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Economic pressure and social exclusion in Europe

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Abstract

This study examines people's perceptions of poverty and social exclusion in 12 countries in Europe: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom. Data come from the 1993 Euro-barometer and a model of the dynamics among feelings of social exclusion, community poverty and social exclusion, and economic pressure was tested for the goodness-of-fit using structural equation models (AMOS 4.0) techniques by the method of maximum likelihood. The goodness-of-fit provided evidence that the hypothesized model was stable. The results also showed significant differences in the attitudes toward poverty and social exclusion according to country of residence, gender, and age of the participants.

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1. Introduction

Poverty and social exclusion are important issues in the contemporary international debates. In the past two decades, poverty appears to have become more difficult to escape, being more chronic and less transitory (Rodgers & Rodgers, 1993). Persistent poverty is more deleterious to children's development and home environments than is transitory poverty and research indicated that neighborhood poverty has adverse effects on children's functioning, independent of family level poverty (Brooks-Gunn, 1995; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). There is also a remarkable little consensus among social scientists, politicians or lay people about the nature, causes, or future course of poverty (Jordan, 1996).

Social exclusion is a term frequently used in the recent political vocabulary referring to a wide range of social situations and processes, like rupture of social bonds or generalized disadvantage (Dean, 1991). The impact of exclusion from social integration has also negative consequences on individual and family development since an array of psychological problems

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such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, isolation accompanies this process (Goodban, 1985). The purposes of this study are to examine Europeans' opinions on the causes of poverty, their subjective appraisals of poverty and social exclusion, and the dynamics between these processes.

1.1. Poverty: definitions and measures

The definitions of poverty are crucial because they allow comparisons of economic well being across different groups and across time (Abrahamson, 1995). Social science scholars (Hagenaars & de Vos, 1988; Strobel, 1996) elaborated three definitions of poverty: absolute poverty, relative poverty, and subjective poverty. Absolute poverty is having less than an objectively defined, absolute minimum required for basic needs (Hagenaars & de Vos, 1988). Absolute poverty is the focal construct in intervention and policy studies and the most common measure of it is the cash income using the "official" federal poverty index as a marker (McLoyd, 1998). Governments' poverty index should be corrected because it determines the size and characteristics of the poor population and therefore influences public attitudes about poverty, types of antipoverty policies and programs that should be implemented (Vaughan, 1993). Townsend (1993) pointed out that individuals cannot be reduced to energy-consuming organisms and that even basic physiological needs are socially determined.

Relative poverty is having less compared to others in the society, lacking certain commodities that are common in a community (Hagenaars & de Vos, 1988). In this case, poverty is not defined in absolute terms but in relation to the "average" living conditions of a given society (Strobel, 1996). It focuses on the multidimensional nature of poverty, taking into account all living conditions and emphasizes the fundamentally social character of poverty because living conditions are not limited to material factors (housing, food, income) but include social relations, access to employment, and health care (Strobel, 1996).

Subjective poverty refers to people's feeling that they do not have enough to get along (Hagenaars & de Vos, 1988). Two individuals or households with the same resources and living conditions may experience the situation differently and assess differently the difficulties they have making ends meet (Strobel, 1996). Asking households about their perceptions of their situation makes it possible to define subjective poverty indicators. Economic pressure is an individual's appraisal of economic circumstances, and it is often more important to his/her functioning than is his/her objective economic condition (Conger et al., 1993). Research showed that objective economic measures of economic problems (e.g., debts-to-asset ratio, income, and unemployment) have indirect effects on individuals and family processes through the intervening variable of economic pressure (Conger & Elder, 1994; Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994; McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, & Borquez, 1994). This subjective appraisal of economic difficulties impacts individual and family functioning variables like mental health (depression), marital quality, parenting process, and child development (Conger et al., 1993). The present study examines economic pressure (the subjective evaluation of poverty) and how it is perceived by residents of different countries in Europe. This research also analyzes the dynamics between economic pressure and social exclusion.

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