



A multidimensional approach to child poverty in Taiwan



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ABSTRACT

To elucidate the multidimensional nature of poverty, this study analyzed child deprivation and social exclusion in Taiwan. First, a fuzzy set approach was used to construct an aggregate poverty index, to measure the levels of perceived necessity, deprivation, and social exclusion experienced by children. The study involved conducting a decomposition analysis to measure the poverty index according to certain dimensions. Second, this study involved analyzing possible determinants of perceived necessity, deprivation, and social exclusion, using seemingly unrelated regression models. We used cross-sectional data obtained from the Household Living Conditions Survey conducted in 2014. The results suggest that over two-thirds of the respondents identified all the items as necessary. Three highest levels of perceived necessity were housing, medical care, and clothing dimensions. Children faced high risks of deprivation and exclusion. The three highest levels of deprivation and exclusion were exhibited in the dimensions of environment, recreation, and education; the lowest two levels of deprivation and exclusion were exhibited in the dimensions of medical care and housing. The dimensions with higher levels of deprivation and exclusion exhibited higher relative contributions to facilitating poverty reduction. Moreover, evaluation of income and expenditure, family income, and family type were significantly related to the degree of perceived necessity and the levels of deprivation and exclusion. Those living in families with a large number of children exhibited a higher level of deprivation. Education of the caregivers was closely linked to social exclusion of children. This paper represents preliminary and small-scale research; however, several implications for methodology and policy can be derived from this study.

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1. Introduction

Poverty is a complex concept with various definitions (Spicker, Leguizamon, & Gordon, 2007) and cannot be understood appropriately using simple measures referring to income or consumption; diverse methods of measurement are required, because results obtained from only a single measure of poverty lack reliability and validity. Policy responses also vary depending on the type of poverty measure applied. Thus, to identify poverty and draw conclusions, it should be measured using triangulation (Bradshaw, 2001; Bradshaw & Finch, 2003).

Over the past few decades, the focus in poverty research has shifted from traditional unidimensional aspects to multidimensional aspects. Prominent concepts such as relative deprivation, proposed by Townsend (1979), and the capability approach, introduced by Sen (1985, 1999), have contributed to the development of a multidimensional perspective on poverty. Several non-monetary indicators have been widely considered as proxies that enable identifying various aspects of poverty; for instance, material deprivation and social exclusion (Bossert, D'Ambrosio, & Peragine, 2007; Jana, Nad'a, & Jana, 2012; Mack & Lansley, 1985; Menchini & Redmond, 2009; Nolan & Whelan, 2010).

Increasing attention has been focused on identifying and making comparisons between various dimensions of poverty, to understand it more clearly (Bradshaw, 2001; Bradshaw & Finch, 2003; Main & Bradshaw, 2012; Saunders, 2008, 2011). In Australia, Saunders and colleagues employed income, deprivation, and social exclusion approaches to analyze people who experience social disadvantage, detect the similarities and differences between the employed approaches, and explore related factors (Saunders, 2008, 2011; Saunders & Naidoo, 2009; Saunders, Naidoo, & Griffiths, 2008). A multidimensional approach has informed comparative studies that have examined and compared poverty across cities, regions, and countries (Batana, 2013; Battiston, Cruces, Lopez-Calva, Lugo, & Santos, 2013; D'Ambrosio, Deutsch, & Silber, 2011; Dewilde, 2004; Roelen, 2014; Waglé, 2005, 2008; Whelan & Maître, 2007; Yu, 2013). Considerable variation has been identified in the dimensions and measures of poverty.

Although multidimensional approaches have been commonly applied to poverty research, only a few studies have investigated the relationships among poverty, social disadvantage, and social exclusion (e.g., Lee, 2007, 2011). Most research on poverty in Taiwan has focused primarily on unidimensional poverty measurement, which is related to monetary poverty (e.g. Ho, 2007; Ho, Wang, & Leu, 2003; Leu, 1996, 2010b, 2010c; Wang, Ho, & Liu, 2008). Even in child poverty research, income poverty has often constituted a major approach (e.g. Hsueh,

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2008; Lee & Wang, 2008; Leu, 2010a). Studies that have employed an income-based approach have exhibited data limitations.

The income poverty approach has limitations. Income defined as an “indirect” concept of poverty cannot represent the standard of living of a family or an individual (Ringen, 1988). Moreover, the income poverty approach involves assuming intra-household sharing of resources and uses an equivalence scale to adjust for individual needs. Under the assumption of sharing, this approach cannot reflect children’s needs and may overestimate poverty among children and underestimate poverty among parents (Saunders, 2010). Household income cannot comprehensively reflect children’s material circumstances (Main & Bradshaw, 2012). Therefore, the income-based approach typically fails to adequately identify child poverty.

The measures of child poverty are based on a child-centered approach, to ensure that children’s perspectives are considered. Children’s experiences of poverty differ from those of adults (Grødem, 2008). Their needs are not expressed through their parents; thus, a child-centered approach enables understanding various aspects of poverty from children’s perspectives (Main & Bradshaw, 2012). Children are active participants and construct their own understanding of poverty. Evidence from Ireland indicated that children and adults have unique perceptions and experiences of deprivation and social exclusion (Kerrins, Greene, & Murphy, 2011; Swords, Greene, Boyd, & Kerrins, 2011), implying that children’s experiences of poverty should be analyzed separately. Consequently, this study employed two types of poverty measure, deprivation and social exclusion, rather than relying on only one measure.

Regarding measurements, the methods of multidimensional analysis have been discussed in previous studies (e.g. Alkire & Foster, 2011; Batana, 2013; Belhadj, 2011, 2013; Betti, Cheli, Lemmi, & Verma, 2008; Dewilde, 2004; Giordani & Giorgi, 2010; Neff, 2013; Whelan, Nolan, & Maître, 2014). An analytical method based on fuzzy set theory has been widely adopted in the study of poverty. The fuzzy set approach proposed by Zadeh (1965), as a method of using imprecise data, indicates that poverty measurement should go beyond a dichotomy of poverty (Belhadj, 2011; Betti & Verma, 2008; Betti et al., 2008; Cerioli & Zani, 1990; Mussard & Pi Alperin, 2005; Pi Alperin, 2008). As Belhadj (2011) suggested, poverty is not an absolute dichotomy between poor and non-poor but rather “a matter of degree” (p. 687). Apart from constructing aggregate levels of poverty, the fuzzy set approach can enable deriving a poverty index according to attribute, group, region, and country (Pi Alperin, 2008). In this study, the fuzzy poverty approach enabled estimating relative levels of deprivation and social exclusion.

Insufficient research has been conducted on the multidimensionality of child poverty in Taiwan because of the limited availability of data. The purpose of this study was to identify and understand child poverty more holistically by using a multidimensional approach. The specific aims of this study were the following: (1) measuring the levels of perceived necessity, deprivation, and social exclusion experienced by children, using the fuzzy poverty approach; (2) examining possible determinants of perceived necessity, deprivation and social exclusion by applying seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) models. This study constitutes preliminary research, but may have methodological and policy implications.

2. Background

During the last half century, the notion that deprivation and social exclusion reflect the multidimensionality of poverty has received increasing attention. Deprivation and social exclusion are not only treated as measures of poverty but are also used as indicators of social disadvantage (Saunders, 2011). The concept of deprivation, initially introduced by Townsend (1979), has emerged as an alternative approach to the analysis of poverty. Poverty exhibits several characteristics: (1) unsatisfied physical and social needs; (2) the lack of resources; and (3) the need to draw a comparison to the lifestyles of others. Thus, poverty is viewed as an objective term that can be understood through the

concept of “relative deprivation.” People are deprived if they live below the socially accepted standard of living (Townsend, 1979). Deprivation, in this context, differs from poverty; deprivation can be experienced without being poor. However, individuals and families can be considered to be in poverty if they lack an adequate standard of living and the ability to fulfill social obligations (Townsend, 1987). Townsend’s pioneering work on relative poverty transcended the absolute and narrow definition of poverty. Deprivation defined in a broad manner can be extended to individual lifestyles and the capacity to participate in social activities, implying that the experiences of poverty are diverse.

Despite Townsend’s considerable contribution to poverty research, he has been criticized for his definition of deprivation. Mack and Lansley (1985) argued that Townsend’s concept of deprivation did not distinguish need from choice. The absence of certain necessities may depend on income level or choice. Mack and Lansley (1985) defined deprivation as “an enforced lack of socially perceived necessities” on the basis of a consensual approach, to explain that people may lack socially perceived necessities because of an inability to afford them, rather than a personal choice or preference. Hence, based on the consensual approach, people are considered to be in poverty if they fall below minimum standards of living (p. 34–45). The consensual approach has been widely used to measure deprivation (e.g. Gordon & Pantazis, 1997; Gordon et al., 2000a; Hillyard, Kelly, McLaughlin, Patsios, & Tomlinson, 2003; Swords et al., 2011). It can be used as a headcount measure of poverty, for example, by quantifying material and social deprivation. Moreover, an effective measure of deprivation can identify those who are deprived because of constraints or choices (Gordon, Pantazis, & Townsend, 2000b).

Social exclusion has been identified as a principal concern in the study of poverty and become a dominant concept in the United Kingdom, the European Union, and other countries. The concept was introduced in 1974 by Lenoir and means that people are excluded from social protection. In the United Kingdom, the notion of social exclusion was first used in Townsend’s studies on poverty, which investigated people’s exclusion from normal life (Levitas, 2006). Social exclusion is difficult to define and varies according to country (Levitas, 2006; Silver & Miller, 2003).

Although the definition of social exclusion is imprecise, Atkinson (1998) suggested three components to identify social exclusion clearly, namely, relativity, agency, and dynamics. Relativity indicates that exclusion is perceived based on comparisons with the situations of others in a particular place and at a particular time. Agency refers to the notion that social exclusion may result from self-exclusion or the actions of others. Dynamics means that social exclusion has to be examined over time (Atkinson, 1998). To improve operational efficacy, Levitas et al. (2007, p25) proposed the following working definition of social exclusion:

...involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas.

[Levitas et al. (2007), p. 25.]

Deprivation and social exclusion have commonalities. The two types of social disadvantage reflect a multidimensional nature and are characterized by relativity and a lack of participation. Socially excluded people feel disconnected from their community and society; however, the causes of social disadvantage vary. Regarding deprivation, nonparticipation is attributed to the absence of resources. About social exclusion, social disadvantage is not inevitably related to the absence of deficient resources and may occur because of other factors such as discrimination or ill health (Burchardt, 2000). The concept of social exclusion involves emphasizing how factors such as relationships, institutions, and behavioral patterns influence the exclusion of people from their community (Saunders, 2010).

Identifying the differences among poverty (often measured using income), deprivation, and social exclusion is crucial because various

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