

Commentary

## New Approaches to the Study of Social Inclusion of Poor Children and Youth: A Commentary

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### Abstract

This thematic issue addresses one of the most important social and political challenges worldwide: The social inclusion of poor children and youth. In addressing it in this commentary I will have Europe as the regional context and Norway as the national one, although the methodological perspectives I bring forth have relevance beyond Europe.

### Keywords

children and youth; ethnography; methodology; participant observation; poverty

### Issue

This commentary is part of the issue “New Approaches to the Study of Social Inclusion of Poor Children and Youth” edited by Anita Borch (OsloMet) and Kirsi Laitala (OsloMet).

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The theme of poverty and social inclusion/exclusion is not new (Borch et al., 2019; Lareau, 2011; Pugh, 2009; Ridge, 2002), but appears to be more publicly debated today than twenty years ago. I believe this is directly connected to at least two historical developments: the commercialization of childhood and the increased social mobility and migration, making, for instance, Europe increasingly culturally, financially, and ethnically/racially diverse. Over the last two decades, modern childhood has become increasingly commercialized in the western world (Buckingham & Tingstad, 2010; Brusdal & Frønes, 2008; Cook, 2004; Pugh, 2009; Sørensen, 2014). As a result, more and more aspects of children’s lives cost money, for instance, “must-have” clothes and organized leisure activities. This commercialized situation increases the possibility of social exclusion related to class and income. The commercialization of childhood means that more and more aspects of children’s and youth’s lives cost money, such as leisure activities and sociality in general. As a result, peer pressure and own expectations to have acceptable clothes and other material items have probably increased in so-called western countries, making social inclusion increasingly hard for children and youth in low-income families.

In earlier research from two culturally diverse areas in Oslo, it appears that children of immigrant parents

strive to experience social inclusion among the ethnic Norwegians due to lack of finances and parents’ cultural priorities. The title of one of these articles is “It Costs Money to Be Cool” (Rysst, 2005), with a follow up article this year “It Still Costs Money to Be Cool” (Rysst, 2022). These articles and other research (Pugh, 2009; Ridge, 2002) point to the significance of relevant consumption in discussions of social inclusion among children and youth growing up in low-income families. Allison Pugh states from her research in the US, that the most important relational process among children concerns how to secure the experience of belonging among peers. Her analysis of children’s “longing and belonging” argues that children everywhere “claim, contest, and exchange among themselves the terms of their social belonging, or just what it would take to be able to participate among their peers” (Pugh, 2009, p. 6). She termed this system of social meanings the “economy of dignity” (Pugh, 2009, p. 7). According to her, “children together shape their own economies of dignity, which in turn transform particular goods and experiences into tokens of value suddenly fraught with meaning” (Pugh, 2009, p. 8). If Pugh is correct, this situation affects children and youth worldwide and puts materiality up front. However, “particular goods and experiences” that are “suddenly...fraught with meaning” are not easy to grasp for an outsider

or researcher, and often demand a bottom-up methodology that includes long-time participant observation. In my experience, the distinctions in the hierarchies of children and youth are seldom revealed through interviews only (Rysst, 2020, 2022).

In Europe today, including Norway, immigrants from non-western families make up the majority of low-income families. In this sense, in today's world, migration and poverty are closely intertwined. That relationship is increasingly addressed in European political debates because capitals such as London, Paris, Copenhagen, Stockholm, and Oslo have a great number of immigrants from non-western countries, which in varying degrees stir harmonious living in these cities. Parts of these cities are populated by non-white immigrants and political debates concern how to avoid these immigrants settling in the same areas. This is no easy task, as many non-western immigrants have low-paid jobs or no jobs at all and live where housing expenditures are relatively low.

"Social inclusion" is a much-used concept both in academia and media, and is closely connected to the concept of "belonging." It is often used in opposition to "social exclusion" and "marginalization." The phenomenon may be studied from various scientific angles: from a macro and statistical level or an individual, phenomenological level—and many in between. Research designs may be quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods, be positioned in defined disciplines such as political science, sociology, social anthropology, or social work, or be entirely interdisciplinary.

An ongoing research project in Norway called BELONG: Practices and Policies of Belonging Among Minority and Majority Children of Low-Income Families is methodologically and theoretically interdisciplinary. More precisely, BELONG's goal is to increase current knowledge of the practices causing marginalization and social exclusion of minority and majority children of low-income families by exploring them from new theoretical and methodological angles. I mention this project here because one of its aims is almost the same as that of the articles in this thematic issue: To highlight new approaches to the study of social inclusion. Methodologically, the project will advance novel techniques specially suited to capture practices of social inclusion and will use techniques equipped to assess actions, the role of materials in people's life, as well as belonging experienced through senses such as vision, touch, smell, sound, and taste. These include well-established methodologies like desktop studies, interviews, observations, and surveys, mixed with novel methodologies that have gained ground in recent years: visual ethnography, walk-along studies (Pink, 2006), and having children as co-researchers by asking them to share pictures of their belongings. This will be done by using a recently developed mobile app (preliminary entitled MobileApp) for collecting and storing sensitive mixed-methods data. Inspired by methodologies where children act as "co-researchers," researchers will

arrange workshops where children categorize and analyze photos collected through the MobileApp. Inspired by "stakeholder/user-involvement" methodologies, the project will arrange a seminar every six months to discuss research results with potential users—representatives from local schools, parents, sports clubs, organizations, and political parties. These are "new approaches" in the study of children, youth, poverty, and social inclusion, some combined with traditional approaches like participant observation. It is my view that in interdisciplinary projects, long-term participant observation is an underrated methodology to grasp poor children's and youth's perspectives on their situation. Against this backdrop, I will give a summary of the research designs of the articles in this issue and how they can be understood to present "new approaches."

The article by Laura Vetrone, Cecilia Benoit, Doug Magnuson, Sven Mikael Jansson, Priscilla Healey, and Michaela Smith is based on qualitative interviews of a social group in Canada that rarely has been studied before: street-involved youth who were partly or fully disengaged from school. The authors apply thematic analysis of qualitative data from in-person interviews with a purposive sample of street-involved youth (N = 69). This research design in itself is not "new," it is traditional and much used, but the theme of street-involved youth is original.

The article by Laia Narciso, Silvia Carrasco, and Gabriela Poblet has data from Catalonia and is also based on a qualitative research design combined with fieldwork and interviews. This methodology captures the voices and experiences of both the young people and the staff surrounding them, which gives a rich picture of the poor children's situation. The methodology is relevant to the task at hand and, even if it is not new in itself, I believe it is one of the best approaches in the study of children, youth, and poverty.

Linnéa Bruno's article on economic abuse is based on a scoping review in order to grasp the perspectives of children and youth. The author makes an effort in mapping what we know about economic violence from a child and youth perspective today, but the question is how a scoping review can actually capture the "perspectives of children and youth." I would also recommend a bottom-up perspective to get a fuller view of economic abuse.

Another type of review, written by Anita Borch, is reported through a critical discourse review of academic literature and results in new knowledge of scientific tendencies and missing knowledge in the field. This approach is fruitful for its task.

In their article, Elisabet Näsman and Stina Fernqvist question how children and youth are treated in the court system. This is an original and relevant contribution to the study of poor children and youth, even though it remains somewhat unclear on how it relates to social inclusion.

Finally, Ji Liu, Faying Qiang, and Ying Zhou use a mixed-method design to construct data from China. This

study is not original in research design, as mixed-method is widely used, but it is original in that it brings forth valuable knowledge on China.

These articles represent many methodological approaches. However, it is my view that it is unclear how they fit the category “new approach” methodologically, since that is the title of the issue. Still, when viewed in relation to the theme each article addresses—that is, the research design and theme—they are “new,” particularly when we look at the countries the data are constructed from. There is not much research on children, youth, and poverty in China, Catalonia, or Sweden, nor do we have enough overviews of which scientific disciplines dominate in the field of children, youth, and poverty issues. That said, in my view, the issue would have benefited from more articles focusing on the importance of relevant consumption and materiality for social inclusion, using participant observation and a bottom-up phenomenological approach to grasp the perspectives of children and youth. As mentioned above, I believe this is an underrated methodological approach in the study of sensitive fields like children, youth, and poverty, particularly in interdisciplinary projects and interdisciplinary research milieus in general. In such milieus, long-term participant observation often appears as a “new” approach. Sensitive themes like social exclusion, poverty, and racism often demand methodological approaches that get “under the informants’ skin” in order to understand what is going on.

In conclusion, I will say that there is potential in the BELONG project to bring forth new methodological approaches and knowledge that can go beyond the contributions in this thematic issue. However, I believe that the issue together with forthcoming publications from the BELONG project hopefully will bring research on children, youth, social inclusion, and poverty a major step further.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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