues to plague large sections of all societies, not least of all in the Caribbean region.

Today, there are over 1.2 billion people in the world living in absolute poverty and misery, and their number is growing, increasingly enveloping those who previously formed part of the rich, First World and of the semi-developed Second World. Furthermore, the gap between the richest and poorest quintile of the world’s population is twice as big today than it was 30 years ago (Hoogvelt 1997: xi).

Given the persistence of poverty worldwide, development ‘experts’ have intensified their efforts at attempting to curb this social problem. At the same time, the field of development studies has undergone major crises and paradigmatic shifts in response to widespread criticism. The persistence of poverty through the years has posed serious threats to the life span and popularity of development theory and practice.

This area of study, while apparently noble in its cause, has been accused, among other things, of ignoring the expressed needs of those groups, which it claims to be assisting. More recently, therefore, there have been calls for more actor-oriented approaches to development. However, the confusion within the development camp is no reason to abandon the ‘war against poverty.’ The fact is that poverty continues to plague a number of countries globally, and it presents itself as an obstacle to their development. It prevents them from realizing their full potential because the large pockets of poverty represent human resources, which could otherwise contribute more significantly to the national product. Instead, a significant portion of the society’s resources has to be spent taking care of the poor through social assistance or protection programs.

This is not to suggest that no strides have been made in improving human wellbeing around the world.

Living standards have been improving all over the world. Globally, real GNP per capita has increased by more than three per cent a year on average since the mid-1960s ... Many developing countries have succeeded in reducing poverty, a few by as much as fifty per cent (World Bank 1997: 29).
While acknowledging these global successes, it is evident that many countries have not had such progress. For instance, the infant mortality rate remains as high as 90 per 1000 births in Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank 1997: 29). In addition, a country may have a high GNP per capita but this figure disguises the unequal distribution of resources, which leaves large sections of its population in poverty while a small minority enjoys the bulk of the country's wealth. Hence there is still much more work to be done in the fight against poverty.

This research is set in St. Lucia, a Caribbean island of 238 square miles. In order for significant strides to be made on the country's road to development, research must be done to inspire and inform policy-makers and development practitioners. At the time of the study there were mainly two (2) official documents on poverty in St. Lucia. The most notable and widely used document that provides an understanding of national poverty in St. Lucia is the 1996 Poverty Assessment Report (PAR) commissioned by the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB). This report, which followed an extensive national survey, focus group discussions, interviews and community observations, has since been used, as a guide to policy formulation aimed at reducing poverty and enhancing the wellbeing of communities in St. Lucia. While it is useful for the national, large scale data it provides there is need for more focused and specific investigation, to provide an even deeper understanding of poverty in St. Lucia.

The PAR gives insight into some broad aspects of the lives of the poor. It focuses on health, nutrition, education, housing and community life. Additionally, attention is given to the role of local institutions and their impact on poverty. It focuses on those communities previously considered poor, but because of various circumstances and community-based initiatives, their conditions have improved. However these are communal responses to poverty and are reflective of the social capital in such communities. There is also a need to explore how on an individual or household basis, persons respond to their poverty and actively try to resist it.

According to the PAR, 18.7 per cent of households and 25.1 per cent of individuals in St. Lucia were poor in 1996 (KAIRI 1996: xi). Although poverty in St. Lucia is presented as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, caused by various factors, the role of economic and other structural factors is clearly emphasized. The issue of money, and the individual or household's position in the economy is unavoidable and forms the basis of any understanding of poverty. The Social Assessment Study (SAS), confirms the economic basis of poverty in St. Lucia. The top priority was access to permanent employment with a minimum wage that pays enough for the "baby minder, transport, buy groceries and save a little" (Cowater 2000: viii). Notwithstanding this economic underpinning of poverty, there are other broader issues that must be factored into the analysis.

For several decades, bananas have been the mainstay of the St. Lucian economy, "contributing up to one third of the employment opportunities and about half of the country's export earnings" (Cargill 1998). The economy of St. Lucia is presently undergoing major restructuring, seen in the transition from a predominantly agricultural to a more service-oriented base. Tourism has replaced bananas as the island's main contributor to foreign exchange. "In 1999, tourism's foreign exchange earnings were estimated at approximately EC$300m, whilst banana earnings stood at
EC$65.2m. (US$1 = EC$2.70)” (Cowater 2000: 2-1). As a result of this shift in focus, the SAS reports that some 27,000 banana farmers and their families were expected to be seriously affected. Moreover, social and economic policy has created the category of ‘displaced farmers’ as a vulnerable group requiring specialised support.

It is within this context that this research is conducted. While there are clearly a number of structural changes which threaten the quality of life of the average person, there is need to explore the activities of such persons in dealing with these challenges. The research also involves a special focus on children in poverty. Child poverty is perhaps even more detestable because of the innocence of its victims. Studies on the situation of children in the Caribbean would suggest that all is well among the Caribbean’s children. Advances have been made in human development over the years and these are reflected in improved access to primary educational and health services. However, these generalized indicators may not accurately reflect the diverse and complex experiences of individuals in particularly vulnerable positions. For example, over 85-90 percent of children receive primary school education, and because of this, literacy rates may be higher than in the past. However, beyond that, more than half of the children who sit the Common Entrance Exam (CEE) fail to obtain a place in a secondary school (UNICEF 1998: xxx). How does this rejection by the system impact on the future of these children? What are some of the coping strategies that they are taught to adopt as a result of these experiences? These are some of the questions that go unanswered by the statistics.

Although it has been given relatively little attention by Caribbean researchers, the problem of child poverty is of dire significance to Caribbean societies for two main reasons. In the first place, there is the fact of the youthfulness of Caribbean populations. In 1991, nearly half of St. Lucia’s population was below age 17 (UNICEF 1998: 8). Secondly, and not surprisingly, given the first fact, youth and children are disproportionately represented among the poor (KAIRI 1996:2-58). The objective of this study is to explore and appreciate the diversity of responses to poverty among poor persons, including children. To this end, we propose that there is a significant diversity of responses to poverty among poor persons.

Theoretical Background

Much of sociological theory involves a concern with structure and agency in explaining the social reality and accounting for social change. The venerable position which this debate occupies in the sociological literature, though at times more implicit than explicit, touches various social issues. While the debate persists, there has been increased recognition of the need to integrate the two features. Generally, theorists recognise the interaction between humans and the social structure; the rupture emerges in determining the extent to which one feature impacts upon the other. This long-standing debate on structure and action is at the core of this research.

Dawe (1978) opines that both social action and structure theories demonstrate an awareness of the human agency and autonomy and that both of the sociological traditions are in essence, ‘sociologies of social action.’ They simply present different views about social action. According to Dawe, this concern with the relationship between the individual and society (and the tension surrounding it) is by no means confined to sociology, it is an existential problem. Archer also highlights the experiential foundation
of the theoretical absorption with structure and agency.

[T]he urgency of the problem of structure and agency is not one which imposes itself on academics alone, but on every human being. For it is part and parcel of daily experience to feel both free and enchained, capable of shaping our own future and yet confronted by towering, seemingly impersonal constraints. Consequently in facing up to the problem of structure and agency social theorists are not just addressing crucial technical problems in the study of society, they are also confronting the most pressing social problem of the human social condition. (Archer 1996: xi-xii).

The focus on issues of structure and agency can be seen early in the works of the founding father of sociology, Auguste Comte with his concepts of ‘social statics’ and ‘social dynamics’ as well as Durkheim, Marx and Weber. This examination of the structure-agency debate would hardly be complete without reference to Anthony Giddens’ theory of structuration whose main tents are compatible with some of the assumptions of this study (Giddens 1984). Giddens attempts to integrate structure and agency in his understanding of the social reality; he recognises a mutual relationship between the two. Therefore he does not support ideas of one having absolute control over the other. While acknowledging the constraining presence of structures, Giddens is able to identify the enabling effects of structure, and even beyond this, the power and deliberative activity of human agents to impact upon the structures as they attempt to direct their own lives.

An important contribution that fits directly with this theoretical discourse is Sen’s capability perspective, which deals with “the role of human beings, and in particular with the actual abilities that they achieve and acquire” (Sen 1997: 1959). Sen makes a distinction between two important concepts in the process of social and economic development, namely, human capital and human capability. Though distinct, the two are undoubtedly related. Human capital is seen as the agency of human beings - the use of their knowledge, skills and efforts—to increase their production possibilities. Human capability is the ability of individuals to lead lives that they value and make substantive choices based on that which they have reason to value (ibid.). This distinction is important as it facilitates a move from viewing human capital solely in terms of its value to commodity production, and as an end itself. For Sen, the more substantive value of human capital comes from the freedom that it facilitates, that is its implications for human capability. Although the integration of structure and agency will form part of the theoretical assumptions of this research, an ‘agency bias’ may be noted. This is mainly to explore the diversity of responses to poverty, thereby testing assumptions of structural determinism in poverty research.

A Culture of Poverty?

The little attention to the responses to poverty has primarily focused on negative activities, for example criminality. Deosaran (1995: 14), in refuting the myths about the criminality of the poor, calls for the need,

... to highlight the many poor persons in our midst who with pride and with dignity combine their spirituality with their limited material resources to pull themselves up and out. These
are the forgotten children of our soil as we prefer to sensati
tionalize day after day the criminal perversities of the few.

In other words, negative attitudes and behaviours such as fatalism and crime are neither inevitable nor universal responses to poverty. However useful Deosaran’s contribution, studies that emphasize the negative or non-productive responses to poverty have greatly influenced our understanding of the poor. “Most research on youth living in poverty has focused on problem behaviors: drug use, delinquency, dropping out of school.” (de Haan and MacDermid 1996: 4).

The culture of poverty thesis by Oscar Lewis (1966) is perhaps the most widely known of these. In short, the thesis states that as a result of their common experience of poverty, poor persons develop similar means of coping with or responding to poverty and these responses are so different from the mainstream values that they represent a separate culture.

On the individual level, the culture presents itself in strong feelings of marginality, fatalism, helplessness, inferiority and dependency. Individuals also possess a weak ego structure and are devoid of impulse control and the ability to defer gratification and plan for the future. For Lewis, it is these attitudes that become internalized and are passed down along generations, thus securing the perpetuation of this culture of poverty (Lewis 1966).

While the ‘culture of poverty’ is first presented as a reaction by the poor to their socioeconomic positions, Lewis goes further, suggesting that the culture itself perpetuates poverty. The features outlined above, such as fatalism, resignation and non-participation, only serve to further weaken the poor and prevent them from effectively combating their plight. The perpetuation of poverty is also facilitated by the socialization process, through which the ‘dysfunctional’ values of the culture are transmitted.

The culture of poverty, however, is not only an adaptation to a set of objective conditions of the larger society. Once it comes into existence, it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effects on the children. By the time slum children are age six or seven they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of the subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime (Lewis 1966: xlv).

This claim serves as a point of departure for a critical review of Lewis’ thesis. Far from presenting possible means of combating poverty or of undermining the ‘culture of poverty’ (if it exists in the first place), Lewis leaves his readers and policy-makers despondent about the future of the poor. They are unable to resist the predisposition to be fatalistic, hopeless and passive, perhaps because of their weakened ego structure. In spite of the age of Lewis’ theory, elements of his ideas persist, and continue to influence society’s perceptions of persons in poverty. Poverty is seen for example, “as a state in which a person is rendered incapacitated, too crippled to be independent and self-reliant.” (Khan and Husain 1989: 3).

Child Poverty

Child poverty is a particular pernicious form of deprivation because it denies human beings
the chance to develop adequately and securely from the very beginning of their lives. (Ambert 1998: 117).

It appears that children in poverty are far more disadvantaged than adults in poverty, as they are denied educational and other productive opportunities to acquire the skills necessary to secure viable jobs and lead fulfilled lives.

Not enough work has been done on child poverty in the Caribbean region. This may be due to the assumption that first, to talk about household poverty, is to refer to all persons residing in that poor dwelling place, and second, that children do not have significantly different experiences from adults in poverty. Even when various groups of poor persons are analyzed it is mainly women in poverty, the elderly and ethnic minorities that are acknowledged. For example, there is a wealth of information, which highlights the greater incidence of poverty among women than men, and the need to give special attention to the needs of poor women in development planning. One can hardly challenge such a plea. Indeed, development projects for poor women are expected to benefit their children. However, these may not necessarily take account of children’s special needs.

Thanks to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children in 1989, a greater focus is now being placed on the child.

The Convention ... promotes the concept of child protection based, not on compassion but on recognition of children as human beings entitled to membership of society in their own right (UNICEF 1995a: 1).

These commitments made to children were again confirmed by member states in 1990 at the World Summit for Children. From this perspective, children are no longer seen as objects of the will of adults, but as subjects in their own right. More recently, development theorists have acknowledged the need to include children in development research and programs. Such efforts are appreciated for their twofold benefits:

Evidence suggests that early investments in the development of the whole child can bring improvements in the life of a child and provide benefits to the entire society (Young 1995: 1).

Furthermore, the neglect of children in development planning results in a number of losses for the country in the medium and long terms (Heaver and Hunt 1995: 27). Development experts have also come to appreciate the value of observing children and analyzing children’s welfare as a predictor of the country’s wellbeing (UNICEF 1995: 10).

Resilience and Agency

Recently, attempts have been made to explore the issue of agency. The concept involves the power and action of individuals, communities and groups as they attempt to cope with the wider structures within which they live.

As a result of the failure of development theory to provide workable solutions to the problem of underdevelopment and poverty in parts of the world, there was, by the 1980s, an impasse in development theory. A number of new theoretical approaches emerged. Previous theories were criticized for their over-emphasis on structure and their failure to address individual
agency. This issue was particularly relevant to the study of poverty, where the efforts and struggles of poor persons had been given insufficient attention.

Another contention with earlier theories involved diversity and this issue is not unrelated to the first. Booth (1993) highlights the post-impasse calls for rediscovering diversity; a direct response to the exaggerated use of generalities and all-encompassing concepts by mainstream development theorists. The celebration of difference is meant to end reductionist methods that have themselves been challenged by the social reality of diversity. Efforts at rediscovering diversity involve the recognition that structures do not create homogenous or unique responses. Rather, human agency reveals a diverse set of responses.

These ideas are heavily influenced by postmodernist views and are valuable for the challenges that they pose to the conduct of development theory and practice. Rather than approaching poverty as a holistic, homogenous and integrated reality, there is need to acknowledge the variations that exist within this broad concept. The essential meaning of poverty may be a lack of basic goods and services; however, the elderly will experience poverty in a different way from women or children because each of these groups has different and specific needs. At the same time this is not to suggest that all poor women have the same experiences. Even within the sub-groups, there is individuality and diversity. Hence, in addition to understanding the macro dimensions of poverty, development specialists need to approach the poor at a very direct and personal level, thereby allowing individuals to relate their personal experiences.

Ramphall (1997) adopts this approach in his efforts at rewriting Caribbean radical development thinking. He criticizes the subject-object dualism that was so prevalent in earlier works. Likewise, in this research, participants are approached as persons possessing knowledge and information that is valuable. They know their own experiences of poverty, they know how they cope with these, and they have ideas on how to ease their plight.

The resiliency theories present an element of hope for children growing up in poverty and other disadvantaged conditions. They recognize the ability of children, and persons in general, to ‘achieve despite the odds’; they differ from mainstream contributions by emphasizing positive features of persons in poverty: their competence, resourcefulness, motivation, creativity and aspirations (Floyd 1996: 81). A common thread here is the factors that facilitate resilience in children: family protection strategies, the presence of an adult role model, and parental resource-seeking strategies. This underscores the importance of parenting or socialization in determining children’s effective use of coping strategies.

It is interesting that contributors to this sort of research, value qualitative research methods for their ability to yield such data: “...qualitative studies focus attention on important factors that permit children to succeed, despite social and economic obstacles” (Jarret 1997: 275). The foregoing indicates that this is by no means uncharted territory; however much of the research is specific to the United States. There is little evidence that such issues have been explored for the Caribbean, or even St. Lucia.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed method approach in the generation and analysis of data, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative
methods. Deosaran makes a strong case for it, thus justifying his own methodological choices for his ‘psychonomics of poverty’ theory.

It must be emphasized that the poor, as defined by quantitative criteria, are not as homogenous as such criteria may make them appear to be. And cognitive and affective measures of their living conditions are ways to uncover the social and psychological diversity among the poor. When combined with quantitative measures, such supplementary ones will help increase the validity and alleviation potential of poverty projects (Deosaran 2000: 51).

While Deosaran promotes a ‘supplementary’ role for the qualitative methods, in this study, these will undoubtedly occupy a more central position. The decision to give priority to qualitative methods, does not come without due consideration of the disadvantages associated with such methods. Because breadth has been sacrificed for depth, the findings are of limited value as far as their representativeness and generalizability are concerned. However, this limitation would only be a problem if general information about large groups of persons was required. Rather the concern here is with the very specific details about individual households in poverty. The aim is not to generalize about such persons but to explore the variability of their experiences in order to refute the general assumptions about them. A number of other shortcomings may be identified, but the advantages afforded with the use of qualitative methods here, serve to minimize the implications of such weaknesses (Sarantakos 1998: 53).

Mason (1996) provides a useful guide for questioning and presenting a rationale for the use of qualitative research and it serves to assist here in deciding on the appropriate research methods: “Why might I want to speak to or interact with people to generate data? Why use this style/approach instead of a more structured form of interviewing or questionnaire?” (Mason 1996: 39) For Mason the choice of qualitative methods should be compatible with the ontological, epistemological and theoretical assumptions of the study.

Those of us who aim to understand and document others’ understandings choose qualitative interviewing because it provides us with a means of exploring the points of view of our research subjects, while granting these points of view the culturally honoured status of reality (Silverman 1998: 100).

The communities selected for the research were for the most part, those identified by the PAR as poor communities. The methodology utilized by the PAR included 3 main research activities: a national level sample survey; a community level situational analysis and the analysis of key institutions and organizations. The national survey was conducted with the use of an extensive questionnaire, the “Survey of Living Conditions for St. Lucia.” In addition to the PAR, the local Department of Statistics also provides useful data on poverty characteristics of communities in St. Lucia. A Poverty Index is derived for each community using the National Census and Labour Force Survey data. It attempts to provide some indication of a community’s level of poverty by examining access to and quality of basic socioeconomic services, demographic features of the community and employment data. The Poverty Index ranges from 0.00 to 4.00 where a lower figure represents a higher level of poverty. Table 1
below shows the poverty index of the communities in this research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Poverty Index</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belmont</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>Very bad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foux a Chaux</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>Bad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roseau</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>Very bad</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: KAIRI 1996.

The sampling technique for this research is purposive. Both the communities and the families are deliberately chosen because of their specific socioeconomic features. Features such as overcrowding, dilapidated houses, inadequate clothing and food supplies, leaking roofs, dirt floors and absenteeism among school children were some of the observable indicators of deprivation among community residents. Ten families were chosen from each community, and in each case the household comprised both adults and children. The presence of children was important because of the interest with the socialization practices. In-depth interviews were undertaken, using an open-ended interview schedule, the main instrument for generating the primary data with heads of households and children aged nine to twelve. Younger and older children were observed and interacted with, but no formal interview schedule was administered with them. Moreover, the schedule only served as a guide, to ensure that all the salient issues were addressed and free association was not discouraged. In addition to the in-depth interviews there was observation of the family and community settings as this allowed for a more holistic understanding of the situation.

A follow-up study was undertaken approximately four months after the initial study. This added a minimal element of a longitudinal dimension to the research by giving an updated report of the family’s conditions: the negative or positive changes experienced, the causes of these changes, their agency in these new circumstances and the rationale behind their (in)actions. This is by no means the ideal condition for a longitudinal study, but it was an attempt to work with the time that was available. Additionally, the follow-up study allowed for the verification of the information that was previously acquired.

Results and Discussion

Family Background

Although a wealth of information was generated in the original research, such as community profiles and national data from the PAR on employment and educational background by quintiles, this paper presents the results of the interviews with families, focusing exclusively on responses to poverty and the socialization practices within these households.

Just as national figures show a relatively high birth rate among persons in poverty, the findings of this research also lead to such a conclusion. Among the twenty households contacted there was an average of 5.9 children. Only four of the women interviewed had two children or less. The other women had between three and ten children, with four of them having nine or ten children of their own. One woman, admits that she is certain that if she could have had children she would have had many by now, and her situation would have been a lot worse. Table 2 below shows the family structure of the participating households. Out of twenty families, there was one with the nuclear type structure.
With the visiting unions there was a single parent as head and in all of these cases that parent was the female. Likewise in the single-parent (unattached) family structure, the parent is female. Male heads of households could be found among the common-law and nuclear households. Their headship was more often than not, based on the fact that they were the sole or major breadwinners.

Only about 4 persons owned the houses that they occupied. Most persons lived in rented houses and three lived in the houses of relatives. Given that both Belmont and Foux a Chaux are squatter communities, none of the respondents owned the land that they occupied. All of the land belonged to the government of St. Lucia. This situation made their living accommodations quite precarious. In fact, at the time of this research, there were concerns that persons would be relocated from the Foux a Chaux area because of the government’s development plans for that area.

**Socialization Practices**

The main methods of socialization observed, involved parents talking to their children and presenting themselves as examples to follow. Most adults indicate that they simply talk to their children regarding what they should and should not do. The specific habits that parents and caretakers encouraged included respect for elders, recognizing the importance of prayer and an appreciation of what is good and avoidance of what is bad. Children were encouraged to value education and hard work, avoid bad company, drugs, criminal and early sexual activity. Parents also hoped that by their examples, the children would come to know the difference between right and wrong and always choose the former (see Box 1).

There are also a few parents, and indeed children, who find difficulty in recognizing the value of education. This is primarily due to the absence of tangible short-term benefits associated with school attendance. While some children cannot wait for the day when they leave school and find a job, their parents anxiously await the day when they will contribute directly to the family income. When asked in what way would she benefit from her children’s education, a mother replies “I don’t know. They going to school, not to say is pay they getting pay.”

There was a slight difference in the kind of values instilled in boys and girls. The “talks” to the girls often focussed on sex and relationships with the opposite sex. Parents were concerned about their daughters becoming sexually active too early and being trapped by pregnancy. As far as they were concerned, this would symbolize an end in their daughters’ lives, and doom for their future, as their education would come to a premature end. An example of this situation is seen in the seventeen year old mother in Belmont, Clara. This type of advice

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1 For reasons of confidentiality, the names used here are pseudonyms; the actual identity of respondents has been protected as far as possible.
was particularly favoured by mothers who had had first-hand experience with teenage pregnancy. Boys were less likely to receive this sex education lecture, or at least it was not the main focus. They were generally cautioned against drug abuse, theft and other criminal activities. These gender-specific socialization practices may reflect some of the wider societal values, practices and gender-biases. Because of stigmas and limited institutional support, if a girl becomes pregnant, she is forced to quit school. However, the boy who has fathered the child is able to continue his education. Teenage pregnancy is generally seen as a female problem while criminal activity and delinquency are associated with boys. Not all parents were so focussed on the upbringing of their children. A few persons were not at all sure exactly what habits and values they encouraged.

Box 1
Socialization of the Poor Child

Jesse is an unemployed 42 year old mother of 8. She lives with three of her children and her common law husband. She is an alcoholic and a victim of domestic abuse from her partner. Although she claims to value her children's education, her son, who is scheduled to do the Common Entrance Exam the following week, is often forced to stay away from school when she is sick, meaning after a beating from her partner and a drinking spree. Moreover the regularity of his school attendance is dependent on whether his mother has money to cover his transportation and food costs. Jesse reflects on her past when she was a prostitute on the streets. She is pleased that things have improved and that she has a "husband" who "tries his best". In spite of her acknowledged idiosyncrasies, she values the power of socialization as a force of change: "I tell them about life, how it was, how it is. I ask them to take their time, get a job and don't go into sex too early. They have to think of what I say and not go into the same thing. I am sure if my mother had talked to me I wouldn't have no children ... I talk to them and tell them everything I go through already." Jesse has thus revealed her awareness of and confidence in the power of socialization as a tool for breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

As far as coping with poverty was concerned, children were generally encouraged to pray, have faith and believe that God would provide for them. While this response may have been spurred by noble intentions, it is evident that such habits could breed fatalism and complacency. One mother stated that she encourages her children to ‘satisfy themselves,’ in other words, be satisfied with what they had and not be envious of others. She declared that "by the Grace of God I am confident that I'll have something in my life.” Her demeanour, and indeed, her other responses, suggest that her approach is not simply one meant to keep her children and herself out of the kind of trouble that results from envy. Rather, it is a case of contentment with one's lot in life and a disinclination to effect a change. No matter how desperate the situation, there was no parent who openly condoned resorting to illegal measures to appease their financial stress neither did they tolerate it from their children. This observation
goes contrary to the assumption of a correlation between poverty and crime. Of course, it is possible to question whether anyone would openly admit their involvement in criminal activity, but most persons were obviously quite taken aback by any suggestion of criminality. Moreover, most participants developed a rapport with the researcher that allowed them to be frank about any topic without questioning the confidentiality involved.

The Childhood Experience of Poverty

The child growing up in poverty, is to a certain extent, denied a childhood. Some of the feelings, thoughts, dreams and habits usually enjoyed by children seem to be absent among some poor children. The child is forced to adopt adult-like coping strategies while simultaneously suppressing natural childlike fantasies. Some parents speak of their ongoing efforts at preparing their children for the experience of poverty by constantly speaking to them. The children are drilled about the imminent hardships and they come to understand and adapt to the situation. They understand that they will miss school because their parents sometimes lack the necessary money and food. So great is their understanding of the family’s plight that some children attempt to spare their parents the embarrassment of being unable to provide the family’s needs. One 32 year old, unemployed, pregnant mother of 9 remarked that her children would rarely complain to her of their hunger. They would remain silent, ignoring the sounds of their hungry bellies. Two other women observed that their children would not even bother to approach them with some of the monetary requests made by the teachers, for example for school tours. However much she wanted to go on the school tour at the end of the term, Shara acquiesced silently. Her mother only found out about the tour from another parent after the fact.

These accounts reveal the precocity of some children in poverty. They are forced to grow up, if only mentally, before their time. This does not mean that children are not able or do not know how to play. Rather, there is an absence of the innocence and naïveté normally associated with that childhood. Some children have such great awareness of their poverty that they attempt to claim the responsibility of getting their families out of poverty and their life goals are linked to these assumed responsibilities.

Sample Responses:

If my mommy doesn’t have something we ask for she tells us. We stay without and go and play. We don’t even worry about it.

We are poor; it’s a strain on my mom; we living here and we have a lot to pay for. I have to work for what I want; help my mom and put her in a good situation.

We know the situation so we understand when she cannot give us what we want.

My grandma not working, my mom not working. I have to give them a help by working when I am 15.

Among the respondents, child labour was not a very significant phenomenon, at least not as a response to poverty or as a reliable source of a household’s income. Very few parents admitted to allowing their children to work for pay; the main reason being that they were children. In fact, eight out of the twenty parents stated that their children had never worked. Generally, the children corroborated their parents’ view. Some parents who admitted that their children performed duties other than housework stated that this only involved work in the family garden and they insisted that such
work never interrupted their school schedules. No money was involved. Those parents who admitted that their children had at some time worked for pay, also indicated that these arrangements had ended because they had turned sour for a number of reasons. For example, there were rumours concerning the parents’ allowing their children to work, or the children had been deceived and not paid adequately. Given the community response to working children, as well as some of the parents’ views, it appears that child labour is not yet culturally acceptable.

Responses to Poverty

There is no single or universal response to poverty among the participants. Persons and families adopted a variety of attitudes and actions in response to their poverty, and as means of coping. Even where one response proved common, its significance and frequency varied. The reaction of a particular family or household head depended on a number of factors including the specific family conditions as well as individual characteristics and experiences. Some responses to poverty may eventually contribute to poverty by worsening a person’s situation. For example, alcoholism would actually contribute to greater poverty because it compels a person to spend the minimal income on alcohol while the family’s basic necessities are unmet. This is also true of fatalism. In this regard it is possible to see why Lewis (1966) refers to the culture of poverty as a self-perpetuating reaction to poverty. There are also related responses, which may be present at the same time. Only some of the responses will be discussed here in detail.

Fatalism

Among the respondents, some believe that they are incapable of improving their conditions and adopt a “wait and see” approach. They become overwhelmed by their constraints, and are disinclined to do anything. The 24-year-old mother of 3, Valencia, from Belmont epitomizes this attitude of fatalism. Not only does she accept her poverty, she also accepts the abuse from her boyfriend. During the interviews, she appears de-motivated and confused about her options and capacities. She does not believe that she could effect a significant change in her life. Even her sister observes her resignation and chastises her about it. Those persons who demonstrate fatalism attempt to separate themselves from their poverty, in understanding of the phenomenon, its causes, and the necessary solutions. Poverty has happened to them, it has been brought upon them by factors out of their control. There are no jobs available. The government is not doing anything to help. A boyfriend does not allow her to work. The employers only want persons with an education. Poverty forced her out of school. The fathers of the children are not supporting them. The banana situation is worsening so prices are lower than before. All of these, and many other explanations, lay blame on external forces. The individual’s lack of control is demonstrated and the inactivity rationalized (see Box 2).
As will be seen with resilience, the fatalism evident in a parent is often passed on to a child. Alana is a 28-year-old married woman with 6 children. She is unemployed and depends totally on her husband’s small salary as a security guard. Though she admits that her family is struggling, Alana seems quite at ease in her situation. There is no move to make any changes to her life situation, and she is very modest in the goals that she sets for herself and children. She wants to see her children become teachers, masons or carpenters. When her son Mark indicates his desire to pursue a career as a pilot, she laughingly brushes that idea aside, and replaces his high hopes with a more grounded suggestion: “You must have a good education to be a pilot. You can do carpenter, mason or teacher instead.” Mark acquiesces. Not only has Alana shattered her son’s dreams of moving beyond his present level, but she has also expressed her lack of confidence in him and in his ability to succeed in school.

Alana’s case may well provide evidence of the connection between religion and fatalism; her intense religiosity is evident in her responses throughout the interviews. Hers was not simply a case of faith in God, or belief in his delivering her. Rather, Alana seemed quite content in simply waiting to see what would happen and what would come her way. Sample Responses:

I does feel bad when I can’t give my children what they need. But when you can’t do better you have to take it as it is.
I would like to move out and have my own house, but I don’t think it will happen. I can’t do it on my own.

Resilience

Not all persons accept their situation and believe themselves helpless. Some persons display remarkable resilience in their struggles with poverty and great strength of character despite the odds, agency despite the structural constraints, ingenuity despite the apparent absence of options, hope despite the encroaching despondency. This resilience seldom results in grand, heroic achievements, however it is a powerful force in coping with the daily struggles.

Individuals’ attitudes speak volumes about their refusal to accept misery and poverty as their destiny. Such persons speak with hope and exude overall optimism. They are self-confident and assured of their ability to succeed in their actions. These positive vibes are naturally passed on to their children, so that in most cases, in any one household, resilience is evident among both young and old. This does not mean that every member of that household is resilient (see Box 3).

Box 3

A Rich Woman in Poverty

A 40-year-old single mother of 7, Sonia is desperately in need of a job. Her two-bedroom place is hardly adequate for her family, which is sometimes extended by her boyfriend’s occasional visits. The impropriety of the house is made more apparent by the large holes in the floor, the gloomy ambience, and the unsanitary conditions that are worsened by the absence of water. However, Sonia refuses to allow her situation to depress or distress her. She is determined to find a job and in the meantime, willing to do anything. “I’m living in poverty but I’ll not let poverty put me down. I’ll still count myself as a rich woman in poverty. I’ll not depend on government to help me.” Indeed, she has a wealth of motivation, of knowledge about her situation, her surroundings, and what may be necessary to solve her problems. In fact she is pleased to participate in the research and satisfied that it is being carried out in her community, as it allows the people who suffer the hardships to speak out about their daily tribulations. “We know more about here (the community) than anybody else. We going through it so we know.” Sonia is able to acquire some money by washing for the more well to do persons in the community. She uses the public facility to do their laundry as she has no private water supply, and she gets paid for these services. Her industriousness comes to the fore because, although having few resources, Sonia is able to transform that which is available to the wider community into an asset for herself and her family. It is this simple ingenuity that helps her to meet her financial obligations. Though there is nothing grandiose or extraordinary about her actions, as a daily coping mechanism, they must be applauded.
In the same way, child resilience presents itself in both the actions and attitudes of the children. The resilient children demonstrate optimism about their future accomplishments. The individual's self-confidence may be seen in an eagerness to teach, lead their younger siblings and even older children in the community. They take their education very seriously and perform well in order to complete school and become the doctor, teacher, nurse or government official that they want to be. They are not eager to leave school for work, but appreciate the value of a sound education. Though they understand, such children were always distraught when the family's financial constraints prevent them from attending school and related activities. They do not rejoice over the vacation but find themselves wondering what they have missed, what has been taught and how they can catch up.

Their potential is easily detected by other persons with a vested interest in their development, for example their teachers, who go out of their way to encourage these children and serve as their role models. One mother, Angella, proudly relates the case of her daughter's teacher who requested that she allow the child to live with the teacher. She recognized Crystal's potential and was willing to invest some additional time and effort in the child by having her live with her and receive more direct guidance, while also alleviating the family's stress.

**Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence occurs as the adult male (sometimes the head) physically or verbally abuses his partner and/or the children. There are no reported cases of the men being the victims. It is considered here as a male response to poverty and is reported in 6 out of the 20 households in the two communities. These can only be seen as minimum figures as there is no certainty that it did not occur in other households, given that there was no specific question in the interview schedule dealing directly with domestic violence. In the known cases, this information was volunteered during the interviews as persons discussed their lives and their degree of happiness and satisfaction.

Where domestic violence was reported, some women believe that they have to remain in such a situation for the sake of their children. They feel that few alternatives exist for them and that they are very dependent on their male partners-cum-batterers for the financial assistance that they provide. "He trying to show people he is a man. When we quarrelling and he beating me he always saying 'I'm not a little boy, is a man I am.'" Poverty directly attacks a person’s manhood as it impedes his ability to supply his family’s needs and fulfil his societal expectations as the head. The violence towards the women and children serves to re-establish a man's control over his family, if only physically.

**Alcohol Abuse**

A less significant but noteworthy response to poverty is the use or abuse of alcohol. Only two of the female respondents are declared alcoholics or heavy drinkers, and they are both from the urban community of Foux à Chaux. There are also two men, whose alcoholism often drives them to abuse their women and children. Persons attempt to drown their poverty woes in the alcohol, but the reprieve is always short-lived. By the time sobriety sets in, the problems that they had evaded are still awaiting their attention, and at times have intensified, if only because of the delay. The children still need to be fed, sent to school, and the money spent on the alcohol has to be replaced to attend to their more pressing needs. One woman, who was visited at about 4:00 pm in the afternoon, was
so drunk that the interview had to be rescheduled to a more appropriate time and date. Her 25-year-old daughter was utterly embarrassed for her. The woman later laments that she is both mother and father to her children. Her situation had worsened lately after the father of her younger children past away.

Although this is not a very significant or common reaction, alcoholism cannot be ignored. It is important to consider as it indicates the diversity of experiences among the poor. Moreover, it is a response which only serves to worsen a family’s situation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Sample Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fatalism</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>“I waiting to see what will come for me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>“I’m living in poverty but I will not let poverty put me down”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>“No I believe I can help myself so I’ll not stay poor all my life.” This individual also indicated that she has attempted to commit suicide in the past when her conditions seemed unbearable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated above (table 3), there are diverse responses to poverty and fatalism is not at all common to all persons. While fatalism is not totally absent, it certainly is not the norm. The table shows the distribution of response types among the 20 cases. The responses have been categorized as fatalism, resilience and both. The term ‘both’ is used to refer to cases which exhibit resilience as well as fatalism. Although fatalism is the highest single occurring response, it is important that it is not the only response, that is, it is not evident among 100% of the sample, but only 40%.

Structure Versus Agency in the Context of Poverty

From this study, the tension between structure and agency can be seen within the context of poverty. On a daily basis, individuals struggle with the constraints imposed by the structure through poverty, and their desire to be active and dynamic agents in the process to change their present state.

Understanding the agency role is thus central to recognizing people as responsible persons: not only are we well or ill, but also we act or refuse to act, and can choose to act one way rather than another. And thus we—women and men—must take responsibility for doing things or not doing them. It makes a difference and we have to take note of that difference. This elementary acknowledgement, though simple enough in principle, can be exacting in its
implications, both for social analysis and for practical reason and action. (Sen 1999: 190)

Among the participants therefore, some persons failed to act. In the case of Clara, we know that it was a conscious and deliberate effort. Her evaluation of the situation has led to the belief that her actions would amount to failure. As a result she has not tried looking for a job or leaving her abusive boyfriend. Her agency has been restricted by her perception of the greater power of the structure.

There are also those who are active, regardless of the challenges before them. They constantly seek out options in an attempt to secure some benefit from their adverse conditions. This agency is a powerful force which would accomplish small feats such as reducing the family’s discomfort in some way. What is it that determines whether a person will demonstrate this agency? Sen’s capability perspective suggests that it is the entitlements afforded to individuals that determine who will act and how. From this perspective, poverty is not simply the absence of wealth, but on a deeper level, it relates to the substantive freedoms that are denied by this absence of wealth; the freedom to lead the life that one values; the freedom to make choices.

In addressing the incidence of hunger, Sen demonstrates how an individual’s ability to acquire food is largely determined by the person’s entitlements that is, “the commodities over which she can establish her ownership and command.” For Sen, a family’s entitlements are determined by a variety of distinct influences. One of the major influences which appear most significant in the context of poverty, is what Sen refers to as endowment, ownership over productive resources which, includes land, labour power, skill and experience. This approach is not unlike the Sustainable Livelihoods (SL) framework.

The SL framework focuses analysis on the assets and vulnerabilities that bear upon poor peoples’ abilities to attain and sustain their livelihoods. It emphasises understanding the vulnerability context and the organisational and institutional environment within which poor people, drawing upon various assets, implement their livelihood strategies (Mukherjee, Hardjono and Carriere 2002: 3).

As part of the SL framework, five (5) types of assets are identified viz., human capital, social capital, financial capital, natural capital and physical capital. Though all poor persons may not have access to all of these assets, the access to at least one may help in dealing with structural and other constraints.

Both the SL framework and Sen’s approach assist in understanding why human agency may be evident among some persons and not others. Among the respondents, it is possible to see that at least one of the assets or entitlements identified here may have been present and thus facilitated the emergence of human agency and resiliency. Likewise, in cases where persons failed to act, it is difficult to locate these assets. Examples of respondents’ use of the livelihood assets are presented below.

- **Human Capital:** This asset is common among the respondents. While persons may not have sophisticated skills or expertise, their ability to undertake unskilled labour is used to earn some money for the family. Respondents engaged in
farming on the property of others, housekeeping, transporting bananas to depots using the vehicle of another. In one case there is a deficiency of this asset as the family suffers with health problems; however, they are able to tap into other available assets.

- **Physical Capital**: Notwithstanding her other limitations, one woman is able to capitalize on the availability of a public facility, earning a living by doing the laundry for others in the community.

- **Social Capital**: Benefits from social capital are seen as community persons support each other in cash or in kind; additionally, membership or association with key institutions equip persons with knowledge to access available opportunities. Examples include one respondent’s ability to obtain a house from a local charity, as well as her ability to access materials for that house.

- **Financial Capital**: Venus is able to obtain a small loan from the Belfund to establish her small business.

- **Natural Resources**: Several persons in the rural community of Belmont, use the land which they occupy to provide them with their daily food. The use of the land is mainly for subsistence living, as most persons are not equipped with the additional resources required for food production for sale.

Some of these assets may stem directly from the broader structural arrangements, but what is significant here is the degree to which poor persons can access and utilize them to their benefit by increasing their income, improving their quality of life or reducing their vulnerability to poverty.

This review of the influence of assets and vulnerabilities on human agency helps account for the variability in responses. It adds a new and important dimension to the structure and agency dichotomy, without losing focus on either of the two realms.

A major strength of the SL framework is its potential to link diverse scales of analysis, tracking back and forth between the specifics of people’s livelihood strategies and national policy environments. The SL framework has high policy relevance when applied to planning processes generally, and specifically in the preparation of strategies for poverty reduction. It can be used as a tool for pro-poor policy analysis, planning and priority setting, as well as monitoring the effects of existing policies and programmes (Mukherjee, Hardjono and Carriere 2002: 3).

This analysis calls for special attention to the resources available to poor persons in spite of their poverty and the vulnerabilities which thwart their efforts at alleviating their plight. Lewis’ culture of poverty does not account for these assets but rather emphasizes the negative outcomes and manifestations of poverty. At the same time, this call for the recognition of the debilitating effects of the vulnerabilities among
some persons is by no means meant to endorse the actual tendencies towards fatalism and inactivity among some persons.

**Conclusion**

In essence, this research has shown that persons in poverty have varying experiences, adopt different responses, and experience multiple consequences to their actions. These dynamics vary from individual to individual, and from household to household, are played out in the attitudes of persons, the values passed on to and adopted by their children and their goals for the future. In short, it is seen that fatalism is indeed a response by some poor persons, but it is by no means the norm. The various activities adopted by persons speak of their agency and their individuality even in the face of their common structural constraints. The utilization of the case study to interpret the findings has proven useful, as the importance of issues such as diversity, individuality and specificity has been highlighted.

The aim of the research has been to highlight the variety of responses to poverty, and more importantly to understand the meaning that persons attach to these responses. In other words, persons have been called upon to describe the attitudes and actions that they take in response to their daily experiences of poverty. In addition, the meaning of these actions has been sought as persons explain their intentions and expected outcomes. This sort of information has been virtually unaccounted for in the poverty literature for St. Lucia. While a number of assumptions have been made about the actions of the poor, they have hardly been allowed the chance to explain the meaning behind such actions. Moreover, the views and experiences of children in poverty have been given special attention in this study. The research has found that fatalism is not the universal response to poverty. On the contrary, while fatalism is among the varied responses, there is also resilience among the poor. From this research we have seen the variability of responses and come to realize that as a result of this variability, case specific programs are required to deal with poverty.
References


