

**Determining dimensions of poverty applicable in China:  
a qualitative study in Guizhou**

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**Abstract**

While China has succeeded in dramatically reducing income poverty, it is increasingly recognised that poverty is multidimensional. Moreover, all countries are expected under the UN's Sustainable Development Goals to halve poverty in all its dimension by 2030 "according to national definitions". However, there is little agreement, either in China or elsewhere, as to what the dimensions should be. Therefore, qualitative research was undertaken in Guizhou in 2019 to identify the dimensions of poverty through discussion with people with direct experience of poverty. Forty-two people participated in one of five extended creativity groups that met for up to 12 hours over two days. One group comprised people on middle incomes, the others, people in poverty, a substantial minority of whom were functionally illiterate. Eight dimensions of poverty were identified in addition to low income and poverty duration: lacking decent work; material deprivation; physical suffering; emotional suffering; social abuse and exclusion; institutional injustice; powerlessness; and struggle and resistance. If replication confirms these dimensions, indicators should be developed to enable multidimensional poverty to be adequately measured and anti-poverty policies better evaluated.

**Keywords:** China; poverty; multi-dimensional; qualitative; "extended creativity groups"

Economic and poverty alleviation policies have enabled China to cut the extreme poverty rate (US\$1.90/day) from about 40 per cent to almost nothing between 2000 and 2015, thereby accounting for half of the global reduction in income poverty achieved during the era of the Millennium Development Goals (Zhang, 2019a; Chan and Lei, 2018; Blaxland et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2014). However, it is increasingly recognised that to measure poverty simply in terms of per capita income of less than US\$1.90/per day is insufficient, for poverty is inherently multidimensional with many invidious manifestations (Li et al., 2019; Alkire and Jahan, 2018; Bedük, 2018.; Bourguignon and Chakravarty 2003; Ravallion, 1996). With better measurement and a deeper understanding of the multidimensionality of poverty, many argue that it should prove possible to develop more comprehensive and effective poverty alleviation strategies (Zhu and Li, 2019; World Bank, 2018; Ferragina, Tomlinson and Walker, 2017; Tomlinson and Walker, 2009).

Reflecting this turn towards multi-dimensionality, the Sustainable Development Goals require governments not only to eradicate extreme income poverty but, according to Target 1.2, to halve poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions. However, the dimensions of poverty remain undefined both internationally and nationally. This reflects both weak theorising as to the dimensions of poverty and major data limitations (Bedük, 2018; Godinot and Walker, 2019). Consequently, most studies to date, reliant on pre-existing data, have been forced to be arbitrary in their choice of dimensions. The most widely used measure, the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) employed by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) since 2010, combines material deprivation and deficiencies in education and health but was initially intended, had data been available, to include empowerment, work, environment and social

relationships among other dimensions (Alkire and Santos, 2014). Studies within China have similarly been constrained by data availability, even simply attempting to operationalise the three dimensions of the MPI (Alkire and Shen, 2015; Yu 2013).

In the absence of strong deductive theory regarding the dimensions of poverty, scholars have suggested employing inductive reasoning based on people's experience of poverty (Bessell, 2015; Bedük, 2018; Walker 2020). This approach is also consistent with the UN Human Rights Council's Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights which affirm the need to:

ensure the active, free, informed and meaningful participation of persons living in poverty at all stages of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of decisions and policies affecting them. (Commissioner for Human Rights [CHR], 2012, p.10)

The *Voices of the Poor* study, an international qualitative study undertaken for the World Bank, is credited with triggering this move although it sought merely to describe the experience of poverty rather than to define dimensions (Narayan et al., 2000). However, two major international studies have now demonstrated that is possible to identify dimensions empirically through direct engagement with people in poverty. The first study focused on gender and deprivation in six different countries (Bessell, 2015). The second study was deeply participative and engaged people in poverty as members of national research teams in six different countries (Bray et al., 2019). It sought explicitly to test the cross-national stability of dimensions developed in local national settings and found that nine dimensions, shaped by five moderating factors, were both common to all six countries and exhaustive in the sense of embracing all dimensions identified at national level (Figure 1). The Director General of the

OECD took Bray's study to be the first to bridge "the gulf in the measurement approaches between rich and poor countries" and committed the Organisation "to work hard to develop additional measures that capture" the new dimensions (Gurria, 2019).

*(Figure 1 about here).*

Neither of the studies seeking inductively to identify poverty dimensions included China, an omission which the proof of concept research reported in this article seeks to rectify. Two questions were posed, one methodological, one substantive, both reflecting China's uniqueness, characterised by a communist regime, a self-styled 'socialist market economy' and a culture infused by the legacy of Confucianism:

1. Would people feel able to share their experiences of poverty and work together to identify dimensions of poverty and how this might best be facilitated?
2. Would similar dimensions of poverty emerge despite the radically different socio-political and economic context?

The research conducted in Guizhou demonstrates that people in poverty, even those who are functionally illiterate, are well able collectively to analyse their individual experiences and to reach consensus as to the dimensions of poverty. Moreover, the dimensions bear more than a passing resemblance to the dimensions identified in the international studies. The need for empirical research on the dimensions of poverty is first further discussed before the methodology used in Guizhou Province is described. The dimensions identified are then presented before drawing conclusions and considering the implications for further research.

## **Multidimensional poverty and its measurement**

Although poverty in China has fallen at an unprecedented rate, it remains the focus of policy attention. Extreme poverty is due to be eradicated in 2020. Nationally defined to be a little above the US\$1.90 standard (when welfare benefits are added), 30.5 million people still suffered extreme poverty in 2017 with eradication meaning that nearly 38,000 people are needing to be lifted out of poverty each day. The target excludes urban poverty, which is not yet officially measured, but the expectation is that things are about to change with the additional prospect that a relative measure of poverty will be introduced (Huang, 2019). This progressive policy agenda is tempered, though, by recognition that, since 2012, China has been classified by the World Bank (2019) as a high middle-income country, with a corresponding poverty line set at US\$5.50/day. Measured on this basis, the poverty rate in 2015 was 27.2 per cent with 373 million people living below the poverty line. This compares with 54 million, according to UNDP's Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) in 2014 (UNDP, 2019).

There is no clear indication of how China will define multidimensional poverty for the purposes of the Sustainable Development Goals. As noted above, the MPI combines three dimensions (living standards and deficiencies in health and education) and, in so doing, its origins can be traced to the work of Amartya Sen (1985). Sen introduced the so-called 'capability approach' to poverty but declined to say what dimensions should be considered, while Martha Nussbaum (2000) later developed a set of dimensions to capture lack of capability based on Aristotelian philosophy. However, Sen was also instrumental in the 2010 introduction of the Human Development Index which ranks countries in aggregate according to level of per capita GDP, life expectancy



and educational attainment (Sen, 1983, 1985; Huq, 1999; Stanton, 2007). This measure was later supplemented with an aggregate index of relative national failure with respect regard to three similar dimensions which came to be termed the Human Poverty Index. The ten indices adopted for the MPI, which replaced the HPI in 2010, relate the same three dimensions as the HPI (living standards, health and education), the difference being that the MPI is measured at an individual rather than aggregate level and can therefore usefully be disaggregated by geographic area and according to the socio-demographic characteristics of the people experiencing poverty.

Many Chinese scholars have sought to replicate the MPI using a variety of different data sets (Li et al., 2019; Lu, Routray and Ahmad, 2019; Biggeri, Bortolotti and Mauro, 2018; Zhang, Li and Zhou, 2017; Wang and Wang, 2016; Yu, 2013). They have shown that, compared to income-based measures, poverty is: differently distributed geographically being more concentrated in the South West (Li et al., 2019); measured poverty rates are generally higher (Alkire and Shen, 2015); and that, whereas over time income poverty has become more transient (Wang and Wang 2016), poverty measured multi-dimensionally is more persistent (Zhang, Li and Zhou 2017).

There are different viewpoints in the literature about the precise nature of dimensionality. Some argue that poverty is latent concept, possibly inherently unidimensional with the multiple manifestations (Goertz 2019; Costa and De Angelis 2015). Others believe that poverty is cumulative, the result of multiple deficiencies (Gordon and Nandy 2015). Atkinson (2003) further distinguishes between the union and the intersection approaches; with the former approach, a person counts as poor if they are deprived on just one dimension whereas, with the latter, they need to be deprived on every dimension. The MPI is best viewed as a hybrid, for, to be counted a

poor, a person must be deprived on a third of the indicators; therefore, a person deprived on all education indicators but no others would count as poor despite being poor on only one dimension.

Some scholars have suggested that both Sen and Nussbaum were dealing with a concept closer to ill-being than to poverty (Walker 2020; Lister 2004). Moreover, the MPI can also be criticised for confusing the causes and consequences of poverty with its intrinsic dimensions; while poor education and ill-health could either be causes of poverty or consequences, neither is necessary and sufficient to define the experience of poverty. Several Chinese scholars have also sought an MPI with more Chinese characteristics. Both Wang and Wang (2016) and Lu et al. (2019) seek to capture the essence of the official poverty alleviation goal of ‘two no worries and three guarantees’: no worries about food and clothes and guaranteed access to compulsory education, primary health service and safe housing. However, whereas Wang and Wang only add housing to the MPI as a specific extra dimension, Lu et al. (2019) also include relations (indexed by lacking a smart phone, knowledge of community plans and/or any source of emergency borrowing) and assets (limited land, too small a house and no access to modern transport). Wang et al. (2015) extend the number of dimensions to eight, some of which might reasonably be considered as constituents of the dimensions of health and living standard in the MPI, albeit they better reflect the nature of China’s welfare system: health facilities; health insurance; education; housing; electricity; drinking water; assets; and land.

Li et al. (2019, p.1125) offer a more profound criticism of the MPI and the work of other scholars suggesting that the dimensions ‘derived from subjective judgment based on experience and existing research’ and propose “a multidimensional poverty

index that is calculated without human interference'. Working with county level aggregate data and using principal components analysis, they suggest five dimensions relating to lack of human capital (based on industrial sector), social and financial capital (health and telephone infrastructure), comprehensive capital (mountainous terrain and ethnic minorities), 'nature' capital (precipitation) and lack of compulsory education. If not subjective, Li et al. (2019) are still constrained by data collected for purposes other than poverty measurement and selective in their use of them. Moreover, the heterogeneous content of the dimensions suggests that they are descriptive of the distribution of poverty in China rather than intrinsic to the experience of poverty.

Li et al. (2019) assert that Chinese scholars offer no independent empirical evidence to justify their choice of poverty dimensions and, as already noted, the same could be said of the MPI. The richest source of independent evidence would surely be that from people who experience poverty on a day-to-day basis (Wresinski 2006). This response to Li and colleagues' critique is also consistent with Sustainable Development Goal 16 that aspires to 'ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels' and, in the Chinese context, with Xi Jinping's social governance model introduced at the 19th National Party Congress based on co-construction, co-governance, and co-sharing (Wei, 2017). In this setting, therefore, the challenge is to develop an approach that enables people in poverty to reflect on their life experiences and, based on these, to formulate dimensions of poverty that lend themselves to measurement. In the remainder of this article, the approach adopted is first described and the dimensions identified presented.

### **Approach and methods**

The study was set in Guizhou, the poorest province in China and conducted in

Guizhou's capital city. Forty-two participants, 20 of them women, were recruited purposively to take part in extended creativity groups, an approach common in marketing and product development in which participants work together to solve problems with varying degrees of moderation (Lalaounis, 2017). The problem set participants was to identify the dimensions of poverty through reflecting on their own direct experience.

Three separate groups of participants were recruited on different days from an urban, daily job-market, and were escorted directly from the market to the university where all the creativity groups were held (Table 1). A fourth group comprised villagers belonging to the Miao ethnic minority who were on an organised trip to the city. The final group consisted of people on middle-incomes and was included for two reasons: first, because prior research had suggested that discrimination by the middle class formed part of the poverty experience; and secondly, to explore whether people who were not poor would be prepared to answer survey questions designed to measure the dimensions of poverty. The group was recruited by snowballing using social media with an income threshold and quotas for age and gender.

*(Table 1 about here).*

The research was subject to the ethical scrutiny provisions of Beijing Normal University. People in poverty are a vulnerable group and certainly persons participating had never been involved in research before. The research was described in detail at the point of recruitment and verbal consent was secured; signed consent was not sought both because of socio-political considerations to ensure anonymity and because of the limited literacy of several participants. During the research process, participants were given time for personal reflection before speaking and those with limited literacy were

individually supported throughout by members of the research team.

People in poverty were paid an amount to cover the earnings foregone over the two days in which they participated in the research together with a sum to cover travel expenses. A midday meal was provided and snacks during the day. It is important to stress that payment was not an inducement to participate with the risk of coercion but to cover costs incurred. However, it must be acknowledged that some participants might have considered a day participating in research as preferable to a labouring job. Indeed, one of the research team engaged in recruitment was physically attacked by a person, heavily under the influence of alcohol, who insisted in participating even though he was at that time incapable of doing so. In keeping with custom, the group on middle incomes was provided with refreshments that symbolized the gratitude of the research team.

The extended creativity groups met for between three and 12 hours generating some 35 hours of transcribed conversation. Participants in the first three groups were encouraged to reflect on their life experiences, as individuals, in pairwise discussions and in open conversations; they first identified salient aspects of their lives, then determined which aspects could be attributed to poverty and then collectively grouped the aspects into dimensions of poverty. A range of projective techniques were used to stimulate discussion and to enable people to draw on potentially humiliating experiences without exposing them to further embarrassment. The women in the first group were generally found not to be functionally literate. While the women were well able to talk about their life experiences, they needed considerable interpretive assistance in compiling dimensions from attributes, using icons rather than Chinese characters. Therefore, it proved effective on that occasion to work in gender segregated groups.

Literacy was also not high among older participants in the group of villagers.

The purpose of the final two groups was somewhat different, namely, critically to evaluate the poverty dimensions developed by the first three groups. Therefore, participants first completed a questionnaire reflecting the poverty dimensions that had been developed, discussing their understanding of each question and considering the meaningfulness of each dimension in terms of their own life experiences.

The group work generated literally hundreds of attributes of poverty based on people's real-life experience. Table 2 indicates the sets of dimensions created by the first three groups and their aggregation into the ones reported below. The dimensions were created in each group by a process of open coding. Participants, working in pairs or triplets, assigned "Postiks", each labelled with a single attribute, one by one to emergent groupings of Postiks which were then merged collectively by the whole group into dimensions. The dimensions, comprising of attributes, were then perused by participants to assess their internal consistency and appropriate adjustments made. Time constraints prevented subsequent closed coding, reassigning attributes into the already named dimensions, as a further check of consistency. While to check feasibility, the research team independently grouped attributes into dimensions, these were not used in the analysis or to guide participants.

*(Table 2 about here)*

The dimensions proposed by the first three groups were taken at face value and treated as clusters of related or sometimes disparate ideas that, taken together, reflected the poverty experienced by participants. The dimensions and their contents were compared by the research team in the light of discussions that had been witnessed

during the group sessions noting especially the influence of group dynamics, dominant participants and imbalances attributable to gender and literacy. On this basis, composite dimensions were identified for which indicators developed that were evaluated in the final two groups.

### **Results: specifying the dimensions of poverty**

As is evident from Table 2, while participants in the different groups did not identify precisely the same dimensions, there was much communality. Alongside material deprivation and poor living conditions, they all noted the separate dimensions of physical and emotional suffering, the former associated very much with work and working conditions. All similarly identified loss of face, being looked down on and being socially excluded as a dimension or dimensions. Likewise, they all recognised various manifestations of poor treatment in their dealings with authority. Clearly these dimensions resonate with the international research cited in the opening section, but the experiences recounted were inevitably framed by Chinese institutions and culture. Only the middle-class group expressed reservations, with some participants downplaying the suffering of people in poverty, suggesting that they chose their own lifestyle. Respondents in poverty would have cited this as evidence of social abuse or exclusion.

Not all the original group dimensions were taken forward for further evaluation and specification in the final two groups. Family burden overlapped considerably with education and health which are already captured as dimensions in the MPI. It is nevertheless worth noting that the discussion emphasised that poverty often caused adults who were sick to work until they died, while the needs of children and the costs of their education contributed much to emotional suffering. Gender inequality, though

undeniably important, is arguably a mediating influence affecting how each dimension is experienced rather than a dimension in its own right. In contrast, while a person's lifetime history is not strictly a dimension of poverty, it was thought worthwhile to explore whether it could be measured simply. Neither this dimension nor income are further explained below while dis-empowerment and lack of agency are considered together. The dimensions are described below with reference to their composite attributes as elaborated by respondents in discussion in the creativity groups.

### **Material deprivation**

Using a common Mandarin phrase ‘贫困是一贫如洗’, which translates literally as ‘whom was washed by water’ meaning ‘destitution’, one participant directly equated poverty with material deprivation. Indeed, most discussions began with listing the necessities of food, shelter and clothing, usually in that order and corresponding closely with the physiological needs that constitute the base of Maslow's celebrated hierarchy of need (Maslow, 2016). Moreover, it is notable how basic the necessities were, often reflecting a combination of what things are like today, and what had been the situation only a few years ago. Regarding nutrition, the need was simply to have enough food; people did not have the choice to think about the quality of food or having a varied diet.

The poor have no choice for food. It's ok if it's not fatally poisonous.

Sweet potatoes and corn flours are staples for poor households.

I eat cold tea and left-over food.



Others can eat meat; we only have vegetables.

Children don't have milk powder.

Food is not enough to eat.

Pain and little inside me.

I smelled someone else's delicious meal, but I didn't have it.

Housing need was defined with respect to somewhere weatherproof and safe rather than about modern facilities. Some participants did not have water piped to inside their homes.

Poor people's houses are small, dark and dirty.

There are only benches in the house, black and dirty.

Others can repair the house, but not me.

Conditions are bad, the house leaks and hasn't any decorations.

An environment full of mosquitos.

Home is like a latrine.

For migrant workers, even some long-term migrants, accommodation in the city was considered temporary, necessarily cheap to minimise the drain on wages. Some

spoke of the accommodation provided on constructions sites where the inadequate had to be deemed acceptable.

Living conditions are poor, sleeping on doors; employers need workers with their own bedding.

Poor accommodation men and women are separated by only one piece of cloth.

Reflecting further on material deprivation, and in marked contrast to earlier research in other countries [Bray et al., 2019; Broxton, Charvon and Meyer, 2019]), people aspired to acquire what was necessary rather than to possess what others already had. Or, at least, participants were unprepared to admit that they wanted to compete with their peers.

Can't afford to eat, can't afford clothes.

Pick up other people's old clothes.

Eat and wear, can't catch up with others.

In a further departure from the international findings, there was little spontaneous mention of the absence of basic social infrastructure: piped water; electricity; paved roads; good schools; and medical facilities. Such things may have been taken for granted or were simply out of reach due to cost. Certainly, the cost of education was a recurring theme, while people often expressed the hope that they could remain healthy and thus avoid the cost of medical treatment.

Need money for family members, medical operation.

My husband died, it's hard for me to support my children for education.

If a child drops out of school, it must be because of economic difficulties.

### **Lacking decent work**

While poor housing brought physical discomfort, lack of furniture, mosquitos and inadequate sanitation and bad odours, physical suffering was most often expressed in relation to work where exhausting labour was compounded by poor work conditions and resentment against exploitation and justice. Except for traditional craft labour undertaken by villagers, when the problem was the difficulty of commanding retail prices that provided adequate recompense for the investment of time, there was no mention of job satisfaction.

We undertake handcrafts not just for our own use but to sell. However, if the price is too low, I'd rather keep them for myself.

It's other people's business of how much they charge, I have to sell at this price. Because I work slowly and spend more time on this, I have to charge more.

Rather work was an unavoidable punishment for living that daily revealed people's low status and powerlessness. They were at the beck and call of employers who were abusive, demanding, inconsistent in their demands and exploitative. They

had no security, lost work and income if ill and could trust no-one.

The employers walk over migrant workers, treat them badly.

The poor get used to employers' impatient way of speaking.

The boss lost his temper at me, I was hurt and the tone was fierce.

Don't slack off or you will be fired at any time.

The boss eats our hard- earned money.

If you finish your work early, you will also be scolded by your boss.

The boss scolded people for not making money in the morning.

Bosses never keep their words and reduce our payment.

Some, nevertheless, felt lucky that they were able to secure employment every day when others were unable to do so; despite being daily workers, they therefore described their work as secure, even permanent. Moreover, for many, one job was not enough; they needed multiple jobs, working round the clock. Some participants joined the research having worked all the previous night.

Migrants, having left their villages to find paid work, did not reflect much on whether they were better off. Some suggested village work was harder while others for several reasons could not return home even if they wanted to.

Rural women have the hardest life, they have to take the baby, plant the land and do housework.

It's hard for migrant children to go back to village life and join in local children's life.

Governments built a road in my hometown and demolished my house. I can't go back now.

What was evident however, was that work generated incomes that met little more than basic needs and certainly failed to lift people above any reasonable conception of a relative poverty line. Furthermore, the employment itself was precarious and made life unstable, unpredictable and inherently stressful. There was the risk everyday of not finding work, or of earning insufficient to make ends meet.

You can only find job on a lucky day. One can only live on today's income. Tomorrow is nowhere.

There is no shortage of workers. The bosses pick the ones they like.

If you can't find a job, you can't lift your head when you come home.

### **Institutional injustice?**

Participants in the second group ranked evil employers (恶老板) and authoritarian village governance (村霸) as the two most intolerable aspects of poverty and the ones that they would most like to change. As already reported, from the perspective of respondents recruited as daily employed workers, employers were

exploitative, disreputable, and demanded too much while offering little or nothing in return. Poor food and delayed or withheld wages were common complaints.

Workers at construction sites always end up being unpaid.

Subcontractor: I'll pay you (workers) if I get the money from the company.

I was not paid by my employer for my work.

Delaying wages is a way to keep you.

Bosses don't eat with workers; workers eat gutter oil.

Food for the poor at work is often cooked with waste oil.

For the first group, the least literate one in which women outnumbered men, these concerns morphed into fear about safety at work and the general hardship of manual labour:

Do heavy physical work every day.

Money is hard to earn; food is easy to satisfy.

It is quite possible that women who were functionally illiterate were also less able, or simply felt less able, to articulate their dislike of employers. The physical suffering imposed by manual work was echoed by the village group who had few dealings with employers. With their own land, they also work as a cooperative to

market handicrafts produced to supplement their subsistence agricultural output.

Lime water hurts the hands.

Hands get frostbitten in winters.

Only when the hands are hurt, can they take a rest. Otherwise hands are always busy.

In addition to complaints about bad employment practices, migrant workers in the first and second groups were strident in their criticism of poverty alleviation strategies. Welfare provision, they said, was unfair, inequitable. While children placed heavy demands on family budgets, they were ineligible for benefit. Moreover, being migrants, they were excluded from receipt of *dibao* (social assistance) and other services.

Targeted poverty alleviation only focusses on older children, it ignores the education needs of younger ones.

Because I'm forced to work way from home, the poverty alleviation project in the village has nothing to offer me.

While villager participants accepted that few people benefited from poverty alleviation policies, they thought that this was the result of insufficient resources. However, the migrant workers went much further in their complaints suggesting that *dibao* and poverty alleviation systems remained corrupt with funds being primarily allocated based on nepotism and *guanxi* (social influence). People in real poverty, it was argued, had no such influence, were excluded and lacked the courage or ability to

protest:

Corruption of poverty alleviation funds is more serious than it was ten years ago.

Village cadres only care about their relatives.

The order for distributing poverty relief funds is: relatives; friends; acquaintances; and others.

The village head evades his duty when the poor ask for poverty alleviation funds, taking no notice.

If the poor are not sure whether they will get the poverty funds, they would not ask. Because it's all decided by village committee. The poor will not complain to the upper government as it's useless.

References were also made to the implications of family planning policies and their discriminatory effect, at least in the past, on low income families, especially those reliant on farming:

People in the countryside must have a son and want to avoid the family planning policy.

If people who have the child are having twins again, they have to abort to follow the Family Planning policy. But abortion of twins is too expensive to afford.

They leave the village to avoid family planning and taking care of



the elderly and children.

These concerns echo the dimension of administrative maltreatment important in the international research. Certainly, the complaints about “evil employers” and bad work conditions fit this categorisation if employment and employer relations are treated as institutions. While, bad treatment by an individual employer might be construed as an aspect of person-to-person or social abuse, the discussion was clearly about bosses and employers in general, representing the institution(s) of employment, business and commerce. However, critique of the public sector was perhaps more inchoate than that reported in other countries (Bray et al, 2019). Participants felt strongly that institutions shaped their lives and limited their prospects, but their analysis had a less dominant focus on government. As with material deprivation, this may reflect the state impacting less directly on individuals’ lives, or less visibly, than elsewhere, certainly in more developed countries. Equally it may reflect a reluctance to be critical and a belief that the role played by the state is benevolent, not based on rights (Zhang, 2019a). As one older respondent said:

We had no land, no food, nowhere to go; luckily, we had Chairman Mao.

### **Social abuse and exclusion**

The vulnerability to abuse and coercive behaviour in the workplace was one manifestation of a more pervasive phenomenon: social exclusion, the multiple processes of dismissal, discrimination and disengagement that result in people in poverty being pushed to the edge of society and beyond, causing them often to feel less than human

(Levitas, 2007; Hoff and Walsh, 2018)

People in poverty felt looked down upon in all walks of life. They observed others pointing at them, muttering about them, accusing them and avoiding them.

Poor are looked down by others.

Others talk about me.

Keep the distance on the bus.

Others will not drink the water of the poor, eat the food of the poor, because they think the poor people's water and food are dirty.

Part of the negative discourse was the accusation that people in poverty were lazy. Whereas nobody participating in the groups considered themselves to be lazy, they slipped into the same way of thinking, explaining the poverty of others as being the result of laziness. This phenomenon, often termed othering (Lister 2004), is widespread internationally and explained as an unconscious, protective, distancing strategy aimed at diverting the direction of society's negative gaze onto others. Participants were not lazy, but they adopted the logic that others must be in order to justify society's willingness to blame poverty on laziness.

Poverty doesn't equate to laziness, but extreme poverty must be caused by laziness.

Poverty is said to be the result of laziness.

Most poor people are fond of eating and averse to work.

If you're not lazy, don't steal, don't gamble, you cannot be very poor.

It might be argued that the negative reaction of others was imagined, a projection of the internal sense of failure attributable to being poor. As already noted however, discussion in the one group of middle-income participants were quite dismissive of the plight of people in poverty. Moreover, people experiencing poverty were frequently able to cite specific examples of abuse and discrimination, sometimes linked to migrant and ethnic status.

When employers see the poor person's appearance, they would say 'we don't want (to employ) them anymore'.

Urban people may think us dirty, that we don't wash our hair, it's the impact of an old concept.

Discrimination against migrant workers is very common. I can only share with my peers.

Some people don't want to deal with us Miao, they think we are dirty and look ugly.

When you leave the village to work you often encounter discrimination; you can only mix and talk with other migrant workers.

Nevertheless, people in poverty often talked in class terms, contrasting their experiences with those of 'the rich', stressing the cultural and social gap between them,

the role of *guanxi* in ensuring that the rich remained rich, their own lack of *guanxi*, and the contempt with which people living in poverty were believed to be perceived by the affluent.

The poor make friends with the poor, not the non-poor, because the non-poor don't deal with us.

The poorer you are, the more you will be disrespected. The richer you are, the more you will be respected.

Rich people and those of higher social status, when they need help, everyone will offer a hand.

In the city, the social networks of the poor and rich are not at the same level.

Just listen to the arrogant words spoken by rich people.

The negative attitudes of the rich were said to affect even the children from poverty-impacted homes. In reality, since the rich were scarcely if ever encountered, respondents were referring to their experiences of people who were not poor. Children, it was said, were made to feel ashamed by their non-poor peers and sought strategies by which to avoid this.

“Poor schoolbags” means poor parents

Children of single parents often get excluded, because they behave

badly.

A child does not let me tell others that their family is poor, they fear that others will look down on them.

While participants spoke in class terms, the exclusion was felt most sharply within the family when poverty, or the economic success of other family members, could mean a severing of kinship ties:

The rich don't care about their relations with poor relatives. They let the family break.

Sisters and parents look down on poor relatives.

After being rich, brothers don't talk about brotherhood anymore.

Money, lack of money, and the need to borrow money seemed to be the root cause of the breakdown of family relations. When attempting to hold families together, it became a rule not to talk about money and certainly not about borrowing it. One participant recounted how relatives had said 'No!' to lending even before they had been asked.

They refused to lend me money without me asking.

Rich and poor members in a family can only talk about things irrelevant to money. (The poor can't borrow money.)

It's very difficult for the poor to speak to their rich relatives about

borrowing money.

Richer relatives were loath to lend money, people suggested, because they feared that they poorer relatives would be unable to pay them back. Equally richer relatives failed to empathise with their poorer kin, failing to understand their circumstances.

The rich don't believe that their poor relatives will keep their promise to repay them even they have money.

The rich don't sympathize with their poor relatives. They say any difficulties you meet are not a big issue.

The rich are always accorded higher priority than their poorer relatives.

People experiencing poverty therefore often found themselves stymied, rejected by relatives with the resources to be help and unable to be assisted by other relatives who were similarly poor. To have any chance of getting assistance, people had to beg, something that was both distasteful and humiliating.

When I have money, brothers are brothers; when I have no money, it's difficult to borrow money from brothers even to buy vegetables.

The relatives of the poor are also poor and cannot help each other.

I begged people all around to borrow money.

The poor need to be very humble when they need to borrow money.

The repeated pattern of rejection and contemptuous treatment was liable to take its toll, undermining confidence and people's sense of self-worth. The goal of the rich, in wishing to prevent people from asking for help, was often achieved, leaving people lacking the necessities of life.

I'm afraid of being looked down upon and so don't ask.

I was desperate to borrow money after being sick but didn't.

I am afraid that others will say that, if you are poor, you should not have so many children.

I try borrowing money privately in the evening when few people are around (to see).

The poor hurt inside if their pleas to borrow money is declined. They'll never try to borrow from the relative again.

### **Emotional suffering**

If physical suffering, as noted above, was largely associated with employment and less consequentially with accommodation, emotional suffering was pervasive. Participants in the second group decided to call the dimension 'despair', but other groups chose the more expansive label of 'emotional suffering' to embrace other feelings and emotions such as: frustration; sadness; anger; hopelessness; shame; and hurt. The suffering was multifaceted, varied, often individualised but central to what poverty meant to people, how it was experienced and what effect it had on them.

One important facet of the suffering was the ongoing need to keep going, coping with a lack of resources, not knowing how to cope and what to do, working endlessly to make ends meet with no end in sight.

Poverty is: “don’t know what to do.”

I can’t see tomorrow. (There is no hope.)

There is no hope and light in extreme poverty.

Poverty is like a red light, telling you this way is not through.

Poverty means responding to challenge after challenge, event after event with little room for manoeuvre, and catastrophe being only a decision away. This wore some people down, taking all the joy from life. Others suffered symptoms of depression, or manifested anxiety attacks. While the people participating in the research were necessarily survivors, none of those identifying as poor escaped the emotional pain that accompanies poverty.

Life should be colorful as flowers, but poverty is black.

The pressure is too high, the heart is purple and green. [a Guizhou expression meaning bitter painful and stressful].

The pressure is so heavy that I can’t breathe.

Two of the people recruited as being in poverty did not self-identify as being



poor. They felt that they were not as the others in the groups and thought differently. Be this as it may, one aspect of the suffering associated with poverty was that it was difficult to share, difficult to admit to. There was often an element of pretence, presenting things as not being as bad as they were. This was sometimes to maintain face but also to protect others. There was little point in telling people how bad things were when they themselves could not help because they were equally poor.

The hardship of migrant can't be shared with families. Otherwise family will worry about me.

Difficulties can't be shared.

As discussed in the previous section, another facet of suffering was the humiliation and pain attached to being treated badly, being excluded and ignored. A similar aspect of this psychic pain was the loss of face in not having adequate clothing and of being instantly recognised as being poor with the risk, therefore, of abuse and being shamed:

The poor are looked down by others.

If I don't have a good dress, I am embarrassed to go to other villages.

Emotional suffering also arose from the constraints of being unable to help others and from the failure adequately to fulfil obligations associated with the roles of parent, partner and relative. Suffering was expressed through a range of emotions:

Recalling with tears.

Seeing the family suffering.

Sad in the heart.

Suffer from anger.

Moreover, the fact that people respond differently to the pressures of poverty, and differently in different contexts, needed to be considered in people's dealings with others. This, in turn, added to the stresses in life and to the risk of conflict and confrontation.

Employees who are frustrated will have a bad attitude.

Children don't learn well, so I get in a bad mood.

To summarise, if poverty is material deprivation, it is also simultaneously the emotional response to deprivation. People see deprivation but also feel it as a degree of psychic pain. How much they feel suffering differs by context and circumstance and possibly, even by personality. Logically, as one respondent noted, it cannot be enough pain to cause a person to give up.

Poverty is not enough hope, but it hasn't reached despair.

### **Struggle and resistance**

Despite the emotional suffering reported by participants living in poverty, they

had not given up. They kept on working, eking out an existence. In truth, they had no alternative. But equally, they talked in terms of hopes, aspirations and strategies.

Aspirations ranged from the hopeful ('I long desperately to get out of poverty and live a good life'), through the desperate ('I just want poverty to end') to the pitifully small ('I want to meet my family again').

The strategies to be adopted were equally varied. Some amounted to doing more of what they were already doing ('Making more money for my family'). Others addressed the causes of poverty although from the perspective of hope rather than practical strategies since they were already doing all that they knew how.

I wish I could get better soon.

Hope I can be safe and healthy in migration.

I hope that my employer treats me better in terms of payment and reasonable working hours.

Yet other strategies sought not to address the causes of poverty but to minimise its effects such as stigma and social exclusion. This sometimes meant pretending things were not quite as they were:

Going out to work is to avoid being looked down upon.

If you don't have money, don't take the bus. It's humiliating to be thrown off.

If you don't build a house, your neighbours will take up your land.

Although you have no money, you are forced to build a house.

There were examples, too, of resistance, fighting back against the forces that trapped people in poverty. Perhaps most often, that was achieved through control of the emotions; for example, choosing not to be humiliated when refused help but, instead, treating the person who refused with contempt:

I despise wealthy relatives. They don't care of me.

Sometimes, the resistance was projected through people's children who it was hoped would escape the fate of poverty through education.

I tell my children to study hard, don't be like me.

I expect my children to change their fate through education. Not live a life like mine.

Occasionally, there was talk of collective resistance happening, for example, in the labour market. But, for the most part, people in poverty felt that they had to face life's circumstances alone. They were, though, powerless; without money, they had no leverage, no influence.

Migrant workers stopped working and blocked working sites because they were not being paid.

The poor have no *guanxi* nor money.

**Dis-empowerment, powerlessness or helplessness**

Figure 1 locates dis-empowerment at the interface demarcating suffering and its proactive counterpart, struggle, from the other six dimensions that collectively serve to dis-empower people in poverty, thereby creating suffering and the need to struggle. This was demonstratively so among the groups in Guizhou although the term disempowerment was not used by participants. Instead, participants in two groups spoke of helplessness while, in the other, the largely illiterate first group, dis-empowerment was only alluded to when explaining the reasons for suffering and exclusion. It is, at least possible, that referring to helplessness rather than dis-empowerment is a cultural difference reflecting in China, as Zhang (2019) notes, the lack of a concept of pre-determined rights that can be withdrawn or denied. Elsewhere, people in poverty witness other people enjoying access to services and participating actively in promoting their interests, political, economic and cultural, in ways that they feel are denied or, more explicitly, removed from them. In China, by way of contrast, governance is often seen as benevolent rather than responsive, while others progress through *guanxi*, lacked by people in poverty but not thought by them to be theirs by right.

The sense of helplessness was palpable in much the discussion, countered, as already noted, by little more than hope and the inevitability of struggle. It was perhaps most evident in relation to the labour market, for most respondents the sole source of income, and in terms of the consequences of social exclusion and their lack of social capital. There was, though, a generic response that, whatever one did, circumstances remained the same. One person expressed it poetically:

Poverty is a heavy cloud in the blue sky.

Others were more prosaic:

Poor people are always busy. But it's hard for the poor to improve their lives.

It's is very difficult to do anything.

In relation to employment, there was a distinction between those who saw no alternative to casual employment and the difficult of securing it, and others, with more entrepreneurial aspirations, who were without the wherewithal to start.

I want to get out of poverty, but I don't have skills and way of making profit.

I have no work. Have no deposit, I have no capital. I have no mobile phone.

Participants referred frequently to their inability to borrow, especially from kin whom they thought of as the natural people to assist. The result again was that they were left helpless.

I have no money to pay for my son's wedding.

The poor can never be sure about borrowing money. Perhaps a 50% chance from close relatives; with general relatives possibly up to a 20% chance.

Indeed, people were inclined to define poverty in terms of the absence of money and the absence of assistance leaving them alone and helpless.

Poverty feels like being helpless.

Poverty is nobody giving me money.

Nobody helps me.

Beyond relatives though, there was a tendency to blame themselves or their history, taking personal responsibility for what might have had structural causes.

I don't know how to use WeChat [a social media platform] because of lack of education. So, I can't make money from it and I must rely on others.

When I was a child, I was almost abandoned by my stepfather.  
When I was 8 or 9 years old, I became the main labour force in my family.

It's climbing up a mountain. I climb the climb to the top but fall down again. It's all because of my inability.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

It is evident from the research that people living in poverty and recruited in Guizhou describe their experience of poverty in very similar terms to people in other countries (Bray et al. 2019; Broxton, Charvon and Meyer 2019). While an income that is insufficient to meet needs is a necessary component of poverty, it is the implications of this insufficiency in terms of harsh living and working conditions and the resultant physical and emotional suffering which are experienced more directly as poverty.

The need to find work and to take work that is low paid, physically demanding, precarious, lacking in autonomy and which offers virtually no intrinsic satisfaction drives daily life. The pressures of survival are evident in terms of a lack of material possessions and often in the need to live away from kin and home, but most directly in the emotional suffering attached to a life lived at the edge of the impossible, where even the smallest decisions have profound consequences and no day passes without a crisis.

This suffering is exacerbated by feeling and being alone, a product of social exclusion. People in poverty feel that they are deliberately ignored by others, including relatives, who could assist. This they believe is because people in poverty are likely to ask for help without any prospect of reciprocity, but also because being poor and even associating with ‘the poor’ is disreputable (Zhang, 2019b; Li and Walker, 2018; Yang, Walker and Xie 2019). Institutions, informal, commercial and to a degree governmental, reflect and project society’s negative perception of poverty, often denying respect and autonomy to anyone living in poverty.

The eight dimensions identified, in addition to income, echo Maslow’s (2016) hierarchy of need with most of the discussions beginning with physiological needs. However, groups differed in the dimensions that they perceived to be most important, either with respect to making their lives difficult, or in terms of which should be tackled first by government. Nonetheless, emotional suffering, hardship at work and exclusion by the family were particularly evident in respondents’ accounts of their lives. No attempt was made, for reasons of time, systematically to explore the relationships between dimensions in order to identify, for example, cause and effect. However, in Bray et al.’s (2019) international study, complicated networks of influence were created but respondents tended to argue that such refinement was irrelevant in terms of their



everyday lives since they experienced dimensions simultaneously and cumulatively.

While the scale of the study places limits on the ability to generalise, certain observations are in order. In answer to the first question posed by the research, it proved possible to work with people in poverty, even those with limited literacy, to characterise their experiences of poverty and to categorise them into distinct dimensions. This demonstrates the ability and agency of people living in poverty and underlines the potential fully to engage them, in a Chinese national context, in Xi's model of social governance and the development of a 'socialist consultative democracy', and globally in accordance with SDG 16. However, Bray et al. (2019) triangulated the views of people in poverty with those of practitioners and academics arguing that only by merging the different perspectives, experiential, practical and academic can a complete understanding of poverty be achieved. They further argue that it is important to spend additional time with people in poverty to give them confidence to interact with practitioners and academics. Therefore, having demonstrated the possibility of consulting people in poverty in China, the intention is to repeat the work in Guizhou and perhaps elsewhere bringing the three perspectives together. Time is an inevitable constraint but equally a necessary resource. The extended creativity groups in Guizhou worked together for upwards of 12 hours and more time could productively have been spent. For both ethical and pragmatic reasons, it is imperative to bring people experiencing poverty to the point when they are willing and able fully to engage in the process of conceptualisation that is typically the preserve of academics and policymakers.

With respect to the second research question, there are striking similarities between the findings in Guizhou and those from other parts of the world, potentially

supporting Gurria's belief that there is now a common concept of poverty that facilitates global policy conversations (Gurria 2019). All the dimensions of poverty recognised in China had been found elsewhere (although physical and emotional suffering were not separately identified by Bray et al. [2019]). It is also likely that the contributions made by people in poverty that are socially unrecognised, which Bray et al. identify as a dimension, are similarly ignored in Guizhou although this point was not mentioned in discussion. At the macro-level, the similarity in dimensions, if replicated by larger scale studies in China, poses a new question of profound importance, namely is the experience of poverty truly universal irrespective of socio-political structures, or is China's socialist market economy simply creating the same dependencies, inequalities, structures and social values that shape poverty in capitalist societies?

However, Figure 2 suggests schematically that there were also subtle differences that warrant further investigation. What in other countries people called dis-empowerment, in Guizhou was termed helplessness. Deprivation in other countries, especially in economically more developed ones, included strong references to inadequate public services and infrastructure as well as to the lack of household essentials noted in Guizhou. Furthermore, while internationally, public institutions shaped the dimension of institutional abuse, this was less so in Guizhou where employers were more often named the source of most maltreatment. All these differences could be explicable simply in terms of language or sampling. But they might reflect political and cultural realities in China where, from Confucius onwards, individual rights have been subordinated to collective interests and the state is perceived as operating out of benevolence (Zhang, 2019a). Comparative research to further elucidate these differences is needed.

(Figure 2 about here)

Having identified dimensions and determined the nature of poverty, new indicators need to be developed to permit poverty to be more accurately measured and poverty alleviation policy to be better evaluated. As a purely heuristic exercise, survey questions were developed and administered in the last two groups. They were successfully scaled as indicators of emotional suffering, social exclusion, lack of decent work, and material deprivation, albeit with respect to the non-random sample of just 16 respondents (Jiang et al., 2019). Scales to capture institutional injustice, physical suffering and struggle proved to be inadequate. The attempt to index disempowerment proved a better indicator of passivity for, while participants on middle incomes were prepared to complain about bad treatment, people in poverty were not, possibly because they expected to be treated badly. It is also worth reporting that the five disparate dimensions for which scales were successfully developed loaded, in exploratory analysis, on the same principal component, a finding consistent with the notion that poverty as a latent concept is unidimensional with multiple manifestations. Clearly, though, further research is warranted with a representative sample.

Finally, the limited size of the project, located in one province, with predominantly urban samples and embracing just two ethnic groups, denies any meaningful attempt to explore whether the dimensions of poverty experienced in China are shaped by the same mediating factors as Bray identifies (Figure 1): time; location; identity; culture; and natural environment. The evidence is that these factors are relevant with respect to the narrower set of dimensions covered by the MPI (Li et al. 2019; Lu, Routray and Ahmad 2019; Wang and Wang 2016; Yu 2013); additional research is required to determine whether this is true in relation to the newly identified

dimensions: lacking decent work; physical suffering; emotional suffering; social abuse and exclusion; institutional injustice; struggle and resistance; and powerlessness.

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**Table 1:*****Characteristics of participants***

Group	Recruitment	Number of Participants	Gender	Age	Education	Household income, RMB
	LM: Labour market  V: Village: villager visit  SM: Social media		Male/ Female	<35/35- <45/45+	Junior/Pre-university/ Degree	<30k/ >30k-80k/>80k
1	LM	6	2/4	0/3/3	6/0/0	5/1/0
2	LM	8	6/2	2/1/5	6/2/0	4/2/0**
3	V	12	4/8	N.A	N.A	N.A
4	LM	8	5/3	1/6/1	7/1/0	6/2/0
5	SM	8	5/3	3/2/3	0/1/7	0/0/8
Total		42	22/20	6/12/12*	19/4/7*	14/8/8*

\* Excludes Group 3 for which information could not be collected

\*\*One person recorded an income in the top income category, recruited at a daily labour market there was no together information consistent with this response. She is entered in the middle-income category.

## Table 2

### *Developing understanding of the dimensions of poverty\**

\* Original Mandarin on the top lines, English translation below

**NB The**

## Figure 1.

*Dimensions of poverty identified in Bangladesh, Bolivia, France, Tanzania, the UK and USA*

Source: Bray et al., (2019)

## Figure 2

*Comparison of dimensions of poverty in Guizhou with the rest of the world (Bangladesh, Bolivia, France, Tanzania, the UK and USA; Source: Bray et al 2019)–*

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**Figure 2 Comparison of dimensions of poverty in Guizhou with the rest of the world (Bangladesh, Bolivia, France, Tanzania, the UK and USA; Source: Bray et al 2019)–**