

# Poverty, Shame and Social Exclusion

## Synthesis Working Paper 1

### Cultural conceptions of poverty and shame as portrayed in seven diverse societies

#### A brief summary of findings

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## **Cultural conceptions of poverty and shame as portrayed in seven diverse societies**

### **A brief summary of findings**

#### **Introduction**

This working paper constitutes a first step in exploring the contention that shame is universally associated with poverty, irrespective of place, time and culture. The importance of establishing such a link, if it exists, are multiple. Social psychologists suggest that shame is among the most pernicious of the social emotions, creating a sense of powerlessness and lack of agency that cannot readily be assuaged since the cause may not be of the person's making. If they are correct, a poverty-shame nexus might help to explain the persistence of poverty. Furthermore, if policies designed to tackle poverty deliberately or inadvertently add to the shame experienced by people in poverty, they could prove counterproductive by eroding individual agency. In addition, if poverty is everywhere associated with shame, shame, and its possible antonym dignity, might better facilitate a global discourse on poverty than do current definitions based on relative and absolute measures of poverty.

The contention of a link between poverty and shame was popularised by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen with the publication of his 1985 book *Commodities and Capabilities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). In seeking to reconcile relative and absolute conceptions of poverty (the former meaning definitions that vary with the affluence of a society, the latter meaning that they are fixed by the biological determinants of survival), he distinguished between 'capabilities' and 'functionings'. Capabilities, he explained, are the potential that people have to lead fulfilled and engaging lives and are absolute and everywhere the same. Functionings, on the other hand, are the facilities and resources required to enable people to achieve their capabilities and are determined by cultural expectations and resource constraints. Sen placed 'the ability to go about without shame', like a capability, at the 'irreducible absolutist core in the idea of poverty'<sup>1</sup>.

#### **The strategy**

The task of establishing whether or not shame is universally associated with poverty is a daunting one. It seems self-evident that conceptions of poverty and of shame are likely to vary over time and across cultures. May be the concepts do not exist in some cultures. If they do, may be they mean such different things as to be incomparable.

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<sup>1</sup> Sen, A. (1983) 'Poor, relatively speaking', *Oxford Economic Papers*, 35, pp. 153-169; p. 159.

In response to this challenge, a maximum difference design was adopted that would ultimately involve fieldwork in diverse settings in seven countries: rural Uganda<sup>2</sup> and India, urban China, Pakistan, Korea and United Kingdom and small town Norway. These countries embrace: Christian, Islamic and Confucian traditions; include established parliamentary democracies, fragile political systems and communist regimes; and span the range from among the richest to among the poorest. Should a poverty-shame nexus exist in each of these very different countries it would add credence to the idea that shame is everywhere associated with poverty.

In this paper, literature, film and proverbs are used as windows on the meanings attached to poverty and shame in seven national cultures and on the relationships perceived to exist between them in each context. The argument is not that these media provide an accurate account of the social reality of poverty or shame. Nor is it suggested that these media will necessarily be directly accessed by people experiencing poverty or be directly affected by them. Rather it is proposed that these media provide a means of accessing dominant cultural values that might help to shape social understandings of poverty, its causes and consequences, and to determine the part shame might play in the experience and perpetuation of poverty.

Creative writing pertinent to six of these seven countries is considered (Korea is omitted) with samples of approximately 30 volumes drawn from each that typically span about 150 years. The samples were constructed with the advice of leading local literary scholars and critics and seeded by, though not restricted to, the language syllabuses used in secondary schools. The texts chosen, selected from much larger numbers that were scanned for relevance were read in detail and the content analysed adopting the 'New Historicism' approach, employing discourse analysis techniques<sup>3</sup>. This analysis of literature was supplemented by analysis of around 30 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 detailed content and a targeted semiotic analysis<sup>4</sup>. In addition, proverbs were collected in India, China and Uganda, countries with strong oral traditions.

While no strong claims are made for the representativeness of the small volume of material perused, strenuous efforts were made to ensure that the material was deemed to be culturally salient by national educators and experts. This report is condensed from a synthesis report, available from the research team, that is derived from an analysis of detailed reports based on research in each of the seven countries.

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<sup>2</sup> Analysis of Ugandan literature is still to be completed.

<sup>3</sup> Gallagher C, and Greenblatt, S. (2000) *Practicing New Historicism*, Chicago: Chicago University Press

<sup>4</sup> Chandler, D. (2004) *Semiotics: The Basics*, London: Routledge

## **Understandings of shame**

The analysis indicates that shame is a recognisable social emotion across the seven national cultures with similar physiological and psychological manifestations. It looks and feels similar to the writers and filmmakers that portray it; it is presented as an emotion that is unpleasant and, appertaining to the inner self, leads to concealment, retreat, avoidance and ultimately to disintegration and even suicide. Shame comprises internal and external components: it is felt by self but requires others to impose it even though the others' views may become internalised as a mental reference point for self.

However, the literature, and other scientific evidence, suggests that the salience of shame may be greater in more collectivist cultures, China, Korea, India, Pakistan and perhaps Uganda, than in the more individualistic Norway and Britain. In the former set of cultures, individual behaviour may serve to undermine the standing of the family, clan, community or caste, to bring on it shame that will be experienced by all members of the social group. Members of the social group may correspondingly feel that it is appropriate to shame fellow members that transgress social norms with a view to achieving the positive goal of bringing them into line. While the experience of shame in Norway and Britain is shaped by the perceived views of salient others, it is more individualistic in its incidence and in the effects which are generally considered to be negative rather than positive. Western scientific literature treats the consequences of shame as being largely deleterious to the person who is shamed. However, there were repeated hints in the materials drawn from the more collectivist cultures, including China, India and Korea, that such individual hurt must be offset against the greater goal of positive social benefits, ensuring conformity and enforcing obligations.

## **Concepts of poverty**

There is greater diversity in the conceptualisation of poverty across cultures but with the common themes of deprivation and hardship. Distinctions are apparent between absolute or subsistence poverty, life lived on the edge of death, and more relativist interpretations. The latter entail comparisons of the degree of deprivation between one person or group and another or, especially in countries experiencing rapid economic change such as China and Korea, comparisons between one time period and another with personal memories of the past shaping perceptions of the present. Whenever the literatures surveyed reach back into the pre modern period, poverty is presented as being endemic and severe. Life was and sometimes is shaped, first and foremost, by the need to eat in order to survive, with people eking out a precarious living from the land, labouring in the towns and begging on the streets. Malnourished children serve as an ever present reminder that life is harsh and cruelly indiscriminate.

A division between urban and rural environments is also evidenced that is linked both to economic development, and hence to history, and also to agency; except at times of natural disaster the rural environment typically offers more means of sustenance than does the city. In urban settings, when employment is rare, crime and welfare benefits (if the latter exist) are often portrayed as the only protection against the ravages of poverty. Life in the city also imposes new requirements: the opportunities for material consumption, the often costly requirements of socialising, and the expectations of success shared by the protagonists themselves, by peers and by kin and friends at home in their villages. Such demands were perhaps heightened in modern China following the economic reforms which opened up the possibility of self advancement and promoted the prospect that ‘getting rich is glorious’.

The concept of relative poverty is found in the British novel and Urdu literature, with comparisons often framed with respect to concepts of social class, long before the 1960s when it began to be adopted by social science. Chinese literature includes relativities defined with respect to: individual life trajectories; inter ethnic differences – for example, the relative decline of ethnic Manchurians and immediate peers. It also draws distinctions between divisions in contemporary experience between urban and rural, the remnants of the former command economy and products of marketisation, and between the new economic classes being delineated by escalating inequality.

There are differences, too, over time and between countries, in the narratives of causation. In early literature, and more modern work adopting an historical perspective, poverty is presented as an inevitable part of the natural order of things. It is seen as the backcloth of life and a source of the trials and tribulations that demand the heroes and heroism that feature in myth and legend and provide hope to the merely mortal. During the Maoist period in China, the belief that poverty was the product of exploitation by the rich superseded the Confucian and Daoist acceptance of the status quo. It has now been overtaken in the current era of ‘getting rich first’ by the idea that economic failure is symptomatic of personal failure, the prevailing view in Britain that is challenged by the directors of many social realistic films. Twenty first century Korean films also portray protagonists without wealth as losing out in life’s race, while Norwegian literature struggles to explain the perpetuation of poverty in a universal state and tends to focus on flaws in individual character.

### **Shame and poverty**

The writings and films reviewed demonstrate an understanding, present in diverse cultures, that shame frequently intersects with poverty in ways that exacerbate the harshness of the poverty experienced. They suggest, too, a recognition that women and children are particularly vulnerable to shame experienced as a result of poverty and that, for the individual if not always the wider society, the consequences are generally negative. Shame is shown to lead to social withdrawal, concealment and

fantasy; to sap morale; and to precipitate a loss of control resulting in mixes of anger, depression and despair. Poverty is sometimes described as driving people to take actions that are demeaning, irrational, subject to social disapproval or even illegal and that this adds to the sense of shame, sometimes pushing people to the point where they appear to be acting 'shamelessly'. Only occasionally is personal good magicked out of the shaming process, as when people strive to keep up appearances despite the risks entailed or when it provokes resistance, either by individuals in their interpersonal relations or collectively with people coming together to organise against oppression. The sense of optimism conveyed by such episodes may itself hint at the improbability of such positive outcomes in real life.

Most often, the shame felt by people in poverty is presented as being the product of an internal sense of shame and inadequacy and shaming by other protagonists and institutions. However, sometimes characters are shown eaten up by shame even when there is no one else to shame them, the internalisation of social expectations, with sometimes positive outcomes that celebrate agency and the work ethic and sometimes negative ones including suicide.

There were a few works, specific to points in time and to particular constellations of content, culture and context, that suggested that Sen's thesis of the universality of poverty-related shame might not hold. Referencing traditional societies, China before the Communist takeover, India before and during the Raj, and rural Africa in recent times, writers apply explanations of poverty linked to fate, witchcraft and the supernatural that excuse the individual of personal responsibility for their own fate. In such situations there no cause for blame and no reason for shame. Maoist writing also portrays an environment in which people in poverty are encouraged not to be ashamed but to take pride in their circumstances and small tasks of survival are celebrated as contributions to the common cause of the Chinese national family.

More common in the material reviewed are examples of villains who shamelessly ignored prevailed social norms of decency and hard work, and heroes who succeed against the odds challenging the oppressors and the status quo. Anger and resentment, brutality and coarseness, criminality and violence are attributes exhibited by protagonist in novels and films from China, Korea, Britain and Norway and explained in various ways to be attributable to their poverty or, indeed, to be characteristic traits of people in poverty. Such portrayals find their antithesis in the genres that take delight in telling stories of successful resistance by oppressed individuals and groups. Resistance at the individual level range from simple coping strategies and 'making do', through make believe and cutting wit directed against the oppressor to epic tales of lifetime achievement in, for example, British genres as varied as Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* and the hit film *Billy Elliot*. Collective responses would include a strand in Chinese literature of the Maoist period portraying class resistance, certain Norwegian novels that engage with trade unionism and the creation of the Nordic welfare state, nationalist Indian and Urdu literature dating from towards the end of the colonial period, and the Dalit literature of

post independence India, epitomised by autobiography that seeks to expose the daily humiliation of untouchability and its associated poverty

### **Arenas of shame**

While in each of the diverse national cultures considered, poverty is commonly perceived to engender feelings of shame, the settings in which this occurs often differ. The agents of shaming similarly vary. In India and Pakistan, shame is institutionalised in the Caste system. Ritual, religious festivals and family events are all arenas in which shaming is reported to occur and in which the shame of poverty can be experienced. The clan, tribe and village historically were important in determining and policing social codes yet still create networks of allegiances in modern cultures as divergent as China, Uganda and Norway; they offer support but also provide markers against which individuals judge and understand their progress and behaviour in life, mirrors in which the shame of poverty can be reviewed.

The family is similarly important as an institution and setting in which the shame of poverty is manifest through the inability to provide and participate, as a reference point for personal aspiration and as a source of mutual support based often on reciprocity. In societies based on the nuclear family, shame may be experienced in private, behind closed doors, but within the extended family the shaming is semi-public and moreover can, through association, attach to the family as a whole. The workplace, school, and the welfare benefits office are other venues where people can be made to feel shame of their poverty, public evidence of economic and personal failure. The dole queue and the job queue are repeated motives across media and countries; people stand in line to be judged by their superiors with the livelihood of one, in public view, dependent on the decision of another. Unskilled, dirty work, 'women's' work challenges men's masculinity and their legitimacy in claiming to be the head of their household. The stigma of claiming benefits is portrayed in Indian film as reinforced by claimants bribing officials; welfare recipients are shamed for using bribes and officials are shamed for exploiting the very poorest. Likewise, borrowing and lending is often portrayed on film and in novels as leading to both debtor and money lender being shamed in a relationship comprised of exploitation and dependency.

### **Conclusions**

The analysis of proverb, literature and film indicates that while poverty has been understood differently at different times, by different artists, in different places, there is far more agreement on the meaning and manifestation of shame, albeit it may have more negative connotations in individualistic cultures than in collectivist ones. The presumption is that this material in part reflects and in part helps to shape the dominant understandings of poverty and shame in the different societies. If so, it would seem, consistent with Sen's assertion, that shame is intimately associated with poverty in all of the very different societies studied even if not always in the way

that he predicted. The arenas in which poverty-shame nexus is most evident appears to vary between cultures and over time and it may be that the shame attaching to poverty was, and is, less apparent in more traditional societies than in modern ones.

Qualitative comparative cultural analysis as reported above is perhaps better attuned to recognising similarity than to demonstrating difference. However, there is at least a hint that the poverty related shame experienced in China is not as prevalent or as acute as in the other countries. If so, this may reflect the legacy of post revolutionary rhetoric that praised the poor for their role in resisting and overthrowing capitalism. It may also be a product of the rapid transition from mass endemic poverty, characterised at its worst by unimaginable famine, to a level of poverty that represents a vast improvement over the course of a lifetime even if the endpoint is little better than the poverty threshold captured by the UN's Millennium goals. The irony of this finding, juxtaposed against recognition of China as one of the archetypal cultures bonded by shame rather than guilt, is inescapable. Perhaps the ubiquity of shame in Chinese culture serves to submerge that attributable to poverty. Perhaps, too, Chinese literature will soon begin to reflect the shift in official rhetoric that increasingly lauds individual economic success as appears to be the case in Korean film.

Until Sen drew attention to the importance of the shame attaching to poverty, the topic had received limited coverage in the academic literature on poverty, discussion being largely restricted to the nevertheless salient topic of the stigma sometimes associated with means-testing. The social psychological literature demonstrates that shame can have important ramifications for individual wellbeing and human agency but has not focussed on the links with poverty. This analysis demonstrates that creative writers and filmmakers have identified such links. Moreover, to the extent that their work reflects shared cultural understandings of social phenomena, it points to the salience of the poverty shame nexus in the belief structures that help to explain how societies function and individuals think and behave.

Materials from each culture considered suggest that the shame attaching to poverty is heartfelt and in most cases pervasive. Institutions and individuals participate deliberately, or otherwise, in the shaming process. A functionalist analysis would suggest that this is a process of control through which society seeks to minimise the extent and social consequences of poverty resulting from individual failings. In literature and film it is also portrayed as a mechanism through which the non-poor justify and exploit their privileged position. Indeed, the labelling of the behaviour of some poor people as 'shameless' may be a manifestation of this protective stance adopted by the privileged. However, the label of shamelessness is one that often adds to the shame felt by characters portrayed in literature and film; protagonists are shown to absorb social expectations as their own and they do not need to be actively shamed to feel the shame of failure.



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However, while film and literature both reflect and play a part in the social construction of culture, there is no necessary relationship between the worlds of the silver screen and creative writing and the ones that real people inhabit. Hence empirical work is undertaken in the same seven countries to explore whether the reality of people's lives reflects the world of fiction and whether shame is, indeed, a ubiquitous concomitant of poverty as predicted by Amartya Sen.

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*1 This draft draws on collaborative research undertaken by the following colleagues but the interpretation presented in herein is that of the author and not necessarily that of the research team as a whole: Grace Bantebya; Elaine Chase; Sohail Choudhry; Erika Gubrium; Ivar Lødemel; JO Yong-Mie (Nicola); Leemamol Mathew; Amon Mwiine; Sony Pellissery; Monimala Sengupta and YAN Ming. The research is funded jointly by the UK Economic and Social Research Council and the UK Department for International Development (UKAid).*