

Dimensions of poverty among rural migrant children in urban China

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Abstract

The dimensionality of child poverty is not well understood because children are seldom asked systematically to describe their poverty experience. This hinders prediction of poverty's long-term consequences and constrains policy design. In this research, 55 children aged 8-12 from Hangzhou and Beijing China were each interviewed individually for 0.5-2 hours and participated in 3-4 focus group sessions on poverty experience. Integrating their understanding with perspectives of parents and teachers suggests nine dimensions of poverty: four structural (material deprivation, limiting home environment, constrained education, restricted opportunities); three relational (violence, negative social relations, lack of confidence) and two core (shame, neglected agency).

Keywords: multidimensional child poverty; China; qualitative methodology; rural-urban migration

Poverty is inherently multidimensional. This is reflected in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals which require nations to half poverty 'in all its forms' for both adults and children by 2030. On some reckonings, children comprise half of the people afflicted by multidimensional poverty and their risk of poverty is twice that of adults (Evans, 2019).

However, there is growing recognition that poverty experienced in childhood is to some extent different in kind from that encountered by adults (Bray et al., 2019; Boyden et al., 2019). The rapid development of children in the first two years and, relative to adults, throughout much of childhood, means that the negative consequences of deprivation are magnified and long lasting, imprinting themselves on adult life (Le Menestrel and Duncan, 2019; Boyden et al., 2019). Several authors have also proposed child specific dimensions of poverty that need to be embraced and measured to

provide an appropriate account of children's experience of poverty (Vaz et al., 2019b, Guio et al., 2018). Comparatively few studies, though, have asked children for their views on the dimensionality of the poverty that they experience.

The lack of children's perspective on poverty must call into question adult understanding of the nature of childhood poverty and the processes that make its effects so long-lasting. Furthermore, the silence of children, or arguably the adult silencing of children, on a topic as important as poverty is to their well-being fits uneasily with the UN Convention of Rights of the Child (Article 12). This posits a right to freedom of expression for all children who are 'capable of forming his or her own views' on 'all matters affecting the child' with 'the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. Similarly, the Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights affirm 'the right of every individual and group to take part in the conduct of public affairs' (OHCHR, 2012, p.10).

In China, where over 250 million people remain poor according to the World Bank standard for high middle-income countries, no study is known that has directly engaged children to reflect on their experience of poverty. Most Chinese research on child poverty has focussed on those left behind in the care of grandparents and others when their parents migrate to the city (Yang and Fuller, 2019). However, increasing numbers of children are migrating with their parents to confront a life of relative poverty in the city. There, their rural *Hukou* (registration status) denies them access to many urban services.

Therefore, this article gives voice to rural-urban migrant children living in poverty in China as a critical complement to the decontextualised definition of poverty adopted in the SDGs. Children aged from eight to 12 in two schools, one in Hangzhou and Beijing, were asked in group discussion and in-depth interviews, to identify and describe the dimensions of poverty that they experienced. The next section introduces the study rationale and the concept of multidimensional poverty before describing the research methodology. Informed by a model derived inductively from analysis, the study findings are then presented in three sections respectively covering structural, relational and core dimensions of child poverty before offering some concluding reflections.

Children and poverty

While much research has been conducted on Chinese children left behind in rural areas due to their parents seeking work in cities, studies of urban child poverty in China are rare and none is known that has encouraged children to think about poverty conceptually (Liu, 2021; Qi and Wu, 2014). The

urban children most likely to be poor are those whose parents have migrated to the city (Zhang 2016). In 2019, 236 million rural migrants lived in China's cities, accounting for 16.8 percent of the total population (China Statistics Yearbook, 2020). While typically earning more than when living in rural areas, migrants are typically recruited into the informal labour market where they lack the protection of recognized systems of regulation and need to work exceptionally long hours to achieve reasonable incomes. Additionally, migrants often cannot escape the disadvantages associated with their rural status which include: having less access to social welfare protection; experiencing stigma; and being disadvantaged in terms of access to public services, most notably education (Yang, 2012; Zhang, 2017; Liu et al., 2018; Yuan and Zhang, 2019). Such disadvantages coalesce to shape a multi-dimensional poverty that adds relative deprivation, discrimination, and emotional suffering to the unfulfilled material needs generated by low income (Wang and Liu, 2020; Yang et al., 2020).

While the multidimensionality of poverty is widely accepted, there remains debate about the salient dimensions and their nature. Some scholars have sought inductively to identify the dimensions of poverty from survey data (Ferragina et al., 2017), while others, much influenced by Amartya Sen (1983) and capability theory, have defined conceptual dimensions in advance (Alkire and Foster, 2011) and yet others, following Peter Townsend (1979), have sought to define poverty in terms of what people cannot afford to do or buy (Dermott and Main, 2018). Only very recently have persons experiencing poverty been invited to describe and label the dimensions as they experience them and, while the dimensions identified have proved stable across continents and cultures, they have proved different from those based on a priori reasoning (Bray et al., 2019). Of note is the emphasis given to relational (e.g., stigma and exclusion) and emotional dimensions (e.g., anxiety, shame and suffering) of poverty.

Following the outcome of participatory research with people in poverty, poverty is conceptualised as the lack of money and money-like resources and its immediate consequences (Bray et al., 2019). These consequences are experienced simultaneously as the dimensions of poverty. Adopting a life-course perspective, some dimensions may be causes of extended spells of poverty or of poverty later in life.

Previous work on the multidimensional nature of children's poverty has focussed on measurement. Internationally, use of the UNDP's Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) has become mainstream. Based largely on the characteristics and circumstances of the adults living in households, children are deemed to be multidimensionally poor if their parents are (Alkire and Foster, 2011; Vaz et al., 2019a).

An alternative approach, Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis (MODA), pioneered by UNICEF, employs child-relevant indicators and, reflecting child development, has two specifications: one for infants aged 0 to 4; and one for children and youth aged 5 to 17 (Carraro and Ferrone, 2020; De Neubourg et al., 2013). MODA embraces more dimensions (14) than the MPI and reaches beyond material deprivations to embrace violence and negligence, child labour, access to information, leisure, and social relationships.

While the MPI and MODA represent important advances in conceptualising and measuring poverty both reflect adult thinking as to the nature of child poverty. The relatively small number of poverty studies that have engaged with children divide into four types. The first asks children in general about poverty and about its causes. Chafel (1997) in the USA, for example, found children as young as five distinguished between rich and poor and, with increasing age, shifted from societal to individual and psychological factors as reasons for poverty. In Finland, however, Hakovirta and Kallio (2019) found that older children (aged 11-15) still prioritised structural causes and thought of poor children as being humble and modest and, while not deprived of basic things, nevertheless 'settling for little'.

A second approach asks children in poverty to describe their life experiences, often focussing on the hardships and deprivations and their responses to them (Haanpää et al., 2019; Weinger, 1998). Main (2019), in Britain, found children being unfairly treated, admitting to embarrassment and shame, and reporting lower subjective wellbeing. Similarly, Odenbring (2019), working in Sweden, identified the 'fields' in which children were disadvantaged by their lack of economic capital: school lunches and excursions and during 'free-time'.

The third perspective prioritises the agency of children in family and other settings (Ridge, 2002, 2011). Shropshire and Middleton (1999) in Britain found that children's growing awareness of resource constraints led to very strategic negotiation and bargaining with parents, or to self-sacrifice. Similar responses have been reported from Scandinavia with children contributing their own pocket money to meet family needs (Harju and Thorød, 2011).

The fourth approach invites children and young people to reflect on their experience of poverty and to theorize about it. Only three studies are known with one in Thailand involving just four female teenagers in a small urban community in Bangkok (100294178, 2020). The other two studies, in Tanzania and Bangladesh, were both conducted in parallel with investigations of adult poverty and

entailed extensive group work with children aged between nine and 16 (Bray et al., 2019). Two dimensions of poverty were found to be unique to children. The first was a deficit of time and care reflecting the long hours that parents were forced to work and, among children in care or fostered, lack of emotion and actual abuse. The second was the need to make sacrifices for the well-being of the family, forgoing schoolwork to care for siblings or to earn money that led to ridicule and life-scarring failure at school. Other 'adult' dimensions, bearing a much closer resemblance to those included in the MODA analysis than the MPI, were also identified and experienced by children. The dimension of suffering manifested in hunger, weight loss, illness, beatings and victimisation at school, work and/or home. Institutional maltreatment was experienced as low-quality schooling while the adult dimension of social maltreatment well described the social exclusion and ostracism experienced at school.

These last three studies illustrate the feasibility of fulfilling the promise of the UN Convention of Rights of the Child by enabling children in different cultural contexts to express their views on the nature of child poverty and to contribute to its definition. Therefore, this article reports a replication and extension of this approach conducted in two urban areas in China in Autumn 2020.

Documenting how poverty is experienced and understood by children in the context of urban China becomes the principal objective of this article recognising the role potentially played by parents in moderating or even exacerbating its negative consequences.

Method

Conducted in 2019 and 2020, the research was delayed, and the design affected, by the Covid-19 pandemic. Originally to be conducted in a mixed migrant non-migrant school in Beijing, here called River School, the main fieldwork was moved to Stone School in Hangzhou, an ancient but rapidly growing city of 7.64 million people in Zhejiang Province in southeast China. The latter, a nine-grade school of nearly 3,500 students, was solely open to migrant children. UNICEF (2015) procedures for conducting ethical research with children were scrupulously followed and directly appraised by UNICEF-China. The design and implementation of the research were stringently consistent with the five principles of ethical evidence generation prescribed by UNICEF, i.e., respect, beneficence, justice, integrity, and accountability.

In Stone School, 36 children drawn from two school years (Grade 3, ages 8-9, and Grade 5, ages 10-11) were interviewed (Figure 1). They were selected by school staff as children experiencing

material deprivation. The children were first divided into small groups of between three and six, homogenous in terms of age, parental income and migration experience. Each group met on three occasions with two members of the research team to discuss school life (especially interaction with peers), home life, and self-image and aspirations. Thereafter, volunteer children participated in groups of mixed migration and financial backgrounds that focussed more explicitly on aspects of life that children associated with poverty. Altogether, 36 group sessions were held averaging approximately 45 minutes in length. In addition, each child was subsequently individually interviewed in depth for about three hours over four to six sessions. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the permission of the children, their parents, and teachers.

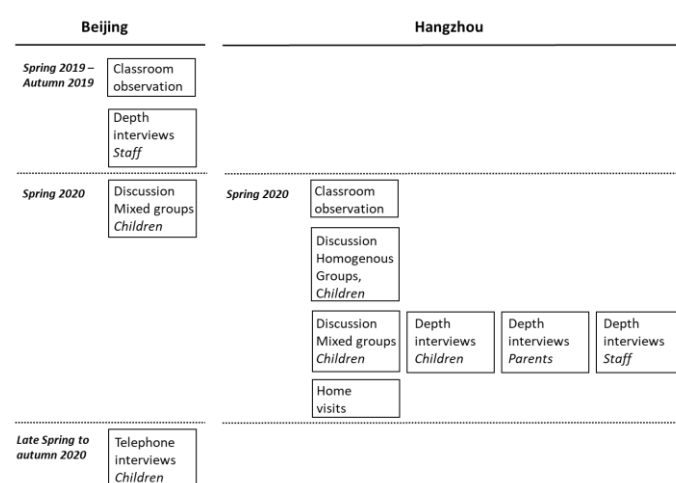


Figure 1 Study design

In Beijing’s River School, Covid-19 control procedures required children to be interviewed by telephone or online and no group-work was possible. In the event, 19 children, nine girls and ten boys, drawn from grade 4 (ages 9-10) and Grade 6 (ages 11-12), were interviewed individually for an average of about 50 minutes spread over several occasions. Whereas none of the Hangzhou children had a local residency (*hukou*), seven of the Beijing children did so. The family per capita income of 16 children from River School was lower than Beijing’s low-income/poverty line; in three cases incomes hovered around the line. Although not part of the original design, the study benefitted from comparison of two schools differing in terms of migrant intake, teaching style and average family income.

Fifty-five hours of classroom teaching were observed across both schools (in Beijing before the onset of the pandemic) and hour-long, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 teachers and

parents. In Hangzhou, researchers also spent a half-day observing a sub-sample of 10 families in their homes.

Various methods were employed in the group discussions, including games, theatre, themed debate, and picture drawing to engage children's participation to create a comfortable atmosphere. This enabled children not only to report on life experiences but also to start categorising those that they linked to poverty into dimensions. Moderators and note-takers paid special attention to children's interaction, with details of participants' body movements, facial expressions, and tone of speech captured in the fieldnotes. The individual interviews sought more personal and emotional reflections on matters such as children's life paths, social relations and prospects related to migration and poverty.

The analysis was conducted systematically by all Chinese speaking members of the research team of nine with coding and retrieval aided by NVivo-12 software. Informed by the group discussion and individual interviews in which life experiences were linked to poverty, items in children's accounts of home, school and social life were inductively coded into categories relating to material, relational and emotional experience. All the fieldwork data, namely interview transcripts, focus group transcripts, observation notes, and research dairies, were analysed in an integrated manner, with special attention paid to triangulating the information. Meanwhile, each respondent, child or adult, was set as a case in NVivo-12 to enable an overview of his/her contribution if involved in multiple research events. These were subsequently divided into those attributed – on the basis of logic or children's ascription – to resource constraints (poverty) and those that were not. In presenting the results below, priority is given to accounts provided by children which, when necessary and appropriate, have been further elaborated or collaborated by reference to observations made by teachers and parents.

Findings

Figure 2 is an attempt to visualise the complex nature of the poverty experienced by children in the Hangzhou and Beijing schools. The model's structure is driven by the groupwork in Hangzhou in which children collated aspects of the daily lives that they attributed, or categorised as relating, to poverty into larger groupings or dimensions. There were inevitably variations in language and emphasis between the discussion groups and constructing the model was an iterative process undertaken by the research team, cross-referencing across sessions and between groups, and with the adult and children's in-depth interviews in Hangzhou and Beijing. The result is that the poverty

experienced by children, most of whom were migrants, is best conceptualised as comprising nine dimensions divisible into three types. Four dimensions are, when viewed from the perspective of children, structural: material deprivation; constrained educational resources; restricted opportunities; and a limiting home environment. Three of the dimensions are relational: negative social and family relations; violence; and lack of confidence vis-à-vis others. The final two dimensions are somewhat different, being pervasive and, to borrow Amartya Sen's words (1983, pp. 32-3), for children, constituting 'the absolutist core' of the experience of poverty. They are the shame experienced because of poverty and, as children, the neglect of their agency with the presumption that they are victims and helpless. While each of these nine dimensions is discrete, they are necessarily interrelated and cumulative, reflecting the complex nature of childhood and poverty. The content of each dimension is presented below relying heavily on the words of the children themselves.

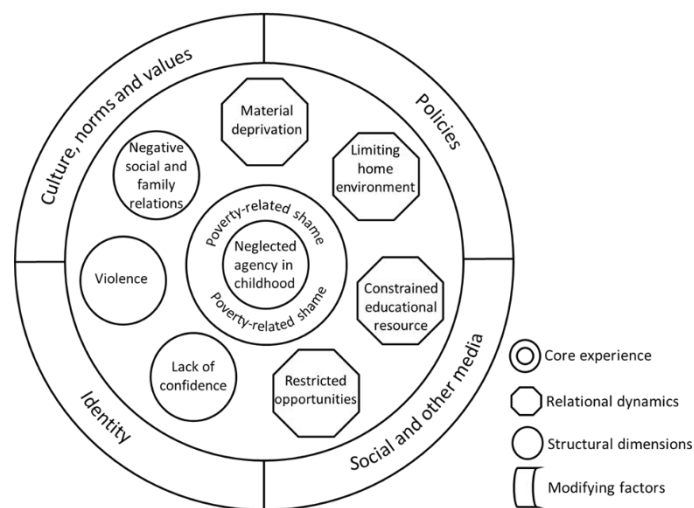


Figure 2 Dimensions of child poverty

Structural dimensions of poverty

While children, certainly the older ones, could logically distinguish between individual and structural causes of poverty, the distinction lacked meaning in real life. They did not see themselves as being a cause of poverty, albeit they were an extra mouth to feed. Rather, structural dimensions of poverty were those over which they had no control.

Material deprivation describes the absence of essentials: decent accommodation; adequate food; and sufficient clothing. This, in the eyes of children, marked out who was poor and who was not and was understood to relate to lack of income.

30 of the 36 children in the Hangzhou study did not have their own room and 25 did not have an individual space for studying. Moreover, many families had needed to move accommodation several times since arriving in Hangzhou due to insecure tenure, erratic employment, and, on occasion, urban planning policy. In Beijing, accommodation conditions were even more constrained because of the high cost of renting. Five of the 19 children interviewed lived in an apartment with per capita housing area of less than 7.5m². Food was provided cheaply at school but eating out was a luxury of which most children could only dream. Instead, in children's understanding, food was a necessity for life with choice being constrained and poverty understood as meaning 'one cannot afford breakfast'. Children themselves associated poverty with old clothes, looking dirty and being untidy; they applied the same criteria to judge their own poverty status albeit sometimes seemingly unconsciously. School uniform was a requirement explicitly to remove class distinctions, but the reality was that well-fitting and clean clothes and branded shoes marked out non-poor children from those who were poor.

The poor children can only change clothes once every six months because parents are too busy to keep them tidy and they don't have money to buy new clothes for the children to change either.

11-year-old, LLH(F), Stone School

I don't need many clothes at all. Normally my new clothes are all too big for me... for example, this black top, I have had it for three years and I am just big enough for it this year.

12-year-old, LJ (F), River School

Children were conscious of being poor and its implications. They spoke of the tensions that were created at home. They heard adults arguing over money and they knew that they would often not get things that they asked for, although this did not necessarily stop them from asking:

Yes, our family is very poor. When my parents quarrelled, my mom scolded my dad in our dialect, and my dad would also scold my mom in our dialect. The two of them even used swear-words, because of the cost of our education.

...for example, if I wanted to buy this toy, my mother didn't buy it for me after finding it so expensive. I begged her to buy it for me. She said oh, wait until I earn money next time to buy it for you... My sister bought this very expensive item, and my mother scolded her.

11-year-old, CZH(M), Stone School

The scarcity of money translated into an acute perception of its value, at least for small items that children might reasonably purchase with any pocket money. Many children moderated their demand for purchases, either wishing to avoid confrontation or to ease pressures on their parents.

Limiting home environment was less about lack of space and facilities than about missing adult company and their guidance if well-informed. Family life was shaped by the excessive demands of the labour market. Parents worked long hours and, while grandparents could provide some care in about a quarter of cases, often there was no-one. Moreover, what children noticed most about parents was their tiredness, irritability, and inability to help with schoolwork.

Dad is often completely worn out when he comes home from the construction site. His job doesn't bring so much income although he works very hard. I guess that's why he is easily irritated - I don't dare to talk to him.

9-year-old NZH(F), Stone School

Dad is a long-distance truck driver, and I can rarely see him... Every time he comes back from a few days' driving, he needs a few days' sleep to recover.

12-year-old, ZRY(M), River School

Few parents had had more than nine years of education. For perhaps most, this was a source of regret and humiliation. A mother of two herself had to drop out of school to support her family and was in tears when explaining that she had to ask her daughter to help her 10-year-old son with his homework. Others trapped by their own experience of limited schooling did not understand and could not explain the value of education. Some teachers saw this simply as a failure of parents to instil the habit of learning in their children:

There is also the habit. ... not doing homework while eating. If the habit is not cultivated, and parents did not supervise it, the child won't be able to get out of the habit. Even if the schoolteacher mentions it to the parents, they do not cooperate well.

Teacher, Stone School

But for children, parents' limited education was a source of annoyance and despair as they sensed the long-term cost in terms of frustrated hopes and aspirations. Indeed, it was often a source of conflict.

My mum is looking at her phone all day and dad is asleep from morning to night. They only ask me to study for a good future. But why don't they study for their good future?

9-year-old, ZZQ(M), Stone School

Parents, unable to assist, tended to resort to force, reinforcing children's perception of them as being authoritarian. This tendency was buttressed by traditional parenting styles that favoured threats and corporal punishment, leading to scenarios in which home and schoolwork became battlegrounds characterised by arguments and fear. There was, then, often a lack of positive reinforcement, modelling, or loving support from adults.

Mum said, 'poor children had no other choices to achieve their academic goals aside from following what's being instructed.'

11-year-old, YZX(F), Stone School

If you don't follow rules at school, you will never escape from where you are... I'd only support you learning painting if you get good scores at school.

9-year-old, LQQ(F), Stone School

Constrained educational resources restricted the extent to which schooling could counteract the consequences of a limiting home environment. For some, school provided an escape from cramped conditions but Stone School for migrant children visibly lacked the resources available to the mainstream River School in Beijing. But neither school could compensate for the lack of extracurricular education that parents mostly could not afford, and which is so essential for academic success in modern China (Cui and Xia, 2020). The head teacher at Stone School was explicit:

We cannot compete with other schools for academic performance, especially English, which relies greatly on extracurricular input.

The immediate effect for children was to narrow their horizons, lower their expectations, and to learn that certain activities were not for children like them. This was particularly true in Hangzhou.

SZX(F): (Parents said) only Chinese, Math, English and Science matter, Music and Art are useless and simply a waste of money.

FYX(F): For subjects that can be taught by parents, like Chinese, Math and English, there is no need to pay extra to go for extra-curriculum training.

WYJ(M): My parents said only children with very good academic performance can go for extra-curriculum training. You are not one of them, why should you go?

11-year-olds, group discussion

Restricted opportunities were seen by children to follow from the other material disadvantages.

This echoed the opinions of their teachers especially in Stone School who generally believed that it was unrealistic for most children from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed, to escape from poverty, or to rise above their social class. One child observed:

Poor children can easily give up themselves, 'smash a pot if it is already cracked.'

11-year-old, AQL(F)

Migrant children, though, were also confronted by material constraints since their hukou status denied them access to the best education. In Beijing, despite policies that have sought to improve opportunities for migrants, migrant children were denied access to academic high school after the nine years of compulsory education. Their options were to return to their place of origin or to enter a vocational training school after leaving middle school. In Hangzhou, migrants were allowed access to high school but only 15 percent of children from Stone School did so, although the local norm was 40 percent.

This fourth dimension of child poverty is particularly important in that it exposes the lie of much of what children were told and the futility of what was expected of them. Parents expected, indeed demanded, that their children succeed at school for the sake of the family but very few would do so. Teachers repeated the same mantra with the intention of encouraging children who necessarily had to live out this lie. Some did so in ignorance of the truth. Others recognised the invidious nature of their circumstances and continued working hoping to beat the odds. Yet others were forced to continue studying hard for fear of punishment at home.

Relational dimensions

The three relational dimensions reflect how children in poverty are treated by others. Before addressing them, it is worth noting children's abstract notions of poverty were solicited through a game in which children were encouraged to designate different descriptions as either rich or poor. (Binary opposition theory suggests that meaning is defined with respect to opposites [Derrida, 1992].) Children at Stone School associated poverty with being diligent, honest, intelligent, and virtuous, the very virtues that they were encouraged by parents and teachers to acquire; wealth was linked - possibly reflecting Mao-era rhetoric - with laziness, dishonesty, stupidity, and villainy (AUTHOR). However, children also associated poverty with negative things: dirt; smelliness; squalor; things to be avoided. And alongside material deprivation, they also identified a poverty of spirit, even laziness, someone not wanting to be rich.

Negative social and family relations followed, in children's eyes, from the negativity of poverty. In relation to peers, children believed that 'everybody wants to have rich friends and avoid people in poverty'. The reasons given were experiential, pragmatic, and selfish: 'Poor children have nothing so other children don't want to engage with them'; 'A poor child gives no gifts and has very few toys which are all cheap and boring'. In addition, of course, children from poorer homes were often unable to participate in activities with peers for reasons of money and so were inevitably excluded from the bonding opportunities provided by such events. Not infrequently children living in poverty were identified by characteristics that were deviations from group norms: 'he appears ugly with dark skin and smelly hair'. In groupwork, it was observed that poorer children were more likely to be suppressed by others:

LQQ(F): *How can you be a cook if your family has no money to send you to a cooking school?*

YJY(F): *You want to be a chef? No f*****g way.*

9-year-olds, group discussion, Stone School

The result was that children experiencing poverty normally had fewer friends and were not infrequently socially isolated in their school class.

At home, children tended to be evaluated above all else by their school performance, with a focus on what they had failed to achieve. High school marks were demanded. But praise was most evident by its absence leading, sometimes, to a lack of communication between parent and child.

SZX(F): ... I scored 98 points in the English test. I said that I made a mistake with two questions... that I chose the wrong question. I knew it. My dad said, 'that's because you are not careful.' He then made me copy out the two questions five times.

11-year-olds, group discussion, Stone School

I often lose my temper at home. All they [parents and grandparents] expect from me is to study hard. I cannot have any time doing anything else. They promised that I could play for a while after I finished my homework. But when I played, my grandma blamed me harshly for not working extra time... I was so cross and disappointed.

12-year-old, LJ(F), River School

The focus on obedience, discipline, and achievement was typically replicated in the classroom. Teachers relied heavily on imperative sentences not only to control the class but also to encourage learning: 'don't do this'; 'you mustn't'; 'you must'; 'listen carefully'; 'do this for me' Rather than building a commitment to learning based on mutual support and reciprocal engagement, difference, competition, attainment, and correctness were emphasised meaning that children without home support were the least likely to be academically successful and therefore to be positively acknowledged by teachers. More often they were blamed and shamed for poor performance.

Violence, physical and emotional, was prevalent in the lives of many of the children. Although children disapproved of bullying, it was recognised to occur and to affect children from poorer families more often than others. Violence by adults towards children was thought normal and generally re-interpreted as being necessary for their moral and other education.

The following extract illustrates that poverty, and its correlates, were perceived by children to be factors in bullying.

LYH(M): *Poor and dirty children are vulnerable in school bullying.*

AQL(F): *Children with low self-esteem get bullied.*

WYJ(M): *Polite children easily get bullied.*

LYH(M): *Those who have no friends get bullied.*

AQL(F): *Poor children get bullied because they don't even have enough food and cannot afford things. Nobody likes poor children.*

11-year-olds, group discussion, Stone School

A teacher suggested, based on children her class, that poverty might also cause children to become active protagonists, being both victims and culprits:

Poverty, yes, I think so. Take X, he is very depressed inside, so he feels very inferior. He might use this method to vent some of his inner emotions. I think such children are a little weaker in learning, and usually don't talk very much. Such children may be bullied. Then after being bullied, he might burst into a small universe, venting a sense of inferiority that he has accumulated in his heart for a long time, through this form of fighting or how to vent the feeling.

Teacher, Stone School

At home, the strong parental commitment to education combined with the stress of endless work and the inability to offer their children practical assistance often led to verbal violence becoming physical. Children described in detail how parents' desire to help became abusive, but they were often unable to do anything to resist it.

Sometimes I feel close to my dad, for example, when we have dinner together. But when I ask him to check my homework, I am often worried about being beaten...I remember when... he tried to assist me, but I couldn't get it quickly, he became really cross and used violence to make me remember.

10-year-old, AQL(F), Stone School

There was less mention of physical violence in Beijing but possibly because interviews were conducted by phone with parents in the background. Certainly, parents in both localities spoke with regret about their negativity towards their children.

I know I should not always criticize and challenge her at home. But I cannot help doing it. I never encourage my daughter. I realise that but I cannot help using negative words whenever I communicate with her.

10-year-old, CXZ(F)'s mother, River School

Because I am poorly educated, I cannot supervise my children. If they cannot do their homework by themselves, it means they didn't learn carefully in class. The only thing I can do is to shout at them.

Parent of 8-year-old, Stone School

The idea of corporal punishment as a manifestation of parental love is consistent with traditional Chinese culture and was generally accepted by children along with the obligations of filial piety: 'we must support and look after our parents as much as we can.'

CZH(M): Every time parents beat us when assisting us in homework, it shows they are good to us... 'Both corporal and verbal punishments are love' [A Chinese idiom.].

SZA(M): I fully agree that 'both corporal and verbal punishments are love.'

9-year-olds, group discussion, Stone School

Lack of confidence is the unsurprising result of multiple disadvantages that undermine the self-esteem of migrant children living in poverty. Certainly, this was the view of teachers and might, as noted above, be a factor in bullying, creating both victim and protagonist.

Children therefore learned through experience, social exclusion, and bullying what they were told at home, namely, that people in poverty were looked down on by others.

My friends saw my dad when he came to school. They laughed and said, 'so that is your dad!' I was so embarrassed because it implied that my dad looked ugly.

11-year-old, LLH(F), Stone School

If one has no money in a city like Hangzhou, one has no confidence.

9-year-old, HZX(F), Stone School

Sensitised to the stigma of poverty, they came to experience it in settings, and in response to behaviours, that were intended by others to alleviate their poverty and promote their well-being.

There was a student from a low-income family in my class... Once I asked everyone to buy a book, his mum could not pay for it. I bought the book for him. It was very cheap but then I observed the child's embarrassment and sense of inferiority. I told his mum to try her best to help him keep up with others in the class to protect him from psychological hurt.

Teacher, Stone School

The combined effect was to make children feel different, worthless, and inadequate, feelings that could be further reinforced by their identities as migrants, rural and outsiders.

Core experience

The two dimensions that seem to represent the core of the poverty experienced by the children in the Hangzhou and Beijing schools - shame and neglected agency - may differ from the others in being pervasive to the point of becoming part of a child's identity. All children share the experience of being considered immature, too young to take rational decisions and therefore, if not less than human, less than adult. This labelling becomes powerfully apposite when a child is experiencing poverty through no fault of their own and has limited ability to do anything about it. Their innocence and powerlessness are insufficient to protect children from the negativity of all the other dimensions of poverty and feeling ashamed as a result.

Shame arose from the accumulated experience of negatives in life, society's negative portrayal of poverty with its emphasis on personal blame, and a sense of relative deprivation. The prevailing adult discourse, sometimes reinforced by policy statements, is that poverty is caused by laziness, a characteristic that children sought in their parents and even in themselves. While disappointed in their parents, their lack of education and low incomes, they were also keen to deflect blame from their parents and themselves drawing attention, for example, to the high cost of urban living or pointing to families worse off than their own. Some chose to try to ignore external criticism or to reverse it:

As for the malicious comments from arrogant, conceited, and ignorant people, I don't even care about them. Although poverty is a big problem, those people who viciously attack poor people are in fact a bigger problem in the society.

12-year-old, LJ (F), River School

However, children were seldom able to deflect the shame for long since it was constantly provoked by jibes and putdowns and by comparisons made with children from more affluent homes. While teachers at both schools discouraged the flaunting their expensive possessions, the result was a conspiracy of silence: owners inhibited and observers envious, embarrassed, and unwilling to expose their envy for fear of lost self-esteem.

We all like comparing. Sometimes, when a poor kid sees that a rich kid has something, but he does not, he will have an inexpressible feeling. He will try his best to get that stuff and compare with others, to show the rich kid that he is not so poor. Even if he knows he comes from a poor family, he will never tell others that he is poor, because he has pride.

Neglected child agency added to the pain that children experienced as poverty. It seemed to children, that denied agency, they were simply condemned to their fate, seen as burden, as just another mouth to be fed, with nothing to contribute. However, their reality was they did try to assist, doing housework, caring for siblings, helping with the business, foregoing requests that might have boosted their self-esteem among peers.

YH(M): *A poor child needs lots of time to help with household chores, like to prepare firewood, to walk and feed the cows, and help parents make money... He has no time for himself.*

YY(F): *He is very insignificant anywhere. Nobody would notice him. Parents and teachers don't care for him. He is also silent with his peers... Because nobody likes him, he feels inferior all the time.*

11-year-olds, group discussion, Stone School

I never ask any family members, not mum, dad or uncle, to buy things I want. I have younger brothers and sisters. I know life is hard for my family... What I need is simply food so I can live.'

8-year-old, JX (F), Stone School

Moreover, from an analysis of family coping strategies discussed elsewhere (AUTHOR), it is evident that children often did make a meaningful contribution to the family economy, making poverty less arduous for their family, sometimes at considerable cost to themselves. It is difficult to know for sure how much of this activity was truly altruistic, freely motivated by the desire to help others, and how much as undertaken under threat of sanction. However, it was clear that some children were aware how tight money was in their family and how stressed their parents were and acted accordingly. For the most part, children did not spell out to parents the consequences of their sacrifices and so parents remained unaware of the shame and the sense of powerlessness that children sometimes experienced. For some children, taking on adult responses such as sibling care and casual employment meant a partial curtailment of their childhood.

While on home visits, parents spoke with pride about the maturity of their children, describing them as 'little grown-ups', children were seldom thanked for what parents considered to be their duty. Indeed, it might be argued that adults exploited their children - by ignoring them and letting them take care of themselves, by expecting them to care for siblings and to help around the house, and by telling them not to ask for things. Children were prepared and generally wanted to do these things; the exploitation came from not acknowledging their contribution or listening seriously to their

opinions. In this, culture and the perception of necessity both probably played a part. Children in China have traditionally counted as family possessions and just three generations ago they were bought and sold. Now, although individually more precious because of national population-control policies, children represent a return on investment only when they become financially successful adults. But for parents surviving in poverty, the need to earn, feed and to clothe the family and to send back remittances must be prioritised over children's education, thereby reducing the chances of their offspring ever becoming financially successful.

Conclusion

Children living in Hangzhou and Beijing, aged between eight and 12, proved well able to reflect on their experience of poverty and even to theorise it. Their understandings were then integrated with the perspectives of parents and teachers to identify nine dimensions of child poverty pertinent in both cities.

The dimensions reflected inadequate monetary and material resources, were interconnected but distinct, and to varying degrees were often simultaneously experienced by children. From the perspective of children, four of the dimensions of poverty appeared to be structural about which they could do little. Material deprivation shaped home-life, not only in terms of substandard accommodation but also with respect to the absence of parents who needed to work long hours to make ends meet. Deprivation and home environment both affected the type of schools that children could access, the extent to which the schools furnished opportunities, and the degree to which children could exploit opportunities that might enrich their current lives and determine their futures.

The three relational dimensions of poverty serve as reminders of how children's poverty is made worse by other people. Although material circumstances differed little, children were sensitive to relative deprivation. Poorer children were shunned and abused by peers; teachers who focussed on academic achievement often tended to ignore or underate them, and their parents frequently did not have the time or ability to adequately support their development. Violence was often a feature of children's lives, manifest as bullying and corporal punishment both at home and at school (despite its prohibition in law). Lack of confidence was also a common characteristic, a product of the other dimensions of poverty but one that was often reinforced by their status as migrants and/or as children of the city outskirts.

All the above dimensions contributed to the shame that children experienced. Ashamed of their parents and themselves because they were poor, their lives were largely determined by adults who presumed that they knew what was best for children and seldom accorded them agency. In the eyes of adults, they were not only children, they were also poor.

These nine dimensions were important to the children and provide insights for social science. They are not necessarily comprehensive, ill health for example did not feature, and their generalisability, without extensive further research is unknown. Figure 2 offers four factors thought likely to modify the dimensions or their expression in different contexts: culture; identity – that in Hangzhou and Beijing schools being strongly associated with migration with two negative statuses coalescing; policy – children felt more stigmatised in the migrant-only Stone School than in River School which integrated migrant children into mainstream education; and media discourse – social media being a major source of information and self-evaluation among children.

With respect to the measures of multidimensional child poverty discussed earlier, listening to the children in the Hangzhou and Beijing schools, suggests a distinct preference for the dimensionality suggested by the MODA approach to measuring child poverty rather than the narrower MPI as currently specified (Carraro and Ferrone, 2020; De Neubourg et al., 2013; Vaz et al., 2019a). It captures the same concern with negligence, violence, work, and social relationships that the children in Hangzhou and Beijing identified and, if not directly, the shame, lack of confidence and agency that also emerged as important. In this respect, the findings are consistent with reported perceptions of children in Bangladesh, Britain, Sweden and Tanzania (Bray et al., 2019; Main, 2019; Odenbring, 2019). The study found that the nine dimensions were often experienced simultaneously but further work is required to explore possible causal sequences linking them. It might be that the relational dimensions are conditioned by the structural ones with the core dimensions of shame and neglected agency being the psychosocial site of children's poverty experience.

While scholarship is not policy, the UN Convention of Rights of the Child insistence that children should be heard speaks to research methodology. Adult views on children's experience carry all the dangers of hearsay evidence ruled inadmissible in many law courts. When children can, they should surely be allowed tell their stories alongside those of adult respondents.

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