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Poverty in Global Perspective: Is Shame a Common Denominator?

ROBERT WALKER[1], GRACE BANTEBYA KYOMUHENDO[2], ELAINE CHASE[3], SOHAIL CHOUDHRY[4], ERIKA K. GUBRIUM[5], JO YONGMIE NICOLA[6], IVAR LØDEMEL[7], LEEMAMOL MATHEW[8], AMON MWIINE[9], SONY PELLISSERY[10] and YAN MING[11]

[1] [corresponding author] Department of Social Policy and Intervention, Oxford Institute of Social Policy, Barnett House 32 Wellington Square, OX1 2ER
email: robert.walker@spi.ox.ac.uk
[2] Department of Women and Gender Studies, Makerere University, PO Box 7062, Kampala Uganda
email: gbantebya@yahoo.com
[3] Department of Social Policy and Intervention, Oxford Institute of Social Policy, Barnett House 32 Wellington Square, OX1 2ER
email: elaine.chase@spi.ox.ac.uk
[4] Department of Social Policy and Intervention, Oxford Institute of Social Policy, Barnett House 32 Wellington Square, OX1 2ER
email: sohail.choudhry@wolfson.ox.ac.uk
[5] Oslo & Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Norway
email: erika.gubrium@hioa.no
[6] Department of Social Policy and Intervention, Oxford Institute of Social Policy, Barnett House 32 Wellington Square, OX1 2ER
email: yong.jo@stx.ox.ac.uk
[7] Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Oslo, Norway
email: ivar.lodemel@hioa.no
[8] Institute of Rural Management, Anand, Gujarat 388001 India
email: leemamol@gmail.com
[9] Department of Women and Gender Studies, Makerere University, PO Box 7062, Kampala Uganda,
email: amonmwiine@gmail.com
[10] Institute of Rural Management, Anand, India
email: sony.pellissery@gmail.com
[11] Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Jianguomen nei dajie 5, Beijing, China 100732
email: yanming2222@yahoo.com

Abstract

Focussing on the psychosocial dimensions of poverty, the contention that shame lies at the 'irreducible absolutist core' of the idea of poverty is examined through qualitative research with adults and children experiencing poverty in diverse settings in seven countries: rural Uganda and India; urban China; Pakistan; South Korea and United Kingdom; and small town and urban Norway. Accounts of the lived experience of poverty were found to be very similar, despite massive disparities in material circumstances associated with locally defined poverty lines, suggesting that relative notions of poverty are an appropriate basis

for international comparisons. Though socially and culturally nuanced, shame was found to be associated with poverty in each location, variably leading to pretence, withdrawal, self-loathing, 'othering', despair, depression, thoughts of suicide and generally to reductions in personal efficacy. While internally felt, poverty-related shame was equally imposed by the attitudes and behaviour of those not in poverty, framed by public discourse and influenced by the objectives and implementation of anti-poverty policy. The evidence appears to confirm the negative consequences of shame, implicates it as a factor in increasing the persistence of poverty and suggests important implications for the framing, design and delivery of anti-poverty policies.

Poverty in global perspective: is shame a common denominator?

There is growing recognition, both in the UK and globally, that poverty is more than simply a lack of income or a shortage of resources with which to meet needs (Alkire and Foster, 2011; Dean, 2010; Tomlinson and Walker, 2009; Marlier *et al.*, 2007). Poverty manifests itself as material deprivation and often leads to poor physical and mental health, restricted social and economic mobility, social isolation and powerlessness. In societal terms, poverty potentially reduces economic productivity, risks improvements to public health, erodes social cohesion and fosters social division and political unrest. There remains debate about whether poverty is best thought of in absolute terms – the distinction between life or death – or whether it is inherently relative, conditioned by social custom and expectations (Besharov and Couch, 2012: Judge, 2012). Either way, poverty carries with it the political and policy challenge as to how best to reduce it and its attendant human suffering.

Increasingly, attention has been directed at the psychosocial dimensions of poverty, particularly the shame that people can experience as a consequence of economic hardship. This reflects a broader movement promoting psychosocial analysis that adds the subjective to the objective, the relational to the individual and views agency as a process not achieved entirely through independent autonomous action (Taylor, 2011). However, similar ideas can be traced in older literature. Townsend (1979: 241, 841) noted the 'social shame of those with little money' and the desire 'to avoid the shame of pleading poverty' in the context of claiming benefits reflected in much subsequent work on stigma (Baumberg *et al.*, 2012). Likewise, even Sen (1983: 159), whose work has been criticised for being 'inherently liberal individualist' (Dean, 2009: 273), has gone so far as to suggest that shame is at the 'irreducible absolutist core' of the idea of poverty.

Social psychologists posit shame to be one of the most pernicious of emotions, creating a sense of powerlessness and incompetence arising from the fact that, unlike guilt, the cause of shame is not necessarily of a person's own making and so cannot be assuaged through her/his own actions (Tangney and Dearing, 2002). Some sociologists (e.g. Scheff, 2003: 255) view shame as 'the large family of emotions that includes many cognates and variants', including

embarrassment and guilt, but agree that, as a social emotion, shame has structural as well as individualistic components. It occurs as a reaction to the sense of failure in living up to societal expectations which, in turn, become internalised as personal aspirations.

There is evidence that shame experienced as a consequence of poverty is widespread across different cultures (Narayan *et al.*, 2000a, b). In Britain, the word poverty itself is stigmatising and shunned; people in poverty are instead more likely to describe their everyday experiences as 'mundane, limited, constrained, full of drudgery or struggle' (Castell and Thompson, 2007). In Europe and North America where social success is increasingly judged in terms of financial gains and conspicuous consumption, poverty is often experienced as personal failure (Edin *et al.*, 2000; Beresford *et al.*, 1999; Clasen *et al.*, 1998). Furthermore, poverty-related shame is clearly gendered (Rodogno, 2012; Tangney and Dearing, 2002). Not only are women more at risk of poverty, they may more often find themselves in settings where they are exposed to poverty-related shame, be it due to domestic budgeting, child rearing or a lack of hygiene. Equally, men may find that poverty reduces their ability to meet socially constructed norms of masculinity (Ruxton, 2002).

Yet, profound theoretical and policy implications would follow if, beyond evidence of its existence in different contexts, the centrality and universality of the shame—poverty nexus could be established. Likewise, existing evidence of the counter-productiveness of anti-poverty programmes which create or reinforce shame, such as those demonstrating how stigmatising social assistance policies limit take-up (Matsaganis *et al.*, 2010; van Oorschot, 2002), could be more systematically evaluated using a 'shame' lens. The fact that shame is known to reduce human agency further raises the possibility of it providing a useful lens through which to better understand the persistence of poverty and intra-familial poverty dynamics.

The task of establishing whether or not shame is universally associated with poverty is a daunting one and this article merely an early step. The approach adopted is a maximum difference design, underpinned by the logic that if there is evidence that shame is associated with poverty in extremely different cultural and economic settings, then this adds weight to the proposition of the universality of poverty-related shame. Such a finding would not necessarily constitute irrefutable proof of the proposition, but discovery of a setting in which poverty is not associated with shame would cast considerable doubt on the idea, logically destroying its credibility.

This article reports on original fieldwork conducted by an international team in diverse settings in seven countries: rural Uganda and India; urban China, Pakistan, Korea and United Kingdom; and small town and urban Norway. It focuses on the experiences and perspectives of people defined to be in poverty according to local definitions. The cumulative evidence is that, although culturally

nuanced, a mutually reinforcing process of shame linked explicitly to poverty was evident in each of the settings studied.

Approach

Conducting research in diverse cultural settings generates conceptual and logistical difficulties. Taking the former first, Sen's proposition presumes that the concepts of poverty and shame are universal while research on them requires there to be at least a modicum of shared understanding across different cultures. Readers of this journal will already be familiar with the many different interpretations of poverty, reconciling these disparate conceptions being a motivation for this article (Hick, 2012; Lister, 2004); therefore, reference here is limited to the less familiar scientific literature on shame. This generally supports a universalistic perspective on shame but distinguishes its role in more collectivist and individualistic societies (Furukawa *et al.*, 2012). In all functioning societies, attempts are made to ensure compliance with social expectations through, for example, ritual and social sanctioning, and legislation and its enforcement. The research literature suggests that there may be a greater opportunity and willingness in collectivist societies to intervene informally to encourage conformity by explicitly shaming transgressors, and more need in individualistic ones to rely on formal legal process (Wong and Tsai, 2007). In collectivist societies, persons are also more likely to share in the shame inflicted on others with whom they are connected; that is, to experience collective or reflected shame.

Before entering the field, dominant values with respect to poverty and shame and their conjunction were explored in each of the settings via their representation in literature, film and proverbs. Samples of approximately thirty volumes from six of the seven countries were considered (Korea was omitted), typically spanning about 150 years. The samples were constructed with the advice of leading local literary scholars and starting with, though not restricted to, the literature syllabuses used in secondary schools. The selected texts were analysed adopting the 'New Historicism' approach, employing discourse analysis techniques (Gallagher and Greenblatt, 2000). This work was supplemented by analysis of around thirty films each from India, Korea and the UK, countries with thriving indigenous film industries. The films were selected with the assistance of local film studies academics and each was subjected to a detailed content and targeted semiotic analysis (Chandler, 2004). In addition, proverbs were collected and analysed in India, China and Uganda, countries with strong oral traditions.

From these analyses, it was concluded that shame was a recognisable social emotion with similar psychological and physiological manifestations in each society and that, despite cultural and temporal diversity surrounding the meanings of poverty, shame was widely considered to be associated with it. There

TABLE 1. *Respondents' characteristics*

	Adults		Children	
	Men	Women	Boys	Girls
China	20	13		
India	12	17	14	14
Korea	8	23		
Norway	11	17		
Pakistan	15	14	7	8
Uganda	13	17	17	13
UK	11	31	18	4

was the suggestion, too, that the shame attached to poverty might have been less prominent in the past than at present because life experiences were variously attributed to fate or the supernatural rather than to individual effort, and that this differential might continue to persist in more traditional societies.

While the analysis of popular media pointed to the viability of conducting parallel research in different settings, there remained practical challenges. Although the broad research strategy sought to investigate the theoretical proposition that poverty induces shame, the detailed design was necessarily inductive because so little is currently known about how these concepts are expressed across diverse cultures. While standardisation is important in making comparisons, conceptual and functional equivalence were prioritised. Therefore, in selecting people for interview, a judicious balance was sought between the need to facilitate comparison across countries and the desire not to undermine the veracity of lives lived within particular cultures. The research was therefore based on in-depth interviews with adults all experiencing what their fellow countrypersons would generally acknowledge to be poverty; in this sense, local and hence relative definitions of poverty were adopted, albeit in India and Uganda ones fixed at subsistence (absolute) levels. About thirty adult interviews were conducted in each setting, mixed by gender though generally with a preponderance of women reflecting local circumstances and, in the British case, access (Table 1). Where possible, conversations were held with children living in similar conditions and typically conducted in pairs or small groups.

Reflecting the maximum difference design, the settings chosen were deliberately very diverse. Interviews were conducted in rural areas in Gujarat and Kerala in India, in urban and rural parts of Norway and Pakistan and in urban China (Beijing), Korea (Seoul) and Britain (two areas of high deprivation) For the most part, the adults interviewed had dependent children, although in Beijing respondents belonged to a new class of poverty – former workers of now-dissolved state owned enterprises. Children were not interviewed in Korea, China or in Norway.

In India and Uganda, respondents were accessed via village elders after detailed discussions about local understandings of poverty. In China, respondents were selected on the basis of their former employment status but were necessarily accessed through neighbourhood committees. In Britain, researchers worked with neighbourhood groups in two areas of high deprivation, where respondents who had previously received means-tested benefits were identified through a questionnaire sift. In Norway, Korea and Pakistan, respondents were recruited directly from lists of social assistance recipients.

Interviews were conducted in the native languages of respondents, recorded (where prior permission was granted) and transcribed. Analysis was conducted in the original language to maximise reliability (although in Norway the analysis was undertaken in English). For both analytic reasons, not wanting to be overly directive or to increase bias, and ethical ones, not wishing to compound any shame associated with poverty, the words poverty and shame were not introduced in the interviews or in recruitment material. So, for example, the rubric adopted in the British component related 'to coping with hard times' and respondents were invited to reflect on their current circumstances, feelings about life, themselves and their interactions with others and with the structures and institutions with which they came into contact. The research was approved under the University of Oxford ethical code but recognised local circumstances. Thus, for example, recorded oral consent was accepted in situations of prevalent illiteracy or where fear of governmental surveillance meant that respondents considered giving written consent to be too dangerous.

Poverty itself

In material terms, the poverty suffered by landless farmers in India, Pakistan and Uganda was radically different from that experienced in urban Beijing or Britain and different again from that faced by an Iraqi immigrant in outwardly prosperous Western Oslo or an ethnic Norwegian living in a small coastal town.

Respondents in Indian settings were mostly daily labourers, with families occasionally having a cow to supplement their income. Housing was generally single-storey, comprising one or two rooms with cooking space outside. It was usually constructed from locally sourced timber and thatch with soil floors except when state funding allowed for concrete floors and walls and corrugated roofs. Water was generally supplied from communal taps; soil and water closets were rare and access to electricity variable. In Uganda, all respondents were subsistence farmers growing foodstuffs for family consumption, some supplementing incomes through casual labour. The housing was local vernacular; typically not securely weatherproof, with some houses comprising makeshift grass thatched single room dwellings without internal facilities for cooking and

sanitation. A third of the households interviewed lacked access to clean water. In Pakistan, interviews took place in both rural and urban locations. Families in the former typically lived in small one or two room homes which they had built largely from mud ('katcha' houses) without sanitation or a water tap. In urban areas, people often incurred the additional cost of renting. Even the best urban housing was located in 'Katchi Abadis' (squatter camps); often three or four room houses were subdivided, with a family or many migrant workers sharing a single room, cooker and sanitary facilities. Respondents in rural areas mostly worked the land, either for themselves or as peasants, while those in urban areas typically worked as day labourers, paid on a daily basis in cash. Most of the children interviewed worked – the majority full-time without attending school.

The respondents in China all lived in Beijing in an area dominated by large factories that once housed state owned enterprises. Respondents mostly lived in one room apartments in large concrete buildings, dating from the era prior to economic reform, and were supplied with electricity and communal piped water. Most respondents had previously worked for state owned enterprises but over a third were now unemployed and most of the remainder were working in low skilled contract employment.

In Britain, respondents were mostly living in rented local authority, brick-built, three bedroom terraced housing or flats with two or three bedrooms in concrete high rise properties located on the outskirts of town. The properties had piped water, electricity and heating but several suffered from health-affecting dampness. Each of the respondents had at one time or another received out of work benefits and only about 12 per cent currently had a job, mostly in low skilled or service sector occupations, with a similar number undertaking unpaid voluntary work.

In Korea three-fifths of respondents had dependent children living with them and most of these – half of people interviewed – were lone parents. All resided in medium-rise apartment buildings in Seoul that dated to the 1970s and were equipped with electricity and running water. Some occupied 'half underground' dwellings or basements that suffered from damp, while heating was often inadequate in winter. About half of the respondents were working, although mostly in part-time and temporary positions, with many of them employed in menial jobs in the public sector. When respondents had children of school age, the children all seemed to be attending school regularly.

The respondents interviewed in Norway lived in three different locations: a small fishing town on the west coast, an industrial suburb in Oslo and a wealthier district on the other side of the city. Most lived in apartments which were generally weather proof and well equipped, although often somewhat smaller than the Norwegian norm. Unusually for Norway, most respondents rented their homes, often with financial assistance from the welfare office. All the respondents were unemployed, with approximately half engaged in an activation programme,

providing training and work experience; the other half were in receipt of social assistance.

Judged by material standards, respondents across the seven national sites lived in different worlds. The financial pressures on them were similarly different in degree and conceivably in kind; the decisions that result in starvation, going without a meal and 'eating in' rather than 'eating out' are not commensurate. But measured against local expectations, the pressures on parents to provide the best that they could for their children, their families and themselves may be much more comparable. As will become increasingly apparent, the failure to live up to those different expectations takes a surprisingly similar toll on the personal well-being and social functioning of people in each of the research settings. The suggestion is that the shame resulting from poverty is an important catalyst in shaping a uniform response to different degrees of material hardship.

The effects of poverty

The effect of poverty, where poverty is taken to be the absence of resources necessary to match needs, is to restrict the ability of people to achieve the things expected of them and which they expect of themselves. Respondents in all seven countries talked of their frustrations about being unable to achieve their material aspirations, and the challenges of making hard decisions between competing demands. Equally, many had aspirations other than those of a material nature, often quite modest in scope, to do with esteem and a sense of worth. However, failure to achieve these latter aspirations was often part of the personal and social costs associated with being unable to fulfil material ones. Sometimes people were also forced explicitly to sacrifice their sense of inner worth in order to attain material goods.

Basic necessities

Food and housing were issues of concern to many respondents almost regardless of context. Both are matters of subsistence, but each is also rich in symbolism. Both suggest security, but with limited resources they can instil a sense of insecurity and real fear for the future. Both provide statements of social position, indicating success or demonstrating failure and, especially when a person is economically successful, both can serve as means of self-expression. However, there is no more telling symbol of failure than the inability to provide appropriate food and shelter for oneself and one's family; for respondents this was the epitome of shame and demonstrable evidence of having succumbed to poverty.

Accommodation for respondents in rural India, Pakistan and Uganda typically comprised one or two rooms housing upwards of six adults and children. They spoke of the overcrowding, disturbed nights, lack of privacy and the

indignity and, additionally for women, the dangers of having to urinate and defecate in fields and open spaces. Child respondents in Uganda talked of their embarrassment at living in a mud and thatched hut and of their unwillingness to invite friends home from school, a response echoed elsewhere. In Britain, particular streets had reputations that meant that friends did not want to be invited home. Even in Norway, a parent confessed to not wanting his daughter to bring friends to their 'simple' apartment for fear that she would be marked out 'as different'.

Living up to expectations

Social conventions and institutions that bind society together – family, community, education and other public services — proved to have even greater potential for shaming than the need to secure basic necessities. To meet any of these conventions requires a basic level of resources and the respondents believed themselves placed at a clear disadvantage. In India especially, but also in Pakistan, China and Uganda, the demands of the family and ritual were paramount, imposing significant and sometimes precisely defined costs. In Uganda, not to be invited to village community events was often interpreted as a humiliating consequence of poverty.

Equally, there were additional expectations imposed by society such as school attendance and preventative healthcare that carried with them real costs since they were less often free at the point of use than they were in Norway and Britain. Living up to social expectations is a challenge for anyone and can become a personal nightmare for those suffering poverty as the accounts of the people interviewed testified.

Debt and financial control

Work and employment, the keys to the resources that open the door to active social participation, were generally in short supply, many respondents having limited skills and education. People with low incomes saw themselves as potentially trapped in a vicious life cycle – an intergenerational process in which limited human and social resources constrain the acquisition of the financial resources necessary to invest in human resources and to acquire additional social ones. Needing to ensure that limited resources could be stretched to meet immediate demands, many respondents found themselves caught in the continuing short-term, dealing with today's needs at the expense of tomorrow's.

For those on a low income, even to succeed in meeting basic needs required exceptional budgeting skills. Women frequently carried the burden of responsibility and the risk of shame. Such juggling often entailed respondents borrowing in cash and/or in kind and, when in debt, a miscalculation or misfortune could spiral into financial disaster. People typically intensely disliked the need to borrow and feared its repercussions; the final demand, the landlord,

money lender or bailiffs and the sanctions that might be imposed, legitimate or criminal. In a number of cultures, to borrow was degrading; people lost their reputations and their respectability. Even so, many, perhaps most, respondents were in debt and were worried about being so.

It is apparent, therefore, that respondents shared much in common in their descriptions of the kinds of pressures, social and financial, that they had to confront despite differences in material living standards. The potential for shame was equally apparent and linked to the difficulty that people faced in living up to their own expectations and those of their wider communities.

The experience of shame

Respondents universally despised poverty and frequently despised themselves for being poor. Parents were often despised by their children, women despised their men-folk and some men were reported to take out their self-loathing on their partners and children. Despite respondents generally believing that they had done their best against all odds, they mostly considered that they had both failed themselves by being poor and that others saw them as failures. This internalisation of shame was further externally reinforced in the family, the workplace and in their dealings with officialdom. Even children could not escape this shaming for, with the possible exception of Pakistan, school was an engine of social grading, a place of humiliation for those without the possessions that guaranteed social acceptance.

The family

No parent was able to escape the shame of failing to provide for their children even when children were prepared to stop asking for things – the latter itself being a further source of shame. Particularly in the more collectivist cultures, notably India, Pakistan and China, some of these pressures were created by the finely tuned expectations over who, for example, should provide care for which elders and in what fashion. Respondents explained how any failure to appropriately fulfil these roles offended wide sections of the family and risked ostracism and, indeed, disinheritance. Even when positive support was forthcoming from the wider family, in the form of cash, gifts and loans, for example, this created a pressure for reciprocity and sometimes a sense of dependency. In India, respondents reported disputes over unpaid dowries, un-repaid loans and unrequited gifts that had left them excluded from family events or explicitly ignored when they attended. Gender distinctions were real. Women were more likely, for complex cultural reasons, to describe excluding themselves or being excluded from family gatherings that their husbands continued to attend. In Pakistan, women, and especially widows, were shown to have unclear rights within the family. They

were particularly susceptible to poverty and frequently subjected to its incumbent shame.

Even positive support from family, 'the difference between keeping your head above water or sinking', could reinforce the sense of shame since, as one British lone mother explained, 'it is all to do with admitting the fact that you cannot cope'. For men, relying on others or on welfare benefits was perceived as a challenge to their sense of masculinity: a British father to two children admitted that he felt 'like shit . . . I'm the man in this relationship. I am meant to be the man . . . to take care of the missus and my kids. And I don't.'

The workplace and school

For many adult respondents, especially those who worked as daily labourers or were unemployed, the labour market was an arena of constant comparison. Standing in the job queue served to mark a person out as being different from, and inferior to, others who had jobs. In India and Pakistan, daily labouring was the norm and yet respondents still felt the inferiority of rejection, believing that the better jobs went to other people who were perhaps fitter, younger or who could afford the necessary bribes. The constant rejection, which in Britain and Norway often meant repeated unanswered job applications, standardised rejection slips and failure at interview, took a considerable toll on people's self-confidence. Respondents in China, who as employees of state owned enterprises had once been part of the vanguard of the worker class enjoying high status as 'masters of the state', now had largely to be content with low paying, insecure occupations because they lacked the entrepreneurial skills demanded by the reformed Chinese economy. To work was what one was expected to do, what one wanted to do, and without a job people lost their sense of positive identity.

Respondents reported sometimes being exploited at work, subjected to non-payment of wages and brutality. This seemed to be at its worst in unregulated labour markets where jobs were auctioned daily, when children were employed, and when respondents – often women – were employed in domestic service. Some adult respondents in Norway and Britain, who had been placed on employment or work experience schemes as a condition of receiving welfare benefit, also spoke of exploitation. They believed that they were doing real work for the benefit of employers but not being paid real wages. Moreover, they felt further aggrieved when their hopes of being taken on as permanent employees were dashed. Whether this kind of exploitation is in any way equivalent to that experienced by child workers in Pakistan is questionable, but in both cases it emphasised to respondents their vulnerability and powerlessness.

Like the workplace, school in Uganda, India and Britain was a cockpit of comparison for children and their parents. At home, children's reference points were limited such that the experience of extreme poverty sometimes seemed normal. School broadened horizons but the stark differences it exposed were a

source of shaming: smartly dressed or not, more than one set of uniform or not, hungry or not, pocket money or not, calculator or not, the list was endless.

Officialdom and community

The vast majority of respondents believed that public services frequently added to their sense of shame and failure. Sometimes this happened because they were required to admit to their poverty in order to access the services or support that they needed. Sometimes it occurred vicariously simply because of how they felt they were treated. Sometimes, even, their own insecurities may have triggered the response that they feared or merely reinforced their beliefs about the negative light in which other people saw them. Financially dependent on bureaucracies, they believed that they had been turned into numbers under the presumption that they were guilty of being society's failures.

A view common among Ugandan respondents was that the label of poverty was dehumanising and had to be resisted since it smacked of failure. Many sought to avoid antipoverty programmes since, as one respondent explained, the benefits would not outweigh the feeling of shame. Respondents in Norway similarly considered receipt of social assistance to be demeaning, not only marking them as needy, lazy or dependent, but also rendering them powerless to the vagaries of seemingly unfathomable, discretionary decisions by caseworkers.

India proved the exception to the finding that public services increased respondents' sense of shame since the stigma attaching to benefit receipt was trumped by the salience of corruption. Every five years a 'Below the Poverty Line' (BPL) list is compiled which gives people access to various government schemes. However, such is the abuse of the list that inclusion was reported to have become a matter of esteem, to have one's name included alongside large landowners, rather than contempt.

Respondents believed that the perception that poverty was the result of individual failing was reinforced in local communities and, in Britain especially, by the mass media. The interview evidence therefore suggests that the juxtaposition of internalised shame with the explicit shaming of people in poverty by society was present in each of the seven national settings. While the expectation gained from analysis of films and fictional literature was that the shame attached to poverty might be less evident in more traditional societies, this was certainly not the case among subsistence farmers in Uganda or elsewhere.

Responses to shame

The review of creative literature, film and oral tradition suggested that shame associated with poverty might prompt a spectrum of responses, partly dependent on how people sought to manage the experience. The interviews certainly revealed a range of responses, perhaps skewed more towards the deleterious, if not the

extreme, than the balance of the literature might have suggested. Most of the devices that the literature indicated could be adopted to manage shame were being used by the people interviewed. However, the messiness of real life, and the limits of a single interview, made it much more difficult to make conceptual distinctions and to isolate strategies for coping with shame from its direct effects.

Instrumental responses

A common response to the shame associated with poverty was to avoid its glare by appearing to be normal, to be part of the majority, and not to be recognised as living in poverty. This meant, whenever possible, people doing what they could to change their circumstances for the better. This instrumental approach to avoiding shame largely involved maximising resources and minimising expenditure in the short term, and working towards more sustained income in the future. From a structural functionalist perspective, this response might be considered to be firmly in society's interest; the fear of poverty and its incumbent shame fuels the work ethic and ultimately the capitalist motor of economic production. While the vast majority of respondents sought to make ends meet in the best ways that they could, the reality was that most were trapped in poverty by limited skills and by a structural lack of opportunities.

British respondents stressed how important it was to be seen to be coping; thus being in work, even if poorly paid, gave people a sense of pride and made them feel better about themselves. Equally, respondents spoke a lot about the need to swallow or to bury their pride in seeking help and assistance. Thus, on occasion, the spur to avoid the shame of being poor, to cope financially and to advance came headlong up against the desire to be proud of oneself by living up to expectations of self-reliance and self-sufficiency and the aspiration to be seen to be coping well.

Keeping up appearances, pretence and concealment

Unable to escape from poverty and the associated shame, respondents sought to keep up appearances and to pretend that things were fine. Doing so frequently led to the concealment of problems and the avoidance of situations likely to publicly expose their circumstances. A male respondent in Norway pretended to his wife that his work experience was truly a proper job; a British respondent made out that her volunteering was paid work; and a support worker was unable to admit that she was having difficulty making ends meet for fear that her professional colleagues would count her as 'no better' than the clients whom they were supporting.

While they sustained the pretence and 'held things together', major problems could be avoided or at least postponed, but there was always the constant fear of being 'outed'. With limited resources, the pretence could easily get out of hand and end with debt collectors closing in and people losing control of their

circumstances. Depression and even suicide attempts were documented among the people interviewed, suggesting that the psychological costs of failure, real and perceived, can be severe.

Withdrawal

A further strategy to cope with the prospect of shame was a partial and sometimes complete withdrawal from social life. This not only reduced expenditure but meant that respondents could reduce the likelihood of experiencing shame. The weakness in the strategy was that it inevitably reduced the social resources that people could draw on in times of crisis.

It was occasionally difficult to determine whether the social isolation that respondents described was an intended result, the consequence of being shunned by other people, a symptom of depression possibly triggered by poverty (or perhaps something else), or a combination of all three. A lone father in Britain said that he 'shut the curtains and hid away', not wanting 'to be the victim'; respondents in Uganda also spoke of withdrawing into their home and 'keeping quiet'; and an older woman in Pakistan ceased visiting her daughter, lacking as she did the wherewithal necessary to buy the customary gift.

Sometimes the withdrawal, the hiding, was deliberate, hiding from the money lender in India and the bailiff in Britain. Sometimes it was more generalised, as illustrated by respondents in Uganda not participating in village meetings because they felt that they were actively 'looked down on' and 'humiliated'. Likewise, British respondents felt disenfranchised, pilloried by the media as being 'workshy' or 'scroungers' and targeted by politicians, government, by 'them', with welfare cuts and 'beat the benefit cheats' campaigns.

For some respondents, the hiding observed might be what psychologists call avoidance behaviour such as drinking. Women in India attributed heavy drinking by their husbands to crop failure, land change and an inability to recover economically. In Uganda, children spoke of their fathers' excessive drinking and associated violence at home, as did certain female respondents. In Norway and Britain, there was more mention of drug than alcohol use, though, as elsewhere, little discussion of cause and effect with respect to poverty.

Anger and resignation

Film and literature predicted anger as a manifestation of shame and there was indeed some evidence of this among participants, most often a generalised expression of contempt for government and the unfairness of 'the system'. What was found in creative writing and film, but was not much evidenced by respondents, was collective action arising from the anger and shame. Respondents were generally focussed on survival and convinced that the system was too big to change; often resigned to the belief that those with power, the 'them', would never listen or understand.

Children also occasionally admitted to being angry. This anger sometimes erupted when they were told that they could not have the things they wanted or stayed just below the surface, directed against their parents and society at large. Children in Uganda, for example, were often deeply ashamed of their circumstances and blamed their parents, yet felt confused because they saw their parents struggling to feed and clothe them. Their counterparts in Britain also talked about anger and the need to control it when faced by peers gloating over possessions and deliberately coaxing a response from those who could not afford them.

A sense of resignation was, however, more frequent and more long-lasting than anger. Respondents often had the feeling that the forces against them were too great to be meaningfully challenged and that mere survival, or the attainment of decency, required all the energy that they had at their disposal. Much more rarely, people gave up trying to keep up a facade, sometimes knowingly flouting social convention and occasionally unknowingly, too, possibly due to illness. There were hints of this in the profligate spending of a couple of respondents in Uganda and perhaps among the most disaffected social assistance recipients interviewed in Norway.

Reflecting blame and 'othering'

The prospect of collective action was further impeded by another response to the shame that respondents exhibited. They generally could not reconcile the assertion that poverty was a product of indolence and other flaws of character with their own experiences and their sense of self. Bombarded by this notion which they felt was not true of themselves, they sought to find others who fitted the widely promulgated portrayal of the undeserving poor, hence finding comfort in the belief that they were no longer at the bottom of the social pile. Many of the respondents receiving social assistance in Norway contrasted their commitment to finding work with the casual attitudes of others, sometimes defined by ethnicity or migrant status. In Britain, there seemed to be a hierarchy of acceptability based on work status, work history, benefit receipt, family size and migration or 'citizen' status. People working or able to demonstrate a decent work record held the moral high ground; those on benefits distanced themselves from stereotypical benefit cheats and most felt superior to migrants who it was claimed took 'all the jobs and housing'. Similarly in Uganda, respondents sought to demonstrate that they were upstanding and coping by reference to behaviours of which they disapproved: begging, theft, not sending children to school or sending children unkempt, heavy drinking, promiscuity and so forth. In adopting such 'othering' behaviour (Lister, 2004), respondents inadvertently divided any concept of 'us' into smaller units and set themselves in opposition to other groups of people in poverty. They also fuelled the very belief that they believed in their own lives to

be untrue, that poverty was largely about lack of trying rather than the absence of opportunity.

Discussion and conclusion

The adults and children interviewed in the seven countries confronted dramatically different degrees of material deprivation and extremely varied life chances. Yet, as Amartya Sen would have predicted, their lived experience was generally very similar; the capabilities to which people aspired were much the same despite economic and cultural differences. Likewise, there were striking parallels in their psychosocial responses to poverty. These communalities might facilitate meaningful debate about poverty across the traditional global South–North, absolute–relative divides. Equally, they might allow for a common approach to the definition and possibly even similar measurement of poverty, thereby expanding the scope for two-way policy learning.

The prevalence of feelings of shame associated with poverty arose from respondents' inability to achieve their own aspirations, their failure to fulfil social expectations being placed upon them, and the sense of being judged a failure by others, assessments often couched in relation to capabilities and always in relation to a lack of resources. This finding is consistent with Sen's assertion that shame lies at the 'irreducible absolutist core' of the idea of poverty.

Moving beyond Sen and connecting with psychosocial theorising, the findings point to the importance of societal and social relationships in framing individual agency. They are congruent with the view prevalent in the, albeit predominantly Western, psychology literature that shame has largely negative results. Shame attributed to poverty caused many respondents social and psychological pain. This, in turn, variably led them to engage in pretence, withdrawal, self-loathing and scape-goating. It sometimes resulted in despair, depression and thoughts of suicide. The diverse roles of women meant that they were typically exposed to shaming more often than men, although men's failure to match the expectation of being successful providers was a ubiquitous source of shame. Many respondents felt that the odds were stacked against them: they had to survive but they could not progress.

The sense of powerlessness attributable to the shame associated with poverty is not to say that people in poverty lack agency or to explain poverty in individualistic terms. To survive on a low income in very challenging conditions requires skill, inventiveness and fortitude. These qualities, many respondents argued, were made more necessary by societies' dismissal of people in poverty as feckless and lazy, assertions that added to their own sense of failure. Indeed, shame is individually felt but socially constructed and imposed by the non-poor in their discourse and dealings with people in poverty (as revealed by separate interviews reported elsewhere (Walker *et al.*, 2013)), and structured by social forces including

the media and government in the framing, structuring and delivering of policy. This reaffirms Dean's (2009) critique of Sen's capabilities approach that humans cannot be free from their material and emotional dependency on others, while stressing that close relationships do not necessarily lead to 'thicker well-being' but can be vectors through which structural inequalities are perpetuated. The sense of shame arguably contributed to 'othering', dividing poor from non-poor and eroding notions of solidarity among persons in poverty (Chase and Walker, 2012). Moreover, to the extent that poverty-related shame increases social exclusion, reduces self-esteem and social capital and cumulatively inhibits effective agency, it might be implicated in extended spells of poverty.

Developing this last point, the research is consistent with, if not proving, the contention that welfare policies that shame or stigmatise recipients are counterproductive. This has long been known with respect to low take-up and targeting (Spicker, 1984). However, the psychological evidence points strongly to shame negatively affecting personal efficacy, suggesting that even persons who negotiate the application process may be psychologically scarred by receipt of a stigmatising benefit. As a consequence, lacking in confidence, for example, they might find it more difficult to move off benefit than would otherwise be the case. This possibility might help to convince even those politicians and commentators, who believe that receipt of benefit should be humiliating, to have second thoughts – the principle of less eligibility was not buried with the Poor Law (Walker and Chase, 2013). The research evidence arguably facilitated acceptance of the amendment to ILO (International Labour Organisation) Recommendation 202 that the rights and dignity of all recipients of social protection should be respected by the 185 member governments, including Britain (ILO, 2012; Walker *et al.*, 2012). Recommendation 202 is an invitation to all governments and analysts to review policies through the lens of shame, asking whether, in their design and implementation, programmes promote dignity. While dignity might not be the perfect antonym of shame or a complete antidote to shame induced by poverty, policies that dignify should help build self-esteem. The same lens arguably needs to be applied to policy and media discourse, challenging stereotypical presentations of welfare recipients as being scroungers, burdens or an underclass.

It is, however, important not to over-interpret the findings based on a systematic but necessarily selective, small-scale qualitative inquiry. While the research, conducted in very different settings, failed to refute Sen's contention of the universality of a poverty—shame nexus, there remains the possibility of situations and societies in which such a nexus does not exist. Likewise, the research cannot refute the proposition, often associated with collectivist cultures, that shame brings positive benefits to society; any persons escaping poverty as a result of being shamed into changing their behaviour would not have been eligible for inclusion as respondents.

Nor is it claimed that poverty is the only cause of shame or that culture is immaterial. Culture demonstrably determines the arenas in which poverty-related shame is experienced and shapes the form that it takes and the way that it is received, whether it occurs in the public or private realm, and whether it is focussed on the individual or shared by a wider collective. Quite often, respondents, especially women whose behaviour is often more tightly prescribed by custom than that of men, were exposed to multiple and cumulative forms of shaming, risking incurring new forms as they sought to avoid others. People are located into hierarchies by class, gender, caste, lineage, opportunity and performance, demarcated and reinforced by status differentials that are similarly policed, in part, by shame. Thus, a banker may feel ashamed if they only receive a small bonus but, while the process may be analogous, the shame associated with poverty is more intense since the persons targeted are unable to fulfil society's minimal expectations, and is more insidious because they generally have few or no alternatives.

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