

## Book Review: Why Fight Poverty? by Julia Unwin

*This book looks back at the struggle to rid the UK of poverty and asks if the struggle is worth it. What would a poverty free country be like if we could overcome the obstacles which impede progress? **Julia Unwin** asserts that attempts to end poverty have floundered partly because they are not supported by the public. At the core of the fight against poverty therefore is a need to change public perceptions, misconceptions and prejudices and to better identify, understand and challenge the deep-rooted emotional responses that cause them. Reviewed by **Elaine Kellman**.*



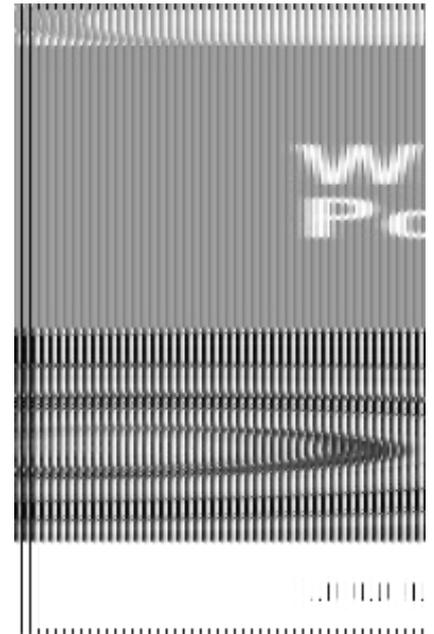
**Why Fight Poverty? Julia Unwin. London Publishing Partnership. November 2013.**

### Find this book:

In the UK, 13 million people live in poverty, according to the [New Policy Institute](#). This poverty is not restricted to adults. In 2012, Save the Children launched a [campaign against child poverty in the UK](#) warning that children were missing regular hot meals, failing to wear warm coats or shoes, and struggling to take part in school trips because their parents did not have enough money. The situation is dire: in 2012/2013, food banks run by the [Trussel Trust](#) gave emergency food to 346,992 people in the UK including 126,889 children, with the Trust stating that “rising food and fuel prices combined with static incomes mean more people are hitting a crisis where they can’t afford food”.

As the Chief Executive of the [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#), **Julia Unwin** is better placed than most to write a book on the fight against poverty. At just over 75 pages, *Why Fight Poverty?* is not an in-depth analysis of poverty, but a short and easily accessible book, reflecting Unwin’s intention that *Why Fight Poverty?*, together with [essays](#) published in *Prospect*, will help “to kick-start a national conversation ... about the need to eradicate poverty in the UK”. There are three questions at the heart of *Why Fight Poverty?* that this review shall explore: “Does poverty matter?” (Chapter 2); “Why is there little public support for solving poverty?” (Chapter 3) and “Is poverty inevitable?” (Chapter 4).

A major challenge to the fight against poverty in the UK is the assertion that poverty either does not exist or that set in the context of global poverty, it does not matter. Unwin states that in 2009, 39% of people thought there was ‘very little’ real poverty in the UK and many strongly disputed any suggestion it existed. This is in sharp contrast to reports, including [Oxfam](#)’s, that show that 1 in 5 of the UK population live below the poverty line and experience life as a daily struggle. While acknowledging there is a world of difference between UK and global poverty, Unwin perhaps skirts over what this means for the fight against UK poverty. Instead she stresses that poverty in the UK is “relative, real and affects a sizeable portion of the population”, and, it matters because it affects not only individuals but is a public issue that “squanders human ability, capability and potential” and “causes waste, cost and risk”.



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Volunteers at a food bank. Credit: [Trussel Trust](#)

Despite the negative societal effects of poverty, attitudes in the UK are increasingly unsympathetic. Unwin states that the prevalent attitudes to poverty are that it is caused by: laziness or lack of willpower (with a 2010 [survey](#) demonstrating that 23% of people actually believed poverty was caused by character weakness or behaviour); drugs and alcohol, and/or big families. Even politicians are in on the act, with Iain Duncan Smith and George Osborne recently [claiming](#) the root causes of child poverty are “entrenched worklessness, family breakdown, problem debt, and drug and alcohol dependency”. In fact, as Unwin shows, over half of children and working-age adults in poverty live in working households. There is also little evidence to support the belief that drug and alcohol dependency is one of the main causes of poverty – of those that receive out-of-work benefits only 7% are estimated to be problem drug users and 4% dependent drinkers. Additionally, only 8% of benefit claimants have three or more children.

Unwin blames societal representation of poverty for some of the mistaken attitudes. She states that while literature has presented “respectful and meaningful” representations of the complexity of poverty today (in particular mentioning works such as those of Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier* and Walter Greenwood’s *Love on the Dole*, and more recent books including Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*, Karen Campbell’s *This is Where I Am*, Stephen Kelman’s *Pigeon English* and Kerry Hudson’s brilliantly titled *Tony Hogan Bought Me an Ice Cream Float Before He Stole My Ma*), people in poverty are more likely to be represented as “shirkers and scroungers”, in particular on television, with series like [Shameless](#), and documentaries such as [Skint](#), showing poorer members of society as “feckless architects of their own fate, failing to take opportunities and living a life of relative ease”.

Perhaps this has most recently been demonstrated by the furore surrounding [Benefits Street](#). Accused of being “poverty porn”, and prompting a national outcry and debate, viewers reacted angrily – and bizarrely – towards those portrayed, with the [Independent](#) reporting threats of violence on twitter including: “I want to walk down #BenefitsStreet with a baseball bat and brain a few of these scum bags”; “Set fire to #benefitsstreet,”; and, others

calling for those featured in the programme to be “castrated”, gassed, “spayed and neutered” or “put down like dogs”.

In this context, what is particularly interesting about *Why Fight Poverty?* is Unwin’s exploration of the emotions underlying such strong responses. For Unwin, deep-seated feelings of shame, fear, disgust, and mistrust combine to create a dangerous feeling of “difference” between those who are poor and those who are not, shaping attitudes towards, and conceptions of, poverty. It is clear that these innately entrenched emotional responses must be identified and challenged if effective solutions to poverty are to be developed. And, there is some, albeit limited, indication that this is already beginning to happen. For example, Unwin identifies social media as a weapon that enables those experiencing poverty to reclaim their voice and directly challenge assumptions that they are “skivers, shirkers or victims”, (with examples including blogs like [A Girl Called Jack](#), [Benefit Scrounging Scum](#), and [Diary of a Benefit Scrounger](#)).

Nelson Mandela once stated, “Poverty is not natural. It is man-made and can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings”. That poverty is not inevitable is at the heart of *Why Fight Poverty?* Unwin concludes poverty is too costly, too wasteful and too risky for society not to fight. There is a need for “a new social contract that recognizes that neither the state...nor the untrammelled market, nor the efforts of individuals can solve poverty alone”. However, perhaps the most important message from *Why Fight Poverty?* is that poverty will not end while language is used to describe “people in poverty as somehow lacking and entirely different in their behaviours, decisions and aspirations” or while those in poverty are viewed as the “other” or as somehow at fault for the poverty they face. Unwin asserts that attempts to end poverty have floundered partly because they are not supported by the public. At the core of the fight against poverty therefore is a need to change public perceptions, misconceptions and prejudices and to better identify, understand and challenge the deep-rooted emotional responses that cause them.

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