

# Poverty, Shame and Social Exclusion

## Synthesis Working Paper 2

### The Experience of Poverty and Shame in Diverse Cultural Settings: A brief summary of findings

Robert Walker

2012

Professor Robert Walker, Oxford Institute of Social Policy, University of Oxford  
[Robert.walker@spi.ox.ac.uk](mailto:Robert.walker@spi.ox.ac.uk)



## **The Experience of Poverty and Shame in Diverse Cultural Settings: A brief summary of findings**

An earlier working paper in this series sought to investigate cultural conceptions of the associations of poverty and shame as revealed through literature, film and oral traditions in seven diverse societies: China; India; Korea; Pakistan; Uganda; Norway and Britain. It concluded that shame was a recognisable social emotion with similar psychological and physiological manifestations in each society and that, despite diversity in the understanding of poverty that varied over time and place, shame was widely referenced in the context of poverty. There was the suggestion, though, that the shame attached to poverty might have been less in the past, and in more traditional societies, where life experiences are variously attributed to fate and the supernatural rather than to individual effort.

The aim in this paper is to investigate whether the messages carried in oral traditions and in works of imagination are replicated in the lived experience of people who today face poverty in the same seven countries. It 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.

The importance of establishing a link between poverty and shame is that because shame is known to reduce human agency, it might help to explain the persistence of poverty and the limited effectiveness of some anti-poverty policies that exacerbate shame. Moreover, if poverty is universally associated with shame it might facilitate a more meaningful global discourse on poverty than the current one based on the competing definitions of relative and absolute of poverty.

The research is based on a mix of ethnography and depth interviews with adults all experiencing what their fellow countrypersons would acknowledge to be poverty. Where possible, conversations were had with children living in similar conditions but these were typically conducted in small groups. About thirty adult interviews were conducted in each case and, where possible, a similar number of children were interviewed. In selecting people for interview a judicious balance was sought between the need to facilitate comparison across countries without doing damage to the veracity of lives lived within particular cultures. 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 in the South Midlands). 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 who tended to be older than persons interviewed elsewhere. Children were not interviewed in Korea and China and only teenagers, all offspring of adult participants, were interviewed in Norway.

Draft-not for citation without prior permission of the author

One would expect great differences among respondents as disparate as those that were interviewed; more striking then, and potentially important for understanding and policy development, that marked similarities were found in the socio-psychological response to poverty and in the prevalence of feelings of shame and its largely destructive consequences.

### **Poverty itself**

In material terms the poverty suffered by landless farmers in Gujarat, Kerala, Pakistan and Uganda was radically different from that experienced in urban Beijing or England 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 of two rooms with cooking 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 comprising makeshift grass thatched single room dwellings without internal facilities for cooking and sanitation. A third of the households interviewed lacked clean water. In Pakistan, respondents' circumstances varied much more than in Uganda due to the fact that interviewing here 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) but often three to four room houses there were subdivided with a family or many migrant workers sharing a single room, cooker and sanitary facilities. Some respondents occupied 'Jhuggis', small dwellings made from wood, mud, canvas and corrugated iron entirely without services. 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 persons interviewed 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 supplied with electricity and communal piped water. Most respondents had previously worked for state owned enterprises but over a third was now unemployed and most of the remainder were working in low skilled contract jobs.

Draft-not for citation without prior permission of the author

In Britain, respondents mostly rented local authority, brick built, three bedroom terraced housing or a flat 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. All 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 jobs, with a similar number undertaking unpaid voluntary work.

Some 55 per cent of respondents in Korea were lone parents while another 39 per cent did not dependent children living with them. All resided in medium rise apartment buildings in Seoul dating to the 1970s and equipped with electricity and running water. Some occupied 'half underground' dwellings or basements, that suffered from damp and heating was often a problem 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. A point of discussion was that, unusually for Norway where most people own their homes, most respondents rented their homes often with financial assistance from the welfare office. Whereas some respondents owned their apartments, none of those living in houses were owner occupiers. All the respondent were unemployed, with approximately half engaged in an activation programme, providing training and work experience, and half 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 conceivable 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 can 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

Draft-not for citation without prior permission of the author

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 material ones, 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 to be unable 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.

### ***Living up to expectations***

If basic necessities like food, shelter and clothing are so laden with symbolic significance, so rich in the potential for shaming, how much more so are the social conventions and institutions that bind society together: family, community, education and other public services? Actively to participate in any of these requires a basic level of resources and the respondents living in poverty 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. 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 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 key to the resources that open the door to active social participation, were generally in short supply especially since many respondents had limited skills and education. People with low incomes are potentially trapped in a vicious life- an intergenerational cycle 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

Draft-not for citation without prior permission of the author

themselves to be 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. Such juggling often entailed borrowing in cash and kind and when in debt a miscalculation or misfortune could spiral into financial disaster. Respondents hated getting into debt; it made them dependent of others; it demonstrated that they were not in control and, in a number of cultures, to borrow was degrading. Even so, many, perhaps most, respondents were in debt and were worried about it.

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 standard. The potential for shame was equally apparent linked to the difficulty that people were having in living up to their own expectations and those of their wider communities.

Another inference stemming from this finding of similarity is that relative definitions of poverty are the appropriate way to think about poverty because the life experiences of respondents were in many ways comparable, 'standardised' despite material differences, providing a useful basis for international comparison across continents and cultures as well as different levels of economic development.

### **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 reinforced in the family, the workplace and in their dealings with officialdom. Even children could not escape this shaming for school, except possibly in Pakistan, was an engine of social grading, a place of humiliation for those without the possessions that guaranteed acceptance.

### ***The family***

No parent could escape the shame of failing to provide for their children even when children were prepared to stop asking for things. The latter was itself a source of shame for parents that they sometimes concealed with thoughts that their children were mature enough to understand the financial pressures that the family was under. Particularly in the more collectivist cultures, notably India, Pakistan and China, some of those pressures were created by the finely tuned expectations that govern familial relationships which stipulated, for example, who should provide care for which elders and in what way. Respondents explained how their failure appropriately to provide and to reciprocate offended wide sections of the family such that they risked

Draft-not for citation without prior permission of the author

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. There were actually cases cited by respondents in which the family deliberately took advantage of its financially weaker members.

### ***The workplace and school***

For many adult respondents, those who worked as daily labourers or were unemployed, the labour market was an arena of constant comparison where those who were poorest felt that they came off worst. 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. To work was what one was expected to do, what one wanted to do, and without a job people lost their positive identity.

Respondents said that they were sometimes exploited at work. This, for example non payment of wages and brutality, seemed to be at its worst in unregulated labour markets, where jobs were auctioned daily, when children were employed and when respondents were employed in domestic service. People in poverty have limited rights of exit; they need work and have to take the jobs that are available.

Like the search for employment, school in Uganda, India and Britain was a cockpit of comparison. 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. In Uganda, children did not repeatedly mention being picked on and bullied as the British children did, while in Pakistan, where very few of the children interviewed attended school, those that did attend seemed happier and to have more friends even when family incomes were similar.

### **Officialdom and community**

The vast majority of respondents, with the possible exceptions of India, believed that public services very frequently added to their sense of shame and failure. Sometimes this happened because they were required to admit to their poverty and the personal failure that this instilled in order to access the services or support that they needed. Sometimes it occurred vicariously simply because of how they felt that there 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

Draft-not for citation without prior permission of the author

believed that they had been turned into numbers under the presumption that they were guilty of being society's failures.

In the exception to the rule that public services ratcheted up respondents' sense of shame, India, the stigma attaching to benefit receipt ironically seemed to be 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 has 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. The expectation gained from analysis of films and fictional literature was that the shame attached to poverty might be less in more traditional societies but this was certainly not the case among subsistence farmers in Uganda or elsewhere.

## **Responses to shame**

### ***Instrumental responses***

Respondents responded to the shame attaching to poverty in various ways. A great motivation was to avoid the glare of shame by appearing to be normal, to be part of the majority, and not to be seen as poor or the poorest of the poor. This meant whenever possible people doing what they could to change their circumstances for the better. Such an instrumental or problem orientated approach to avoiding the shame induced by poverty meant people seeking to lessen the impact of poverty, maximising resources and minimising expenditure in the short term and working towards more sustained income in the future. The vast majority sought to make ends meet in the best ways that they could but the reality was that most were trapped in poverty by limited skills and by a structural lack of opportunities.

### ***Keeping up appearances***

Unable to escape from poverty and the associated shame, they sought to keep up appearances and to pretend that things were fine. Doing so could and frequently did lead respondents into a charade in which they concealed problems and avoided situations in which their circumstances and their shame could be exposed. 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. Things could also break down if people began believing in their own pretence but, in any case, there was only so long that most people could perpetuate the myth that they were fully in control. Depression and



Draft-not for citation without prior permission of the author

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, sometimes adopted in combination with pretence, was partial and sometimes a complete withdrawal from social life. This not only reduced expenditure but meant that respondents could reduce the likelihood of meeting shame. The weakness in the strategy was that it inevitably reduced the social resources that people could draw at times of crisis. It was sometimes difficult to determine whether the social isolation that respondents described was intended, the result of being shunned by other people, a symptom of depression or a combination of all three.

Sometimes the withdrawal, the hiding, was specific, 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 not given a voice but were instead 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.

### ***Anger and resignation***

Film and literature predicted anger as a manifestation of shame and there was some evidence of this, occasionally directed at specific family members but more often generalised as expressions of contempt for government and hatred 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 too focussed on survival, convinced that the system was too big to change and anyway believed that other people, 'them', would never listen or understand.

Children also occasionally admitted to being angry. This could erupt when they were told that they could not have the things that they wanted or might be repressed but fester inside, directed against their parents and society at large. Children in Uganda, for example, were often deeply ashamed of their circumstances, blamed their parents and yet felt confused because they saw their parents struggling to feed and clothe them. The children and young people interviewed in Britain also talked about their anger and the need to control it when their peers were gloating about possessions and deliberating coaxing a response.

A sense of resignation was more frequent and 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, knowingly and, possibly due to illness, unknowingly flouting social convention. There were hints of this in the profligate spending of a couple of

Draft-not for citation without prior permission of the author

respondents in Uganda and perhaps among the most disaffected social assistant recipients interviewed in Norway.

### ***Reflecting blame and 'othering'***

The prospect of collective action was further impeded by another response to the shame that respondents experienced. 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 for whom it was true that might explain the widely promulgated belief in the undeserving poor. They sought in this to reconcile personal experience with public assertion and to seek comfort from the belief that the existence of the undeserving poor meant that they were no longer at the bottom of the social pile. In so doing, they 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 knew in their own lives to be untrue, that poverty was largely about lack of trying rather the absence of opportunity.

### **Conclusion**

Given the vast differences in the material circumstances of the people interviewed one might initially have expected similarly great variations in their responses to life's adversities and in the language used to describe their experiences. It is striking, then, and potentially important for understanding and policy development, that there were marked similarities in the socio-psychological response to poverty and in the prevalence of feelings of shame and its largely destructive consequences.

The comparisons suggest that shame is an important constituent in the experience of poverty in each of the seven different national settings. This finding is consistent with the assertion of Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen, that shame lies at the 'irreducible absolutist core' of the idea of poverty. Yet, there is no support for the hypothesis arising from the earlier analysis of national literatures and film that shame associated with poverty is likely to be most severe in traditional agrarian societies. There were, though, subtle differences in the triggers of shame and in the arenas in which it occurred.

The findings are also consistent with a further hypothesis derived from the predominantly Western scientific literature that shame has largely negative results, to some extent at odds with beliefs associated with collectivist cultures that shame encourages improvements in personal character. However, it must be recognised that the current analysis does not refute the counter-hypothesis that shame brings positive benefits to society, one of which might be to cause persons in poverty to change their behaviours or attitudes in ways that facilitated the accumulation of sufficient income and assets to move out of poverty. Any such people who were

Draft-not for citation without prior permission of the author

shamed into changing their behaviour and thus escaping poverty would, as a consequence, not have been eligible for inclusion as respondents in this research.

Robert Walker<sup>1</sup>

February 2012

*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).*