

How Do Students of Welfare Professions Perceive Poverty? A Study of the Factors Affecting the Judgment of Poverty

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Abstract

The study uses a factorial survey design to examine what factors in the life situation of a family respondents take into account when they appraise whether the family is poor or not. Respondents primarily rely on an income-based conception of poverty and deprivations are ascribed far less weight than income.

Keywords: poverty, judgment, factorial survey, vignette, social work

Introduction

Poverty is often studied objectively, emphasizing how poverty may be defined and measured, the causes of poverty, its magnitude and distribution in and across societies, the effects of poverty on well-being and how people cope with poverty (e.g. Ejrnæs and Larsen, 2013; Ejrnæs, Larsen and Müller, 2013; Lichter, Parisi and Taquino, 2012; Nolan and Whelan, 2007; Saunders and Naidoo, 2009; Whelan, Nolan and Maître, 2012). Little is known about how well concepts of poverty applied in research and official measures of poverty fit with the attitudes of the community and professionals working with poor people. This study addresses this gap by examining the concept of poverty held by students of welfare professions.

How poverty is conceived by welfare professionals, politicians and the general public has important implications for people living

in poverty. Popular and professional conceptions of what poverty is may affect people living in poverty directly and indirectly by affecting attributions of responsibility and how social work and social policy identifies and addresses poverty. Perceptions of what poverty is and who the poor are may namely be regarded as a foundation for actions addressing poverty: If something is not perceived as poverty, it is unlikely to be addressed as such. In this context, it is particularly important to study how poverty is perceived by welfare professionals, since they are the front-line workers responding to people living in poverty. Welfare professionals may be regarded as street-level bureaucrats with considerable discretion in decisions with crucial consequences for people living in poverty (Lipsky, 1980). Understanding what welfare professionals perceive as poverty is hence an important first step in understanding and developing social work practice with people living in poverty. This is furthermore interesting in the light of research indicating that poverty does not affect social work decision making in child protection (Stokes and Schmidt, 2011). Hence, the perception of poverty in social work is important to examine.

In this study, we examine perceptions of poverty. This is done by examining judgments of whether a person is poor or not using a factorial survey. In the study, we seek to identify the factors in a family's life situation that are decisive for the family to be seen as poor. The objective of the

study is to examine what personal and contextual factors impact the perception and judgment of poverty. By examining what factors are perceived as signs of poverty by respondents, it is possible to indirectly examine the concept of poverty held by respondents. More specifically, we examine whether the concept of poverty held by respondents take into account the following aspects of a family's life situation:

- Income
- Deprivations
- Duration of deprivations
- Social background

As we discuss below, income, deprivations and the duration of deprivations are common elements in conceptualizations of poverty, and hence it is relevant to examine the extent to which respondents emphasize these elements in their understanding of poverty. Social background characteristics are included in the study in order to examine whether respondents hold different standards as to what are fair living conditions for different populations. Such differentiation in the perception of fairness of the social distribution of resources is common in discussions of poverty where students are often excluded from measures of the magnitude of poverty. However, such differentiation may also raise concerns regarding discrimination and hence it is important to examine what role social background characteristics play in the judgment of poverty. This is particularly important for a discussion of welfare professionals' attitudes towards poverty.

Concepts and Measures of Poverty

Poverty is often conceptualized in purely financial terms using the household income as an indicator of poverty. Here, a relative concept of poverty relates the household's income to the income distribution of a given society. OECD thus defines a poverty line by disposable incomes falling below 50% of the median (OECD, 2008) and the EU uses 60% of the disposable median

income as a criteria for an "at-risk-of-poverty" rate (Eurostat, 2014). In this context, we examine whether the judgment of poverty of respondents is concordant with the poverty line applied in such official statistics. If respondents perceive poverty to occur at a level of income that greatly deviates from official poverty criteria it may challenge the legitimacy of such criteria.

An alternative approach to measuring poverty transcends the purely monetary poverty lines of OECD and the EU in an attempt to capture an underlying conceptualization of poverty as a resource-based exclusion. This approach links the household income to issues of deprivation and exclusion from participation in a given society. Nolan and Whelan for instance suggest that income poverty defined by 50% of the median income is a relatively inferior indicator of poverty as a resource-based exclusion (Nolan and Whelan, 2007: 159). Here, poverty is defined by two elements: 1) people living in poverty do not have the opportunity to participate in society in ways generally found necessary in a given society; 2) this non-participation is caused by a lack of resources (see e.g. Nolan and Whelan, 2007; Hansen and Hussain, 2009). Deprivations are used to assess this resource-based non-participation (Nolan and Whelan, 2010)—an approach that is inspired by Townsend's (1979) measurement of material deprivation (though Townsend relied on income when assessing the magnitude of poverty). In a study based on Irish survey data using latent class analysis, Nolan and Whelan (2007) thus find that deprivation is the primary factor differentiating between the economically vulnerable and the rest of the population.

Measures of poverty emphasizing either income or deprivation differ with regards to their emphasis on the objective conditions (income) or more subjective elements (deprivations resulting from a combination of objective conditions and subjective choices made by vulnerable populations in coping with these conditions). Whether poverty is defined in financial terms or by deprivation has important consequences for who are identified as

poor. The overlap between income poverty and deprivation is often found to be low, indicating that a composite measure taking account of both deprivation and income may be needed to identify those groups experiencing constraints due to an enforced lack of resources (see Saunders and Naidoo, 2009). The concept of consistent poverty has been used to capture this combined situation of low income and deprivation (Callan, Nolan and Whelan, 1993).

The duration of poverty has been included in some measures of poverty. For instance the EU assesses duration of poverty in terms of a “persistent at-risk-of-poverty” rate (Eurostat, 2014) and the Danish Expert Committee on Poverty has suggested a Danish poverty line based on among other things the criteria of having disposable incomes falling below 50% of the median income *for a duration of three years* (Ekspertudvalg om fattigdom, 2013). Therefore, we examine whether the duration of poverty is held to be a defining feature of poverty by respondents.

In the study, we examine the role played by income, deprivation and duration of deprivation due to financial reasons in respondents’ perception of poverty. This allows us to clarify the concept of poverty held by future welfare professionals, discuss implications for the students’ future social work practice and finally discuss the legitimacy of official poverty measures.

Previous Research on Perceptions of Poverty

In a now classical piece, Fuller and Myers (1941) emphasized that social problems contain both objective conditions and subjective interpretations. This study seeks to supplement extant research by examining the perception of poverty and hence the subjective side of the social problem of poverty. Internationally, a range of studies have examined the attributions of the causes of poverty (e.g. Blomberg et al., 2013; Iyengar, 1990; Sun, 2001; Tagler and Cozzarelli, 2013) and studies have also begun to examine the relationship between such attributions and support for welfare policies (Bullock, Williams and Limbert, 2003)

as well as discussing the relationship between attributions, stereotypes and emotions (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson and Tagler, 2001) and the role of attributions in arousing emotions and help giving (Weiner, Osborne and Rudolph, 2011). An important criticism of studies of attributions of causes of poverty is directed at their use of a general notion of “the poor” failing to differentiate between attitudes towards different groups of people living in poverty (Lepianka, Oorschot and Gelissen, 2009). Our study uses the factorial survey method (described below) which allows for such differentiation of perceptions of different groups of people living in poverty, for instance in terms of gender, ethnicity and position.

Some studies have used factorial surveys to address the justice of earnings (Alves and Rossi, 1978; Sauer et al., 2009) and some have more specifically examined action tendencies towards different groups of people living in poverty in the form of distribution of scarce resources (Cook, 1979; Groskind, 1991; Iyengar, 1990; Will, 1993). A recent study of attitudes towards poverty examined the effect of beliefs and feelings about the poor as well as affective-cognitive consistency on the distribution of resources to the poor and decisions to volunteer for a food bank aimed at poverty relief (Tagler and Cozzarelli, 2013). Hence, studies have examined factors affecting action tendencies and attitudes towards the social distribution of wealth, in particular attitudes regarding public support for people living in poverty, but not lay or professional conceptions of poverty as such.

In the current study, we thus supplement extant research by examining what characteristics of a family’s life situation that are conceived as signs of poverty. Hence, we do not study what people believe should be done about poverty, actual actions or action tendencies towards the poor.

Methods

Study background

The study examines actual judgments of whether a person is poor or not rather than abstract definitions of poverty held by respondents.

Examining concrete judgments of families gives a fuller picture of the respondents' perceptions of poverty than examining their abstract (theoretical) definitions and conceptions of poverty. This is because concrete judgments are not only based on theory, but may be based on both respondents' explicit experience-based knowledge, theoretical knowledge, knowledge about results of empirical research as well as tacit knowledge, assumptions and emotions. In studying judgments of whether a person is poor, we sought to clarify what aspects of a family's life situation are emphasized by the respondents and what aspects are regarded as unimportant. To this purpose, a factorial survey design was chosen.

The factorial survey (horizontal vignette methodology) is a novel method in examining perceptions of poverty (for a review on factorial surveys, see Wallander, 2009). The factorial survey is a form of survey experiment where the content of vignettes (short cases) i.e. descriptions of a family and its life situation, is systematically varied in order to determine the impact of each of the factors on the judgments made of the vignettes by the respondents. The factorial survey holds two defining features: 1) respondents are asked to judge whether different families described in vignettes are poor or not and 2) the content of these vignettes is systematically varied. The description in the vignette is varied with regards to factors which are assumed to have an impact on the poverty perception e.g. vignette person's income, deprivations, duration of deprivations, gender, age, position and ethnicity. This variation of factors makes it possible to analyze the extent to which each of these factors have an impact on respondents' normative beliefs about the concept of poverty. Hence, the factorial survey is an indirect method of studying the underlying criteria shaping judgments and attitudes. An important advantage of studying attitudes indirectly is that respondents may not be aware of what factors impact their judgments, but they are nonetheless able to make judgments in concrete situations depicted in vignettes (Alexander and Becker, 1978). As we shall show throughout the paper, this methodology

is promising in furthering research on perceptions of poverty, since it offers some unique possibilities for examining to what extent selected factors have an impact on people's judgments.

Design of the vignettesⁱ

The vignettes have been developed in two versions: one describes a single adult and one describes a single parent with a 12 year old child. In each version, systematic variations of factors have been made. Each respondent judged 20 vignettes.

The main part of a factorial survey design is deciding what factors to include in the vignettes. The ways in which people in a strained financial situation differ from one another are infinite and thus the amount of factors regarding the person and his or her situation that could be relevant for a judgment of a person as poor or not is enormous. Since it is impossible to include all the factors that may be important to some respondents when making their judgments, we have selected factors based on theories of poverty, welfare and social stratification as well as previous empirical research on poverty in Denmark. The factors in the vignettes are described in the measures section.

Measures

Dependent Variable: judgment regarding degree of poverty

In relation to each vignette, respondents are asked to judge the degree to which the described person or family is poor ranging from extremely poor to extremely wealthy on a 9-point scale.

Independent Variables: factors characterizing the vignette person and characteristics of the respondents

In a factorial survey design, two types of independent variables are used: the factors varied across the vignettes and respondent characteristics. In this study, the focus is on the factors in the vignettes, but some measures of respondent characteristics were also included in the questionnaire: gender, age, children, marital status, education, year of study, income and subjective experience

of poverty. The item measuring subjective experience of poverty calls on the respondent to describe him- or herself on the same scale as the dependent variable measuring the judgment of poverty in each vignette.

Factors—Independent Variables Contained in the Vignettes

The factors varied across vignettes were the person’s income, a range of factors describing material deprivations and the duration of deprivations. In addition, social background information on the person or family described in the vignette was included as factors (gender, ethnicity, age and position) in order to allow respondents to take account of elements of the person’s social position and life situation. In the following, the operationalization of each factor is described in more detail.

Relative income:

Income was operationalized by taking 50% of the disposable median income as a point of departure. We then defined three income levels

symmetrically below and above this line, resulting in seven income levels. We made the difference between the income levels of equal size in percent (15% of the income at the poverty line). For the vignette-version with a parent and child we used the household equivalent disposable income.ⁱⁱ

Material deprivations:

The deprivations included in the vignettes were selected from extant research on poverty in Denmark (Ejrnæs et al., 2011) and covered five types of deprivations: daily necessities, health, leisure, social relations and material comforts. In the vignette version with a child, we have furthermore included deprivations specifically related to the child (selected from Hansen and Hussain, 2009).

The deprivations are shown in Table 1. In the vignettes, 0-4 general deprivations are included (in a pilot study we found that this was more than enough for respondents to take in). In the vignettes with a parent and a child, 0-4 deprivations related to the child were also included.ⁱⁱⁱ

Table 1: Deprivations Varied in Vignettes

Type of deprivation	Specific deprivations
Daily necessities	Eat fresh fruit and vegetables on a daily basis Buy clothes, shoes and outerwear
Health	Visit the dentist
Leisure	Go on vacation outside the home Do leisure-time activities
Social relations	Visit friends/family (that live more than 20 km from the home) Invite guests home
Material comforts	Make repairs in the home, or replace equipment in the home that has been broken or spent
Child—daily necessities	Buy clothes and shoes for the child
Child—leisure	Let the child do sports or other leisure time activities
Child—social relations	Celebrate the child’s birthday
Child—social relations and educational activities	Let the child participate in school trips, participate in club activities etc.
Child—material comforts	Buy the child a mobile phone of his or her own

Each deprivation is binary (either present or not). When discussing poverty it is important whether deprivations result from lack of resources or other hindrances. In order to emphasize the importance of financial means for the deprivations, we introduced the deprivations with the text "... has due to financial reasons refrained from..."

We also included *the duration of the deprivations* as a separate factor indicating the duration of poverty. The duration of deprivations contains durations of 1, 2 or 3 years (covering all the deprivations mentioned in the given vignette).

Social background information regarding the vignette person:

In the vignettes, we have varied gender, ethnicity, age and position. Gender and ethnicity are varied through the name of the person in the vignette, which is either a common traditional Danish feminine or masculine name or a feminine or masculine minority name of Middle Eastern (Muslim) origin that is common in Denmark. We have chosen common names with a clear cultural and gendered reference. 30% of the names of the persons in the vignettes are Middle Eastern names in order to not make the combination of names in

the vignette sample of each respondent too unlikely to encounter in the Danish society.

Age is varied in four categories in the single adult vignettes (22, 38, 54 and 70 years) and in two categories in the vignettes with a parent and a 12-year old child (38 and 54 years). Position describes affiliation with the labour market and covers three broad categories: student, employed and recipient of pension.

Constructing the Vignettes

In order to be able to separate the effect of each of the factors in the vignettes, the factors should be varied independently of each other across vignettes. This is ensured by randomly selecting the outcome of each factor to be included in each vignette (with some minor exceptions in order to preserve the realism of the vignettes). Combining the different factors at random results in over 1 million possible vignettes (the vignette universe). Due to the large vignette universe, we cannot include every combination of factors in the study. This is, however, not problematic since we draw the combination of outcomes on the factors in each vignette randomly. In Table 2 the vignette framework is shown.

Table 2: The Vignette Framework

Single adult vignette:

<Name reflecting gender and ethnicity> is *<age>* years old and single. *<He/She>* is *<position>* and has an income of *<income>* monthly after taxes. *<He/She>* has for *<duration of deprivations>* due to financial reasons refrained from *<0-4 concrete general deprivations>*.

Single parent with one child vignette:

<Name reflecting gender and ethnicity> is *<age>* years old and is alone with *<his/her>* 12 year old child. *<He/She>* is *<position>* and has an income of *<income>* monthly after taxes. *<He/She>* has for *<duration of deprivations>* due to financial reasons refrained from *<0-4 concrete general deprivations>* and *<0-4 concrete child-related deprivations>*.

Note: Varied factors are in italics.

Sample

The data was collected from a sample of students of welfare professions that are likely to encounter poverty in their future professional work. The study included Danish bachelor students from the fields of nutrition and health, nursery teaching and social work. Students rather than professionals in practice were included in the study since their judgments are important to examine in order to evaluate and improve teaching on perceiving, understanding and addressing poverty. Here, the study holds a particular relevance to educators, who may benefit from insights into the perception of poverty their students hold. Furthermore, students are the welfare professionals of tomorrow who during their future practice are likely to encounter and have to respond to the social problem of poverty.

The data was collected during scheduled lectures on either vignette methodology or poverty (with no preparatory readings on poverty) in cooperation between Metropolitan University College, University College Capital and Aalborg University. The data collection was introduced as concerning the students' perceptions of poverty and was placed in the beginning of the lecture and followed a standardized protocol.

A total of 327 respondents completed the questionnaire. 38% are students of nursery teaching, 21% are students of nutrition and health and 41% are students of social work. The sample is predominantly female, 81% of respondents are female. The age ranges from 19-57 years with an average of 25 years, 44% are married/cohabiting and 18% have children. The respondents have a relatively low monthly personal gross income: 11% have less than 5,000 DKK (app. 925 USD), 65% have 5,000-10,000 DKK (app. 925-1,850 USD) and 24% have 10,000 DKK or above with only 2% having an income of more than 20,000 DKK (app. 3,700 USD).

Analysis

The data makes it possible to perform analyses on two levels: 1) the factors in the vignettes and

2) the characteristics of respondents. Hence, there are both independent variables pertaining to the vignettes, i.e. the factors that vary across vignettes (deprivations, position, ethnicity etc.) and independent variables pertaining to the respondents (age, gender, income etc.). Thus, the data contains a hierarchical structure with both a level of vignettes and a level of respondents, making it suitable for multi-level analysis (see Hox, Kreft and Hermkens, 1991; Lolle, 2003). The analysis has been performed using multi-level linear regression analysis, more specifically by fitting random intercept models for each vignette version (single adult and single parent). In the analysis, emphasis has been on the main effects of the factors in the vignettes rather than respondent characteristics or interactions between variable within or across levels. Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics for the two vignette versions are available upon request.

Results

Vignette characteristics

The results of the multilevel linear regression analyses are shown in Table 3. The scale of the poverty rating is 1-9 with higher ratings equaling higher degrees of poverty. The analysis of the single adult vignette shows that respondents take account of most of the information provided in the vignettes. Notable exemptions in both vignette versions are the gender and ethnicity of vignette-persons that were insignificant for the judgments of poverty. Thus, respondents do not judge poverty differently for men and women or for persons of ethnic minority and majority background.

The vignette income is the most decisive variable for the poverty ratings. When a single adult with no child moves from the reference category of 50% of the median income to the lowest income-level of 28% of the median income the poverty rating moves from *somewhat wealthy* to between *medium* and *somewhat poor* all else being equal. For the single parent vignette version, the effect of income is a little more remarked allowing the family to move three points on the nine point poverty-scale (e.g. from *wealthy* to *somewhat*

Table 3: Random Intercept Models for the two Vignette Versions (Primarily Main Effects)

	Single adult		Single parent with one child	
	b	SE	b	SE
Intercept	3.99***	.35	4.84***	.45
<i>Vignette-level factors</i>				
Gender (Male)	.06	.03	-.03	.03
Ethnicity (Danish)	-.04	.03	.05	.03
Income				
28 % of median income	1.35***	.06	1.49***	.06
35 % of median income	.67***	.06	.91***	.06
43 % of median income	.29***	.06	.38***	.06
50 % of median income	reference		reference	
58 % of median income	-.53***	.06	-.47***	.06
65 % of median income	-.79***	.06	-1.05***	.06
73 % of median income	-1.03***	.06	-1.52***	.06
Age				
22 years	reference		-	
38 years	.28***	.07	reference	
54 years	.48***	.07	-.10	.06
70 years	.14	.07	-	
Position				
working	reference		reference	
student	-.43***	.06	-.14**	.05
receiving pension	.09	.07	-.03	.05
Age*Position				
70 years*receiving pension	-.20*	.10	-	
54 years*receiving pension	-.37***	.10	.02	.08
38 years*receiving pension	-.22*	.10	-	
38 years*student	.00	.09	-	
Duration of deprivations				
no deprivations	-.09	.06	-.17*	.07
1 year	-.07	.04	-.05	.05
2 years	-.05	.04	-.04	.04
3 years	reference		reference	
<i>Deprivations:</i>				
Eat fresh fruit and vegetables on a daily basis	.11**	.04	.17***	.04
Buy clothes, shoes and outerwear	.18***	.04	.16***	.04
Visit the dentist	.07	.04	.02	.04
Go on vacation outside the home	-.01	.04	.04	.04
Do leisure-time activities	.07	.04	.00	.04
Visit friends/family (living >20 km from home)	.14***	.04	.09*	.04
Invite guests home	.11**	.04	.04	.04
Repairs in the home/replace equipment	.15***	.04	.11**	.04
Letting the child practice sports/hobbies	-		.12**	.04
Providing the child with clothes and footwear	-		.09*	.04
Giving the child a mobile phone	-		.03	.04
Celebrating the child's birthday	-		.17***	.04
Letting the child participate in school trips etc.	-		.07	.04

**Table 3: Random Intercept Models for the two Vignette Versions (Primarily Main Effects)
– continued**

	Single adult		Single parent with one child	
	b	SE	b	SE
<i>Respondent-level factors</i>				
Gender (Female)	.00	.11	.25	.14
Age	.01	.01	-.02	.01
Married/cohabiting				
Married/cohabiting	.12	.09	.03	.12
Other family type	.00	.23	-.17	.31
Single	reference		reference	
Children (has children)	-.06	.15	.09	.19
Educational affiliation				
Nutrition and Health	.06	.11	.07	.15
Nursery Teaching	-.13	.10	-.19	.13
Social Work	reference		reference	
Income				
0-4,999 DKK/month	-.34*	.15	-.20	.19
5,000-9,999 DKK/month	reference		reference	.43
10,000-19,999 DKK/month	.24*	.11	.10	.14
20,000-29,999 DKK/month	.10	.32	.29	.43
Subjective poverty perception	.20***	.04	.18***	.05
n (ratings valid on all variables in model)	3,049		3,038	
n (respondents valid on all variables in model)	308		309	

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

poor) when moving from the highest to the lowest income level. On average moving 7-8 percentage points on the median income equal a 0.4 change on the 9-point scale in the poverty rating of the single adult vignette and a 0.5 change of the rating of the parent vignette.

The deprivations overall are far less important for the judgment of poverty than the income. All estimates of the effect of the deprivations are relatively low; on average the significant deprivations contribute 0.13 to the poverty ratings across vignette versions. To achieve the same effect in terms of poverty judgment as moving 7-8 percentage points down on the median income the person would have to suffer 3-4 deprivations. One might expect child-related deprivations to be of greater importance for the judgment of poverty than

more general deprivations, but this is not the case. Child-related deprivations are not given higher emphasis than general deprivations and the deprivations are not given higher priority in the vignette version with a child. The data does not warrant conclusions regarding which of the significant deprivations are the most important for the judgment of poverty (the estimates of these deprivations are not significantly different when performing z-tests [table not shown]).

It might be expected that interactions between income and deprivations are crucial for the perception of poverty (as would be the case if the consistent poverty measure was used [Callan, Nolan and Whelan, 1993]). This is, however, not the case, the analysis indicates that these factors are judged independently (table not shown).

Examining the concrete deprivations in both vignette versions, respondents seem to prioritize daily necessities, material things in the home and social occasions (in the single parent vignette version social occasions are prioritized to a lesser extent). Three deprivations are insignificant in both vignette versions: refraining from going on vacation outside the home, doing leisure-time activities and visiting the dentist.^{iv} In the single-parent vignette version some but not all child-related deprivations are significant. “Letting the child practice sports/hobbies”, “Providing the child with clothes and footwear” and “Celebrating the child’s birthday” are all significant for the judgment of poverty. The deprivation “Giving the child a mobile phone” is not important for the judgments of poverty, and curiously “Letting the child participate in school trips, participate in club activities etc.” is not significant either.

With regard to both vignette versions, respondents do not take account of the duration of the deprivations in their judgments.

Turning to position, it is not surprising to find that students are judged as less poor than other positions (given the transitory nature of the

low-income of students). Age and position are important in the single adult vignette and relatively unimportant in the single parent vignette. When a person has a child, it seems that age and position become less important for the respondents’ judgment of poverty.

The analysis has shown that respondents emphasize income in their perceptions of poverty. This raises the question of what level of income the respondents on average regard as a poverty line. If we look at the vignettes that have been given different poverty ratings separately, we can examine the average income of each poverty rating. This makes it possible to compare the poverty line applied by respondents (the shift from the rating “medium” to “somewhat poor”) with official poverty lines. The OECD poverty line for a single adult in Denmark at the time of the data collection was 8,788 DKK (50% of the disposable median income, app. 1,630 USD) and the EU at-risk-of-poverty line was 10,546 DKK (60% of the disposable median income, app. 1,955 USD). The ratings of respondents on average shift from somewhat poor to medium between income levels of 7,832 DKK and 9,615 DKK (see Table 4).

Table 4: Average income for different levels of poverty judgment—single adult vignette version

	Extremely wealthy	Very wealthy	Wealthy	Somewhat wealthy	Medium	Somewhat poor	Poor	Very poor	Extremely poor
Average	11,864 DKK	11,564 DKK	11,075 DKK	10,621 DKK	9,615 DKK	7,832 DKK	6,805 DKK	5,994 DKK	5,835 DKK
Standard deviation	1142 DKK	1174 DKK	1662 DKK	1965 DKK	2288 DKK	2271 DKK	2063 DKK	1707 DKK	2196 DKK
N (vignettes)	9	47	136	384	988	834	434	192	25

In accord with the OECD poverty line, the income level perceived as poor by respondents falls below the OECD poverty line of 50% of the disposable median income and the income level perceived as medium falls above this poverty line. The same pattern is evident for the vignette version with a child, where the household equivalent income was used (table not shown). Thus, we find that the perception of poverty held by respondents is concordant with the OECD poverty line of 50% of the disposable median income.

Respondent characteristics

The intraclass correlation^v in the single parent vignette is 0.32 and 0.25 in the single adult vignette. Hence, the amount of respondent-level variance is substantial with regards to both vignettes, demonstrating that the respondents differ in their judgments of poverty. Since the intraclass coefficient is considerable in both vignette versions, the respondents' judgments of poverty are not similar, but vary across individuals. However, examining Table 3 we find that very little of this variation can be explained using social background information on the respondents to estimate the poverty threshold. Quite surprisingly, respondents do not differ systematically in terms of educational affiliation, gender, age, marital status or having children or not in their level of poverty judgments. Subjective poverty perception is significant in both vignette versions with higher levels of poverty-experience being associated with higher poverty judgments of the vignettes.

Social background thus seems to be unimportant for the poverty threshold of respondents. Separate analyses based on gender and educational affiliations have confirmed this picture (tables not shown). Hence, respondents do generally not differ systematically based on gender and educational affiliation in the weight they ascribe to different factors in the vignettes. These separate analyses have shown great agreement regarding the significance of income for the judgment of poverty and in ascribing relatively low importance to the deprivations (in terms of the size of the estimates). Hence,

respondents seem to agree across subgroups that poverty is closely related to the income of a person and does not rely heavily on the occurrence of deprivations.

Discussion

The results of this study raise interesting questions regarding the role of deprivations and the duration of deprivations for perceptions of poverty. Overall, the study shows that students place higher emphasis on the lack of economic means than on the occurrence of material deprivations. Hence, students seem to favor the objective spending opportunities of families in their judgments of poverty rather than material deprivation. That deprivations are given such little emphasis by students may be problematic, if we accept the position of Nolan and Whelan (2007: 159) that income alone is an inferior indicator of poverty. From this perspective one could argue that if students do not ascribe importance to deprivations they are in a bad position to identify and hence respond to poverty in their future practice. However, while this study allows us to conclude that students hold an income-based poverty conception it does not allow us to conclude that they overlook the significance of deprivations. Students may acknowledge deprivation as important for vulnerable populations, but perceive deprivation as a consequence of poverty rather than defining for the phenomena of poverty. Thus, students may hold poverty, deprivation and social exclusion to be distinct phenomena. In order to clarify whether students overlook the role that deprivation and social exclusion play in the life situation of a family further research is needed. Such research could use a factorial survey design similar to the design of this study, but ask respondents to assess the vignettes in terms of the seriousness of the life situation of each family and the interventions that may be relevant in order to address the described situation.

The concept of poverty held by students is in agreement with the poverty line applied by OECD, both in the emphasis on financial means and in the concrete level of income regarded as

constituting poverty. However, the concept of poverty held by students conflicts with the poverty line suggested by the Danish Expert Committee on Poverty. The Danish Expert Committee on Poverty has suggested that a person is only regarded as poor after three consecutive years with an income below 50% of the disposable median income. Remarkably, respondents did not emphasize the duration of deprivations in their judgments of the vignettes. This indicates that respondents hold a person to be poor when the person has an income below 50% of the disposable median income regardless of the duration of this situation. You are poor when you have a low income in relative terms, you do not need to experience persistent poverty to qualify for the label poor. This does not necessarily imply that the students are unaware of the importance of the duration of poverty for people living in poverty. The students may recognize the duration of poverty as important for the person's well-being, but may not perceive the duration as defining for whether a person or family is poor or not. The attitudes of the students thus challenge the legitimacy of the poverty line suggested by the Danish Expert Committee on Poverty. The Committee has proposed that the poverty line needs to be in accordance with community attitudes (Ekspertudvalg om fattigdom, 2013: 262). This study suggests that a discrepancy may exist between community attitudes regarding the duration of poverty and the poverty line suggested by the Danish Expert Committee on Poverty.

Furthermore, this study has shown that the social background of the vignette family in terms of gender and ethnicity are insignificant for the perception of poverty. This is an important and positive finding in terms of the risk of discrimination of vulnerable groups. However, as we discuss in the limitations-section, the design of the study may have affected this finding. Besides from the role of gender and ethnicity, the study has shown that age and position are taken into account in the poverty judgment. These social background factors, however, play a lesser role when a child

is included in the vignette. Thus, the presence of children in a family seems to moderate the impact of social background information on the poverty perception. This finding is interesting since it indicates that different principles of judgment are active when judging families with and without children and that the needs of children overshadow concerns over what is fair given a person's social position.

Professional front-line workers facing clients living in poverty continuously make assessments of the clients and their social situation to guide their decision-making. The factorial survey is a method that may reveal the knowledge and assumptions that professionals base their decision-making on and it is therefore a useful tool to study professional decision-making and qualify practice with vulnerable populations. Even though the factorial survey does not examine judgments as they occur in contextualized actual social interaction (cf. Parkinson and Manstead, 1993), it holds several advantages in the study of perceptions of poverty. By indirectly examining social judgments through the use of vignettes one is able to examine both determinants of judgments that respondents are aware of as well as tacit determinants of judgments and thereby researchers may help make tacit assumptions explicit (Wallander, 2012: 373-7). Furthermore, when studying the decision-making of professionals with regards to poverty the factorial survey may be used both to examine the classification of a situation as poverty (the professional "diagnosis") as we have done in this study, and the actions with regards to the situation preferred by professionals (the "treatment") (Wallander, 2012). An important methodological advantage of the factorial survey is that the random variation of factors in the vignettes makes it possible to separate the effect on judgments of variables that in real life situations are highly correlated (Alves and Rossi, 1978: 545-6). For instance, researchers may separate the effect of income and position or education that in real life may be entangled and therefore hard to analytically tease apart.

Limitations and Generalizability

The study found that gender and ethnicity are insignificant for the perception of poverty. However, the methodological setup of the study may have affected this finding. In designing the study, we chose to have each respondent judge 20 vignettes. This was done in order to study a large amount of factors and still be able to separate them analytically without increasing the sample size tremendously; however, this design allows the respondents to recognize the manipulation of factors. We deemed this to be relatively unproblematic for most factors (e.g. deprivations and income), since no social desirability bias was expected and since we were interested in examining professional judgments, not in revealing the hidden biases of respondents (which would require the manipulation of factors to remain obscure to the respondents). However, particularly with regards to gender and ethnicity and perhaps also age, the evident manipulation of the factors might have made respondents make a conscious effort not to discriminate. Thus, the validity of the findings regarding these factors may be limited. However, it should be noted that if we look only at the first vignette judged by each respondent, where the respondents arguably are less likely to have noticed the manipulation of factors, gender and ethnicity remain insignificant.

Several limitations regard the sample characteristics. Firstly, the sample consists only of students and though some age variation is present, it is a relatively young group of respondents who are in a similar life situation and with a similar and relatively low income. These characteristics of the sample make it impossible to statistically generalize the perception of poverty to the general population or to welfare professionals in practice. In particular, it makes the generalizability of the findings regarding the significance of the students' own income for their poverty judgments problematic. Further research should examine the concepts of poverty held in broader samples, in particular among welfare state practitioners and the general public. Secondly, due to practical hindrances it was

impossible to ensure that the students were in the same year of their studies and hence, both students of nutrition and health and students of nursery teaching are early in their studies, while students of social work are spread out on different stages of their studies. This makes it impossible to draw conclusions regarding the effect the different educations might have on the students' perception of poverty. Hence, the attitudes of social work students may reflect both selection for this line of study and their secondary socialization during their studies, while students in the two other fields of education have only just begun their studies and therefore their attitudes may only reflect the selection to the study. Thirdly, the data was collected during lectures and while this ensured a high rate of participation at the time of data collection, the actual sample may be affected by unobserved characteristics of the students due to the self-selection inherent in attending class (we do not know the characteristics of students choosing not to attend class).

Conclusion

This study has addressed perceptions of poverty by examining what factors enter into the judgment of a person as poor or not. Using the factorial survey approach, the study has shown that students of welfare professions primarily draw upon an income-based conception of poverty. Several deprivations also enter into the poverty-judgments of the students, but deprivations are ascribed far less weight than income. Furthermore, the duration of deprivations was insignificant for the perception of poverty indicating that respondents do not hold the persistence of poverty as defining for the phenomenon of poverty. In addition, the study has shown that the social background of the vignette person is generally relatively unimportant for the judgment of poverty. Thus, the gender and ethnicity of the vignette person were found to be insignificant for the judgments. And while respondents take into account both age and labor market affiliation when judging the poverty of a single adult, social background characteristics play a lesser role when a child is present in the vignette.

The judgments of the students are found to be in accordance with the OECD poverty line, but conflicts with the poverty line recently suggested by the Danish Expert Committee on Poverty. This finding challenges the legitimacy of the Danish poverty line proposed by the Committee and warrants a distinction between assessments of poverty and persistent poverty if official poverty measures are to reflect community attitudes.

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Endnotes

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ⁱⁱThe household equivalent disposable income is calculated by multiplying the disposable income at the poverty line by (number of adults + number of children)^{0.5}.

ⁱⁱⁱ Based on a pilot study and in line with research on poverty showing that parents shield their children from the consequences of poverty (Ejrnæs, Hansen and Müller 2013; Ottosen and Skov 2013), we chose to let the number of general deprivations in each vignette be larger than the number of specific deprivations for the child.

^{iv} It should be noted that performing a backwards model search on the single adult vignette “refraining from visiting the dentist” and “doing leisure-time activities” also achieve significance; however, the estimates remain very low.

^v The intraclass correlation is the respondent-level variance as a proportion of the total variance (Hox 2002: 15).