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Social isolation and its relationship to multidimensional poverty

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Abstract

While the multidimensionality of poverty is well-recognised, one dimension of poverty that has been often overlooked is social connectedness. This paper draws on conceptual and participatory and measurement literatures to observe that social connectedness seems to be an important missing ingredient of multidimensional poverty analyses, with social isolation being a feature that exacerbates the condition of poor persons. To provide contextual detail as to its particular impact on persons in marginalized communities and for the need for further studies on this frontier, we present qualitative primary data from South Africa and Mozambique, and review pertinent studies of the First Nations of Canada, and among persons with disability. A final challenge for social isolation is that it may not mobilize policy attention if it is seen to be a matter of personal skill, thus the closing section outlines particular areas for positive policy intervention.

Key words: isolation, social connectedness, loneliness, poverty, disability, First Nations

The study of multidimensional poverty has expanded the range of factors that are considered part of impoverishment. For example, the Commission on Global Poverty Measurement led by Tony Atkinson proposed that physical security from violence be regularly monitored by the World Bank as a non-monetary dimension of poverty (World Bank 2016). We argue in this paper that social isolation and decreased social connectedness can be important results of living in poverty, as well as contributing factors to the persistence of poverty, and merit more extensive analysis than they often receive. This paper aims to catalyse that analysis by drawing together literature, case studies illuminating social isolation in different contexts, and observations of policy responses, in order to suggest how appropriate analyses of social isolation can meet a deeply human demand, and improve policy design.

Synthesising a dispersed literature we first examine how social isolation fits into multidimensional poverty conceptually. We then discuss primary field research from South Africa and Mozambique which reveals the influence of social isolation in the lived experience of poverty from the perspective of the impoverished themselves. The next section draws on documented histories of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada to investigate how isolation – in residential schools – created long-term impacts on poverty and isolation. Finally, drawing on the discussion on incorporating people with disabilities, we explore how reducing social isolation, through programmes aimed at reintegrating people with disabilities into their communities, can provide insight into directions for policy. In concluding we show how addressing the issue of social isolation in a concerted fashion, recognizing that it arises in diverse contexts, can potentially mitigate poverty.

Social Isolation and Multidimensional Poverty

In the global discussion on poverty, the focus on income alone long dictated priorities. Yet the Sustainable Development Goals are emblematic of a conceptual shift that has occurred in understanding poverty. The SDGs refer to poverty in ‘all its forms and dimensions’, recognising that monetary poverty is an important component of the complex of interlinked conditions that constitute poverty – but not the only one (UN 2015). Amartya Sen (1999) has been a leading voice among many others calling for such a change by providing powerful arguments why this focus on income is too narrow. Firstly, there are huge variations in people’s different abilities to confer income into capabilities. A person with disabilities may a) have problems earning a decent income, and b) may face greater difficulties converting income into capabilities (the things needed to live well). Thus a person with disabilities may be disadvantaged ‘even with the same job and the same income’ as compared to a person without disabilities (Sen, 1999, p. 119). Secondly, income is not a

proxy for non-income deprivations - having income cannot always purchase non-income capabilities, such as access to health care or education. These realisations point to a skewed relationship between income-earning and income-using ability, and lead to a 'coupling of low incomes with handicaps in the conversion of incomes into capabilities' (Ibid). Outright exclusion and generally lower levels of access to education for people with disabilities or poor children (often due to stigma), create barriers to finding paid work in adulthood, meaning such exclusion can be a predictor of poverty (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2004).

Much of the early work on wider conceptions of poverty and development broadened it to include health and education – for example the Human Poverty Index (Anand and Sen 1997) or the Multidimensional Poverty Index that succeeded it (UNDP 2010, Alkire and Santos 2014). However just as the Human Development Index (HDI) was seen to be too narrow a measure of development (Fukuda Parr 2003, Ranis Samman and Stewart 2006), so too studies of multidimensional poverty are being expanded to include other dimensions such as work and physical safety – but hardly, at the moment – relationality. Yet the centrality of human relationships to understandings of poverty has been recognised in prominent studies, some of which are briefly surveyed below.

The Voices of the Poor study encompassed a pioneering attempt to investigate the multidimensionality of poverty, from those living the experience. This vast effort, organised by the World Bank, collected accounts from more than 60,000 poor men and women in 60 developing countries. The reports highlight the 'pain' of poverty. 'Poverty is pain: it feels like a disease...It eats away one's dignity and drives one into total despair' (Narayan, Patel, Schafft, Rademacher & Koch-Schulte, 2002b, p. 2). Another interviewee explained that being poor contributed to isolation and shame - when a person is too poor to participate in community gatherings and feels compelled to isolate themselves, that is when 'a person goes mad and wishes to commit suicide.' (Narayan et al., 2002a, p. 258). The case studies and quotations provided by the Voices for the Poor study highlighted the relevance of social isolation in impoverished peoples' experiences of poverty (Narayan et al., 2000a, 2000b; Narayan & Petesch, 2002).

Yet many of the dimensions that poor people cite as important (Narayan, Chambers, Shaw & Petesch, 2000a) remain 'missing' within international datasets (Alkire, 2007). One of these missing factors is social connectedness. Social relations are so fundamental that some argue that social isolation is an intrinsically important component of poverty (Sen, 2000; Grootaert, 1998; Narayan et al., 2000a). Sen builds on Adam Smith's observation that the inability to interact freely with others

is a deprivation that ‘relates to the importance of taking part in the life of the community, and ultimately to the Aristotelian understanding that individual lives an inescapably ‘social life’ (2000, p. 4). Relational deprivation, Sen argues, is intrinsic to poverty; people ‘have good reason to value not being excluded from social relations, and in this sense, social exclusion may be directly a part of capability poverty’ (Ibid). Furthermore, relational deprivation is instrumentally a cause of poverty, as not being able to interact freely can result in other deprivations (e.g. being excluded from employment opportunities), thus leading to diverse capability failures. Without social connectedness, without an opportunity for empathetic interactions with one’s peers, without the give and take of generalised reciprocity that Putnam argues is ‘the touchstone of social capital’ (2000, p. 134), isolation can become an overwhelming burden.

In 2008, former French President Nicholas Sarkozy convened a commission to identify the limits of current indicators of economic performance and social progress, and to suggest improvements. The commission concluded that social connections should be considered simultaneously alongside other dimensions, such as material living standards, health, education, personal activities, political voice and governance, environment, and economic and physical insecurity, in determining quality of life globally (Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi, 2009). The World Bank’s former Chief Economist Kaushik Basu (2013) likewise argued that one’s sense of belonging is decisive in enhancing capability or supporting economic progress. The reasons that explain the differences between individuals in benefiting from development run deeper than can be explained by standard economic models: ‘Once people are treated as marginal over a period of time, forces develop that erode their capability and productivity, and reinforce their marginalisation. Such people learn not to participate in society and others learn to exclude them, and this becomes a part of ‘societal equilibrium’ (p. 324).

A particularly resonant aspect of relational deprivation for poverty is social isolation. In earlier work, we defined social isolation as ‘the inadequate quality and quantity of social relations with other people at the different levels where human interaction takes place (individual, group, community and the larger social environment)’ (Zavaleta, Samuel & Mills, 2014, p. 6). Many definitions of social isolation stress the importance of the quantity and quality of social relations in its measurement. Our definition of isolation can be conveyed intuitively as that experience in which a person feels like they are sitting alone at the bottom of the well – they feel as if no one knows they are suffering; no one cares; if they call out they cannot be heard; they are invisible and outside all circles of concern.

More formally, isolation can be defined both by external and internal circumstances. Externally, it means having few meaningful relationships with other people (de Jong Gierveld, van Tilburg & Dykstra, 2006). Internally, it refers to ‘the distress that results from discrepancies between ideal and perceived social relationships’ (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2009). External assessment can be made regarding the number of one’s social relations (e.g. frequency of contact), and some quantitative evaluation can occur. The quality of social relations can be harder to assess. In this instance, ‘quality’ refers to two aspects: a relationship that satisfies a person’s expectations or standards, and the instrumental value of the relationship - one type of friend or network might yield a different contribution to life than another. Evaluation in this internal sphere is affected by one’s perception of an ideal quantity or quality of relationships, and by one’s past experiences. The sum of the external and internal spheres thus reflects the overall set of social relations, and both must be considered in the discussion of social isolation and poverty.

There have been recent attempts to measure social connectedness (the absence of which suggests social isolation). The OECD (2011) used four indicators from social capital literature to examine ‘social connections’: i) social network support, ii) frequency of social contact, iii) time spent volunteering, and iv) trust in others. These indicators were selected because of their capacity to inform about informal and formal types of connections and to measure important individual and societal outcomes. On a large scale, the U.K.’s Office for National Statistics explored social connectedness as part of its Measuring National Well-being Programme (Self, Thomas and Randall, 2012). New Zealand’s ongoing Social Report uses social capital and subjective social isolation indicators to assess social connectedness (Cotterell & Crothers, 2011). The Social Report, published since 2001, blends social indicators with economic and environmental variables to provide information on outcomes, changes over time, and group differences in social outcomes. It contains data on social connectedness, defined as ‘the relationships that people have with others and the benefits these relationships can bring to the individual as well as to society’ (New Zealand Ministry of Social Development, 2010, p. 110). However, in these studies the data for each indicator are taken various sources, which ordinarily prevents analysis of the joint distribution of social, economic and environmental circumstances for each individual.

Counting techniques exist and are widely used to describe, analyse, and measure the joint distribution of deprivations but as yet these have not included social isolation. As mentioned above, in 2010, UNDP and OPHI developed the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). This index measures indicators of poverty in three areas: health, education and living standards (Alkire & Foster, 2011; Alkire & Santos, 2010, 2014). Alkire and Santos emphasise that ‘a key priority for future work on multidimensional poverty must be gathering more and better data around core areas

such as informal work, empowerment, safety from violence, and human relationship' (2010, p. 13), acknowledging the importance of assessing social connectedness within poverty indicators. Work using the MPI draws attention to the 'Missing Dimensions' of poverty data – things like violence (Diprose, 2007); disempowerment (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007); informal work and safety at work (Lugo, 2007); and shame, humiliation and isolation (Zavaleta 2007, Zavaleta et al., 2014, Mills et al., 2014). At the present time, information on these aspects of poverty remains systematically overlooked by internationally comparable datasets, so cannot be included in the global MPI or related analysis of it.¹ Information on these aspects is needed for specific sector studies, but it is also needed to track, analyse, and reduce the simultaneous disadvantages experienced by those living in poverty.

Yet empirical measures of social connectedness exist. The Foundation pour les Etudes et Recherches sur le Développement International developed a Relational Capability Index, which 'focuses on the quality of relationships among people and on their level of relational empowerment.' (Giraud, Renouard, L'Huillier, de la Martinière & Sutter, 2013, p. 2). This index assesses three aspects of relational capabilities, each with multiple components which allow assessment of access to employment and information, strength, quality and quantity of personal relationships, and ties to the larger community. One of the characteristics of this index in the assessment of multiple dimensions of poverty is that income is not directly measured. Instead, the focus is on personal, social and political connections that impact on economic means. Yet the index is limited to relational aspects.

Another significant initiative that does include social connectedness in multidimensional wellbeing measurement, starting at the individual, is Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index (Ura et al. 2012, 2015). The GNH Index has nine domains, of which one is community vitality. Alongside community vitality, the GNH index covers domains of health, education, living standards, time use, good governance, environment, culture, and psychological well-being. The GNH Index is constructed by creating individual level well-being profiles, which show how adequate each person's achievement is in indicators across each of the nine domains. The community vitality indicators reflect a sense of belonging, trust in neighbors, family relationships, safety from violence, donations of time and money to community activities, and volunteering.

Empirically in Bhutan, community vitality is one of the four dimensions that contributed most to GNH in 2010 (Ura et al. 2012). Yet by 2015, while there was growth in GNH nationally, mainly

¹ Without having the data in the dataset it is not possible to confirm whether it would be desirable to include social isolation in a multidimensional poverty measure or to analyse both together, and this paper does not take a position on that issue. In addition to technical issues, the appropriate course of action will depend upon the policy context.

driven by increase in income, services, housing and health, achievements had decreased significantly in some psychological and social indicators – including belonging. The question of belonging used there is quite basic, in that persons are asked: “How would you describe your sense of belonging to your local community?” and they may respond: Very Strong, Somewhat Strong, Weak, Don’t know. And yet even such a swift, inexpensive, and imperfect question was able to sing out and suggest a potentially worrying trend – because it was measured in the same survey as the other indicators of GNH, and analysed jointly with the rest (Ura et al. 2015).

In a related paper we analyse indicators of social isolation that were fielded in nationally representative samples in Chile and Chad, and begin to develop a set of measurement tools that can be incorporated in multi-topic household surveys that measure poverty or well-being (Zavaleta et al 2016). To develop measurement tools, however, it is essential first to listen keenly for the lived definitions of social isolation as it is experienced in different contexts.

The next three sections study marginalised populations who face difficulty in ‘taking part in the life of the community’ (Sen, 1999, p. 89). They illustrate how social isolation contributes to multidimensional poverty and vice versa, and how mitigating social isolation can ultimately improve lived experience. Because multidimensional approaches to poverty enable the exploration of whether a particular person, or a particular group, have their lives battered by deprivations in different dimensions, they are particularly relevant for groups that have experienced high levels of marginalisation and exclusion.

Impact of Isolation among Vulnerable Populations – Case Study of South Africa and Mozambique

Qualitative field research in South Africa (Soweto and Grabouw) and Mozambique (Chibuto and Xai-Xai) probed the value that people living in marginalised communities placed on social connectedness, and the ways in which isolation (self-imposed or not) removed people from their community and contributed to their lived experience of poverty in all its dimensions. This research used approximately 60 semi-structured interviews of community members and three focus groups. Respondents were aged 19-82 years, engaged in a mix of occupations (including the unemployed) and slightly more females than males were interviewed. Extensive thematic analysis was conducted using themes participants proposed, and points of contention as well as consensus were carefully noted.² The two most common themes that emerged from these conversations were i) the high value that people attached to social connections, both for intrinsic and instrumental reasons, ii) how

² An early presentation of the analysis by C. Mills used the title “‘If you’re poor...then you can’t be my friend’: Entanglements of poverty, social isolation and shame.” mimeo.

poverty impairs social connectedness through a myriad of different mechanisms, particularly through the intricate link between stigma and isolation.³ All quotes in the following section not otherwise referenced are from this qualitative field work.

When asked to name the five things that were most important in their lives, participants included relationships with others (both with family and broader communities) as one of their choices (alongside food, shelter, education, and work). Their rich justifications for this choice demonstrated both the instrumental as well as the intrinsic value they attach to social connections, and how the different arenas where relations take place (family, friends, community) matter. One participant in Mozambique said, ‘Whenever people are around you, whatever is eating inside you will become better because you are surrounded by people, as you are talking you will be able to talk out whatever is bothering you inside, because when you’re with people you are talking, talking, talking’. This need for connections extended beyond familial relations. Some interviewees pointed out that good relationships with neighbours are important when a person is experiencing difficulties or breakdowns in relationships with family members;

‘If I have a problem with my family then I go to the community and they can help me with things my family can’t help me with...I can cry loud but my family won’t hear me but the community will hear me and they will be able to help me.’

This suggests that good relationships with neighbours, being connected to community life, can alleviate certain worries (for example about safety) and provide an outlet for other kinds of worries - someone to talk to about problems in the home or outside of it. Across respondents, having connections within the community, and particularly at least one close friend, seemed to be of intrinsic importance. Some suggested that not having someone with whom to cry, or share problems, is a deprivation in itself.

Connectedness within the community seemed to alleviate people’s worries about facing adverse events in the future, such as illness, and thus, seems to provide this ‘peace of mind’, which may allow people to better make use of social opportunities. Good relations with neighbours was also observed to lay the ground for people to build connections to others (within or outside the community), or to sustain and nurture connections that continue at a distance (for example, with old friends and family who may live far away).

³ These themes were central in all focus groups and in a vast majority of the interviews held. The aspect of the centrality of social connections emerged from an open question enquiring about the most important aspects in people’s lives and the reasons why people valued this aspect. In turn, the aspect of stigma emerged spontaneously during the first phase of fieldwork as no question was specifically prepared to enquire about this issue. A specific question on this particular topic was then added for the second and third phase of the fieldwork to test its relevance.

Summing up the intrinsic importance of connectedness, one interviewee from Soweto explained that,

‘if people are friendly you will see that you are important and its very important to live with them and share ideas and try to help one another and know you are safe. Even if maybe a person wants to rob you, they won’t be able to because you know people they will always be there for you’.

In outlining an approach to understanding poverty as relational, Amartya Sen refers to Adam Smith’s observation that linen shirts and leather shoes, while not strictly speaking necessities, were necessary in the England of his day, as they were required by social custom to be worn by those who were seen as creditable, and thus were required in order to go about without shame. Those who could not afford a linen shirt would be ashamed to appear in public, as this denoted a ‘disgraceful degree of poverty which, it is presumed, nobody can well fall into without extreme bad conduct’ (Sen, 2000; Zavaleta, 2007).

Similarly custom has made leather shoes a necessity, so that even ‘The poorest creditable person of either sex would be ashamed to appear in public without them’ (Smith, 1776: p.351-2). In these case studies, it was not linen shirts as much as branded trainers, lunch boxes, and not living in a shack that allowed people to appear in public without shame. The effects remain similar – those who ‘have’, cannot play with those who ‘have not’ (as the quote below suggests). The more isolated people feel, the more vulnerable they become. The durability and persistence of these judgments and ways of marking out social divisions, over generations was illustrated by one woman in Soweto.

‘If I get successful and my neighbour lives in a shack, I won’t allow my children to play with her children...even after I’m dead and their parents are dead, these children will not have a good relationship, because mine will know they are better. And those that are living in the shack, when they grow up, they will make sure they destroy everything that I have...just to make me feel the pain they are feeling’.

It is no wonder that she goes on to explain that these sorts of judgments make people ‘feel anger and creates hatred’. Or as another participant said, ‘it kills both of the people’s spirits, it hurts’... it ‘kills our community’. This makes evident how these divisions and exclusions pass down across generations. It also locates part of the problem of bad relationships being caused by some people ‘knowing’ they are ‘better’, while evoking the pain, and subsequent potential destructiveness, of

those who have long been told they are inferior. The importance of emphasising social connectedness is perhaps best illustrated by a participant in this research, who, after describing the importance of relationships with others because of their capacity to sustain people, reduce poverty and give a sense of solidarity and of hope, felt compelled to state that ‘poor people have the right to have relationships’.

Within accounts from people living in poverty, both in the literature as within the preliminary fieldwork discussed here, social isolation tends to manifest in association with the stigma of poverty, and the shame associated with being labelled as the ‘poorest of the poor’. Here it seems that isolation may work in two directions, sometimes simultaneously. People may be excluded by others based on a process where they are marked out within a community as being ‘poor’. But people may isolate themselves and withdraw from community participation in order to avoid the shame of being seen by others as ‘poor’ due to not being able to meet normative cultural standards, such as not having enough money to bring food to share at a communal gathering.

A powerful illustration of the stigma that surrounds isolation was evident in the way that people talked about the importance of participating in funerals in South Africa. The social and cultural expectation that participation requires specific contributions of food can act as a barrier and serve to isolate the individual from the very activities that support social connectedness and community bonds. Connectedness within communities was summed up as:

‘important because when you are experiencing some problem, the neighbour they are ones who come first. Let’s say death, they [neighbours] are the ones who come and assist you with things before your family come. So I can say community relationship it is good’.

A woman from Mozambique explained;

‘Being poor means not having anyone to care for you, for example an orphan child ends up becoming poor because of lacking those relationships that would result into a support to him/her’.

This experience of shame may be particularly critical for poor children, as Vujovic observed:

‘These children (living in poverty) cannot articulate their needs. They are outside what is considered the norm. You know you can be in a group (in school) so physically you may not seem isolated, but emotionally you really are.’ (Vujovic, 2012, p. 13)

This reiterates the relative nature of social isolation; it may not be immediately obvious to those on the outside that an individual is isolated, but their interior landscape is barren.

In our field research as in prior studies, impoverished people themselves cited social isolation as a powerful and important component of the lived experience of poverty. Without connections to their families, their neighbours and their community, they reported feeling invisible and alone, without any way out. Maintaining relationships with others is necessary in their view to minimise poverty. Our study advanced previous research by documenting direct and detailed analyses of the relational components of poverty in these communities.

Isolation in the First Nations of Canada

Because multidimensional approaches to poverty enable analysts to explore many dimensions of deprivations, they are particularly relevant for groups that have experienced high levels of marginalisation and exclusion in high income countries, such as the Indigenous peoples of Canada. Thus multidimensional analyses can be useful for those groups who experience particular difficulty in ‘taking part in the life of the community’ (Sen, 1999, p. 89, Alkire & Santos, 2014).

Reading the literature and interviewing thought leaders in the First Nations of Canada suggested that the systematic isolation of a group may dramatically contribute to continued poverty in its many dimensions among that population. As is well-known in Canada, First Nations people living on reserves experience inadequate housing, lack of access to healthcare, and vastly inferior educational opportunities as compared to the rest of the country (Best Start Resource Centre, 2012). A child born into an Aboriginal community in Canada is twice as likely to die in infancy as one born elsewhere in the country (Smylie, Fell & Ohlsson, 2010). If that child makes it to her teenage years, she is five times more likely to commit suicide (Kielland & Simeone, 2014). And if she survives, she is more likely to end up in jail (Owusu-Bempah et al., 2014) than to graduate from high school (Richards, 2014).

The historical disenfranchisement of Aboriginal peoples has led to widespread isolation of this group, and has contributed to their lived experience of poverty. The roots of Aboriginal poverty can be traced back to the forced relocation of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples onto Reserves. This destroyed many of the traditional ways of life including economic pursuits, and continuing lack of funding support or access to aid agencies has perpetuated the cycle of isolation and poverty. Work in communities in the Cowichan Valley on Vancouver Island revealed that the women interviewed, who were living below the income poverty line as defined by the Canadian government, identified

isolation as a key feature of the deterioration of their emotional wellbeing (Ocean, 2005, as cited in Raphael, 2011).

In the instance of First Nations peoples' lived experience of poverty, there is a strong historical component of government-supported exclusion. The destruction of the traditional life style of the First Nations people by relocation to reserves served to isolate this group, both along an urban/rural divide, but also within the isolated Aboriginal community itself. This is reflected in the shocking statistics related to suicide among indigenous communities. Kral (2012, 2013) reports that First Nations communities have suicide rates ten times greater than the rest of Canada, while half of all deaths of young people in Inuit Nunangat were suicides, compared with approximately 10% in the rest of Canada (Oliver, Peters & Kohen, 2012).

The thread running through the many documented stories of the First Nations is one of isolation - geographic isolation on reserves, and cultural isolation through forced assimilation in a residential school system that forcibly removed children from their families and their culture. This school system, beginning in 1849 and ending only as recently as 1996, when the last residential school closed (Elias et al, 2012), removed children as young as four from their families and kept them isolated from their families and communities until their teen years. The policy objective of the day, chillingly stated as to 'kill the Indian in the child' (Milloy 1999, p. 42), sought specifically to disconnect children from their families, their cultures, their languages and their homelands:

'First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children were often separated from their parents for long periods of time, living in an institutional rather than a family home environment. This impeded the transfer of valuable parenting skills. The isolation of children from their families and communities also thwarted the transmission of language and culture, resulting in significant cultural loss' (Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2012, p. 12).

Children going through this school system ended up with low literacy rates and school achievements, and seemed pre-disposed to experience continuing isolation throughout their adulthood, leading to multi-generational effects.

Both the statistical description of present poverty of the First Nations' population within Canada, together with evocative and consistent descriptions of isolating experience suggests that isolation had a pervasive historical impact and demonstrates the importance of generating strategies grounded in this understanding.

Reintegrating people with disabilities into community

We now turn to consider isolation among people with disabilities. In many contexts, people with disabilities experience profound stigma and isolation. Without deliberate policies of inclusion, their access to essential services may be limited because of their disability, thus jeopardising their health and wellbeing. When people with disabilities are invisible due to systemic marginalisation, even responses to pressing global issues by governments, civil society organisations, and the private sector may fail to completely address the rights and protections of people with disabilities and their families.

The sense of shame and isolation that can be related to a wide range of disabilities is pervasive. One respondent in the South Africa study explained,

‘I think people are still hiding their children...the parents are ashamed, they think they did something bad that is why God gave them the children like that...or that they deserve it...Most people in the community look at the disability and not the child’.

These processes of dehumanisation are acknowledged by both people with disabilities and those living in poverty. The dehumanising seems bound up with a process of labelling, as evident in the account of extreme poverty given the following respondent:

‘that people disrespect us by calling us names like ”social case”, “bad mother”, “incapable”, “good-for-nothing” demonstrates how they are judging us and do not know about the reality we face. We experience the violence of being discriminated against, of not existing, not being part of the same world, not being treated like other human beings. This everyday violence is abuse’ (ATD Fourth World, 2012, p. 39).

Such ‘everyday’ violence and humiliation is also experienced by many children with disabilities (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2011) - indeed, hate crimes against people with disabilities are a global problem (Sherry, 2010). Examining discrimination in the lives of children with disabilities in the UK, research has found a tragic ‘propensity for violence against disabled children ingrained in the relationships, institutions and cultural acts of our time’ (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2011, p.

614). How this impacts on the lives of children with disabilities is illustrated in the account of a mother in Bangladesh:

‘My daughter cannot bathe herself and neither can she comb her hair ... She cannot use her hands for anything ... That is why her younger brothers beat her, and even neighbours bully her. People ask, ‘why is your daughter like this?’ ... [They] talk in an ugly manner and make ugly remarks’ (Participate, 2013).

Many people with disabilities living in poverty also experience violence and humiliation (Ibid, p. 8). Multidimensional poverty is not exclusive to low income countries, but is most devastating in the developing world. For example, 80% of people with disabilities live in developing countries, meaning that an enormous number of people live with disabilities in contexts of poverty. The limited data that exists suggest that people with a range of disabilities are more likely to live in poverty (Mitra et al 2013). Indeed, they may be among ‘the poorest of the poor’ in diverse contexts globally, and exist on the margins of society, with many barriers to full participation (Groce, Kett, Lang & Trani, 2011, p. 14).

A report by Human Rights Watch (2014) raised concerns that nearly 30% of all Russian children with disabilities live in state-run orphanages where they are likely to suffer severe abuse and neglect. These children often lack access to health care and adequate nutrition, as well as formal education. They have been further isolated in that at least 95% of children living in Russian orphanages and the foster care system still have at least one living parent. The report documents that the parents of many children with disabilities were pressured into giving them up, and were told they would be unable to care for their children adequately.

‘...many parents face pressure from health care workers to relinquish children with disabilities... Human Rights Watch documented, a number of cases in which medical staff claimed, falsely, that children with certain types of disabilities had no potential to develop intellectually or emotionally...’ (p. 5)

Even within such care homes, children with disabilities were apparently forcibly isolated from each other. For example, when moved from one institution to another, children were typically required to spend time (from days to a month) in a separate wing with little stimulation. Other examples of deliberate isolation policies included confining children to cribs or in rooms without any interaction with staff. (Ibid). So what kinds of policy responses can address the very immediate

marginalization that arises from the attitudes and untrained responses of children, health workers, and communities?

Siperstein et al. (2003) examined attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities in several countries, and demonstrated how public attitudes impact quality of life directly. The study surveyed the general public in Brazil, China, Egypt, Germany, Japan, Nigeria, the Republic of Ireland, UK, Russia and the United States. The results showed that, although public perceptions of the people with disabilities varied in different cultures, the end conclusion was that people with disabilities are marginalised worldwide. The result of these attitudes is a very low expectation of what people with intellectual disabilities are capable of achieving, thereby limiting their opportunities from the outset.

For young children with disabilities, just as in South Africa, social isolation refers to multiple communities: it is a multilevel challenge. Children may face isolation in their own family, their local school or community at large. This was highlighted in studies by Favazza et al. (2011, 2014b) of the Young Athletes (YA) program of Special Olympics International, which illustrated the power of a simply motor skill intervention to not only improve the motor abilities of children with disabilities but to open doors to greater inclusion:

‘At the close of the YA program at Pugu Secondary School in Tanzania, we [the investigators] watched as the YA leaders called all the children together for a closing song and dance. The children stood in a circle holding hands and the YA leader began to sing in Swahili. The children, smiling ear to ear, full of energy, joined in. The YA leader took the hand of one of the children, Sonia, and brought her into the center of the circle. The leader began to dance and, grinning sheepishly, Sonia imitated the dance putting her hands in front of her body and rocking back on her heels. Her eyes lit up as she danced and she gained a confidence that we had not seen before. Sonia rejoined the circle, and each child had a chance to step in the middle to dance. There was sheer joy on the faces of the children and some looked surprised as they participated in a traditional tribal group dance.’ (Favazza et al., 2014a)

Favazzo et al. (2014b) argue that this was the first time that these children had participated in the communal tribal culture. Before this moment, they had been isolated from the communal society because of their disabilities. By being invited to join in with the song and dance these isolated

people were finally allowed to belong. Thus, ‘the opportunity to participate in a traditional dance or hold hands with someone or make a friend or to wear a Young Athletes shirt all signify belonging...Being a part of YA creates a sense of belonging in a place where belonging and community is at the core their culture’ (Favazza et al., 2014a). Such experiences of belonging are not only important to the children at the time, but may impact them into the future:

‘When a child becomes a part of Young Athletes, change seeps into every aspect of the athlete’s development, ushering him/her into adulthood, sure of his/her capacity to go to school, have a job, have a family, participate more fully in life. That change comes to rest in families who develop new perspectives about the value and potential they now see in their child. That change unsettles our collective conscious, demanding that we all rethink what it means to live included in, not excluded from, all of the opportunities the world has to offer.’ (Favazza, 2014, p. 4)

The Young Athletes program is one example of an intervention to redress social isolation among individuals with disabilities. Another example is the Special Olympics programme in South America which seeks to include people with disabilities in athletics in part in order to offer a better opportunity to connect with a wider community (Harada, Parker & Siperstein, 2005). A study of this programme concluded that athletes ‘participate because they value the social opportunities and friendships that come along with playing sports...The benefits of participation in Special Olympics are substantial for its athletes...there is significant improvement in athletes’ sense of self, social skills, and relationships with others as a result...’ (p. 50). Furthermore participation benefits their families in addition to directly impacting the lives of people with intellectual disabilities themselves; becoming part of a broader community helps everyone concerned.

The positive effects of reducing isolation and increasing social connectedness is not limited to people with intellectual disabilities. Work with the elderly with disabilities has demonstrated that something as simple as a telephone outreach program can lessen feelings of loneliness and isolation (Evans, Smith, Wekhoven, Fox & Pritzl, 1986). Creating environments in which people with physical disabilities can participate in and contribute to their communities is critical for reducing their social isolation, and the ways in which loneliness contributes to poverty.

In all of the accounts in this section participants speak of the pain – how much it hurts – not to be listened to, for their opinion not to count, not to be seen as fully human, and to have people distance themselves. This social pain was expressed both by people living in poverty - those seen as the ‘poorest of the poor’ - and by people with disabilities.

Towards a Policy Agenda Confronting Isolation

If social isolation is conceptually important to people, and arguably part of a broadened understanding of poverty; if its measurement while imperfect, is improving, and if the qualitative studies clearly document its vital intrinsic and instrumental importance in the lives of marginal people, then it would seem to be a core deprivation that, like other dimensions of poverty, requires an apt policy response. But even if brilliantly clear measures and extensive analyses existed, could states of social isolation be changed by policy?

A first policy entry would be to do no harm. The First Nations' case illustrated powerful links between stigmatisation, isolation and poverty. The effect of stigmatisation is to undermine agency, and create fear, shame and anxiety among those who are poor, who receive welfare for example due to disabilities, making such people more vulnerable to abuse, and diminishing social solidarity (Sepúlveda Carmona, 2013). It can also lead to such stigma being internalised, with people coming to understand themselves as inferior:

‘The indifference and contempt to which people in extreme poverty are subjected is so violent that they end up submitting themselves to such judgments, doubting themselves and seeing themselves only through the eyes of others: useless, incapable and reduced to “waste.”’ (ATD Fourth World (2012) p. 36)

This illustrates Martha Nussbaum's point that ‘poverty is not just a deprivation, but also a degradation’ (2004, p. 285). What seems especially problematic is that international poverty reduction interventions and state welfare services often repeat this process of othering, labelling and stigmatising by ‘targeting’ the poor in a way that evokes public hostility towards people living in poverty (Fraser, 1998). This is problematic for a multitude of reasons, and not least because social assistance programmes for those in poverty that are stigmatising have limited take up, and are avoided by many (Chase & Walker, 2012), and may hollow out self-esteem. Thus, as a first step, poverty reduction policies in general should be examined to ensure they are not producing a stigmatising outcome as a side effect.

A slightly less traditional and yet critical avenue for policy intervention may be psycho-emotional effects of isolation among disadvantaged children. Stigma can lead to people devaluing themselves

because other people assume they live a life not worth living, perpetuating a cycle of hopelessness and isolation. How does the stigma of being seen as poor get ‘under the skin’ – causing those who are stigmatised immense pain and distress? Social isolation can lead to physiological disruptions similar to those seen with high blood pressure, obesity, inactivity or smoking (House, Landis & Umberson, 1988, Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). The experience of social isolation can also alter genetic activity of the immune system in a manner linked to increased stress responses and adverse health outcomes in individuals identified experiencing high levels of loneliness (Cole et al., 2007). Furthermore, functional brain imaging has revealed that the ‘pain’ of social isolation activates portions of the brain that are triggered with the experience of physical pain (Eisenberger, Liberman & Williams, 2003). This body of health research points to another entry point for policy and programmes to address isolation: well-conceived psycho-social policy interventions may help to mitigate stigma and convey confidence and inner pride, as well as confronting approaches that reproduce stigmatizing attitudes and behaviours.

The cultural norms that make possible and sustain situations where people stop participating in what is customary in their societies due to their poverty situation (like attending a funeral in the South African case study), or allow abuse of disabled people, provide the grounds for a further policy entry point: the necessity for a cultural shift towards recognising the need to build and rebuild social connections. Many of the situations described suggest the need to explore how social isolation is embedded within the ‘injurious social arrangements and artificial fictions of incompetence’ that Martha Nussbaum identifies as long impeding people with disabilities (2004, p. 309). For Nussbaum, the ‘myth of the citizen as a competent independent adult’ has meant that people with intellectual disabilities are not seen as productive citizens, meaning that the ‘basic structure of society is mapped out without including them, and their needs are left as an afterthought’ (2004, p. 312).

Who does meet these norms? As Martin Levine, a Canadian disabled self-advocate points out,

‘I may need help in some things, but I’m not retarded. I can take care of myself ... Everyone needs help. Some people need more. Even the ones in the outside—the normal people, have marriage counsellors and other people to help them’ (Goodley, 2001, p. 215).

Complete independence and perfection are myths that hide the fact we all have varying impairments and asymmetrical needs of dependency, that we can be ‘capable and needy’ (Nussbaum, 2004, p.

313), and that life is lived through mutual interdependence. In devising poverty reduction policies, perfectionism should not be used to justify ‘denying the right to be in the world to large numbers of people whose heightened vulnerability is the result of social arrangements organised around the needs of a dominant group’ (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 318).

The capabilities approach developed by Sen and Nussbaum provides a particularly useful and sensitive tool in conceiving of politics as tasked with providing support for human flourishing, for what people value, and for what enables them to live a life they value. The task of policy overall therefore is to address influences that stigmatize or isolate the poor in particular, and also to proactively create enabling and facilitating environments that recognise and support interdependence and expansive ideas of what it means to be human.

Conclusion

Multidimensional poverty analysis attempts to take in to account distinct deprivations that are all part of the fabric of poverty, that people living in poverty articulate, and that go far beyond a simple lack of economic resources. Going beyond the familiar domains of health and education, one key component is the degree of social connectedness of the poor. The ties poor people have to their friends, families and community play an enormous role in their lived experience of poverty, as well as in their practical ability to escape poverty. Social connectedness is a critical area to consider in effectively addressing multidimensional poverty going forward.

As illustrated both conceptually and through different cases, social connectedness appears to be an extremely relevant aspect of people’s lives, for both instrumental and intrinsic reasons. Moreover, a shortfall in social isolation is linked to poverty in a diversity of ways: it can cause poverty or it can be the result of being poor, it can be product of a particular condition or belonging to a particular group, etc.

In the wider literature, social connections have been recognized to be critical due to their instrumental power: social connections have a positive impact on health, wellbeing, job opportunities, financial security and physical safety (Cattell, 2001; Kahneman & Krueger, 2006; Putnam, 2000). Yet the recognition did not fuel a widespread change in measurement and analysis – nor policy. Also, besides the instrumentality of social connections, most people value social connections intrinsically. They value belonging to a community, having emotional attachments, and participating in society. Indeed, people place such high value on social connectivity that they

‘report that good relationships with family members, friends or romantic partners — far more than money or fame — are prerequisites for their own happiness’ (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). This is evident in a quote from *Voices of the Poor*, where an impoverished Bulgarian woman states, ‘I like money and nice things, but it's not money that makes me happy. It's people that make me happy’ (Narayan & Petesch, 2002, p. 258). But too often, ‘people’ have appeared to baffle policy.

Using a conceptual review of intersections between poverty and social isolation, as well as studies from developing countries, marginalized groups, and those with disabilities, this paper has re-articulated the importance of including social connectedness in studies of multidimensional poverty because of the myriad of ways it can impact the lived experience of individuals and communities. We have also outlined the importance and the possibility of designing improved policies to address social isolation among poor and marginalized communities.

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