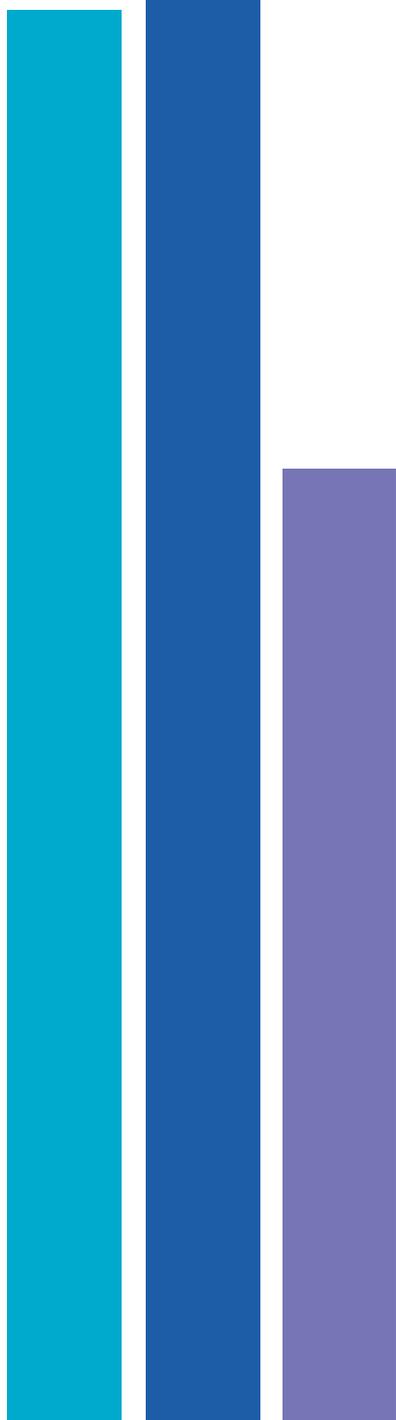


# Self-Esteem, Comparative Poverty and Neighbourhoods



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## **Self-Esteem, Comparative Poverty and Neighbourhoods**

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## 1. Introduction

This working paper explores concepts of self-esteem and comparative poverty, based on the experiences of residents living in six neighbourhoods in Britain. A full account of the research methodology and descriptions of the six case studies are available in accompanying papers from the *Living Through Change in Challenging Neighbourhoods* study, available at: <http://research.shu.ac.uk/cresr/living-through-change/reports.html>.

The issues of neighbourhood stigmatisation and work and identity are also addressed in more depth in accompanying research papers (see Flint and Casey, 2008; Crisp, 2010).

This paper aims to contribute to our understanding of how individuals on low or modest incomes construct their livelihoods and reflect upon and view themselves as a subject of assessment (Orr *et al*, 2006: 2; Parker and Fopp, 2004: 153; Burchardt, 2004: 3). There is a need to learn more about the direct impact of poverty on people's everyday lives and their social and economic relationships (see the literature review by Ridge, 2009: 13). According to Giddens (1991: 14) individuals lives are reflexively organised around questions about how to live which are answered in their day to day decisions. This reflexivity contains hidden processes of regulation, self-surveillance and self-scrutiny (Sweetman, 2003: 544; Adams, 2006: 521).

The paper begins by presenting existing research evidence on self-esteem and relative positioning amongst individuals living on a low income. It then examines issues of self-esteem described by the study participants including their reported sources of anxiety and low self-esteem and drivers of positive self-esteem and the cultural and values framework of independence, self-reliance and self-criticism within which esteem is generated. The following section examines the concept of comparative poverty, examining the extent and mechanisms through which the study participants compared themselves to others and previous periods and circumstances in their own lives. The final section presents findings on the effects of neighbourhood on identity, self-esteem and comparative poverty. All respondents have been given pseudonyms and some interview quotations have been subject to minor edits in order to preserve anonymity.

## 2. Existing Research Evidence

### 2.1 Introduction

This section presents the existing theoretical and empirical evidence on the policy and social discourses of judgement, including those within deprived communities, linked to the conceptualisation of poverty self esteem and aspiration. It examines the existing evidence on the impacts of poverty on individuals' self-esteem and aspirations and the role of individuals' agency and resilience in response to poverty. Finally it explores the existing literature on how individuals assess their own circumstances and the impacts of this assessment on their wellbeing and self-esteem. The following empirical sections of this working paper will present data that confirms but also challenges this existing evidence and conceptualisation on the processes and impacts of deprivation and neighbourhoods on self-esteem and comparative frameworks of poverty and self-assessment. It should be noted that, although this section attempts to identify key themes and findings within the existing literature, each of the studies were based on a specific methodology and focus and were conducted with particular groups and contexts. This explains part of the different findings within the literature. Similarly, our own findings presented in this working paper have also been generated within the specific methodology and aims of our study.

### 2.2 Discourses of Judgement

It is argued that poverty is a highly stigmatised social position that can be isolating and damaging and have a profound impact on people's lives (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Ridge, 2009: 20) and that naming or labelling people in poverty as 'the other' has symbolic, cultural, psychological and material effects (Lister, 2004: 103). Deprived communities are often conceptualised as lacking the ability to cope with 'modern' life (Johnston and Mooney, 2007: 139). Through social processes of individualisation (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 2002, Pahl *et al*, 2007) and within policy rationales, poverty becomes individualised as arising from personal inadequacy (Fraser and Gordon; 1994; Cruikshank, 1996; Mooney, 2009; Frost and Hoggett, 2008: 445; Saugeres, 2009: 6). Social policy responses have, in turn, focused on the behaviour, values and capacities of welfare subjects and those on low incomes (Herron and Dwyer, 1999; LeGrand, 1997) and in media, political and policy discourses there is a focus upon a culture of 'welfare dependency' (Johnston and Mooney, 2007: 138). Thus, Prime Minister David Cameron, outlining his vision of the 'cultural changes' required to create the Big Society, described "capable individuals [being] turned into passive recipients of state help with little hope for a better future", the "sapping of responsibility" and "people always turn[ing] to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face" (Cameron, 2010). These discourses, based on a deficit model, generate low expectations of those on low incomes (Canvin *et al*, 2009: 238-242) in which the poor are represented as being pervaded by a sense of despair, desolation, misery and apathy (Mooney, 2009).

Skeggs and Wood (2008) describe how, from Victorian times, working class women were judged on their performance of domestic labour and how contemporary phenomena such as reality television create an obsession with domestic failure in

which household management and parenting are subject to judgement and assessment of effort. In this moral assessment of the appropriate behaviour of women, being a good mother and being a good housekeeper are inextricably linked (Stokoe, 2003: 325). These discourses of judgement and self-assessment construct the moral contours of the social space in which individuals on low incomes orientate themselves (Charlesworth, 2000: 266). These contours are heavily influenced by the concept of 'respectability' (Skeggs, 1994: 185; Watt, 2006) within the imagined collective of the hard working family or public moralities of credit and debt (Clarke, 2005: 448; Charlesworth, 2000: 242; Goode, 2010: 105) in which the idea of 'duty' is always present (Weber, 1930: 181-182).

This wider social order is not simply generated by elite discourses. The performance of labour has always been a major value in working class lives (Skeggs and Wood, 2009: 567). Working class males often believe that they should be 'the main breadwinner' and should provide reasonable standards of living for their families (Orr *et al*, 2006: 19; Dolan, 2007: 717; Charlesworth, 2000). An inability to provide for their families therefore may create feelings of shame, powerlessness and embarrassment in accepting support from family and friends (Creegan *et al*, 2009: 67-73; Saugeres, 2009: 10). This social order regulates everyday practices and the social world and effects individuals' sense of self-esteem.

### 2.3 Self-Esteem and Aspirations

Some researchers suggest that dominant discourses of low expectations may 'seep into the consciousness' of low income residents (Canvin *et al*, 2009: 238-242) and make it difficult to build self-esteem and a positive self-narrative (Davidson, 2008: 123). Writers such as Bourdieu (1984: 156), Skeggs (1994: 33) and Frost and Hoggett (2008: 443) have argued that, in such processes, social and structural issues become replaced by the internalisation by deprived individuals of personal critique and crisis as an explanation for their circumstances, with physical or verbal abuse directed at the self as well as others (Creegan *et al*, 2009: 71). Individuals thereby view themselves as primarily responsible for their own position and circumstances (Dolan, 2007: 719; Pahl *et al*, 2007: 17). Orton (2009) has shown how some deprived individuals are often highly self-critical, regarding their financial hardship as arising from their own behaviour and debt as being their own 'fault' due to weak financial management. Similarly, Blokland (2007:43) found that many individuals on low incomes viewed themselves as 'not trying hard enough' whilst Charlesworth (2000: 235) reported deprived individuals as regarding themselves as 'not clever' and Reay (2005: 917) describes how working-class girls internalise low educational achievement as pathological.

Frost and Hoggett (2008: 438-441) focus upon the internal and lived experiences of inhabiting what they term social structures of domination, oppression and repression. Their 'psycho-social' analysis of the 'welfare subject' identifies 'intra-psychoic and relational wounds' and 'social damage' including pain, feelings of abjection, humiliation, anger, despair and resentment. Similarly, Reay (2005) explores the 'psychoic economy' of social class and its affective dimensions of ambivalence, inferiority and superiority. Ridge (2009:19) review of the literature highlighted the psychological effects of poverty including loss of self-esteem, powerlessness, anger, depression, anxiety and boredom and relational effects including stigma. Wilkinson's evidence (1996: 215) suggests that many individuals on low incomes feel devalued, useless, helpless, hopeless, anxious and define themselves as a failure. Hopper *et al*, (2007a: 4) found common psychological impacts of poverty to include a feeling of being trapped by a lack of options, guilt at being unable to meet expectations and difficulty in planning ahead when living in unpredictable circumstances. These emotional impacts included the lack of opportunities to bring about change, a sense of failure (particularly in relation to children) and uncertainty over health, income and

expenditure which made the future stressful and unpredictable (Hopper *et al*, 2007b: 26). Reflexivity in this context does not bring choice, but rather a painful awareness of the lack of choice (Adams, 2006: 525), as found amongst a group of women studied by Mitchell and Green (2002: 14) who perceived a dearth of life chances and opportunities which affected their self-esteem and aspirations. This issue became apparent during our research, in which our interviews provided some participants with a space to reflect on their circumstances, in a manner that was not routinely used in the 'thick of' everyday lives. Sometimes this could have negative implications for our interviewees in which the comparative challenges of their own circumstances came into sharper focus.

Orr *et al*, (2006: 6-7) relate self-esteem to a four-rung livelihoods ladder. Individuals categorised as 'surviving' feel that that life is a constant battle against things going wrong and their low self-esteem leads to a feeling that no-one is interested in them. Individuals who are 'coping' feel that they are 'getting by' but that there is little prospect of material improvement in the future. Individuals who are 'adapting' have a vision of what they want for their household, what the opportunities to achieve this vision are and an active sense of working towards the future. Individuals categorised as 'accumulating' believe that life is going well and that their circumstances will continue to improve, although few individuals were classified in this category in the study. A sense of hopelessness, pessimism and depression was particularly pervasive amongst lone men (Orr *et al*, 2006: 35).

The existing evidence consistently finds a strong link between poverty and poor mental health. Studies have found that many parents on low incomes have undiagnosed mental health difficulties and a form of low level depression to be a feature of many of their lives (Parker and Pharaoh with Hale, 2008: 61). A majority of low income households and a high proportion of women experienced mental health problems, including depression and the stresses of caring, debt and unemployment (Hopper *et al*, 2007a: 3; Orr *et al*, 2006: 3/31). The challenges and pressures of financial hardship make family life difficult and uncertain (see Ridge, 2009: 3) as, for many families, even vigilance and strict budgeting could not make money go far enough (see Ridge, 2009: 4). As one research participant described: "Psychologically you get sick of telling your kids no. And it does your head in and it does depress you...I'm talking about day to day stuff" (quoted in Horgan, 2007: 62). It is therefore difficult to overstate the importance of financial difficulties as a source of stress in daily lives (Ghate and Hazel, 2004: 65). Research has also found a link between neighbourhood factors and poor mental health (Warr *et al*, 2007; see Galster, 2010 for a useful overview of neighbourhood effects theory and evidence of the drivers and impacts of these effects). However, what is less certain is the extent to which comparative notions of poverty contribute to this emotional effect and how individuals on low incomes respond to their circumstances. Recent evidence has shown that area-based regeneration initiatives appear to have a net positive effect on the mental health of residents and that this improved mental health is linked to a number of neighbourhood factors including the environment, social relations, accommodation and a sense of belonging to a community (Batty *et al*, 2010: 57-59; Beatty *et al*, 2010: 64).

Poverty often results in families going without what the majority of people in the United Kingdom take for granted (Hopper *et al*, 2007a: 4; see also Hirsch *et al*, 2009; Bradshaw *et al*, 2008; Davis *et al*, 2010). Although poverty is thought to have a damaging effect on expectations and aspirations (Canvin *et al*, 2009: 239), research studies have shown that those on low incomes aspire to 'the normal things in life' such as a home, car and relationship (Orr *et al*, 2006: 40) and aspirations cut across socio-economic class, to include housing, a better place to live, success for their children and more money (Parker and Pharaoh with Hale, 2008: 35-36). However, a low income undermined individuals' capacity to meet their own aspirations, including

as parents, creating feelings of guilt and inadequacy (Hopper *et al*, 2007b: 19). Parents in one study described their guilt that they had fallen below their expectations of themselves as parents. They desperately wanted to give their children more and were painfully aware of the constraints of their situation (Parker and Pharoah with Hale, 2008: 35-36).

## 2.4 Agency and Resilience

Analyses of poverty do not always consider the assets and positive strategies used to overcome obstacles (Orr *et al*, 2006: 4). Individuals find ways of thriving and carrying on their day-to-day lives in spite of adversities (Canvin *et al*, 2009: 245) and there may be an underestimation of the potential for resistance, fighting against the odds and 'coping strategies' which is evident in poor communities (Johnston and Mooney, 2007: 139). At the individual level, there is often a refusal of self-pity (Frost and Hoggett, 2008: 442) and creative adaptations to circumstances in which individuals (including children) are not passive victims but rather employ 'coping strategies' (Johnston and Mooney, 2007: 127; Ridge, 2009: 3). This suggests that resilience may be conceptualised as a process of achieving positive and unexpected outcomes in adverse conditions (Canvin *et al*, 2009: 238; Mohaupt, 2008: 63) and more broadly that working class identities exist in positive ways that are not necessarily perceived as problematic (Johnston and Mooney, 2007: 135). These positive outcomes may be facilitated by family and community support, the respectful attitudes and behaviour of service providers and engagement in activities that bolster self-esteem (Canvin *et al*, 2009: 238).

Within constraints, individuals deploy constructive and creative strategies to generate a sense of themselves with value (Skeggs, 1997: 162). This suggests a complex and nuanced construction of both positive and negative identities. For example one study found that for some women their success as mothers and their ability to nurture a family was *the* measure of themselves and this brought with it self-doubt and at times guilt but also pride, bravery and determination (Parker and Pharoah with Hale, 2008: 36) where parents believed that they had managed to raise, or were raising, children who were happy, healthy and doing well (Canvin *et al*, 2009: 241). Similarly, Pahl *et al* (2007: 11/13) found pride amongst individuals' in their ability to 'pay their way' and being able to 'manage and keep your head above board.' Parker and Fopp (2004: 153) found that homeless women in Australia mediated their environment in a way that was conducive to change for their betterment. Other studies have identified a sense of pride in not resorting to 'negative' forms of coping and positive attempts to look forward to a different place and time (Creegan *et al*, 2009: 68-75) and also the importance of volunteering in the community as a source of esteem and opportunity to 'give something back', particularly for individuals unable to take paid employment (Orr *et al*, 2006: 5/36). In this conceptualisation small positive steps, like getting children to school and on time, were highly significant (Canvin *et al*, 2009: 241) and, rather than a sense of low self-esteem or hopelessness there was a focus on mastery and agency for reducing the effects of adversity (Edge and Rogers, 2005; quoted in Canvin *et al*, 2009: 244).

Although Lawler (2005: 800) argues that the working class is implicitly vilified for not spending their money properly, contrary to such discourses of fecklessness and indolence, studies of low income families consistently find them to be assiduous money managers (Parker and Pharoah with Hale, 2008: 9/37). These studies, exploring the day-to-day management of low-income budgets within families, have found little evidence that families mismanage their money and that parents spend a considerable amount of time searching for bargains and low cost items (see Ridge, 2009: 66). Strategies included going without, doing things yourself, travelling distances for cheap food, delaying purchases, using charity shops and re using

clothing (Ridge, 2009: 70). But even these strategies are insufficient at moments of crisis: “If you are a good budgeter you can find you can live on it, but when things come up” (Beresford *et al*, 1999: 106).

However, definitions of resilience may not be defined or conceptualised in such terms by studied groups themselves (Mohaupt, 2008: 66). Rather, their responses to their circumstances are often doxic (taken for granted) perceived as a set of ‘routinized practices’ mundane, ordinary, normal and ‘common sense’ (Oliver and Reilly, 2010: 50; Giddens, 1991:81; Stokoe, 2003: 339; Savage *et al*, 2001; Allen *et al*, 2007; Saugeres, 2009: 2). Although they involve considerable competence in everyday situations, they are viewed as so ordinary as to be unremarkable (Carvin *et al*, 2009: 243). Hence, some participants in the study by (Davidson (2008: 119-121) stated that “I can always try and do better...improving myself” and “I’ve got to get up and do what you gotta do”

## 2.5 Comparative Poverty and Stigma

Runciman’s (1966) classic study identified processes through which social comparisons were made to different groupings, including reference, normative and membership groups. Runciman found that individuals tended to compare themselves with similar others and that this thereby limited the extent to which relative deprivation was perceived. Social class is dynamic and circulates through symbolic and cultural forms as much as through economic inequalities (Oliver and O’Reilly, 2010: 50). However, there has been limited research into ‘lay understandings and experiences’ of differences in income and material circumstances (Dolan, 2007: 711) or what Burchardt (2004: 5) terms ‘subjective economic welfare’. It is argued that ‘humans have a drive to evaluate themselves against others’ (Davidson, 2008: 122) and that the effects of income are mediated by psychological responses to relative position rather than actual material conditions, located in the social meanings attached to how individuals feel about their circumstances and how this is linked to stress, insecurity and vulnerability (Dolan, 2007: 712; Wilkinson, 1996). Relative deprivation is defined as a psychological effect based on comparison with others who have achieved what it was thought feasible for oneself to achieve but has not been achieved (Runciman, 1966:9). It is therefore social comparisons, based on subjective assessments of the self and others, that provide the mechanism for relative deprivation to have a psychological impact (Dolan, 2007: 718). In this understanding, the ‘objective reality’ of a household income does not translate in a linear manner to individual’s subjective assessment of their own position or sense of self-esteem (Dolan, 2007: 715). Social relation dimensions are therefore about inequality rather than material levels of poverty, and inequality has an independent impact on well-being and how individuals compare their income levels with their own previous experiences and the circumstances of others around them (Wilkinson, 2005; Layard, 2005; both quoted in Hooper *et al*, 2007b: 3). For example, there is an emotional cost as children struggle to cope with the social risks of difference and disadvantage (Ridge, 2009: 29). This occurs despite the individuals are often not aware of the actual extent of income inequality within society (Pahl *et al*, 2007: 1).

Some studies suggest that individuals on low incomes are very concerned about stigma, negative images and stereotyping (see the review by Ridge, 2009: 19). As Hooper *et al* (2007b: 32) state:

*The experience of stigma- of feeling one’s identity spoiled or discredited- may contribute significantly to low self-esteem, and also to social isolation, as people attempt to manage information about potentially stigmatising circumstances within their social interactions.*

Forms of stigma were being excluded from options to purchase some goods, participate in some activities and to exchange hospitality and gifts; being reliant on benefits and the visibility and identification that accompanied this; or being in debt or unemployed, generating feelings of being 'looked down on' or 'being a scrounger or good for nothing' (Hooper *et al*, 2007b: 32-33). Stigma and feelings of 'low social value' were additionally experienced by households affected by domestic violence, disabilities or mental health problems and stigma could also arise from the 'pity' individuals perceived towards them from family and friends (Hopper *et al*, 2007a: 4).

Stigma could also apply to neighbourhoods (see the accompanying 'Adjacent Neighbourhood Effects' working paper from the *Living Through Change in Challenging Neighbourhoods* study: Flint and Casey, 2008). Those who are poor in a more mixed area face a particular set of issues relating to greater local inequality (Hooper *et al*, 2007b: 27). Parents were aware of pressures on children to keep up with their friends in terms of material goods, with parents in more affluent contexts having 'higher standards' to live up to and children in more affluent contexts had a clearer sense of their families being on comparatively lower incomes (Hooper *et al*, 2007b: 28). Individuals living in more affluent areas were found to experience this more acutely, whilst those in more generally deprived neighbourhoods, whilst aware of a poor reputation, identified others as being in similar situations (Hooper *et al*, 2007b: 32). Orr *et al*, (2006: 2/ 29) found that stigma was also generated through public services. Where public services were unsupportive or treated people without dignity, the impact on individuals and their confidence was damaging and the attitudes and actions of some external agencies was found to have discouraged some individuals, including reinforcing low expectations of achieving employment. For example, Dolan (2007: 711) found that the anger and resentment of men on low incomes was rooted in perceptions of others and how others treated them rather than actual income differentials or feelings of shame or inferiority.

Tilly's (1998) concept of emulation reveals how stigmatisation becomes internalised and replicated by stigmatised individuals themselves. Awareness of social norms equips individuals to be aware of self failure and to agree with this framework of self-critique, although they also deploy adaptive techniques to manage or reduce this stigma (Goffman, 1968, see Allen *et al*, 2007: 241) and the threat of stigma may also be managed through a sense of pride in overcoming adversity or brushing off negative reactions (Hooper *et al*, 2007b: 32).

One process of managing stigma involves the denigration of others or symbolic violence in which families are 'complicit in misunderstandings' of poverty (Oliver and O'Reilly, 2010: 58; Parker and Pharaoh with Hale, 2008: 69). Families on low incomes often suggest that other families conform to various archetypes ('work shy parents', adults who collect benefit when working cash in hand or families with 'out of control' kids or 'unable to cope') but reject such labelling of themselves (Parker and Pharaoh with Hale, 2008: 69-71).

*The stigma attached to those 'on benefits' as being lazy or workshy is powerful. In the face of this stereotype (which is perpetuated even by those most likely to be labelled in this way) many of the parents felt it necessary to construct a compelling narrative as to why they could not work. There is a sense of a desperate need to justify their position and make other understand that they are not worthy of derogatory labels, such as stating a desire to work and plans to do so.*

(Parker and Pharaoh with Hale, 2008:80)

Subtle and explicit demarcations are used to distinguish the 'rough' from the 'respectable' working class (Nayak, 2006: 813) and the presence of low-status others is viewed as threatening the decency of an area and reinforces the importance of

respectability and efforts to distance oneself from 'rough' elements (Watt, 2006: 786). Similarly, some participants in a study by Davidson (2008:122) differentiated themselves from others lacking in motivation. In this environment, 'where everyone criticises each other' (respondent quoted in Davidson, 2008: 121) the need to distance one's own family from such accusations becomes paramount (Parker and Pharoah with Hale, 2008: 72), for example the public presentation of an antagonistic relationship with the state enables families to present themselves as being opposed to state handouts and welfare in general (Parker and Pharoah with Hale, 2008: 81). Class can also be used against those positioning themselves as higher, including 'snobs' (Oliver and O'Reilly, 2010: 62).

However, a sense of stigma and comparative poverty (based on a society-wide framework) are not always present. Many individuals do not see themselves as poor and resisted being labelled as such (Ridge, 2009: 19) or made comparisons of their favourable circumstances compared with starving people in the Third World (Creegan *et al*, 2009: 69). Comparative experiences may therefore enable a reflection of how things are not as bad compared to other people (Davidson, 2008: 121) and individuals may be satisfied if their position is higher than, or equal to, a reference group (Burchardt, 2004: 4). For example, some individuals in a study by Dolan (2007: 719) described their relative position as being the same as or better than others in their community, and accepted as the norm.

It is also the case that "satisfaction with a given level of income is not only influenced by who you are and you have around you, it is also affected by who you have been" (Burchardt, 2004: 29), such that those who have fallen into poverty are much less satisfied than those who have been poorer over the longer-term (Burchardt, 2004: 28). Subjective assessments of one's situation are not fixed by current objective circumstances but rather are influenced by expectations, aspirations, previous experiences and social reference groups (Burchardt, 2004: 1). Therefore, the making of an identity is contingent on previous experiences of wealth or housing circumstances and ongoing and shifting relationships with others and changing position in society (Burchardt, 2004: iii; Mee, 2007: 208/212). For example, one study found that tenants expressed feeling lucky to have a home (in a generally stigmatised neighbourhood) and believed their home was 'heaven' and 'as good as it gets' (Mee, 2007: 215/219).

Knies *et al*, (2007: 18) found no significant associations between neighbourhood income and life satisfaction, which they argue refutes relative deprivation theory which suggests that people are less happy when their neighbours are better off than they themselves are. One explanation is that people may not compare themselves to that many people (Knies *et al*, 2007: 19). In addition, individuals are not always envious or resentful of what others around them had, but rather express a sentiment of 'good luck to them' (Dolan, 2007: 719; Pahl *et al*, 2007: 10; Bamfield and Horton, 2009). Oliver and O'Reilly (2010: 53) found that participants in their study commonly employed an anti-materialistic rhetoric, emphasising the quality of life and opportunities for self-realisation over financial interests or wealth disparities. Some evidence also suggests that, rather than dis-identification with a stigmatised identity, residents in low or modest income neighbourhoods often emphasise similarities and a sense of ordinariness and sameness rather than differences with neighbours within a self-evident, normal and natural order that 'goes without saying' (Allen *et al*, 2007: 239-241; Allen, 2005: 201) or view their neighbourhoods as not different to anywhere else (Davidson, 2008: 118).

However satisfaction with neighbourhood has been found to be a primary determinant of overall life satisfaction (Fried, 1984). A wider sense of ontological security also impacts on experiences of poverty and the neighbourhood plays an important role in this (Mee, 2007; 200; Geis and Ross, 1998), as being familiar with a

neighbourhood and being known and knowing others plays a significant role in feelings of safety and security (Hooper *et al*, 2007b: 28).

## 2.6 Summary

This review of the existing research evidence has identified a number of key themes that will be explored in the empirical sections of this working paper. The current policy and media discourses on 'Broken Britain' represent the latest manifestation of narratives of judgement that individualise poverty and link it to personal inadequacies and dependencies. These narratives are also applied to stigmatised neighbourhoods and communities. However, these narratives of judgement and the values underpinning them are not merely imposed by elite groups in society, but rather also reflect the cultural orientations of lower-income groups themselves.

Previous research has found that processes of self-critique lead individuals on low or modest incomes to view themselves as primarily responsible for their comparative status and circumstances and to suffer a range of emotional and psychological consequences, including low self-esteem and there is a clear link between deprivation and poor mental health.

However, researchers have also identified that, far from passivity and dependence, many individuals on low incomes deploy a range of proactive and sophisticated strategies to address the challenges that they face and demonstrate considerable resilience in the face of adversity, whilst often rejecting notions of self-pity and viewing their actions as normal and mundane.

Much of the research on the impacts of poverty on self-esteem and psychological wellbeing is premised on processes of comparison, relative position and stigmatisation. That is, it is the position of an individual relative to others (or their own previous circumstances) and the social processes linked to this, that affects the sense of self rather than actual material conditions. These processes include the subtle demarcation of 'other' groups that are viewed as less respectable or deserving. Although previous research has identified the impacts of deprivation on mental and physical health and the stigmatisation of deprived neighbourhoods, there is less evidence about the specific impacts of neighbourhood on self-esteem and processes of comparing circumstances.

Using interviews with residents living in six relatively deprived neighbourhoods in Britain, this working paper seeks to build on this evidence base. In the following section 3, it investigates how individuals construct a sense of self-esteem, the drivers of this esteem and the cultural narratives and values that underpin this. In section 4, the paper explores the extent to which individuals utilise comparative frameworks, to others and previous periods in their own lives, to assess their current circumstances. Finally, in section 5, the paper examines the influence of place and neighbourhood on self-esteem and comparative conceptualisations of poverty, including specific impacts from each of our case study localities.

Our findings suggest that, as the previous research evidence indicates, the competing popular conceptualisations of deprived individuals as passive, depressed and stigmatised or heroic and defiant are not an accurate portrayal of the complex processes of self-reflection and self-assessment within individuals and the range of factors that influence, in multi-dimensional and contradictory ways, self-esteem and a sense of positioning in the world. The importance of place to these processes appears to be limited, but our identification of some neighbourhood-specific effects suggests the need for further research to establish the geographical, as well as the psychological and material, determinants of wellbeing.

## 3. Self-Esteem

### 3.1 Introduction

This section presents evidence from our interviews with residents in the six case study neighbourhoods. It should be noted that, whilst all of the interviewees resided in the six case study neighbourhoods, their individual incomes and material circumstances varied considerably and they were not included in the study on the basis of their economic status. The interviews were conducted in residents' homes or community venues. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes and they were tapes, transcribed and coded using NVivo. Participants received a modest payment. The interviews were semi-structured and wide ranging, covering a range of topics linked to individuals' experience of living in their neighbourhood, their personal circumstances, their biography and their response to personal and neighbourhood changes. During the interviews, the participants were asked explicitly about what aspects of their lives made them feel good or less good about themselves, whether they compared themselves to others, and whether they reflected on previous periods of their own lives and how they perceived the circumstances of their neighbours. During other parts of the interviews residents also described the forms and causes of anxiety and/or wellbeing and the personal and cultural values that underpinned these and these responses were also included in our analysis. Participants' narratives were nuanced, complex and in places contradictory, with issues of esteem and comparative poverty returned to at various stages of the interviews, both explicitly and implicitly. The data presented in this paper therefore represents respondents' subjective responses and perspectives in the context of these interviews and the specific questions that they were asked (see Allen, 2009; and also Flint, forthcoming, for a discussion of methodological issues involved in undertaking and interpreting qualitative research with working class communities).

This section begins by identifying the sources of anxiety and low-self esteem reported by the research participants. It continues by identifying the drivers of positive self-esteem and concludes with an examination of the personal values and expectations that framed individuals' generation of esteem. It was evident that this cultural framework was characterised by notions of independence, self-reliance and self-criticism.

It is important to note that, although the following sections examine the drivers of self-esteem, the research participants differed considerably in how they conceptualised their circumstances and the impact of their circumstances on their self-esteem. Some respondents did not appear to locate their situation within a personal judgemental framework:

*"I don't disappoint myself. I don't bring myself down like that. I just think positive: it's less stress isn't it? Think positive, help each other if you can afford to"*  
(Sabina 30-34, Blackburn).

*"I don't know. I've never really thought about that. I get up in the morning and do what I need to do and go to my bed...I've never thought of myself as any different as what I am. I am what I am and that's the way I am"*  
(Betty 34-44, Oxgangs).

These participants exhibit *doxa*: the taking for granted of their circumstances which are perceived as natural, ordinary and mundane and not a subject of critical self-reflection (Oliver and Reilly, 2010; Allen *et al*, 2007; Savage *et al*, 2001). These perceptions would suggest the need for an additional category to the classifications of self-esteem, such as those developed by Orr *et al* (2006) or the reflective concept of 'subjective economic welfare' (Burchardt, 2004) which are all premised upon an individual's comparative self-assessment.

### 3.2 Sources of Anxiety and Low Self-Esteem

Our study confirmed the findings of previous studies (Davidson, 2008; Creegan *et al*, 2009; Frost and Hoggett, 2005; Hooper *et al*, 2007 and see also the review by Ridge, 2009) about the detrimental impacts of low or insecure incomes on many individuals' sense of self-esteem and wellbeing. The research participants rarely located notions of self-esteem as resulting from processes of stigmatisation, although the following quote demonstrates the significance of such processes where they were perceived to operate:

*"I think people look down on people out of work...Yeah I do feel like people look down on me and our family, I know they probably don't but you do feel that, your own self worth, self confidence, you feel like people think of you as lazy even though they don't know the half of it"*  
(Rebecca 25-29, Knowsley).

It was evident that, for some participants their financial status generated very high levels of stress and low self-esteem:

*"I was in a two-bedroom house, took on the grandson, came here, we'd got nothing, there was no wallpaper, on carpets, nothing, it was a complete shell, water pouring in down there. It took about five years to get things straight and I had to struggle to buy furniture, go to second hand shops, most of the stuff I get, even me clothing come from charity. I can't afford to go and buy new"*  
(Kathleen 65+, Grimsby).

*"I suffer from depression anyway so I do notice things like that, it really, they become quite significant and I think 'oh well If I had money I would be able to do this' so it is quite difficult to get my head round"*  
(Joe 45-64, Oxgangs).

*"I don't actually feel good about myself, that's something that's gone right out of my head. I don't even think about that"*  
(Safah 16-24, Blackburn).

It was also evident that the fragility and unpredictability of some residents' incomes lead to a general sense of having to make do, unease, anxiety and insecurity:

*"I wouldn't say I'm happy. I get by, but some weeks it is a struggle, if I pay the bills and things like that. I pay the bills but it can be a struggle"*  
(Wilma 35-44, Oxgangs).

*“There’ll be a day when I’m okay and the next day I’m down in the dumps...which is where my stress starts coming in”*  
(Riffat 35-44, Blackburn).

*“That’s hard but you get by but I think it’s more a security thing, not having the money there if you need it, that sort of...you can’t really save up for a holiday and stuff like that”*  
(Olive 35-44, Oxfords).

The centrality of an adequate income to individuals’ lives and psychological health was epitomised by one participant:

*Money, when you don’t have money you feel down, because here without no money you cannot survive it’s as simple as that, so once I know pay day’s coming I literally count down and it’s here*  
(Cordell 30-34, West Kensington).

This sense of low-self esteem was, in some cases, exacerbated by a sense of not contributing, not progressing in life (see Hooper *et al*, 2007) or negative experiences with the welfare system:

*“If you haven’t got money...you can still participate in society but you’re not adding something”*  
(Mohammed, 45-64, Blackburn).

*“You’re supposed to get better over the years”*  
(Jackie 30-34, Oxfords).

*“I didn’t achieve what I wanted, this is not the life I thought I would ever live...I never thought I’m going to be like that, not working, I never thought it would happen to me, never”*  
(Aaliyah 35-44, West Kensington).

*“I need to get a job because I don’t want to be on benefits longer than I have to so I’d feel better about myself”*  
(Lorna 30-34, Amlwch).

*“You go down the dole office and they made you feel like, I don’t know...and it was just the way they said it like they were giving me something. I was glad to get out of that situation. I didn’t like the way they were talking to people”*  
(Bret 45-64, Blackburn).

For one participant, her lack of income was manifested in her inability to ensure her daughter attended a preferred state or private school (as a response to the widely perceived poor standards of the school she had been allocated to):

*“The last time we looked it was £700 a term which is crazy money. So we’ve resigned ourselves now that this is where she [daughter] is going and we’re making the best of it...I was heartbroken”*  
(Geraldine 35-44, Grimsby)

For some participants, this sense of exclusion or failure to meet personal aspirations was located within a wider belief that they were powerless to address their circumstances:

*“Well not having the qualifications, not having good education, I wish my life would be better for the situation but I can do nothing about it”*  
(Tabasxamu 25-29, West Kensington).

For those living on the margins of poverty, this constraint was epitomised by the borrowing of money which was a necessity but which came at a price. The family was the crucial resource for this borrowing. Many individuals faced a tension between trying to balance their everyday finances, already stretched to the limit, against the need pay for a school trip or buy a school uniform. It was those tensions that posed a dilemma to some individuals who felt they had no choice but to compromise themselves and ask for money. This is exemplified by Jackie (30-34 Oxfangs) who explains her dilemma below:

*“Financially it’s too much to be asking them [family] every month cos we’re short of that but if there is a school trip, uniform, the middle one’s starting [a new school] so that’s a whole uniform and the older one needs a new uniform so coats and shoes are normally the thing that I ask for.*

*[Interviewer]: But you said that’s a difficult thing to have to ask for?*

*Yeah I don’t like asking.”*

For other individuals, as previously found by Hooper *et al*, (2007a) managing alone was a better alternative to asking for help; refusal or judgement was a main fear as Zaneb and Leon explain:

*“I would never ask [to borrow money], I would die first”* When asked why, Zaneb elaborated:

*“Because that’s just me, I would never ask, I would give but I would never ask, because I cannot, if I ask and then he, or anybody, if I asked anybody and they gave it to me and then along came a piece of advice that would kill me...like don’t spent it all at once sort of thing...that would kill me”*  
(Zaneb 45-64, West Kensington)

*“I have done it before but again it’s something I’d try never to do that...It’s just life you know, I don’t want to ask and be told no so I’ll only try and ask once, I’d rather give ten times and only ask once,*  
(Leon 25-29, West Kensington)

Anthony also expressed reluctance to borrow money and thought he should deal with his dilemma alone:

*“Maybe a few years ago I would have [borrowed money] without hesitation. Now I always try and sort it out myself first, I try and exhaust every avenue as an individual”*  
(Anthony 30-34, West Kensington).

As will be shown in following sections, the ‘exhausting of every avenue’ epitomised the sense of self-perceived required agency amongst the majority of participants in which they felt it incumbent upon themselves to manage their situations, which were located in a sense of personal incapacity rather than structural factors.

The interviews revealed how, for some individuals, a low income and the insecurity of financial circumstances generated anxiety, stress and depression, exacerbated by a sense of not achieving or progressing in life or contributing adequately to society.

These feelings of low self-esteem could additionally be generated by reliance upon the financial support of others.

### 3.3 Drivers of Positive Self-Esteem

For many participants, as Johnston and Mooney (2007) and Oliver and O'Reilly (2010) suggest, generators of personal satisfaction or self-esteem were not based or focused upon their financial circumstances:

*"I don't really worry about material things. It's more about relationships and family situations that affect me more"*  
(Sajid 30-34, Blackburn).

*"Me family, me dog. I've just got a new puppy. I don't ask for much. I'm quite content with what I've got"*  
(Kathleen 65+, Grimsby).

*"I beat cancer and I go over that and sailed through it, and just what I've got and my family, they mean the world to me, but there's nothing else that I'm really proud of"*  
(Brenda 35-44, Amlwch).

*"I'm very grateful for my health, I'm fairly healthy for my age, I've never had any major injuries or anything like that"*  
(Anthony 30-34, West Kensington).

Of course, these responses may involve a process of individuals rationalising or highlighting positives in very challenging circumstances and as a response to the particular questions asked of them in an interview situation. It is noticeable for example that Anthony, a relatively young man in his early 30s, highlights good health as something that he should be grateful for.

Independence and the ability to socialise were presented as being important drivers of a sense of satisfaction for some participants:

*"I've no got as much money but money isn't everything. I can do what I want. I don't have anybody to say 'I've got to'"*  
(Olive 35-44, Oxfords).

*"I just want a bit more than staying at home and cleaning and tidying, socialising more if anything...financially we're doing okay, it's not something I can complain about, it's just more socialising really"*  
(Nusrat 35-44, Blackburn).

*"I like to be doing things, I don't like to sit around all day and do nothing. It's also about mixing with people...I like the idea of being with people and communicating with all ages but it is important that I also contribute"*  
(Brenda 35-44, Amlwch).

*"Well I always feel good at the local chapel, meet good people and have a chat with them, it's good to talk to you in fact"*  
(Harold 65+, Amlwch).

Some participants identified a sense of achievement, enhanced self-esteem and growing confidence that were generated through achieving educational qualifications, completing training and accessing a job, although in some cases, training or

education did not result in employment, which could be a source of anxiety and disappointment. Again the sense of personal agency is a central theme:

*“Financially I wouldn’t say we were any better off but me personally, because I’ve been to college for three years and passed my exams and I’ve got a job I feel better in myself yeah definitely and more...that I’ve done something”*  
(Francine 65+, Grimsby)

Rose attended a local training course to gain experience and this eventually secured her a job at the hospital. She spoke positively about her experience:

*“Yeah, that helped me with my confidence and stuff and the ability to... well I didn’t know any of the lads, or the girls that were there, apart from [Josie] and it gave me the confidence to talk to people, just random people if you were in a situation where I had to stick up for myself, things like that, really good.”*  
(Rose 16-24, Amlwch).

Stephanie too attended a local course and explained how this built her confidence and enabled her to engage much more with the local community:

*“I feel as though I’m not stuck in the house every day and stuff. It’s helping to get confidence to go back to work and stuff like that in the future, otherwise I think I’d probably be sat in the house losing confidence each day, because you’re sat doing the same old thing”*  
(Stephanie 16-24, Amlwch).

Through training Nigel not only learnt a trade but gained sense of self worth, he felt that he was able to make a positive contribution to society. Nigel’s words highlight the sense of progress and wider obligations to society that characterise the value frameworks within which individuals assess their self-esteem. When asked what he was most proud of he explained:

*“Going to college and learning a trade I know I’m all right at because I done it for five years when I lived in Somerset as a labourer, I know how the mixes are and I got half my tools of what I need for plastering so I’m quite happy with that...it makes me feel I’m doing something, I’m gonna put something back into the community, I’m paying my tax and insurance”*  
(Nigel 30-34, West Kensington).

For many interviewees, their children and their role as parents, or grandparents, were a source of considerable pride and self-esteem, particularly with regard to achievements in education and a sense of progression:

*“At the moment I’m proud of my girls with their education. I’m happy that they’re getting good grades at school so I’m pleased with that, that they’re actually getting somewhere compared to what support I used to get when I was younger”*  
(Nusrat 35-44, Blackburn).

*“I would say I am proud of my children cos I’m doing the best so far and they are doing well at school, their behaviour is okay”*  
(Riffat 35-44, Blackburn)

*“I’ve got three children and five grandchildren, one granddaughter’s in university which that makes me proud, me grandson, he’s in college and he could go to university next year and the others are younger. I think just me family and that”*  
(Winnie 45-64, Knowsley)

Several participants indicated that their role as parents, and the agency and commitment that this required was their primary source of identity and focus:

*“My children: that’s my job, that’s my career. Everything else helps me fulfil that”*  
(Daphne 45-64, Oxfords)

*“I want to be the main part of her [daughter] life and she can look back in years and ‘yeah me mum was there”*  
(Brenda 35-44, Amlwch)

Some participants explicitly related the achievements of their children and grandchildren in terms of resilience shown in a context of financial adversity

*“Me grandchildren they’re very good and they’ve done really well in life so I’m pleased, even though we’re in a deprived area, I’m really proud of what they’ve achieved “*  
(Pearl 65+, Knowsley).

*“I feel I’ve done a good job of bringing them [children] up, save the recession and the bankruptcy which I was a bit disappointed about because it’s nothing we ever did, if we hadn’t got anything we went without”*  
(Isobel 65+, Grimsby)

A similar sense of esteem was reported by individuals acting as carers:

*“I feel I’m needed. He couldn’t do without me...I enjoy looking after him as well because I’m a carer type of person anyway”*  
(Shirley 45-64, Oxfords)

Other interviewees were, as Orr *et al*, (2006) have previously found, able to generate self-esteem through voluntary work, community activism and sports:

*“I do voluntary work and I’ve always been some kind of activist...I do quite a lot of talking about being HIV positive and I do quite a lot of public speaking about it and I also work with pressure groups and stuff like that to try and get recognition for my situation...I play pool [to a high standard] and play pool locally and I’m quite big on the game. I just live it, so I do things, other things with my time as opposed to sitting and brooding about the fact that I’m not very well”*  
(Martha 35-44, Blackburn)

One individual described her voluntary work as:

*“I think it’s just a sense of helping people because I’ve had help with my life. It’s just repaying it”*  
(Tina 16-24, Oxfords)

Another Oxfords resident reported that, due to her involvement in community groups and neighbourhood regeneration programmes:

*“For the first time since I’ve moved here we can honestly say we’re proud”*  
(Daphne 45-64, Oxfords).

Accessing, buying or owning a property was an important source of esteem for several participants, including the sense of achieving this independently and leaving a financial legacy for children:

*“I’m proud that I managed to get a nice house”* (Hashim 35-44 Blackburn).

*"I bought this house, bought it outright: it was me that bought it, not my husband"*  
(Vera 65+, Oxfords.)

*"I think it makes it more of a home because we've saved up and bought all them as well, we've never had a brand new TV or a cooker ...Yeah, everything that we have here is ours now"*  
(Rose 16-24, Amlwch).

*Everything I've got, it's mine, I worked for it, paid it myself"*  
(Graham 25-29, Amlwch).

*"When we paid our mortgage off we went to see a lawyer and we actually signed our house over to our son and daughter and it gave me great satisfaction cos I felt 'well if I've got nothing else to give you you've got that' and it gave me great pleasure in doing that"*  
(Norma 45-64, Oxfords).

Some individuals, most notably in Blackburn, also got a lot of support and comfort from their religious faith:

*"I'm proud that I've got more into finding out more about my religion, I feel very happy about that and to make me a better person and how to deal with stress and situations, not everything is about money. I've recently started to, learnt to read the Koran which I couldn't do"*  
(Robina 30-34, West Kensington)

*"I think what's helped me most, I've started to take bible studies, even a Muslim, and I take bible studies from Jehovah's Witnesses and that has given me a great deal of help ...because sometimes life situations you see what's happening to you and that would really depress me sometimes and all the world situations, and with these studies it tells me why things are happening, why is the world going this way, and they really help so in that way I think that's, I'm coping well in that way"*  
(Riffat 35-44, Blackburn).

Many research participants related employment to their self-esteem (see Crisp, 2010, forthcoming, for a full discussion). This was not primarily related to the income and status work provided. Rather it was a sense of self-reliance and independence:

*"To me work is very important. You need to work, everyone needs to work in this day and age, obviously by working you get what you want, money and stuff, you build a future for yourself and your own money so I think it's quite important"*  
(Sabah 16-24, Blackburn)

*"I've never enjoyed not working for a living, the only time I was not employed outside the home was when my children were growing up, it's always been important to me...self respect as much as anything, I like to feel as though I'm contributing to society and the economy"*  
(Barbara 45-64, Knowsley).

*"I miss work. It was nice to be independent. I am independent and that but it's completely different to what I am now. I never have time to myself really for anything. I miss working definite"*  
(Safah 16-24, Blackburn).

*“Work is just a bit of extra money in the house, you don’t have to rely on benefits as well, it’s your own money, you’re earning it yourself”*  
(Saima 16-24, Blackburn).

Work could also be a source of routine, enjoyment, purpose and mental stimulation:

*“If I lost my job I would have to go out and find volunteering work to do. I need something to keep me in a routine...I’m better off in all because before...I wasnae getting any self esteem. It wasnae satisfying enough for me, obviously living on the breadline because I was only living off the dole money that I got so I would say in all these I’m better off, no just the money side...if it’s been a good day at work I come in like satisfied that I’ve done good...it’s just my self esteem”*  
(Shirley 45-64, Oxfords).

*“I miss working a hell of a lot. I even felt good mentally when I was in work. I felt good about myself”*  
(Khaliq 30-34, Blackburn)

*“Without work you can’t live because something...not just financially it helps you but mentally its helps you as well and takes away the stress and pressure, you meet different people and without working what can you do? Go to the town centre every day. You get bored”*  
(Mohammed 45-64, Blackburn).

*“The pay’s a bonus in this job at the moment. It’s nice to have the money but it is a bonus because I started off as a volunteer and then it snowballed from there, so it’s something that I enjoy doing”*  
(Betty 34-44, Oxfords).

*“Yeah I do [miss work] to be honest, I did love work, I do feel like you lose confidence when you give up work and I liked that adult environment, it’s all children now and baby talk and I feel like I’d like to go back to work just to get out of the house for a bit”*  
(Verity 25-29, Knowsley).

*“I don’t know about status, but just your focus in life...the brain is a muscle and it needs to be exercised and it needs to be active”*  
(Daphne 45-64, Oxfords).

Although further research would be required to establish this point, it may be the case that, as relative pay levels for manual and unskilled workers have declined, the non-material and intrinsic benefits of work become more strongly emphasised as forms of compensation in the absence of greater financial rewards. However, for some individuals, work could also be ‘soul destroying’ and some jobs meant that

*“you were at the bottom of the ladder with no airs and graces and gratitude towards you”*  
(Mohammed 45-64, Blackburn).

It could also generate a sense of anxiety and insecurity:

*“At the moment I know I’m on the sick. I know I’ve got that money coming in every month. If I were working I’d be even more stressed because I’d be thinking ‘have I got me job next week? I might be out of work”*  
(Artur 45-64, Blackburn).

What also emerged strongly from the interviews, as Edge and Rogers (2005) and Canvin *et al* (2009) have also found, was the importance that individuals gave to being active in addressing or improving their situation. Sometimes this was manifested in a sense of achievement:

*"I was two and a half years at college and it's quite a nice feeling to know that something you've worked towards you're getting something from it"*  
(Geraldine 35-44, Grimsby).

*"I felt happy. I felt good on myself because I didn't think that I would get...it was the first interview that I've had in five years and I got it that day so I felt happy"*  
(Penelope 16-24, Oxfords)

*Well I've achieved a lot in my life, I went from operator to supervisor and then I was [an officer bearer in an important local representative body] for a couple of years, that's quite reasonable you know"*  
(Lloyd 65+ Amlwch).

*"I'm a respected member of the community cos I work in hospital"*  
(Robert 25-29, Amlwch).

*"I guess career again and achievement in terms of passing exams and become a qualified accountant and that kind of thing is fairly arduous so I was quite proud of myself when I achieved that. I think actually academically I've always had a certain sense of pride in achieving qualifications"*  
(Waseem 30-34, West Kensington)

In other cases, the importance of their own agency was crucial, even if the outcomes of their own efforts were uncertain:

*"I'm one of those people that, I'll have a tendency to look on the black side if anything goes wrong but on the other hand it's a case of 'I can't sit around doing nowt, I've got to do something so I'll do anything, if you know what I mean, certainly try my best"*  
(Harold 35-44, Grimsby).

*"In two years time I'll have got my qualification. I'll be earning a bit of money cos I don't want to be stuck on the dole for the rest of me life...we'll have to see, at least I can say I've tried and been to college and attempted to my life..."*  
(Mel 16-24, Grimsby).

*"I need to work for myself, and the money and the kids...just for a bit of respect for myself...I think if you're working you feel better about yourself, definitely...I don't know, I can give it a try, that's all I can do, if it gets too much then I'll put my hands up...but I'll respect myself more for the fact that I've tried it"*  
(Olive 35-44, Oxfords).

*"If I was going to be proud of anything it would be my ability to fight against the odds"*  
(Martha 35-44, Blackburn).

Our interviews revealed the importance of non-material factors, including family, social networks and community activities in generating self-esteem. Work was also an important source of esteem. Many individuals highlighted how esteem could be generated or maintained through a sense of agency and responding to challenges. It should be borne in mind that the positive responses presented above may partly be

a result of individuals seeking to rationalise very challenging circumstances and responding to the specific interview questions about esteem. It is also important that some of the drivers of self-esteem, including parenting, training and education, housing and volunteering still have a material base in that they are, in part, dependent upon some access to financial resources.

### 3.4 Independence, Self-Reliance and Self-Criticism

This emphasis on the centrality of agency and effort was linked to two themes that were prominent in most interviews: the need to be independent and the self-responsibility required to accept and address individuals' circumstances, supporting the findings of Skeggs and Wood (2009) Orr *et al*, (2006) and Pahl *et al*, (2007). There was a pride attached to not being dependent or reliant on others, including friends, family and the government:

*"It's much better to be able to hold your head up high and say you don't owe anything"*  
(Vera 65+, Oxfords).

*"Being independent; I'd love to just do everything by myself without getting any support from anybody because sometimes it's like somebody's feeling sorry for you, that's why you are getting that support. I don't normally want that, I just want to do it on my own, don't need anybody's help"*  
(Saima 16-24, Blackburn).

*"I would never...like job seekers allowance and stuff like that...no matter how much money I wouldn't"*  
(Tina 16-24, Oxfords).

Contrary to the feelings of resentment and inadequacy found in other studies, some respondents appeared to be accepting of their circumstances. Crucially this also limited the extent to which they subjected themselves to a negative self-critique:

*"Life deals you the hand and you've got to do the best with the hand that you're given"*  
(Martha 35-44, Blackburn).

*"I'm not angry I guess you just have to get used to the situation in a way because you can't always have it good. There's going to be times when it's bad times"*  
(Safah 16-24, Blackburn).

*"I've had me bad patches and I have me good patches but the thing is I've got to live with it [epilepsy], simple as that...sometimes it gets me down but I've got to live with it, it's part of me "*  
(Donald 35-44, Grimsby).

*"It's never been a problem. At the end of the day if it's no there it's no there and you can only do what you can do"*  
(Stan 35-44, Oxfords).

As found by Creegan *et al*, (2009), Skeggs (1994), Dolan (2007) and Orton (2009), other research participants believed that their circumstances were caused by their own decisions and actions and that the responsibility for addressing their problems lay with themselves:

*"It's about my lesson, I went down that path, I chose that relationship...it's my responsibility to pay the debt back"*  
(Martha 35-44, Blackburn).

*"Things have to be dealt with so live with it. I chose my path and that's that. You occasionally think 'oh god I wish I'd done that' but tough now pal, you're forty now, get on with it"*  
(Betty 35-44, Oxfords).

*"I kicked myself up the arse and started again"*  
(Callum 45-64, Grimsby).

This was often related to individuals being self-critical and perceiving their own weaknesses and inadequacies as the primary cause of their present situation: One individual described themselves as 'lazy'. Another said:

*"It's very rarely that I ask for help cos it's me own fault"*  
(Tracey 25-29, Blackburn).

Others perceived that they lacked some financial or domestic skills:

*"I tend to think I've got to manage on my own steam...I need to learn to manage"*  
(Olive 35-44, Oxfords).

*"Although we are not great savers...well I'm not that great with money to be fair"*  
(Zara 30-34, Oxfords).

These self-critiques were located within a widespread narrative that the solutions to coping with lower incomes were essentially individualistic and that the agency of individuals could still determine their own outcomes:

*"You can't segregate yourself from your environment; you're very responsible for your actions and the actions of people around you so you have to make a positive"*  
(Sajid 30-34, Blackburn).

*"Problems in life, you don't back away from them, you try and face your problems, the fear inside you've just got to face. I think whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger so I've just got to keep going...it's all down to the individual, some people want everything and you can't have everything in life, you've just got to take it in your stride"*  
(Faizal 16-24, Blackburn).

*"I feel that if we can do it so can everybody else...I think it was, it was pride, it was pride. You wanted something you had to work for it"*  
(Norma 45-64, Oxfords).

This was often, as Blokland (2007) has shown, specifically related to the need to manage effectively on a lower income, rather than a focus upon the actual extent of this income:

*"We just have to get through it. There's no other way round...there's more of an outgoing than an income but life goes on, you have to get it going, find another way of spreading it and getting any bills at a time when you've nothing at all"*  
(Saima 16-24, Blackburn).

*“I’ve been far worse off before but I always picked myself up...You’ve got to work with what you’ve got”*  
(Betty 35-44, Oxfords)

*“You just cut back on everything, lucky enough we didn’t have debts and stuff because we’ve always been ‘if you can’t afford it do without it’ type of thing so that was a major plus but a lot of people have come out of work, are in debt and everything so to us we were lucky in that sense”*  
(Irene 65+, Knowsley).

*“If you’ve got anything about you you’ve got to economise yourself to cope with it”*  
(Ethel 45-64, Grimsby).

*“Even if you’re on job seekers allowance you can still go up to the shops at certain times and shop well. I think anyway, of you’ve got your head on your shoulders”*  
(Charlotte 45-64, Oxfords)

The interviews revealed the importance of self-reliance and independence to individuals’ sense of esteem and respect. Some individuals were not overly-critical of themselves or resentful of others, whilst others did locate their circumstances within a framework of self-criticism and being inadequate in relation to managing money or domestic tasks. This criticism was based on individualistic notions of being able to rectify situations, in which individuals’ responsibility, capacity and obligation to manage modest resources efficiently were paramount.

### 3.5 Summary

The words of these research participants indicate the different scales of poverty that households are confronting. It is clear that living on a lower income is a source of stress and health problems such as depression. It is also the case that a lower or fluctuating income or financial status creates ontological insecurity within individuals and a constant sense of unease. However, our findings also suggest that some individuals do not view their financial circumstances as something that they reflect upon or locate within a judgemental framework of critique. The reasons for this differentiation and any neighbourhood impacts upon this were unclear and will require further research.

This research also highlights the importance of non-material factors in generating self-esteem and a sense of individual happiness and wellbeing. Family and children were the most notable and significant element in most individual’s sense of achievement (as parents, grandparents or carers). Conversely, it was often concerns about providing adequately for children and other family members that could be the source of the greatest self doubt and concern. Volunteering, community activism, participation in sports, arts and other community groups and socialising were also drivers of a sense of esteem and value, particularly in terms of making a wider contribution to society. Further sources of esteem were achievements in education or accessing a desired home. Some of these responses may represent the rationalisation of very challenging circumstances in a research interview situation, but they do indicate that positive drivers of self-esteem are clearly evident.

Work was a significant source of self-esteem, but what was striking was that this was seldom related entirely or even primarily to enhanced income. Rather it was other benefits, such as independence, socialising and mental stimulation and a sense of purpose that were most valued. These findings suggest that studies of the effects of

poverty and low income need to relate financial circumstances more closely to other non-material drivers of self-esteem and self-assessment and to recognise that, for some individuals, their happiness and wellbeing is determined by other factors.

Our research found very strong cultural narratives and values that were present in most interviews in all six neighbourhoods. These included the importance of individuals relating their sense of esteem to their active attempts to respond to challenges, even when the outcomes were uncertain. Self-responsibility and self-reliance were predominant themes: individuals often believed that it was their own actions and decisions that determined their current circumstances and would decide their future prospects. There was a common sense that self-respect and respect from others was achieved through being independent and not reliant on either other family members or, in some cases, the benefits system. Crucially, this respect was related to effort and determination rather than the actual achievement of higher incomes or more material goods.

Our findings also supported previous evidence of significant levels of self-critique and self-blame amongst individuals, who would often conceptualise their circumstances as arising from their own inadequacies and deficiencies, including their financial and domestic management skills and their intelligence. These narratives of self-critique were located within a wider culture of individual responsibility, whereby the causes of poverty were given less emphasis than the response to this poverty. In this understanding, individuals were required to accept and face up to the challenges they faced and to adapt to lower incomes. Indeed, individuals' abilities to economise and to be adaptive and creative in order to manage on a low income were a source both of self-esteem and opportunity and the judgement of self and others.

What these findings suggest is that, whilst stress, anxiety and serious health problems were a major factor for many individuals and that this was often linked to their financial circumstances, the extent of misery or low self-esteem was complicated by other sources of self esteem and by an understanding that this was the way the world was and that there was a need to respond to this, as identified in previous studies of 'doxic' accounts of the ordinary and mundane. These complexities and positive aspects of esteem need to be considered in more depth in studies of poverty, without challenging the primacy of a low income and its negative consequences or the need for continuing governmental interventions to address deprivation. It was also the case that the narratives of judgement and critique- of the self and of others- were in part generated by the residents of the neighbourhoods that we studied, rather than simply being imposed by more affluent or powerful sections of society. Of course, our research was not able to establish the extent to which the respondents internalised or articulated wider societal discourses generated by more powerful groups including the media and politicians. Comparative or self-judgmental frameworks are a reflection of the human condition (Davidson, 2008) and the tendency to place ourselves as a key actor in our live stories. In part, the research participants' narratives were grounded in a sense of loss for a more collective and egalitarian sense of community in which the material circumstances of individuals were less polarised and less subject to judgement. However, these narratives, and the emphasis given to independence, self-responsibility and individual agency also seriously challenge the themes of dependency, indolence and passivism which are dominant in much recent conceptualisations of an alleged 'Broken Britain'.

## 4. Perspectives on Comparative Poverty

### 4.1 Introduction

In order to understand the extent to which individuals deploy a comparative framework to assess their own circumstances, we asked the research participants a series of questions. These included whether they compared themselves to other people (including their neighbours and their friends and family) and what indicators, symbols or markers they would use to make this comparison. We also asked whether individuals made comparisons between their current circumstances and previous periods of their lives. This section firstly presents evidence about how individuals' compare themselves to others and continues by examining comparisons with previous periods in individuals' lives. The final part of this section addresses the issue of the judgement of others, specifically in relation to employment and benefit claims, which emerged as a key theme, across all six neighbourhoods, throughout the interviews. This issue is included here as it appears to be an important form of the comparative assessment of individuals' circumstances and self-esteem.

### 4.2 Comparisons with Others

We found some evidence to support Knies *et al*, (2007) previous findings that conceptualisations of relative deprivation may overstate their importance in individual's assessment of their own and other's circumstances. Some interviewees reported that they did not view their circumstances in comparative terms or in a relational framework to others and indeed suggested that such judgements would represent an intrusion on others' privacy:

*"I don't really compare with anyone. I've never thought of it in that way"*  
(Riffat 35-44, Blackburn).

*"No I don't do that [compare myself to others] I just keep myself to myself"*  
(Gary 45-64, West Kensington).

*"I never really gave that a thought what other people think about our...it's never entered my mind and it doesn't enter my mind how other people get their money, do your own thing, get what you can, at the end of the day that's what everybody does in different ways"*  
(Stan 35-44, Oxfords).

*"No some people are better off than others and some people are worse off than others but that's really none of our business though is it? I wouldn't like poke me nose or start talking about people in that way, I just find that like disrespectful ...No I never really thought about it really"*  
(Kyle 16-24, Knowsley).

Other interviewees stated that they did not compare themselves to others, but rather used a personal comparison with their own previous situation:

*"No because I've no time to do it [compare oneself to others], no not really. I suppose when things are bad you always think 'how come if I'd done this, if I'd done that'"*

(Daphne 45-64, Oxfords)

*"I wouldn't necessarily look at people round about me...I think you judge it on what you maybe had before and it's different from now"*

(Zara 30-34, Oxfords).

Other individuals suggested that, even if they minded to do so, it was not possible to determine how their incomes compared to their neighbours or to assess the financial situation of those living in the same area:

*"We can't measure it against anything that anybody else's finances or anything like that"*

(Kimberley 35-44, Blackburn).

*"Not really. I mean a lot of them are working, you see the cars going away and coming back but I don't know where they work or what they do so they must be pretty stable I should think"*

(Roy 45-64, Oxfords).

*"I'm struggling but I'm not saying that everybody will be. Some might have some pennies put to one side; they might have got a relative. I don't know"*

(Tracey 25-29, Blackburn).

Some individuals assessed their immediate neighbours as being in similar financial circumstances:

*"My immediate neighbours, I would say we're probably all about in the same boat, we're all pretty much the same. We all shop in the same shops and we're pretty much, they must be much the same"*

(Stan 35-44, Oxfords).

*"I think two people spring to mind who are in the same boat but they're in the same circumstances, we're all working and really struggling, but other people seem to be having a great time"*

(Jackie 30-34, Oxfords).

*"Well more or less I think we're all in the same boat, people haven't got the money nowadays. One time you used to see a lot of them getting taxis from the shop, going to Huyton village, I don't see that as much"*

(Winnie 45-64, Knowsley).

Other individuals believed that there were differences in the circumstances of residents in their neighbourhoods, based on physical and visible signifiers such as household goods, home ownership or presence in the neighbourhood at certain times:

*"They've got a big television. I saw it going in and they've had a new cooker, they've got a new washing machine, I've seen them going in. But it doesn't bother me, just because they've got it, I'm not one to say 'I've got to have it too' do you know what I mean? I wouldn't go daft just because my neighbour had something"*

(Vera 65+, Oxfords).

*"I often think that there are other people who aren't working but their situation is better than ours. We don't work either but how come our situation's worse? But then I think maybe it's because they've got more kids so they get more help from the wider family...they seem to have the necessities and food, it's not that we look in their shopping baskets to see what they're buying but they seem to be able to afford more"*  
(Khaliq 30-34, Blackburn).

*"I think most people are on benefits...because you see them drinking cans outside and if they're doing that you know most of them don't work"*  
(Kimberley 35-44, Blackburn).

One participant compared himself to those working in the same trades:

*"I class myself as a tradesperson, being a taxi driver so if I do compare myself it would be with another tradesperson, so someone maybe in the building trades or any other trade where you work with your hands"*  
(Sajid 30-34, Blackburn).

Even where participants did perceive material differences between themselves and their neighbours this did not necessarily manifest itself as a comparative sense of less worth or relative inadequacy:

*"Obviously because there's home owners and everyone goes to work, I know they obviously will have more money than us but I just tend to, we don't go out or nothing, we don't spend money, if we're going out we do things for nothing like go to the park and that, we don't go to anything where you have to have a lot of money, so I don't feel worse off, I don't feel like we're stuck in with nothing, we just have to budget our money to what we can afford"*  
(Verity 25-29, Knowsley).

*"...they're not better than me, I'm on the same level, there's a lot of people like me' so it doesn't make me an outcast sort of thing"*  
(Marie 35-44, Knowsley)

Many residents did not know, or want to know the financial situation of their neighbours, and it was also recognised that possible signifiers of wealth could be misleading or that material wealth did not necessarily equate to wellbeing:

*"I do know that a lot of people have very nice cars, but you can have a nice car and not be able to afford it in this day and age so who's to say what financial situation people are in"*  
(Martha 35-44, Blackburn).

*"I'm happy. Even though we've got financial problems when I look at [my family] and see that they're happy then that's all right. There are some people that haven't got financial problems but they've got so many problems in their homes. You see people, they split up husband and wife split up and the children get left behind and those kind of things"*  
(Khaliq 30-34, Blackburn).

Some individuals compared themselves to other members of their family or their friends, but again, their feelings towards more wealthy relatives were complex and ambiguous:

*"They've got an awful lot of money...he's got a really really good job but they live in this lovely cul-de-sac and just quiet and peaceful. It's lovely and the kids can play out, cos it's a cul-de-sac they can play football and they've got a massive back yard and stuff like that so it's lovely...not in a jealous is a wrong word. I wouldn't even say I'm jealous and like my best friend they've just had an extension put on the house and two new bedrooms and ensuite bathroom put in and I mean they're [abroad] at the minute and they have a lovely life, they really do. Money's no object...I've another friend and she lives in a really nice area of Grimsby, really really good area and you know when you walk in somebody's house and it's just 'ahh' and it's absolutely beautiful her home but I'm not jealous. I do look and think 'that's nice'....it's just how the other half lives"* (Geraldine 35-44, Grimsby).

However, this participant went on to say: *"But her husband has to work away half the year for them to have that life and I know that my friend would give it all up if he was at home...so it's weighing up the pros and cons"* (Geraldine 35-44, Grimsby).

*"That issue doesn't really bother me. I'm probably the least educated from my family. My cousin is a head teacher in Blackburn, I've got another cousin who's a head, he's a psychiatrist, head of a department and a brother who's got a computer business and another one's a planner, so they're far more educated than me and financially better off...I'm very content with my life in that respect because I compare myself to people who are worse off"* (Sajid 30-34, Blackburn).

*"I don't resent anybody. They've worked hard for it. Good luck to them...they've worked hard, just as hard to get their money as everybody else has and I've no grudge for that at all"* (Betty 35-44, Oxfords)

Many participants, as in the study by Creegan *et al*, (2009) and those reviewed by Ridge (2009) did not define themselves as being on low incomes and compared themselves to those who were less, rather than better, off than they were. In these accounts a clear marker was used to describe individuals' own circumstances and what they termed destitution or extreme poverty:

*"We're no destitute or hard up"* (Isobel 65+, Grimsby).

*"You weigh up what you've got and think 'well I've got a job, I can afford to buy'...where there are people who can't just go out and buy a pair of trainers for their kids so in that respect I worked, I've got pride about myself"* (Zara 30-34, Oxfords).

*"I've got to let those angry and resentful feelings go because they're only bad for me and if you keep looking upwards towards what people have that's better or bigger or more than you've got yourself then you'll always be disappointed. But I'm always the kind of person that's always tried also to look down or look behind me and see that I am very fortunate. I've got a roof over my head, I've got a warm house, I've got a comfy bed, I'm not challenged in any way in terms of I don't have somebody abusing me or treating me badly or taking my rights away in that sense so I'm a lot more fortunate than a lot of people who live on the planet or just this area...I try not to aspire to bigger things because at the end of the day because I've got health problems it would only bring me heartache for a start...I've learnt that I can't push myself beyond my own reasonable boundaries and as I'm getting older I'm finding it easier to accept"*

*what you've got and look at it and say 'aren't I lucky?' than to keep saying 'why haven't I got' because we have world of people who keep saying 'why haven't I got?' but in reality the majority of people on the planet have got absolutely sod all and we are, even me living in a terraced house in a quite built up area, I'm one of the world's rich people and that's the way I try and look at it"*  
(Martha 35-44, Blackburn).

*"It could be a lot worse, there are a lot of people a lot worse off than I am so I'm not complaining...not family or friends, I would go extreme, like the Third World"*  
(Nusrat 35-44, Blackburn).

*"...at least I've got a roof over me head so I can't really... there is a lot of people worse off than me like"*  
(Kyle 16-25, Knowsley).

This could also extend to favourable comparisons with other developed nations, such as the United States:

*"The grass always seems greener at the other side, at least you know that if you're ill here you can go to the doctors where as anywhere else in the world you need private insurance"*  
(Abi 35-44, Blackburn).

### 4.3 Comparison with Previous Circumstances

The research participants were, as Burchardt (2004) indicates, much more likely to compare their present circumstances with previous situations in their lives:

*"I see the past. My thinking mentality, the way I think, look at previous experiences I've had and reflect back on things that are happening now, seeing how to improve it, how much I have improved, whether I have or not"*  
(Sabah 16-24, Blackburn).

Although this was not always the case:

*"I just don't think about it that way...I've always been on a low income, it's something that's never bothered me because I know what I've got to do with what I've got"*  
(Vernon 45-64, Oxfords)

*"I rarely judge [present circumstances] because you just get on with it day after day"*  
(Nusrat, 35-44, Blackburn).

For some individuals, their present situation represented considerable progress from earlier periods of their lives, both in terms of relationships, personal happiness and financial security:

*"Now I'm independent, I'm self financing, and I've got a good roof over my head, these homes are in excellent condition, well maintained"*  
(Barbara 45-64, Knowsley).

*"I love life now. I've been on an upward spiral for years now actually and I'm really happy where I am...I had nothing but I walked away with even less really, nowhere to live, nowhere to go, no money, 'what do I do with me kids?' and I got up and made that step and not gone back, not said 'okay just for easiness sake'. I've done what I wanted to do so that's my biggest achievement I think, doing that for myself and I'm glad I have done now because I couldn't be in a better place"*

(Tracey 25-29, Blackburn).

*"I think it's just given the family a bit more security knowing that the bank account's not spiralling downwards at a rapid rate and that it's staying virtually the same. That was the thing before, more going out than coming in"*

(Kimberley 35-44, Blackburn).

*"We're not as worried as people who've normally got more money that I think that have really lost out...I suppose we think we're in a better position at the moment, we don't have jobs to lose"*

(Shirley 45-64, Oxfords).

However, for other individuals, their lives had been significantly and negatively affected by a worsening financial situation, which was a cause of considerable regret and anxiety:

*"In loads of ways, it's like before you go out you have to think twice cos of the budget that you've got and all the things that you buy have got so expensive and you're not getting as much so it's really hard...before we'd just go out and do it and now it's like now it's like "will we be able to do this?" or 'is it better if we change it, not do that and then do this' so we change quite a lot of things...I always say 'oh we used to do this and we don't do it now'"*

(Safah 16-24, Blackburn).

*"My situation was much better when I was working, when I was living in the first house and I was working things were better then, I think about it all the time"*

(Hashim 35-44, Blackburn).

*"It's changed a hell of a lot. At that time we had permanent work, we owned our own homes and now we don't own our homes and we haven't got employment either. It's so different now...I think bloody hell I used to have a really good job and we had everything and now I haven't got anything and we didn't worry about anything"*

(Khaliq 30-34 Blackburn).

*"We used to give a big party in the garden every year. I don't know. I even could provide all the drinks and the food and everything. I can't do it this year...I can't afford to do what I was doing two years ago. I could go into a café if I went out into town for a cup of coffee, it cost me a quid. It costs £1.70 now"*

(Kathleen 65+, Grimsby).

*"Well occasionally, I think I was in banking and I did have a lovely lifestyle, so much as I would have wanted things but things are a lot different now"*

(Sarah 45-64, West Kensington).

Previous financial circumstances were reflected upon by several participants, in some cases in a judgemental way or with regret that money had been squandered in some way.

*“Financially, I’d like to be in a stronger financial position given my career and how much I have earned, potentially looking back if I’d been a bit more sensible...I could have saved more, equally the money that I’ve spent I’ve spent living the life that I’ve wanted to live, I haven’t had to hold back on anything”*  
(Waseem 30-34, West Kensington).

*“It does, it makes me feel down a little bit thinking that gosh you know, a waste that I did with the money when I should have saved it and maybe had a bit more”*  
(Christina 30-34, West Kensington).

Reflecting the complexity and ambiguity of these issues, the following perceptions of an interviewee indicate the ability of individuals to adapt to their present circumstances and reinforce the point that income status is only one element of how individuals’ view and assess their situation:

*“I’d think ‘oh my god’ because I’ve been brought up on the bit nicer things I couldn’t go and buy Tesco basic brand...it’s hard but I’ve learnt now there are some things that just don’t taste any different...its whatever we can afford and it doesn’t make any difference. Juice is juice but...obviously I’d love to have the luxury items that they used to have but I’ve got me independence, I’ve got my family, I’m happy. I’m not bothered about sacrificing what I used to have”*  
(Mel 16-24, Grimsby).

#### 4.4 ‘Fecklessness’ and the Benefits System

Issues of work and identity will be explored in depth in a forthcoming study paper. However, it is important to state here that the narratives of self-reliance, independence and agency in managing on a low income identified above were, as the previous work of Parker and Pharoah with Hale (2008), Nayak (2006), Tilly (1998) and Goffman (1968) demonstrate, very strongly linked, in all six neighbourhoods, to the judgement of fecklessness on the part of others:

*“They’ve got a loan to go out on Saturday night, not for something they need, just for the sake of having some money, so it’s their own fault really. All these people who ‘oh I can’t afford’ but they still smoke twenty a day”*  
(Tracey 25-29, Blackburn).

*“A lot of me friends are on income support because a lot of them have kids which is good in a way to think I have got people that are in my situation but a lot of them seem to manage to go out drinking every Friday and Saturday night and I think ‘well how do you do it?’”*  
(Mel 16-24, Grimsby).

In addition to these critiques of the perceived financial mismanagement and misguided priorities of others, there was also a very commonly articulated belief that the benefits system did not afford adequate status or rewards to those in lower paid employment:

*“You’ve got the layabouts that don’t want to work, they seem to be a hell of a sight better off”*  
(Maureen 65+, Blackburn).

*“Unless you want to be a DSS and live off social and do nothing”*  
(Abi 35-44, Blackburn).

*I think there are some of them who do not want to work, there seem to be a certain element who prefer to indulge in criminal activities shall we say, on the other hand some of those could be officially employed”*  
(Barbara 45-64, Knowsley).

*“When I was growing up you either got on with it or you didn’t it was as simple as. I do agree that people need help but I sometimes think the worse you are, the worse mum you are or the worse family life you have the more you get”*  
(Geraldine 35-44, Grimsby).

This had a direct manifestation in its alleged visibility within the neighbourhoods:

*“I do believe some people are lazy and the benefits system in this country is absolutely ridiculous because there is people on benefits who don’t need benefits or deserve benefits...there’s people driving round in these flash cars they’ve got for free off the government and they don’t have to go to work”*  
(Tracey 25-29, Blackburn).

*“It gripes me that [a neighbouring household] are getting on for fifty and they’ve never done an honest day’s work in their life but they’ve had double glazing done, central heating done...they go everywhere...holidays”*  
(Isobel 65+, Grimsby).

These responses suggest a clear distinction being made in the justification of one’s own position and the projection of the need to work onto others (see Crisp, 2010). Some individuals did recognise that there were a range of explanations for people not being in employment:

*“People don’t work cos they’re too old and stuff so they’ve got their own reason why they can’t work”*  
(Sabah 16-24, Blackburn).

We are obviously not able to verify the circumstances and motivations of the ‘other’ groups that our participants referred to. It is noteworthy that the strength of belief that some individuals were not predisposed to gaining employment suggests that perceptions and explanations for unemployment amongst working class communities themselves may differ to some extent with qualitative studies that tend to find respondents (including those in our own study) universally expressing a desire to work.

It was also interesting to note that some individuals extended the self-critique of themselves and their own inadequacies to their failure to take advantage of the welfare system:

*“I think I just don’t know how to milk the system, like they [people on benefits] have always got nice clothes on and everything with designer labels...you need to know how to work the system and I’m too stupid to”*  
(Olive 35-44, Oxfords).

*“Sometimes I feel like a mug, I get up, go to work, I’ve always worked...I get up and go to work, for example might have four kids cos I know someone like that, she’s laid on her bed, I’m rushing to drop him at school, go to work, come back, ...I always say I wish I had the option to get up, to go to work take the benefit route you have to justify it, they would call you up or contact you, you would have to justify, I’d rather make my own money so I don’t have to justify anything”*  
(Cordell 30-34, West Kensington).

There is an interesting distinction here between the attitudes expressed towards more affluent individuals or groups in which a sense of 'good luck to them' appears to be grounded in the perceived legitimacy of their achievements (qualifications, higher incomes, more material wealth etc.) and the resentment felt towards those who are viewed as making illegitimate gains through 'playing the system' by not working or claiming benefits that they are regarded as not being entitled to.

## 4.5 Summary

These findings challenge, as well as confirm, some of the previous research on the importance and nature of individuals' perceptions of comparative poverty. Many individuals did not compare their financial circumstances to those of their neighbours and even amongst those who did so, there was an acknowledgement that an accurate assessment of others' incomes was difficult and that exterior signs of apparent wealth were not a straightforward indicator of financial or other forms of wellbeing. Thus, whilst consumption practices rather than occupation or production roles were more frequently used to assess others' status (see Watt, 2006; Pahl *et al*, 2007: 17), the extent to which these consumption practices formed the basis for comparative conceptualisations or distinctions of social status and self esteem were limited. These comparisons will also be influenced by the extent, or lack of, neighbourhood ties between residents, as explored in other working papers from this study. The research participants were slightly more likely to compare their circumstances to those of their family and friends, but even in these cases the greater wealth of others was framed within a context of other forms of happiness and the sacrificing of other means of wellbeing such as time with families. In these conceptualisations, 'getting on' is not necessarily linked to enhanced material income. There was very little evidence of a sense of resentment to the more affluent. It was also far more common for individuals to compare themselves favourably to those who were worse off, either in the UK or in the Third World.

The majority of interviewees did compare their present circumstances to previous periods in their lives and for some, this reflection enabled a sense of progress and achievement, in which improved income levels were also related to educational achievements or the overcoming of personal and relationship problems. For other individuals who were worse off financially than in previous stages of their lives, this often brought considerable stress and a sense of self-critique. These individuals were less likely to view their present situations as simply being 'the way life is' and more likely to perceive their current predicament as problematic.

One of the most common and strong themes running through these narratives was a belief in the fecklessness of some others and the unfairness of the existing benefits system (rather than any sense of unfairness or resentment towards the income differentials between groups in society). This challenges the notion that such narratives of individual explanations for poverty and stigmatisation are necessarily generated by powerful groups in society, although we were unable to establish the extent to which residents' narratives were generated as a response to perceived stigmatisation and whether the intra-class critiques of feckless others resulted from wider inter-class judgements. Our evidence does highlight the continuing dominance of notions of self-reliance and respect within the neighbourhoods.

The narratives presented in sections 3 and 4 were drawn from across the six case study neighbourhoods and were commonly articulated in each of them. The following section will examine to what extent place, through neighbourhood, influences self-esteem and notions of comparative poverty. It also presents evidence about the specific effects of each of the case study localities.

## 5. Neighbourhood Impacts

### 5.1 Introduction

The findings presented above were common across the study neighbourhoods. The issue of area stigmatisation and its impact on esteem has been examined in more depth in a previous study working paper (Flint and Casey, 2008) and linkages between place and self-identity has been the subject of other recent JRF research (Robertson *et al*, 2008; Livingston *et al*, 2008). This section of the report attempts to build on these studies by examining the extent to which ‘place’, through neighbourhood, influenced individuals’ self-esteem and frameworks for comparing themselves to others. The section begins by presenting the limited evidence of this neighbourhood impact across the six case study sites and continues by illustrating the place-specific impacts of each individual case study neighbourhood.

### 5.2 The Influence of Neighbourhood

Although one of the aims of the research was to explore the specific impacts of neighbourhoods on self-esteem and comparative poverty, we found any such neighbourhood effects to be very limited and that individuals tended to make comparisons with previous periods of their own lives, or friends and family neighbours rather than neighbours. The research participants did not identify living in their neighbourhoods as a strong driver of self-esteem:

*“I make the best of any situation anyway, but I feel safe here...that makes me feel good”* However, *“I’ve got a good life and it’s not because I live in a big house that I have a good life. It wouldn’t matter where I lived, I’d still have a life like I have really. I don’t think the area attributes that much to it”*  
(Tracey 25-29, Blackburn).

*“I don’t think its [ the neighbourhood] got anything to do with my quality of life, I feel that I just live here, I shut my door and then I’m doing what I’m doing, I’ve got my own mind an d my own purpose and I don’t think my neighbourhood has anything to do with my quality of life”*  
(Sandra 25-29, West Kensington).

However, for some residents, their place of residence acted as a signifier of their progress and a reference point:

*“I was very hopeful that there was a future where I would end up selling this [property] and moving on and we’d get a house together and I’d live somewhere else. The last thing I wanted to do was come back here, it was the very last thing that I wanted to do”*  
(Martha 35-44, Blackburn).

For this resident there was a need to *“come to terms with the fact that I’m here”*:

*“We’re happier than we’ve been for a long time, we’re very content, we’ve got a roof over our heads. It’s not like we have to... it’s not like being under a private landlord where you’d have to get out at the drop of a hat if they wanted you to so there’s a certain level of security”*  
(Kimberley 35-44, Blackburn).

In common with the findings presented above, there was also a regularly expressed importance given to personal and collective agency and responsibility:

*“No neighbourhood is safe, its only as safe as you make it yourself and the people, how safe they [make it]...every neighbourhood has their ups and downs, it’s how you cope with them ups and downs that matters”*  
(Faizal 16-24, Blackburn).

Just as perceptions of individuals’ financial circumstances were influenced by their previous experiences, resident’s attitudes to their neighbourhoods were also affected by their earlier housing experiences:

*“It’s not as nice as it could be but it’s better than nothing, certainly better than nothing”*  
(Francine 65+, Grimsby).

*“I’ve lived in a council house all my life. Some people would probably think ‘that’s awful. Fancy just making do with a council house’ but to me it’s always been home so I’ve never been ashamed of that fact”*  
(Shirley 45-64, Oxfords).

*It’s more were part of a community now instead of just two people above a shop in town and we’re more, I don’t know...it feels better to be here[in a house on an estate] by a long way. I can’t explain it”*  
(Rose 16-24, Amlwch).

*“I’m not negative about where I come from but when I look back on where I used to live and things like that it’s completely different and it’s trying to get my head round that, it’s quite difficult”*  
(Joe 45-64, Oxfords).

It was also clear that, whilst often implicit, the degree to which residents felt “comfortable” (Sarah 45-64 West Kensington) in a neighbourhood (this sense of comfort related to a range of factors, not necessarily living standards); was important to their wider sense of wellbeing and contributed to the wider framework within which they assessed their own lives and perceived the comparative circumstances of others.

### **5.3 The Impacts of Specific Neighbourhoods**

Although we have argued that the relative importance of neighbourhood and physical place in relation to self-esteem and comparative assessments of poverty appears to be limited, there was some evidence of specific effects, including the construction of self-identity, in each of the six case study areas. It is important to note that and place or cultural identity is not linked, in a linear process, to a sense of self-esteem nor to self-assessments of individuals’ personal (including financial circumstances). Rather, each of the neighbourhoods generated specific impacts for some residents in relation to their sense of wellbeing or comparison to others and it is these dimensions that are presented, in turn, for each of the six case study neighbourhoods. Figure 1 summarises the key specific drivers and effects of each study neighbourhood:

**Table 1: Summary of Key Specific Neighbourhood Impacts**

<b>Amlwch</b>	National identity	Welsh language	'Incomers' and established	Industrial heritage
<b>Blackburn</b>	Positive impacts of regeneration	Changing population and ethnic diversity	Favourable comparison with other neighbourhoods	
<b>Grimsby</b>	Negative impacts of anti-social behaviour	Less favourable comparisons with other neighbourhoods	Industrial heritage	
<b>Knowsley</b>	Negative impacts of regeneration, including sense of powerlessness, uncertainty and health effects			
<b>Oxgangs</b>	Favourable comparison with other neighbourhoods	Mixed impacts and views of regeneration		
<b>West Kensington</b>	London context, particularly diversity (including ethnic and financial)	Linkages (transport, employment, social) to other neighbourhoods		

### **Amlwch**

Amlwch presents a unique case study in a number of ways. The town is geographically isolated, being at the “*end of the line*” (as described by a number of residents) on the Island of Anglesey; the town itself consists of Amlwch and Amlwch Port and the population comprises two commonly defined and referenced groups: long standing residents and “incomers”. A striking feature of this case study is the strength of sentiment for the Welsh language, which had both positive and negative impacts. The combination of these features helps to construct the identity of the residents of Amlwch. Residents had clear views about the particular residential area that they lived in and their identity was framed within those parameters, and also within a sense that the town has ‘missed out’ to other settlements in terms of public and private sector investment.

Micro estates within the area were also closely identified with, such as the estate of Craig-y-don. Residents clearly identified with either the town or the port. The strength of feeling for each area, particularly the Port, was manifested in a strong sense of territoriality. In one example, Graham (25-29) had lived in Amlwch Port all of his life. His family lived a few doors away. Graham had been struggling with life and working long hours for the past few years and eventually he had to give up work due to ill health and fell into debt as a result. He identified very strongly with the Port, as became apparent by Graham’s correction of the interviewer’s question:

[Interviewer] *Do you have a sense of loyalty to Amlwch?*

*Amlwch Port. If anybody asks me ‘Where are you from?’ [I say] Amlwch Port. I always make a point of saying Amlwch Port.*

Graham highlighted the differences between the Town and the Port and, during the course of the interview, described how his friends and family [living in the Port] have provided a strong source of support that has enabled him to secure employment:

*“What I’ve seen people live in Amlwch they’re out for number one only, they look after number one, the Port here it’s different, people help people, it’s totally different.”*

Brenda (35-44), a self-defined “long standing incomer” had lived in the area for 24 years, also made the distinction between the Town and Port

*“I think you notice it [drug problem] more living in Amlwch than Amlwch Port”*  
(Brenda 35-44, Amlwch)

These examples illustrate how as Elias (1994) famously described, place identity, at a micro-level can both generate a sense of self-esteem and wellbeing and also provide the framework for the comparative denigration of the status and behaviour of others.

Individuals in Amlwch, across all ages and gender, felt intensely about “their” Welsh nationality, identity and heritage. This manifested itself particularly in terms of the Welsh language. This identifying with their nationality was far more pronounced than the other case study areas. Although in Oxfords almost half of all participating residents wished their nationality to be recorded as ‘Scottish’ rather than ‘British’ the importance of a Scottish identity was not a central feature of their narratives (and there was no equivalent language issue).

The interviews revealed a covert underlying tension between long standing residents and ‘incomers’ in which national identity was a key marker of difference. There was a strong recognition that the Welsh language was an important aspect of the community although this manifested itself differently for incomers and long standing individuals:

*“Oh yeah I’m proud to be Welsh... Err...I’d never want to see the language to go, I’d never want to see it disappear but a few people are very very Welsh Nat, Wales that’s it... Yeah I’m proud to be Welsh but I’m not a Welsh Nat you know”*  
(Graham 25-29, Amlwch).

*“Well you see being Welsh, especially Welsh speaking we feel we are the ethnic group now in Wales...I feel a little bit superior really because I’ve got two languages and I’m conversing with you, although I might have an accent but my English is practically as good as yours, so I’m proud of that and that’s what I tell my grandchildren and nephews and nieces, ‘you should be proud of speaking Welsh, you’ve got two languages, other people have only got one”*  
(Cameron 65+, Amlwch).

There were contrasting views, as demonstrated by another longstanding resident:

*“Yeah I learnt Welsh in school, I got an A in Welsh funnily enough, it doesn’t mean anything. I can understand Welsh perfectly but I’m not one for identity full stop, like British or mainland people, put them in categories”*  
(Carl 25-29, Amlwch).

Residents also identified negative aspects of ‘Welshness’ including tensions in the community, and to some extent, exclusionary activity, both of which impacted on individuals’ identity. When asked if the community was friendly, the tensions between the Welsh and English origin residents were apparent:

*"It's a Welsh-English thing, if you're English and you live here there can be people that don't like you and if you're Welsh and you live here you won't get a problem"*

(Robert 25-29, Amlwch).

Having English parents, but born in Wales, Robert considered himself to be half-English and half- Welsh. This is not how he is viewed by the community however, who, he suggested, considered him as English:

*"...because I won't converse in Welsh with them. My next door neighbour, she'll talk to me in Welsh and I'll answer her back in English, so she'll talk to me fluently in Welsh and I'll speak back to her in English"*

(Robert 25-29, Amlwch).

*"Yeah I'd be invited into the house for a cup of tea if I was Welsh"*

(Robert 25-29, Amlwch).

In some cases, individuals had experienced the exclusionary activities underlying divisions between Welsh and non-Welsh speakers.

*"I've been called an English pig in the post office when I was talking to the cashier, because I was talking in English and the lady behind me didn't realise I was Welsh, she thought I was a tourist"*

(Robert 25-29, Amlwch).

Some Welsh speakers expressed their concern about the use of these tactics and the reinforcement of these tensions:

*"It's like if you're out with friends and there's only three of you in the room talking and they speak Welsh to each other, it wouldn't bother me cos I'd understand it, I'm maybe not in the conversation but you've got to know what they're saying because they slag you off to high hell, you don't know, I feel that's so arrogant"*

(Graham 25-29, Amlwch.)

Individuals also described how these exclusionary activities undermined their confidence and made them feel inadequate:

*"It's like property, it's like theirs and they are proud of it and I do speak a bit because I did a course in it but me personally I get my husband to do all the speaking in Welsh or my daughters because it doesn't sound right coming from an English person, I haven't got the confidence"*

(Brenda 35-44, Amlwch).

*"If [Rose] was talking with her mother in Welsh or a member of the family and they have a conversation I'll understand exactly what they've said but I feel uncomfortable talking because I can't talk as quick as them so it's a speech thing with me, I feel bad that I haven't pronounced it right or... so I don't talk much but I understand, I can read Welsh"*

(Robert 25-29, Amlwch).

One resident had witnessed at first hand this exclusion; he had an opportunity of speaking on the radio about an event at his farm however, as he explains his inability to speak the Welsh language precluded him from doing so.

*"I didn't go on Radio Cymru, I didn't bother, they wanted me to until they knew I was English spoken"*

(Harold 65+, Amlwch).

Harold describes how he is accepted within his peer group even though he is an incomer of 20 years. He describes himself thus “although I am English I think Welsh”:

*“Oh yeah and a lot of them [his friends] are Welsh probably nationalist but it makes no difference, they seem to have accepted me because they tell me I’m 110 percent Welsh although I am English”*  
(Harold 65+, Amlwch).

This language ‘gulf’ has secondary impacts that can be perceived as potentially undermining the future prospects for some individuals:

*“There’s nothing here now for them, there’s no jobs so there’s no point in moving here. Unless you’re a Welsh speaking person it’s very hard to get a job. I’m lucky because I went on a course, but my qualifications are to work in an office as a secretary, I did all that but I can’t get a job round here doing that because of the lack of the Welsh Language*  
(Brenda 35-44, Amlwch).

*“The worst things are the jobs, the job situation are few and far between. You struggle if you don’t speak the Welsh language”*  
(Stella age unknown Amlwch).

There were strong feelings about incomers and for the non indigenous population this presented some tensions. Brenda is a case in point here. Even though Brenda had lived in Amlwch for 24 years, married a local, worked in the school and was heavily involved in the local carnival she considered herself as an outsider

*“but I do class myself as an outsider...sometimes you can have all this going on yet you do actually still feel isolated*  
(Brenda 35-44, Amlwch)

*“Every so often you do feel isolated. You can have lots of people living around you and you just feel really lonely sometimes”*  
(Brenda 35-44, Amlwch).

Interestingly, Brenda suggests that there is specific geographical and national dimension to the differentiation between ‘legitimate’ individuals and those categorised as ‘scroungers’ and the importance of ‘contributing’ to community and society which was such a common theme across all case study neighbourhoods:

*“Well because I live in Amlwch I don’t want to be claiming benefits, I don’t want people to label me as ‘one of those from Manchester again coming here scrounging... I’m actually the chairperson of the Amlwch carnival”*  
(Brenda 35-44, Amlwch).

The industrial history and heritage of Amlwch also had complex impacts on residents sense of esteem. Several residents spoke with pride about the role of industry in the town’s development and the characteristics of its population. However, the loss of this industrial base, and its impacts on employment and the social dynamics of Amlwch was also a source of regret and anxiety about the future.

### **Wensley Fold**

In Wensley Fold in Blackburn, there were two linked themes within most residents’ narratives. Firstly, the neighbourhood, like Oxcgangs, was viewed as being a good area to live in compared to others:

*"I don't personally like that area [another Blackburn neighbourhood] because I think the people there, they think differently...I don't really go round there much so I don't want to be judging but I don't think it's as good as our area"*  
(Faizal 16-24, Blackburn).

*"Our neighbourhood is very good, it's much better than other neighbourhoods...there aren't any rough people in this area at all"*  
(Hashim 35-44, Blackburn).

*"It's one of the best places to live in Blackburn, I've lived in Manchester, I've lived in Liverpool"*  
(Mohammed 45-64, Blackburn).

Secondly, and in contrast to the uncertainties and ambiguities about the urban renewal programmes articulated in Oxfords and Knowsley, there was a sense that the regeneration of the neighbourhood was linked to a sense of progress and improvement in individuals' own lives which in turn generated pride and enhanced wellbeing:

*"I must say I'm quite proud to be living here at the moment with everything that's going on...so I'm proud to be at Blackburn at the moment"*  
(Tracey 25-29, Blackburn).

*"I've approached it with a different attitude this time and I think maybe part of that has been because it's an area that I want to live in because of the upgrade, the upgrade has altered the feel of the area, it was always quite a gloomy area...so I think there's a general feel of there being a lift in the area, people have a brighter attitude to the area. I certainly do"*  
(Martha 35-44, Blackburn).

*"Community courses were a real advantage to a lot of people round here, because people could get out and get involved and do courses which might lead onto them to go further on in life...adult learning"*  
(Riffat 35-44, Blackburn).

*"I think in a way we do take it for advantage that we've got everything close by and we just don't appreciate it"*  
(Safah 16-24, Blackburn).

However, even within these generally positive narratives, neighbours were classified into different groupings, with some groups described again in terms of a lack of responsibility, agency and motivation:

*"People who are renting the properties out and the tenants aren't really bothered...I think people need to know how to respect the area that they live in and it's about that community spirit"*  
(Martha 35-44, Blackburn).

*"There is a lot of entrepreneurs here but also there's a lot of people that have no aspirations, lack of whatever, drive, education, maybe pressures at home, maybe pressure. I don't know what the reason is but there's a big contrast"*  
(Sajid 30-34, Blackburn).

In Blackburn, a majority of residents also identified largely positive impacts from the changing population (see Bashir and Flint, 2010, for a fuller discussion of these issues).

## West Marsh

In contrast to Wensley Fold and Oxfangs, residents in West Marsh in Grimsby were less likely to define the neighbourhood favourably in comparison to other areas:

*“I’m stuck. I hate it. I’d do anything to get out... I think this area and Hull are particularly bad”*  
(Holly 45-64, Grimsby).

One individual also believed that there was a general lack of self-respect which manifested itself in the physical deterioration of the neighbourhood:

*“Some people just won’t do anything about it, they let it slide and their own lives collapse around it. I.e. they don’t bother maintaining their house and the house basically becomes a tip. That’s the way I see it”*  
(Harold 35-44, Grimsby).

Some residents’ health and sense of security was significantly and negatively affected by anti-social behaviour:

*“You’re awake because of what’s going on and you can’t get back once you’re awake. I can’t anyway, I can’t get back to sleep”*  
(Kathleen 65+, Grimsby).

However, other residents were far more positive about the neighbourhood and its effects on their lives:

*“It’s much better here. People actually say hello, good morning, hello, they’re cleaning their gardens and cutting their hedges...there’s no riff raff, druggies or anything like that”*  
(Stuart 30-34, Grimsby)

*“My life is better here because I feel safer leaving the kids to go in the garden to play”*  
(Mel 16-24, Grimsby).

One resident suggested that it was important not to perceive neighbours in a judgemental framework that linked tenure or wealth to moral worth:

*“You’ve got to love your neighbours just cos your renting doesn’t mean they’re no worse than you because you live in a council house...people are people, it doesn’t matter what you’ve got and what you haven’t got”*  
(Callum 45-64, Grimsby).

## Hillside

In Hillside in Knowsley, the most prominent neighbourhood effect was caused by the substantial regeneration programme, including the demolition and planned new build of housing, which had stalled due to the recession. It was evident that residents have been severely affected by the ongoing regeneration activities in the area, including those who were still waiting to be re-housed. This had created a great deal of concern amongst residents, who felt deflated and unsure of their future. This had a direct impact on individuals’ sense of progression and wellbeing and highlighted that, just as uncertainty about personal income generated anxiety and insecurity, so the lack of definitive outcomes for the wider neighbourhood could have similar effects:

*"We're still living with open areas that have been cleared of housing and I don't think that's very good for morale on the estate ... People feel as though they're in a bit of a limbo at the moment, it's demoralising and it's such a shame because the plans for the estate were wonderful, we've all seen the plans and we've not seen the reality yet"*  
(Barbara 45-64, Knowsley).

The lack of power or agency to influence or determine the future of the neighbourhood was also evident. As with some personal circumstances, there was a reliance on positive outcomes that were outside individuals' control:

*"I was going to move but then I thought 'no it has got a lot better' cos it would have cost me a lot more money to move and take another mortgage on so I thought 'no I'll stay and see how it is in a couple of years"*  
(Abigail 35-44, Knowsley).

Residents were aware of the rise in crime and drug dealing in the area and attributed this to the regeneration of the area and this had direct impacts on individuals' sense of ontological security and wellbeing:

*"I know it definitely goes on [drug dealing], in our area now it's so quiet because there's no houses or nothing, but the surrounding estates are all gangs and warfare and fighting, but it does all go on definitely, you've just got to hope it never happens close to you... Within my street it's like a little oasis away from it all but one little walk around the corner and it's just guns and violence and gangs"*  
(Verity 25-29, Knowsley).

As in Amlwch, residents made distinctions both within and beyond the neighbourhood, including between Hillside and Primalt as well as differences with other parts of the estate and surrounding areas. This was linked to a hierarchical status of some areas and populations, which had been exacerbated by the forced dispersal of existing residents. As in Amlwch, incomers were perceived to have problematic lifestyles and a lack of agency and respectability:

*"There's always been a difference between [Hillside and Primalt] I mean like see the resource centre over there, we have things on...and none of these go over and same as them, they don't come over 'ere, there's always been that for as long as I can remember"*  
(Rebecca 45-64, Knowsley).

*"Yeah but the top end of this estate is a disgrace now which wasn't before, you know what I mean? Families have been moved from, they must have been problem families there, we've got one in our road"*  
(Irene 65+, Knowsley).

*"There's no like community on those estates [other surrounding estates], like they don't come together, they stay quiet and that when something happens"*  
(Peter 16-24, Knowsley).

*"I think because the communities have been broken up so they like thought, the ones who've, the unlawful ones shall we say, have had a breeding ground because people who knew everybody in their community don't have, you don't know who the people are that are moving into your area so they've actually had the time of their life, been a breeding ground for them"*  
(Irene 65+, Knowsley).

## Oxgangs

Several residents in Oxgangs in Edinburgh appeared to attach a positive sense of status and distinction to living in the neighbourhood. They suggested that it was a desirable area to live in and contrasted it favourably with other areas of Edinburgh:

*"It's probably better in Oxgangs than some of the areas. I hear from other people and reading the paper and I think there's a lot of worse areas, I think this is one of the better...certainly not upper class. I would say it was a good working class area but not a lower working class area, does that sound right?...I think if you were to take a place like Pilton. I think there's more people in Oxgangs work for a living that what do in Pilton. There's a wee bit more pride I think up here"*  
(Norma 45-64, Oxgangs)

*"If I get a council house, I've got a ground floor flat here in this area. I think I would really enjoy that for the community feeling"*  
(Shirley 45-64, Oxgangs).

As in Knowsley, recent regeneration programmes had impacted on some residents. For some it had increased their pride in their homes:

*"They've upgraded the kitchens and the bathrooms for us, they've made a nice shower room, nice kitchen...in that respect we've had some upgrades"*  
(Eleanor 35-44, Oxgangs).

However, another resident believed that the demolition of the high rise flats and the changing dynamics of the community had eroded a non-judgemental collectivism and increased the sense of difference and individualisation in Oxgangs:

*"It didn't matter if you were working or single or a drug addict or...you were all in the same boat, we all had the same kind of housing, we all had the same problems, so I think that's what made it easier"*  
(Betty 35-44, Oxgangs).

## West Kensington

West Kensington in London has a more diverse population than the other case study neighbourhoods. This was reflected in residents' regular references to being located in London and the range of differences within the city. The comparisons that residents made about their circumstances and those of others were often made on supposition or on judgements about financial management, rather than firsthand knowledge of others' circumstances. However, these judgements revealed a degree of uncertainty about the status of others and divergent views on whether individuals regarded themselves as better or worse off materially than their neighbours:

*"I'm a lot worse off than some people"*  
(Kenneth 45-64, West Kensington).

*"I suppose there are other people that are worse off than me, there are a few single parents around here that probably are worse off than me but if they are I don't really know"*  
(Christina 30-34, West Kensington)

*I think I'm better off than a lot of people and...Yeah it could be because of work but even before I worked I felt that I was better off than other people and I don't know why. Like say me and a friend of mine, we had the same amount of children, we both get the same amount of money but they always didn't have*

*any money and so that's just different people do different things but I've always felt I'm a bit better off.*

(Sandra 25-29, West Kensington)

*...Some of them maybe better off than me, my friend, my neighbour, she has better job than me, she's a teacher...some of our friends they don't work so maybe they're less well off than me, that's life isn't it"*

(Fudiya 35-44, West Kensington).

Other respondents drew comparisons from a wider circle of acquaintances and from peers as a measure of success:

*"No not compare them [personal financial circumstances] to people round here, I tend to compare my financial circumstances to the people I, not so much worked with but went to university with or trained as an accountant with, I like to see where I'm doing against those people"*

(Waseem 30-34, West Kensington).

*"Yeah all the time, but not in a bad way as such but you see certain people and realise you want to be like this or you don't want to be like that"*

(Leon 25-29, West Kensington).

However, in common with the findings from other neighbourhoods, many residents did not compare themselves to their neighbours:

*"I just keep to myself"*

(Gary 45-64, West Kensington).

*"No I don't have the time to do that [compare to other people]"*

(Zaneb 45-64, West Kensington).

*"No not really, that's not my thing really, I don't compare anybody at all."*

(Tabasxamu 25-29, West Kensington).

*"...from a personal point of view if I started looking at myself compared to other people, I'm competitive but not in that way, I'm happy with what I'm happy with and that's good enough for me"*

(Anthony 30-34, West Kensington).

Unlike other case study neighbourhoods, and perhaps linked to the relative proximity to other neighbourhoods and the more porous nature of its transport and housing systems, residents in West Kensington did not articulate differences between the sub-areas of the neighbourhood, but rather made contrasts with other nearby parts of the city:

*"If you go half way down the road yes the borough is very lucrative there because Fulham is quite a lucrative area, but this is regarded as Hammersmith and Fulham so obviously because it comes under that, but there are two sides to it, one end is rather poor area, the other one is very posh area, so I think that's where the divide is and it's a shame because lots of private things are happening and the people who need the services are really not getting them because of the cuts which is important for them, important for the community"*

(Robina 30-34, West Kensington).

*"I don't know I think it's more, you see this place is more like druggy, so over there [Ealing] I would say it's clean, so I would expect its cleaner"*

(Zaneb 45-64, West Kensington).

*“South west London always appears to be just a bit more affluent and greener and I guess as part of what comes with people living in a more affluent area there are better amenities but also just a slightly nicer atmosphere certainly where my parents live in Earlsfield is very nice”*  
(Waseem 30-34, West Kensington).

## 5.4 Summary

The research participants did not perceive their neighbourhoods to be a strong determinant of their self-esteem or the primary arena of reference when reflecting on their circumstances in comparison to others. However, social connectedness was linked to self-esteem and the neighbourhoods provided an important arena in which social connections, or the lack of them, were demonstrated. This reflects our findings that the extent to which individuals reflect upon their contemporary situation and contrast it to those of others is limited and, where such reflective comparisons are made, these are more likely to be with their personal histories than with their neighbours or those living in other neighbourhoods. There was also a strong theme of individual and collective responsibility and agency, in which individuals were required to make the most of the place that they lived in. It is crucially important to note that stigmatisation (in terms of non-residents having negative perspectives on the study neighbourhood) may still occur, and may have direct impacts including employment discrimination, lack of investment and social separation, on residents. It may also be the case that the lack of comparison may in part arise from limiting the relational impacts of making such a comparison with other, more affluent or ‘desirable’ neighbourhoods. For example, residents in Blackburn appeared to compare their neighbourhood favourably to other areas as a result of the perceived neighbourhood renewal improvements (see Flint and Casey, 2008 for a further discussion).

However, the research participants’ attitudes to their neighbourhoods could be linked to their previous experiences of living elsewhere and for some individuals, their current neighbourhood could be a signifier of their personal progress or setbacks. It was also evident that the extent to which individuals felt ‘comfortable’ in the place where they lived was linked to the degree to which they viewed their circumstances as unremarkable and common to others and that ontological security was a primary factor in a sense of wellbeing. Where this security was threatened, most notably by anti-social behaviour or fear of crime, but also in some neighbourhoods by regeneration or redevelopment, this did have detrimental impacts on individuals’ health and life satisfaction.

In three of the case study neighbourhoods-Blackburn, Knowsley and Oxfords-regeneration programmes had impacted upon residents’ psychological wellbeing and were linked to individuals’ sense of progress or alternatively insecurity about their life trajectories and prospects. In Blackburn, and to a lesser and more ambiguous extent in Oxfords, these impacts were primarily positive. In contrast these programmes had significant negative consequences for residents in Knowsley. There was also evidence- most strongly from Amlwch, Grimsby, Knowsley and Oxfords of the process identified by Elias (1994) of constructing distinctions between the established and outsiders, framed within a higher social status for established residents and the judgement of, and the attributing of moral and behavioural weaknesses to, incoming/outside residents. In Amlwch and Knowsley in particular these distinctions had a geographical focus upon micro-areas of the town and neighbourhood and the perceived populations within them.

Although we suggest that place appears to be a relatively weak reference point and influencing factor for self-esteem and perceptions of comparative poverty, there were some specific impacts in each of the case study neighbourhoods. In Amlwch, the

sense of distinction between the established and outsiders was the strongest, based both upon the separate physical and social identities of two districts of the town. Welsh nationality and the Welsh language were important dimensions of many residents' identity and self esteem but conversely could be a mechanism for exclusion, non-acceptance and lower social status for others. In one case, this appeared to extent to the geographical labelling of the undeserving as being from elsewhere. This sense of Welsh nationality as a basis for identity was far stronger than any potential equivalent Scottish identity in Oxfords.

In Knowsley, although often implicit, it was evident that the stalled regeneration programme in Hillside, disruption of social networks and degraded physical environment had a significant impact on residents' wellbeing and generated feelings of powerlessness, anxiety and insecurity about the future. In Oxfords, the impact of physical regeneration was more limited (reflecting the relative scale of redevelopment) and ambiguous. What was noteworthy was a belief that a collective and egalitarian sense of community had become more individualistic and judgemental. In contrast, the regeneration of Wensley Fold signified a sense of progress and optimism that several residents linked to similar processes in their own lives. In both Blackburn and Oxfords, although not prioritised in terms of its importance, there was a strong sense that residents were living in a neighbourhood that had a higher social status than others, which conferred some esteem on individuals. In contrast, residents in Grimsby were more likely to view their neighbourhood as of lower social and reputational status and to report negative psychological impacts relating to insecurity and anti-social behaviour. However, other residents did perceive the neighbourhood to be improving or to be better than areas where they had previously lived. Residents in West Kensington were more likely to make comparisons with other parts of London than to make distinctions within their neighbourhood. Reflecting the diversity within this neighbourhood, residents varied widely in their sense of being better or worse of or similar in material terms to their neighbours.

## 6. Conclusions

This working paper has presented the narratives of residents living in six neighbourhoods in Britain about their self-esteem and their perceptions of comparative poverty. It has sought to contribute to our understanding of poverty and lower incomes upon people's everyday lives (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Ridge, 2009). Whilst acknowledging the specificity of this study's research aims, methodology and case study contexts, the evidence presented in the paper supports the findings of many previous studies. In particular it is clear that living on low incomes did generate anxiety and low self-esteem for a significant number of research participants, with detrimental impacts on their psychological wellbeing (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Frost and Hoggett, 2008; Ridge, 2009; Hopper *et al*, 2007; Orr *et al*, 2006; Ghate and Hazel, 2004; Reay, 2005; Wilkinson, 1996).

Our study also found that part of the explanation for these detrimental impacts on self-esteem and emotional wellbeing arises from the internalisation of personal critique, self-blame and a sense of not being clever or resourceful enough to manage the consequences of living on a lower income (Bourdieu, 1984; Skeggs, 1994; Dolan, 2007; Orton, 2009; Blokland, 2007). This is an important contextual caveat to the sense of self worth and relative contentment found by Pahl *et al*, (2007). This focus of self-critique provides one possible explanation for the 'quiescence' (Pahl *et al*, 2007: 1) within unequal societies. However, the centrality of agency, management and endeavour arising from these self-critiques suggest a more active response to personal circumstances than suggested in notions of passive 'acceptance' (Pahl *et al*, 2007). In such processes any structural explanations for individuals' circumstances are negated in favour of self-criticism and the perceived ability to determine one's own outcomes. However, this belief in the importance of agency also meant that individuals often believed in the possibility of an improvement in their circumstances, in contrast to a sense of inevitability and pessimism about their prospects.

Although such conceptualisations of the causes of poverty are similar to those often presented in dominant policy and elite discourses (Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Lister, 2004; Johnston, 2007; Lawler, 2005; Mooney, 2009), including the notion of the underclass and 'Broken Britain' our evidence suggests that this regime of self-critique is generated as much from within working class communities as being 'imposed' by more powerful and elite groups through processes of stigmatisation and emulation (Lister, 2004; Tilly, 1998; Goffman, 1968). A strong theme running through the narratives of our research participants was the importance of agency, self-reliance, independence and individual responsibility based on values of respectability, pride, resilience and autonomy (Skeggs, 1994; Watt, 2006; Charlesworth, 2000; Orr, 2006; Dolan, 2007). It was not clear to what extent these narratives were influenced by the format and focus of our interviews, which were based primarily on individuals' own experiences and reflections on their own circumstances. However, the strength of these narratives have also been found in previous studies. Our findings indicate that underclass concepts (of different cultural values, indolence and dependency alleged to pervade some communities in 'Broken Britain') are inherently flawed, although they continue to be espoused, most recently in Prime Minister David Cameron's rationales for the Big Society (Cameron,

2010) Indeed, the centrality of a proactive management of individuals' circumstances to their self-identity and their perceived duty to contribute to society was striking. However, our findings also suggest that the impact of stigmatisation upon the identities and behaviour of lower income households may be more limited than previous research suggests. This is not to say that mechanisms of distinction and denigration of particular groups were not present within the neighbourhoods- they were. But this denigration was driven as much by historical working class values as other sources, such as the media and policy discourses.

Our findings offer strong support for the argument that previous analyses of poverty have understated the assets and sources of positive self-esteem within lower-income households and communities (Orr *et al*, 2006; Canvin *et al*, 2009; Pahl *et al*, 2007). The drivers of self-esteem are complex and inter-related and a focus on material circumstances risks, as Johnston and Mooney (2007) and Oliver and O'Reilly (2010) suggest, overstating the centrality of income to individuals' assessment of themselves. This neglects the significance of family, health, parenting, religion, volunteering, leisure pastimes, further training and educational achievements and employment, although some of these are also dependent, to some extent, on access to material resources. All of these factors generated a sense of satisfaction amongst many of our research participants, although they may also be a result of processes of individuals' rationalising, or identifying positive aspects of, often very challenging personal circumstances.

Our findings indicate that previous studies may not have accurately captured the extent of, and mechanisms for, individuals' critical self-assessment. Most of our participants did not regard themselves as being remarkable for the resilience, agency and domestic and financial management skills they clearly demonstrated. Rather, they viewed their circumstances as 'doxic' or taken for granted (Lister, 2004: 160; Allen, 2007; Stokoe, 2003; Canvin, 2009). Rather than identifying their actions as 'coping strategies' or 'dealing with adversity', they perceived them often as mundane, ordinary and 'what had to be done' (Savage *et al*, 2001; Allen, 2007). Just as this prevented some individuals from generating a sense of self-esteem through their day to day actions it also meant that individuals did not always view their situation within a framework of self-critique and reflection on their own inadequacies. This is an important finding as it challenges the extent to which individuals generate 'reflexively organised biographies' (Giddens, 1991) or subject themselves (or others) to processes of surveillance and scrutiny. It also questions whether they view their lives as necessarily problematic in the way that policymakers and researchers often do.

This finding extends to the limited processes of comparison with others reported by our research participants, which challenges the importance of 'subjective economic welfare' (Burchardt, 2004) and the apparent 'drive to evaluate themselves against others' (Davidson, 2008; see also Runciman, 1996; Dolan, 2007). Runciman's (1966) typology of normative, comparative and membership groups usefully identifies some processes of classification and distinction made by our participants. Comparative groups included family members and, to a lesser extent neighbours and those in similar occupations. Membership groups were defined by participants' aligning themselves with 'ordinary, hard-working families' (Pahl *et al*, 2007) and those with legitimate sources of income, personal agency and responsibility, and in some cases, membership was also extended to long-term residents of neighbourhoods, and ethnic, national or linguistic identities. Normative assessments of others were primarily focused upon those deemed to not be seeking employment and relying illegitimately on the state and also 'newcomers' to neighbourhoods.

However, many participants did not compare themselves to others and highlighted that, even if there was a desire to do so, it was often very difficult to assess the circumstances of neighbours (see Pahl *et al*, 2007: 11). Where comparisons were

made, including those with family and friends, there was no moral worth or resentment applied, either to the greater material wealth of others or individuals' own situation. As other studies have also found, many interviewees, far from defining themselves as poor or having deficits in their lives, compared themselves favourably with others, including populations in the Third World (as found previously by Runciman, 1996 and Pahl *et al*, 2007: 12/15). Again, our findings here challenge the extent to which a comparative relational framework and processes of stigmatisation are present and impact upon the self-esteem of individuals.

Individuals were more likely to compare their present circumstances with previous situations in their own lives (Burchardt, 2004), both positively and negatively. Thus, just as individuals' assessment of their lives prioritised agency and personal responsibility rather than structural factors, so comparative reflections about relative poverty were internalised to personal biographies rather than focused outwards to the contemporary circumstances of others. The one area where the fundamental narratives of self-reliance were projected onto others rather than the self were through judgements about the fecklessness or dishonesty of neighbours perceived to be prioritising the wrong expenditure, being in debt or claiming benefits (see Pahl *et al*, 2007: 11). Although this judgemental regime could be a source of esteem and higher social status for those distinguishing themselves from others, even here some individuals criticised their own failure or incapacity to use 'the system' to their own advantage. There was a clear contrast between the benevolent attitude of 'good luck to them' espoused towards more affluent individuals or groups perceived to have 'worked hard' in legitimate employment (Dolan, 2007; Bamfield and Horton, 2009; Pahl *et al*, 2007) and the hostility towards those viewed as failing to live up to expectations of independence and self-reliance.

Although previous research has indicated the primacy of place in determining life satisfaction (Freid, 1984) and strong links between neighbourhood and mental health (Warr *et al*, 2007), our study found that the impact of place or neighbourhood on notions of self-esteem or perspectives on comparative poverty were limited (although see Flint and Casey, 2008 for a more detailed study of neighbourhood reputation and stigmatisation). Living in a particular neighbourhood was not viewed as a strong driver of self-esteem, although for some residents it could be a reference point and signifier of self-attainment and progress. This was strongly linked to the particular factors that resulted in an individual living in a particular neighbourhood, for example having lived there since childhood, being displaced from another area or choosing to reside in a community viewed as improving and of higher status. In common with the findings described above, individuals usually assessed their neighbourhoods on the basis of their own previous housing experiences, rather than in a contemporary comparative framework with other neighbourhoods. Of course, the articulated perceptions of residents do not indicate that processes of stigmatisation of the neighbourhoods and their populations were not occurring, with potentially direct impacts on life opportunities.

Neighbourhoods were important for individuals' sense of ontological security and wellbeing, and this could be severely adversely affected by crime and anti-social behaviour (Geis and Ross, 1998). We also found strong evidence of processes of distinction between the established and outsiders (Elias, 1994). Through these processes, a higher social status and sense of esteem was conferred on long standing residents whilst newer residents were subjected to negative assessments about their values and behaviour (see also Robertson *et al*, 2008). In Amlwch, where Welsh nationality and the Welsh language were important sources of self-identity and esteem, nationality and language were also used as mechanisms of distinction. In most of the case study areas, geographical distinctions were also made between the social status and alleged norms and values in sub-areas of towns and neighbourhoods. In West Kensington, comparisons were more likely to be made

externally with other parts of London. In Blackburn and Oxfords some residents perceived an esteem to be attached to living in what they considered to be desirable and sought after neighbourhoods.

Regeneration programmes also impacted, to some extent, upon residents' psychological wellbeing. Although the recent national evaluation of the New Deal for Communities programme found a net overall positive impact on residents' mental health (Batty *et al*, 2010: 57-59; Beatty *et al*, 2010: 64) our study suggests a varied effect. In Blackburn, where neighbourhood renewal was generally viewed very positively, the redevelopment of the area was linked to some individuals' own sense of progress and enhanced pride. In contrast, the problematic regeneration programme in Knowsley generated considerable levels of anxiety and insecurity amongst many residents. This suggests that it is perceptions of the changes occurring in neighbourhoods, rather than their characteristics relative to other neighbourhoods, that is the most significant 'place' influence on self-esteem. If this is the case, this area effect would mirror the same pattern as the individual level, where a comparison with previous periods in one's own life is a stronger influence on self-esteem and perceptions of circumstances than contemporary comparison with others' situations.

## Policy Implications

The findings of this paper suggest a number of policy implications. Firstly, they challenge some of the conceptual underpinnings of the 'Broken Britain' paradigm and the consequent emphasis on the 'Big Society'. We found little evidence for the need for the 'huge cultural changes' within communities suggested by 'Big Society' rhetoric (Cameron, 2010), and its predecessors in underclass, social exclusion and 'Respect' discourses. Rather, the values of autonomy, duty, independence and self-sufficiency were widely held. Thus, within what David Cameron (2010) describes as 'the daily decisions of millions of people', there is not, as he claims, a 'sapping of responsibility.' Our research participants were not, nor desired to be, 'passive recipients of state help' and actually often believed that 'they could shape the world around them' (Cameron, 2010). It was also evident that individuals wished to 'contribute' to society, contrary to some political and academic accounts of social, economic and cultural changes. What some of these individuals lacked were the material resources, at personal and community levels, to meet the aspirations that they held for themselves and their families; aspirations that are surely common to the majority of individuals in our society. The focus of governmental policy should therefore not be diverted into a civilising offensive aimed at reinvigorating values, but rather to ensure that individuals, in the most challenging of circumstances, are able to enact the responsibilities they feel they have to themselves, their families and their communities. Although residents may not necessarily compare themselves to others or subsequently resent more affluent groups or suffer lower self-esteem, this does not mean that inequality should not be tackled.

The individualistic paradigms of poverty that dominate contemporary policy discourses also run counter to the promotion of community and civic action. If individuals subject themselves and others to personal critiques, this mediates against a propensity to engage in collective endeavour and generates divisions and distinctions within neighbourhoods. In other words, it is not surprising that the individualisation of poverty in policy and other powerful discourses sits uneasily with the promotion of social solidarity at the neighbourhood level. Conversely, the extent to which individuals view their personal and neighbourhood circumstances as ordinary and normal creates challenges to increasing neighbourhood activism, which is often generated, at least initially, by a sense that local communities are experiencing particular or specific problems.

Our findings also suggest the need to consider what is lost when citizenship is viewed as being solely based on economic activity and paid employment status. It was evident that many non-material factors help generate self-esteem, including volunteering, parenting and caring and these have significant positive outcomes for families and local communities. There is a need to reflect on whether the predominance given to paid employment in welfare programmes is not flexible enough to promote other forms of citizenship and civic action. It is also the case that volunteering, parenting etc. do require some material basis, and cuts to basic sources of income, for example Housing Benefit reductions, will impact on this. Likewise, routes to enhanced wellbeing and self-esteem through training or education require the necessary infrastructure provision to be in place. However, it is evident that perceptions of the unfairness of the 'benefits system' do have corrosive effects on social relations and needs to be addressed.

The challenges facing 'incomers' to neighbourhoods also indicate the potential social costs of the promotion of greater mobility in labour markets and housing systems. Similarly, our findings also suggest the limitations of 'role model' dynamics in the rationales of mixed community and area effects theories, given the limited extent to which residents compare themselves to others.

The impacts, positive and negative, of regeneration programmes on residents' sense of wellbeing and esteem were evident. Neighbourhood renewal had the potential to enhance residents' pride in their area but conversely, where physical, environmental and social disruption was extensive and extended this had a major impact on wellbeing, allied to a sense of powerlessness.

Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally of all, it would appear, from this study at least, that the prominence given to continually rising personal economic prosperity and the consumption of goods assumes that these policy priorities reflect those in contemporary British society. We have, hopefully, provided sufficient evidence to show the negative consequences of low incomes on the wellbeing of individuals and the need for continuing, and further, governmental action to address this, within the context of growing financial inequality. However, it also appears to be the case that individuals' self-worth, and their judgement of, and interactions with, others need not be dependent upon consumerist notions of fulfilment through material goods and symbols of social status. It is also the case that many individuals regard themselves as relatively fortunate in comparison to others in greater poverty.

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