

“I always think about tomorrow what I’ll eat” an exploration of the experiences of adolescents in poor urban contexts in Accra, Ghana

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Abstract

Poverty deprives children and adolescents of good sanitation, nutrition, shelter, education, quality water, health services and negatively lead to poor physical and mental health. However, limited studies exist on the experiences of adolescents in poor urban contexts in Ghana. Using 20 adolescents from James Town, Accra, findings show adolescents look beyond money when conceptualizing poverty. They also encounter both pleasant and negative experiences in their context while remaining determined to pursue education for a better future. Implications are discussed considering the need to promote communal support because of its relevance to the well-being of the adolescents within poor urban contexts.

KEYWORDS

adolescents, deprivation, experiences of poverty, perception of poverty, poverty

INTRODUCTION

Poverty is the “world’s biggest killer” and the greatest threat to children’s growth and well-being across the world (World Bank Group, 2016). Globally, the literature on child poverty has focused on poverty estimates, its effects on children’s well-being, its causes and measures taken towards its reductions as well as alleviation of its effects (Children’s Defense Fund, 2019; UNICEF, 2021). Few have focused on how poverty is conceptualized by the children and adolescents who experience it and how these experiences impact their lives and aspirations. The present study was

conducted to contribute to efforts to fill this gap by exploring how poverty is conceptualized by adolescents who experience it in an urban poor context in Ghana, their lived experiences and the impact on their well-being and aspirations within that context.

Although poverty may affect individuals across the lifespan, children and adolescents are more likely than adults to live in poverty and are more vulnerable to its effects regardless of the level of development within their country of residence (Bennett et al., 2022; Chaudry & Wimer, 2016; Children's Defense Fund, 2019; UNICEF, 2021). Child poverty is defined as the section of children who are deprived of sanitation, nutrition, shelter, education, water and quality health services (Short, 2016). While global estimates indicate that around one billion children are multidimensionally poor lacking access to quality education, health, housing, nutrition, sanitation or water (see UNICEF, 2021), an estimated 356 million of this number are described as living in severe poverty and are much more susceptible to its effect (Schmidt et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2021; van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). The international aid community has further estimated that the COVID-19 pandemic will add between 66 and 100 million children to the already huge poverty-stricken children's population (UNICEF, 2021; van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Even within rich countries, one out of seven children is known to live in poverty, with one in four children in the European Union having a high risk of falling into poverty (Bennett et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2021).

The consequences of child poverty are enormous. According to Black et al. (2010), over eight million children in developing countries die from preventable diseases mainly resulting from poverty and deprivation. McKenzie (2019) adds that because of child poverty, over 200 million children around the globe are unable to attain their potential for cognition and/or socio-emotional development. Children living in poor communities are more exposed to food insecurity, depression, parental substance abuse, trauma, abuse, divorce and violent crimes (Children's Defense Fund, 2015) and growing up within poor contexts has long-term effects on children and their aging process (Wise, 2016). It is associated with unhappiness, impulsiveness, aggression and disobedience, high rates of dependency and feelings of anxiety (Bessell, 2021; Schweiger, 2019). Child poverty is also associated with low self-esteem (Doi et al., 2019) and reduced life satisfaction (Haanpää et al., 2019). Poverty negatively affects the intellectual development of the child (Saitadze & Lalayants, 2020), leading to a reduced chance of completing high school (Schweiger, 2019), an increased risk of developing fewer skills and subsequently earning lower wages as adults (Blair & Raver, 2016).

Globally, research on adolescents' experiences of poverty is vast. Among the adolescent population, those from poor contexts tend to rate the annual income of poor people higher than those who have experienced affluence. Poor adolescents tend to ascribe individualistic explanations for poverty whereas affluent ones tend to ascribe societal explanations more important in explaining poverty (Furnham, 1982). In Finland, Hakovirta and Kallio (2016) found that adolescents saw poverty as the absence of non-essential goods and items resulting for lack of financial resources. To these participants, having outdated, broken or second-hand goods were indicators of poverty. Additionally, poverty was associated with humility and stigma. While comparing three studies in sub-Saharan Africa, Hall et al. (2019) found that adolescents and young adults experienced lack of basic needs (e.g. food, school supplies, clothing, water etc.) and stressors (e.g., security, safety and violence, weak social capital, parental loss, unintended pregnancy etc.) within the community that made the experience of poverty worse. Yet while a considerable number of studies have been conducted on adolescents' conceptualization of and experience of poverty around the world, little is known about how adolescents in the sub-Saharan African context conceptualize poverty and its impact on their well-being.

In Ghana, statistics from the Ghana Statistical Service indicate that approximately 2.2 million people lived in extreme poverty in rural areas as at 2017 (Ghana Statistical Service [GSS], 2018). Research has shown that the Greater Accra region which has Ghana's capital city of Accra, is the least affected by poverty while the Upper West region is the most affected by poverty (GSS, 2018). Due to this observation, most studies on general poverty and those that focus specifically on child poverty within the Ghanaian context are often conducted outside of the greater Accra region. Yet, even with its least number of poor people within its boundaries, the Greater Accra region has, in recent years, seen rapid population increases because of urbanization and rural–urban migration in the search for greener pastures (Owusu & Afutu-Kotey, 2010). As a result, the population outnumbers the available resources within the region, creating over-dependency on the limited resources available and consequent poverty among sections of the population. The Greater Accra region therefore has some of the worst urban poor communities in Ghana (GSS, 2018).

The situation of adolescents in such urban cities in Ghana is peculiar because of the high cost of living within urban areas arising from difficulties accessing amenities such as houses, quality health care, etc. (Agyire-Tettey et al., 2021). The increasing monetization of such services and resources coupled with the absence of agricultural activities that could provide easy access to food within such urban contexts exacerbates the conditions of adolescents in poor areas within the urban setup (Kharas et al., 2020). Unsafe living related to unemployment, sanitation and security within these areas also frustrate the quality of life of adolescents (Huston, 2011). This suggests that the life situations and lived experiences of children who live in urban poor contexts may differ from children who are resident in other areas in Ghana (Kharas et al., 2020).

Yet, studies that focus on child poverty in the Ghanaian context are limited and much so are studies that focus on the particular situation of adolescents in urban poor contexts (Agyire-Tettey et al., 2021; Kofinti & Annim, 2016). Most studies tend to focus on adult poverty (Aboagye-Attah, 2019; Regier et al., 2015), creating a gap on the subjective experiences of poverty among adolescents in urban areas. This study aims to explore how poverty is experienced in urban areas in Ghana from adolescents' perspective by exploring: (1) adolescents' conceptualization of poverty; (2) adolescents' lived experiences (both positive and negative) of living in a poor urban context; (3) adolescents' perception of the impact of their experiences on their well-being and aspirations.

METHODS

Research design and settings

An exploratory qualitative design was used to gain first-hand information about the experiences of adolescents from James Town, a poor urban context within the Greater Accra region of Ghana (Owusu & Afutu-Kotey, 2010). James Town is an indigenous Ga community which forms part of the district of Ga Mashie, together with Usher Fort. It is located on the seafront, hence fishing is the common occupation of the inhabitants followed by trading (Kushitor et al., 2018). It is dominated by the Ga ethnic group and the Ga language is the commonly spoken language. Nonetheless, because of urbanization, the town currently inhabits people from other ethnic groups with diverse languages such as Ewe, Hausa and Twi.

The common distinguishing factor of poor urban communities in Accra from other non-poor urban areas is the neglect of basic infrastructure and services, particularly with respect to sanitation, waste disposal and drainage (Owusu & Afutu-Kotey, 2010). As a result, a large proportion of the residents of poor urban areas in Accra rely on limited public facilities such as public toilet

and bathrooms. James Town is characterized by insecurity, poor housing system, inadequate basic amenities, poor health outcomes and unstable incomes (Armah, 2014). Additionally, underemployment and unemployment are common with lower educational achievement poor sanitary as well as adverse environmental conditions and high population growth rates (de-Graft Aikins et al., 2014; Kushitor et al., 2018). The community is also characterized by indiscriminate disposal of refuse, choked and open gutters and flooding leading to regular cholera outbreak (Tutu et al., 2019). Since James Town lacks sufficient toilet facilities, the rates of open defecation is on the increase (Tutu et al., 2019).

Research participants

A total number of 20 adolescents were recruited and interviewed using the snowball and purposive sampling techniques. All 20 ($N = 20$) adolescents were recruited from the various public and private schools in James Town through the support of gatekeepers. Participants were aged between 12 and 17 years. Ten of the participants were males, with the remaining being females. Sixteen respondents were in Junior High School three (JHS 3), one in Junior High School two (JHS 2), two in Junior High School one (JHS 1) and one in Grade six. Two were recruited from a private school and the remaining 18 were recruited from four public schools in the research setting. Nine participants lived with both parents, six lived with their mother, three lived with a grandmother, one with siblings and one with both grandparents. More information about participants can be found in Table 1.

Ethical consideration and data collection procedure

Following ethics approval from the Ethics Committee for Humanities at the University of Ghana (Reference Number ECH 098/20-21), arrangements were made for data collection from participants. To familiarize and create a rapport with the community, communal gatekeepers such as religious leaders and Heads of public and private schools within the research setting were identified and their support was solicited. The gatekeepers eased the identification of adolescents for the interview process. All adolescents were chosen based on voluntary participation. Every adolescent within the private and government basic schools in the research were potential participants, however, 20 were selected for interviews. Permission was taken from the heads of schools to gain access to the adolescents in the school premises.

Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and its procedure, and they were assured of the non-violation of their rights to safety and protection. Respondents were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity with the use of pseudonyms. However, they were informed of the limit to this confidentiality, particularly that the data will be shared among the researchers involved with the study. In addition, participants were made aware of their rights to withdraw from the study, thus, preventing all forms of coercion. Contact numbers of authors were shared with participants and they were asked to contact the authors in case they needed any assistance or support related to their participation in the study. Verbal assent and consent were obtained from adolescents after the contents of the informed consent and assent documents were explained to the participants.

The adolescents responded to a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers with some sample questions such as: How will you describe a poor person? What are some of the

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of participants.

ID	Pseudonyms	Age	Type of school	Status of school	Class	Caregivers	Self-identification
1	Akosua	13	Public school	Poor school	Six	Grandmother	Poor
2	Kwame	17	Public school	Poor school	Form 3	Grandparents	Average
3	Abena	14	Public school	Poor school	Form 1	Parents	Average
4	Ama	12	Public school	Poor school	Form 1	Mother	Rich
5	Akua	15	Public school	Poor school	Form 3	Parents	Poor
6	Kwabena	15	Public school	Poor school	Form 3	Parents	Average
7	Kojo	14	Public school	Average school	Form 3	Mother	Poor
8	Kofi	15	Public school	Average school	Form 3	Parents	Rich
9	Kweku	14	Public school	Average school	Form 3	Parents	Poor
10	Yaw	15	Public school	Poor school	Form 3	Mother	Poor
11	Joe	15	Public school	Average school	Form 3	Grandmother	Poor
12	Adjo	17	Public school	Average school	Form 3	Parents	Average
13	Serwaa	15	Public school	Average school	Form 3	Siblings	Poor
14	Asare	17	Public school	Average school	Form 3	Parents	Poor
15	Maame	17	Public school	Poor school	Form 3	Grandmother	Rich
16	Nelson	16	Private school	Rich school	Form 3	Mother	Poor
17	Mensah	16	Private school	Rich school	Form 3	Mother	Poor
18	Mawusi	15	Public school	Average school	Form 2	Mother	Average
19	Dzifa	14	Public school	Poor school	Form 3	Parents	Poor
20	Araba	16	Public school	Rich school	Form 3	Parents	Rich

challenges you face living in your area? With their full permission, participants' responses were audio-recorded and each interview lasted between 15 and 30 min. The use of semi-structured interview guide was beneficial as it allowed the participants to express their views about poverty and share their experiences without undue imposition from the researchers. The interview questions only served as a guide and the responses of the participants guided the discussions that ensued during the interviewing process. Data collection lasted for 2 months (i.e., from April to May 2021). After the interviews, audio-taped interviews were transcribed and later analysed with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of thematic analysis.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness of the research, guidelines outlined by Shenton (2004) to achieve credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability were followed. To achieve credibility, there were regular debriefing sessions between the authors of the study in order to check individual biases. Developed codes, themes and subthemes were examined and peer-checked by authors to ensure conclusions were based on participants accounts (Erlandson et al., 1993). To ensure transferability, substantial data collected from participants have been documented, including comprehensive information about the study procedures, the study area and the duration of the interviews. To promote confirmability, responses of participants were recorded with an audio

recorder. Finally, to ensure dependability, the authors ensured that the research processes were reported as they occurred (Shenton, 2004). We also took steps to ensure trustworthiness during the data analysis as reported in the ensuing section.

Data analysis

Transcribed interviews were analysed manually using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of thematic analysis as they provide flexibility in analysing data. The stages included familiarizing one's self with the data, generating initial codes, looking for themes, reviewing these themes, defining and naming the themes and finally producing a report. In familiarizing with the data, the first author transcribed the audio-taped interviews verbatim into a written document. The transcribed data were read through several times in order to check for accuracy and also to get familiarized with the data.

At the code generation stage, identified meaningful segments were labelled as codes, which were made up of sentences and/or phrases. Initial coding was done by the first author and they were reviewed for accuracy by the second author. Then, using the objectives of the study, similar codes were grouped together which became the sub-themes. The authors separated relevant data excerpts according to overarching themes. This aided in reviewing and defining these themes. In reviewing themes, the researcher had to combine, discard and refine initial themes. This was to ensure that excerpts within each theme were cohered meaningfully.

The next stage was to define and name themes. To do this, the authors provided themes with precise and concise names that captured the relevance of each theme. In addition, working definitions were cleared to more specific ones to aid in reporting. In addition, the findings from the data analysis were transformed into writing this report. Finally, vivid quotations that relates to the themes discovered were used to support themes and subthemes in this paper. Findings were also discussed considering literature on the subject. Excerpts are identified by pseudonyms, sex, age and their self-identified poverty status.

RESULTS

In all, four overarching themes emerged from the data which describe adolescents' conceptualization of poverty, positive and negative experiences living in an urban poor area, as well as how these experiences impact their well-being.

Adolescent's conceptualization of poverty

This theme describes adolescents' perception of what it means to be poor and their perception of their poverty status. The criteria identified by these adolescents included affordability of basic needs, begging, nature of parent's job, the state of individual's clothing, engagement in janitorial duties and unsupportive environment.

In their self-conceptualization of their poverty status, half (10 out of 20) of the adolescents indicated that they were poor, with seven adolescents mentioning that they were average people and the remaining three identified themselves as rich even though they live in a poor context. The reason for such description was due to the inability of their parents to meet their needs. These adolescents revealed that their money for upkeep was not enough to purchase the things

they needed. They are thus forced to fend for themselves regardless of their young ages. Their inability to meet their physiological needs made them feel poor:

“Because it is not always that they [parents] give me money to come to school. And my [school feeding] money is not always enough [making me feel poor].”

(Serwaa, female, 15 years, poor)

“Sometimes ... I cannot eat. I don't get food to eat. Because at times, I can't ask my mother for money... everyday, they [my parents] will be asking me to go and find work to do...”

(Kwame, male, 17 years, average)

Furthermore, half ($N = 10$) of the participants described their community as a poor one citing reasons such as littering and high illiteracy level as factors justifying their evaluation of the community as poor. The participants reported that ignorance and apathetic attitudes accounted for high levels of littering among community members. This apathetic attitude tends to hinder the progress of the community as there were high rates of filth within the vicinity:

“It's because they don't tidy up their place. They do anything anywhere, they litter around. They are not helping the nation to develop.”

(Asare, male, 17 years, poor)

“Because a lot of people in my community are illiterates...”

(Joe, male, 15 years, poor)

Those who identified their environment as poor also mentioned that their environment was not supportive enough and that is why they described themselves as poor individuals. One participant (a 15-year-old male) revealed that the absence of well-to-do individuals within the community made it difficult to solicit petty jobs or other forms of income and assistance within his community. According to this adolescent (who described himself as poor), the community lacks the avenue for him to receive material support in order to better his future.

“The community I'm living in. If I am [were] staying at East Legon, (An affluent part of Accra), on weekends, maybe I can beg a rich man to wash his or her car for him/her, so that I will get something small but here I will not find anybody like that.”

(Yaw, male, 15 years, poor)

Majority (16 out of 20) of the adolescents described a poor person as one who begs in order to meet his/her basic needs. They mentioned that poor children find it difficult to survive and hence resort to begging. Such children are usually vulnerable, deserted and left to fend for themselves. There was a general consensus on this criterion by most children irrespective of the self-identified poverty status:

“A [poor] person [is someone] who does not have money to buy food, or dress or water. Or a person who does not have somewhere ... to sleep or somewhere to stay in...”

(Abena, female, 14 years, average)

“They don’t get what they need unless [through] begging...And they like begging for food like when you go to the Korle-Bu Junction (a popular place in Accra)...”

(Araba, female, 16 years, rich)

The type of job a parent was another criterion used by the participants to judge poverty. A parent without a well-paying job was perceived to be unable to perform their parental roles for their children. They reported that such parents usually find it difficult to adequately feed their children with the right amount of nutrition and provide a conducive shelter, hence such parents and their children were judged to be poor:

“I can use his parents’ work to tell... [Whether he’s rich or poor]”

(Kwame, male, 17 years, average)

Others also reported that poor children are usually in tattered clothing. According to some adolescents, individuals from poor contexts do not have good clothes to put on. As a result of their poor conditions and the need to meet basic needs, these individuals resort to janitorial services such as sweeping for others, washing for others and other janitorial duties for their survival. It was interesting to note that participants who subscribed to this view were more likely to identify themselves as rich or average:

“...Like the dress they wear... sometimes they wear dirty dress”

(Araba, female, 16 years, rich)

“If somebody finish eating, they [poor people] will wash the plates for him... they sweep for other people... They wash people’s dress for them, and they pay them twenty Ghana [2.84 USD]”

(Ama, female, 12 years, rich)

Experiences of poverty

This theme captures adolescents’ self-reported experience of living in a poor urban context. Participants reported both positive (i.e., received support and deepened motivation to pursue education for a better future) and unpleasant experiences (i.e., sleep difficulties, parental neglect and violence and unrest).

Positive experiences

Regardless of how poor the community was, some adolescents mentioned that living within such communities have some benefits. Positive experiences were more likely to be reported by those who self-identified as average or rich regarding their poverty status. Some of the participants cited that some positive experiences they have encountered included social support received from community members. This included provision of free food, donation of used clothing to them and friends paying for classes’ fees. The nature of support received created a sense of belongingness among community members. This received social support mitigates the negative experiences of poverty such as substandard housing and under-resourced schools, making their

lives more manageable. Received social support also seems to help adolescents to cope better in their context as they believed that they could ask for help when in need and those who are capable will come to their aid:

“Some people here, when you ask them for something, they give it to you. Some people too when you ask for something and they don't have, they will tell you they don't have. If someone is hungry here, and someone has cooked, they fetch some for all of us to eat. My friends too, some of them when they are given money to bring to school and you're not given, they give you some to go and buy food to eat.”

(Abena, female, 14 years, average)

“Okay... for example, when we were robbed, our neighbors came and supported us.”

(Kwabena, male, 15 years, average)

Another important positive experience according to these adolescents was a deepened motivation to pursue education for a better future. Notwithstanding the poor environment, adolescents reported that they were motivated to pursue education given the numerous hindrances within the community. To these adolescents, they see education as a means to a better future which could break the cycle of poverty in their lives. The urge to be educated regardless of one's economic status was a task to be met by some adolescents. The presence of free basic education in the communities further fuels this motivation:

“They [children] are coming to school. Our teachers [are] showing [teaching] them what they will get if they take education serious. So some also come to school because they know what they are looking for in future.”

(Kofi, male, 15 years, rich)

“I have seen that most of them are attending school... Me, the place I stay all of us [there], we attend schools...”

(Akua, female, 15 years, poor)

Negative experiences

Participants acknowledged some negative experiences they have had while living within their communities. Participants who self-identified as poor or average were more likely to report negative experiences. Some participants mentioned that as part of their negative experiences, they found it difficult to sleep. They reported that the thoughts of their poor state triggered insomnia and over-thinking. Uncertainties about how to survive the following day was of importance to these adolescents:

“Sometimes if I do not eat and I am going to sleep, I feel insomnia, I can't sleep. I always think about tomorrow what I'll eat.”

(Kofi, male, 15 years, rich)

One adolescent (15-year-old male) expressed that he constantly regretted being a poor person. This negative experience worsens as a result of his father neglecting his parental roles towards him. Regret and resentment towards himself characterized his emotions living in poverty:

“I sometimes regret for being in between [both poor and rich]. Because my dad is in abroad, [yet] anytime I ask something he will tell me he will send it but he [won't]”
(Nelson, male, 16 years, poor)

Some adolescents reported experiencing high rates of violence and unrest. According to these adolescents, community members are rowdy and thus cause noise pollution. In addition, as a result of frequent power outages, community members are easily attacked by robbers, leading to psychological instability.

“With the light out situation, there was a lot of robbery going on. Also, we have experienced a lot of disturbances and violence.”
(Kwabena, male, 15 years, average)

“They will be throwing bottles, stones, shooting at each other.”
(Kwame, male, 17 years, average)

Negative experiences were so frequent for some adolescents that, one participant mentioned never encountering any positive experiences within her community.

“I haven't seen any positive experience here at all...”
(Akosua, female, 13 years, poor).

Perceived impact of poverty

This theme shows adolescents' perception of the impact of poverty on their well-being and aspirations. Subthemes include hindrance to higher education, lowered self-worth, insecure aspirations, caught up in cycle of poverty, deepened perseverance as well as learned helplessness and were subscribed by adolescents in all categories of self-identified poverty statuses.

Majority (13 out of 20) of the adolescents saw poverty to have the potential to negatively affect their aspirations and well-being. This is because, they perceived education to be expensive, and hence their poor socio-economic status could prevent them from pursuing higher education which could hinder the attainment of their goals in life:

“Because if there is no enough money, my education will become poor... Like without money I can't complete university to achieve my aim.”
(Kofi, male, 15 years, rich)

“Because for now there is nothing called free. As in the university, there is no free education. So [I] don't think I will get the opportunity to go there.”
(Asare, male, 17 years, poor)

Having money was seen as a way of upgrading one's self and hence lack of it was seen as a blockage, affecting one's over-all well-being and aspirations. Money was perceived to give the

individual the opportunity to rub shoulders with friends within the society. Also, being poor signifies difficulty connecting with individuals who may change one's socio-economic status:

“Money makes you. Your money should show a different level [high status in society]. So if you don't have some, you cannot change your level [enhance your status in society] ...”

(Ama, female, 12 years, rich)

“Because you see the poor people, like let me say the rich people they have relatives related to some of the journalists and those kinds of things. But the poor person, who are you going to see for the person to help you achieve what you want to? Because everybody has a destiny helper you see and it will pass through someone before you become a person who you want to be, even though you are making an effort about it...”

(Adjo, female, 17 years, average)

Some of the respondents feared for the lives of their descendants (the carry-over effect) because they believed poverty may affect their ability to take care of their children who may also grow up within such poor contexts. Moreover, participants reported that as a result of a parents' socio-economic status, descendants may not strive to be great as there is no motivation to do so:

“Because your generations and your offspring, if you give birth and you're poor, you cannot take good care of them and they will grow to become like you because they know that their father is not rich”

(Yaw, male, 15 years, poor)

On the other hand, seven participants also reported that poverty cannot hinder their aspirations due to their level of determination. These adolescents believed that persevering in one's education was paramount in achieving one's aspirations and not their current socio-economic status:

“If you're focused on your education and you're doing everything to pass your exams, you will achieve what you want to become. But if you're not serious, you can't achieve anything.”

(Joe, male, 15 years, poor)

“Because I'm good in academics... I always like learning so that I will shame my dad for thinking that I am not a good child.”

(Nelson, male, 16 years, poor)

Some adolescents however raised the role of destiny in the achievement of one's goals and aspirations in life regardless of their socio-economic status. To them, one's success level is rather dependent on pre-destination, hence, whatever has been predestined concerning the individual will come to pass regardless of their socio-economic status. In some participants' narratives is

deep-seated learned helplessness in their inability to change the outcome of their future, hence the need to depend on a Supreme Being who has the ability make good things happen to them irrespective of their socio-economic status:

“Because when God says something in your life, He doesn’t think about [the fact that] you don’t have money or you have money. But it will come [to pass] in your life.”

(Abena, female, 14 years, average)

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to explore adolescents’ perceptions of poverty, the nature of their experiences in a poor urban context and the impacts of the experiences on their well-being and aspirations. Findings show that adolescents’ perceptions of poverty bothered on unmet basic needs, nature of parents’ job, the tattered physical outlook of people and unsupportive nature of the environment. About half of the participants self-identified as poor while others identified as having average and high socio-economic status although they live in a poor urban context.

Positive experiences pertained to received support and deepened motivation to pursue education for a better future, whereas negative experiences bothered on sleeplessness, parental neglect as well as violence and unrest. Negative experiences were reported to hinder participants’ aspirations to pursue higher education (although they were motivated to pursue same), lowered their self-esteem and that poverty may have similar negative ripple effects on descendants. While some thought they had no control over their future growing within a poor context, others believed they had control over their future hence were determined to persevere in pursuing education and relied on God who was perceived to be able to help them to achieve greater things in life. These findings are consistent with previous research in the Ghanaian context (Nachinaab et al., 2019; Quansah et al., 2016).

The finding on adolescents’ conceptualization of poverty as encompassing unmet basic needs, nature of parents’ job, tattered physical outlook and unsupportive environment is interesting as it shows a divergence on international agencies’ conceptualization of poverty which tends to focus on purchasing power of the individual (World Bank Group, 2017). To these adolescents, even the nature of the parent’s job, irrespective of their purchasing power and the ability of the environment to support its inhabitants were considered relevant in the judgement of poverty. This finding calls for the need for international agencies that define poverty to consider the perspectives of the affected individuals (Roelen, 2015). To these adolescents, it is not enough to have certain amount of purchasing power or to lack basic needs to be considered poor, the environment and its ability to adequately provide support for the individuals who live in there as well as the nature of the parent’s job are equally important (Tsironis & Almpani, 2018). This is important because, the perception of poverty can have as much adverse effects on individuals’ well-being as actual/experienced poverty (Quansah et al., 2016).

Adolescents in the present study also reported sleeplessness and continuous violence and unrest in their communities. These findings are consistent with studies in poor urban contexts that have reported that poor children tend to face more daily stressors which tend to affect their sleep patterns (Meyer, 2014). Poor sleep patterns could subsequently compromise their daily activities, leading to more stress, making sleep-poverty cycle worse (Fonta et al., 2020). Poor sleep patterns are also known to have consequential effects on health and mental well-being

(American Thoracic Society, 2019; Doi et al., 2019). The findings of unrest and violence were also not surprising as it corroborates with Malik-Kusi (2012) and Marks (2016) studies, who revealed that poor communities usually experience high levels of violence and unrest because of its rowdy nature. According to Rawles (2010), rapid population growth in urban areas, which in turn leads to overcrowding, inadequate housing and basic amenities results in high violence as residents have to compete for scarce resources.

Despite the report of several negative experiences, positive experiences pertained to received support and motivation to pursue one's education. Social support has been found to enhance the quality of life of an individual by way of serving as a buffer against negative life experiences (Hill et al., 2021). According to these adolescents, the desire to gain quality education and interact with their friends gave them the urge and determination to pursue their education. This may be attributed to the quest to experience some sense of belongingness among peer groups in school (Saitadze & Lalayants, 2020). Moreover, higher classmate support among adolescents has been found to be associated with human-related quality of life (Demir & Leyendecker, 2018).

Adolescents' experiences in poor urban context were reported to hinder their education and aspiration, resulted in lowered self-esteem and were perceived to have similar negative ripple effect on their descendants. Adolescents in poor contexts usually experience cognitive lags, lower academic achievement, behavioural challenges and unemployment due to lack of education (McKenzie, 2019; Naven et al., 2019). This is because families living in poor contexts more often than not have to choose between providing their wards with basic needs or sending them to school (Hair et al., 2015). In situations whereby they are not expected to pay school fees, the extra costs of books, examination fees, uniforms and supplies associated with attending of schools discourages such families from taking their wards to school (Rodriguez, 2020). Given the reality of generational poverty (Wagmiller Jr & Adelman, 2009), adolescents' concerns of the possibility of their descendants also being poor warrant the urgent needs for measures to be put in place to reduce the negative effects of child poverty in order to break the poverty cycle (Evans, 2016).

Nonetheless, with some thinking they had no control over their future growing in poor context, others were determined to achieve because of their current poor status. Adolescents' awareness about the socio-economic status of their families motivated them to work hard in order to give themselves and their family a better life. This finding is consistent with findings in Cheang and Goh's (2019) study in which children reframed their family challenges by appraising new meanings to their financial challenges.

Implications for intervention

Given the significance that adolescents attached to communal support within their environment, there is the need to promote communal support because of its relevance to the well-being of the individual and particularly the adolescents within the society. Policy makers are implored to consider the importance of community-based groups such as young people's guilds as an avenue for receiving psychological support to enhance the well-being of adolescents in poor contexts. This will also increase the social networks available to these children for positive outcomes. Given adolescents' negative experiences and their particular concerns of the generational poverty, clinicians can also develop adolescent-specific therapeutic interventions to help adolescents in poor contexts gain insight and understanding of their situation and help them to understand the options they have and the means to break-free from the cycle of poverty.

Limitations and recommendations for future studies

The present study gathered data from poor adolescents in a single town, James Town. This may have limited the nature of findings obtained in the study as findings may be peculiar to only adolescents in that particular locality. Future studies should consider the inclusion of multiple towns to help gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of child poverty in adolescence. Additionally, the study utilized qualitative approach and a smaller sample which prevented the generalization of the findings. Future study should consider using a quantitative approach with a representative sample in order to broaden the scope and generalizability of the findings. Moreover, this study collected data at only one time-point, hence is it not clear how living in poor urban context actually affect the well-being of adolescents. Hence, future studies should consider using a longitudinal approach to explore the various changes and development that comes with living in poor urban contexts. This will provide a detailed understanding of the transitions that adolescents in poor urban communities experience over a long period of time.

CONCLUSION

The present study has shown that adolescents who live in poor urban context consider factors beyond the purchasing power and unmet basic needs when conceptualizing poverty. Poverty was reported to hinder adolescents' education and aspirations, lowering their self-esteem. Nonetheless, poverty could also be a source of motivation energizing the adolescents to work harder to break the cycle of poverty in their family. Social support was also key in the conceptualization of poverty and hence there is the need to ensure a supportive environment for adolescents within poor contexts. Findings of the present study fill the gap in literature by showing the significance of listening to the voices of adolescents themselves on issues that impact on their well-being.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Diana Ade conceived the study, participated in the study design, data collection and analysis, and drafted portions of manuscript. Joana Salifu Yendork conceived of the study, participated in the study design and data analysis, and drafted portions of manuscript. Ernest Darkwah participated in data interpretation and drafted portions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee for Humanities at the University of Ghana (Reference Number ECH 098/20-21).

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