

Are shame and poverty closely linked?

August 25 2010



An Indian girl is forced to beg. Does this experience necessarily cause shame?

(PhysOrg.com) -- A major international study is to examine whether shame is a key part of the experience of being poor. It will look at whether being poor necessarily results in low self esteem or feelings of shame and whether welfare policies are counterproductive when claimants are stigmatised.

Led by Professor Robert Walker from Oxford University, a team of researchers will attempt to answer these questions in a half-a million-pound study, funded by the ESRC and DFID. The research, spanning

eight countries, aims to improve our understanding of the impact of poverty to establish whether anti-poverty measures could be applied more effectively.

A team of a dozen researchers will conduct-depth interviews with children and their parents about how being poor affects the way they feel about themselves and the way they are regarded by their own community. They will interview families in UK, Norway, China, India, Pakistan, Uganda, South Korea and Germany. As well as comparing experiences across countries, the study will include differences between rural areas, cities and towns.

Professor Walker, from the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of Oxford, said: 'Very little is known about the way people in different countries experience and regard poverty. In the UK, we talk about the "stigma" of poverty. There is evidence of parents going without things themselves in order to buy their child the latest trainers - an example of ensuring their child does not feel [shame](#) at school. However, it has been suggested that, in China, for example, it might be more important for adults, even in [poor families](#), to maintain "face" and to uphold their own sense of dignity. In parts of India and Pakistan it is possible that loss of "family honour" adds to any sense of personal shame.

'This is the first time an academic study has been set up to analyse the importance of shame in understanding the experience of poverty in very different cultures. In China, names of welfare benefit recipients are sometimes posted on neighbourhood notice boards. While, in the UK, we seek to protect individual confidences, judgemental language used in public debates about people in poverty could have the same demeaning effect.'

The research team will analyse whether there is a link between poverty

and shame: through its portrayal in literature and film; in-depth interviews with low-income households; and focus groups with middle-class people on their view of poverty. The researchers will carry out a statistical analysis of existing data on poverty in the World Values Survey. They will also explore the language and practices used by the agencies responsible for implementing social assistance and anti poverty programmes to see whether they are more or less likely to make people ashamed of asking for help.

Professor Walker said: 'Language is loaded with all sorts of nuances and subtleties: phrases like 'sink estates', 'hand-outs', 'deserving' and 'undeserving', even 'rights and responsibilities', make judgements on the poor.

We hope this study helps to inform policy development, both in the UK and abroad. Our objective is to use this research to work together with policymakers and agencies to deliver policies that tackle [poverty](#) effectively while simultaneously recognising the importance of promoting dignity and a sense of self-respect.'

Provided by Oxford University

Citation: Are shame and poverty closely linked? (2010, August 25) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-08-shame-poverty-linked.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.