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THIS IS WHAT POVERTY MEANS: A SECONDARY ANALYSIS OF A PARTICIPATORY POVERTY RESEARCH PROJECT IN JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a secondary qualitative analysis of data from a participatory poverty research project conducted in Japan. Building on the seven-aspect framework of poverty meanings identified in the original project, this study examines how these meanings were emphasized and expressed differently across nationality, social status, and gender. The original project involved participants with diverse experiences of poverty, organized by nationality, social status, and gender. Each group participated in three discussion sessions that focused on the meaning of poverty, daily concerns and problems, and checking and commenting on the research results. This study focuses on the first session, which addressed the meaning of poverty. Participants' narratives were reorganized within the seven-aspect framework and comparatively analyzed across participant attributes using NVivo 15. The analysis showed that participants' understanding of poverty shared common elements but their emphasis and expression differed depending on their individual attributes. Japanese participants tended to understand poverty in more relational terms, including discrimination, social conformity pressure, and fear of being seen as poor, whereas foreign residents in Japan emphasized labor, time pressure, and class-based exploitation more often. Working adults expressed stronger concerns about immediate economic pressures, whereas students highlighted constraints on future choices. Women referred more frequently to emotional, psychological, and mental burdens than men did. The secondary analysis in this study presented more comprehensive lived-experience data from the original participatory poverty research project, thereby contributing to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of poverty in Japan.

Keywords: people in poverty, meaning of poverty, nationality, social status, gender

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, traditional poverty research has been criticized for excluding people in poverty from the research itself (Beresford & Croft, 1995; Dean, 1992; Novak, 1995). Consequently, "Poverty" has been constructed without clarifying how it is understood by those experiencing it. In response, scholars have argued that, to better understand poverty, future research should adopt more inclusive empirical methods. These methods should incorporate the perspectives of people with lived experience of poverty, and participatory approaches are considered important for doing so (Beresford et al., 1999; Lister, 2021; Lister et al., 2019). Bennett and Roberts (2004) provided a detailed account of the origins and development of participatory approaches in poverty research. They reported that participatory poverty research is characterized by granting people with direct experience of poverty greater rights to participate in and control over the research process. By ensuring their genuine participation in the research process, it helps to understand poverty from the perspective of people living in poverty. In this sense, participation means "putting into practice the belief that people in poverty have a right to participate in analyzing their own situation and how to tackle it" (Bennett & Roberts, 2004, p. 6).

Participatory approaches to poverty research were originally developed in the context of the Global South and were later adopted in the United Kingdom and other Western contexts (Beresford et al., 1999; del Tufo & Gaster, 2002; Sutton et al., 2007; Women's Budget Group, 2008). However, in Japan, empirical studies that explicitly adopt such participatory approaches remain scarce. Japanese poverty research has often focused on identifying poverty conditions, measuring disadvantages, and analyzing structural causes, while paying less attention to how people in poverty understand and analyze poverty. Against this background, Chen (2024) represents one of the first full-scale attempts to conduct participatory poverty research in Japan that includes people experiencing poverty as active participants in the research process and positions them as experiential experts. Chen (2024) provided rich empirical data for understanding poverty from the perspective of those who are directly affected by it. One of its major findings was that poverty, from the participants' perspectives, is not a single or fixed concept but consists of seven aspects: financial and economic; restrictive; emotional, psychological, and mental; relational and class-based; labor- and time-related; educational; and health-related.

However, while Chen (2024) presents these seven aspects as an overall framework for understanding the meaning of poverty, there remains considerable room for further analysis of differences across participant attributes. In Chen's (2024) study, participants were organized into eight stratified groups by combining three attributes: nationality, social status, and gender. Although the differences related to these attributes were indicated in the original study, they were not the central focus of the analysis.

Building on Chen's (2024) seven-aspect framework, the present study conducts a secondary qualitative analysis of the original data on the meaning of poverty generated through this participatory poverty research project. The purpose of this study is not to reproduce the seven-aspect categorization; rather, it uses this framework as an analytical basis to examine how the meanings of poverty are commonly shared across participants while also being differently emphasized and expressed based on participant attributes.

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METHODOLOGY

As noted above, this study is based on a participatory poverty research project conducted by Chen (2024) in Hokkaido, Japan, between January and October 2021. As shown in Table 1, 32 young adults aged 18–39, all of whom had experienced poverty in some form, participated in the project. The participants were divided into eight stratified groups according to three attributes: nationality (Japanese/foreign residents), social status (students/working adults), and gender (men/women), with an equal distribution across each category. Foreign residents were included because they live within the same Japanese society, and their experiences are directly relevant to understanding poverty in Japan.

Table 1. Participants in Chen (2024)

Group (n)	Recruitment Methods	Details
Japanese students/Men (JSM), n=4	Recruitment was conducted in two ways. One approach was to post recruitment posters on noticeboards in two student dormitories. The other approach was to distribute the electronic version of the recruitment posters through personal connections and student social networking groups.	All have taken scholarships (loans). Some are from welfare households; some come from single-parent families; some have a poor relationship with and no financial support from their parents, and some must hold part-time jobs to maintain their living expenses and school fees.
Japanese students/Women (JSW), n=4		
Foreign students/Men (FSM), n=4		COVID-19 has reduced their part-time job income. Further, family members in their home country have had illnesses or accidents that have reduced their family's support.
Foreign students/Women (FSW), n=4		
Japanese working people/Men (JWM), n=4	Recruitment was conducted in collaboration with two anti-poverty organizations in Hokkaido.	All have informal employment experience. Some were unable to attend university for financial reasons, and some have worked as freeters (part-time workers) for several years.
Japanese working people/Women (JWW), n=4		All are single mothers and have received public assistance. Some have also experienced homelessness.
Foreign workers/Men (FWM), n=4	A digital recruitment poster and short message were shared through foreign social networking groups in Hokkaido. An intermediate collaborator who had connections with foreign workers saw the notice and helped recruit participants.	Many are married, have had children very early (two men are willing to marry but lack the money to do so), and experience the pressure of raising their families. Many of them are in debt. They came to Japan as [—] workers.
Foreign workers/Women (FWW), n=4		

Note 1. This table is adapted from Chen (2024, p. 27) and has been modified.
Note 2. To protect privacy, content that can identify the participants is represented by "[—]".
Note 3. In this study, within the Japanese context, "working people" or "working adults" refer mainly to non-student adults and do not always mean full-time employment.
Note 4. This study and related analyses have been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, Hokkaido University (Approval Number: 20-34).

Each group held three discussion meetings: the first meeting mainly focused on the participants' images and understanding of poverty, including the meaning of poverty; the second meeting discussed the worries and difficulties encountered in daily life; and the third meeting was for confirming and commenting on the research findings.

This study draws specifically on the first-meeting data. In Chen (2024), these data were used to present an overall categorization of poverty meanings as articulated by participants. The present study should therefore be understood as a secondary follow-up analysis. Here, the seven-aspect categorization was used as the initial analytical framework, and the analysis examined how participants' statements were distributed, emphasized, and expressed across the three participant attributes: nationality, social status, and gender. These axes are important because, as Lister (2015) argues, the experience of poverty is mediated by class inequalities and social divisions, such as gender, race, disability, and age.

For this secondary analysis, the author returned to the original transcripts and discussion materials, including parts of the data that were not fully developed by Chen (2024). During the original project reported by Chen (2024), the transcripts were checked and commented on by the participants to ensure that their views were faithfully represented in the text and to strengthen their involvement in the research process. In the present study, we adopted a new coding procedure not included in Chen's (2024) analysis. First, the seven aspects of poverty identified by Chen (2024) were used as the initial analytical framework. Within this framework, all textual data from the group discussions were read again and reorganized. Then, using NVivo 15 (Lumivero, 2025), the author coded and categorized participants' statements in relation to each of the seven aspects, and finally identified 18 subcategories.

After completing the coding, the author compared the distributions and content of the statements across the eight participating groups. Specifically, the coding data were reorganized according to the study's three analytical axes: nationality, social status, and gender. This included comparisons between Japanese and foreign participants, working adults and students, and women and men. The analysis does not merely rely on the quantity of statements, it also takes into account the underlying ideas and contexts contained in the participants' narratives.

Since this study was conducted by the same researcher who carried out the original project (Chen, 2024), the possession of the data and familiarity with the original research facilitated the secondary analysis in this paper. This secondary analysis does not claim that these findings represent the situation of all people experiencing poverty in Japan. Because the participants were young adults living in Hokkaido and the data were generated through a specific participatory research project, these findings should primarily be understood as exploratory.

RESULTS

Building on the seven-aspect framework identified by Chen (2024), the present analysis reorganized the participants' narratives within this framework and identified 18 subcategories (Table 2). This not only enables the demonstration of the participants' common understanding of poverty but also facilitates discussion of their differences in nationality, social status, and gender within this shared understanding.

Table 2. Categorization of research data on the meaning of poverty

	Main category	Subcategory (number of statements)	Group (number of statements)							
			JWW	JWM	JSW	JSM	FWW	FWM	FSW	FSM
Meaning of poverty	Financial and economic	Money (27)	1	3	5	3	5	4	2	4
		Food, clothing, housing, etc. (30)	8	8	3	2	3	3	1	2
		Administrative criteria (2)	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
		Total: 59	9	13	8	5	8	7	3	6
	Emotional, psychological, and mental	Emotional (10)	3	0	1	2	1	0	3	0
		Psychological (25)	2	3	5	1	5	3	4	2
		Mental (12)	1	0	7	0	3	0	0	1
		Total:47	6	3	13	3	9	3	7	3
	Restrictive	Current life (11)	1	3	2	2	2	1	0	0
		Future plans (15)	0	0	7	4	0	1	2	1
		Total:26	1	3	9	6	2	2	2	1
	Relational and class-based	Relational (13)	4	1	1	1	1	2	3	0
		Class-related (7)	0	0	0	1	1	5	0	0
		Total:20	4	1	1	2	2	7	3	0
	Labor and time-related	Labor-related (16)	3	0	2	0	3	3	4	1
		Time-related (3)	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
		Total:19	3	0	2	1	3	4	4	2
	Educational	Educational rights (4)	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	1
		Educational resources (2)	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
		Higher education (1)	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
		Total:7	2	2	2	0	0	0	0	1
	Health-related	Medical coverage (1)	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
		Foregoing medical care (1)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
		Unhealthy diet (4)	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
		Total:6	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	3

As Table 2 shows, statements related to financial and economic aspects were the most frequent among the seven aspects of poverty identified by the participants. As indicated by Chen (2024), this finding suggests that even in developed countries such as Japan, poverty is primarily understood in terms of material and economic deprivation. However, the data also indicated that participants did not perceive poverty solely as material deprivation, but also in relation to non-material aspects. Further exploration into these nonmaterial aspects showed that statements related to education and health were the least frequent. In other words, within the Japanese context, participants tended to emphasize issues such as psychological and mental burdens, restricted life choices, challenges in social relationships, and class status associated with poverty

rather than more basic aspects such as education and health. The following section presents a more detailed comparative analysis of these aspects, drawing on the three participant attributes listed in Table 3: nationality, social status, and gender. Since the original project generated a substantial amount of data, the quotations and narrative materials in the following seven-aspect comparative analysis were drawn primarily from previously unpublished portions of the original dataset.

Table 3. Classification of the number of statements by participant attributes

Meaning of Poverty	Nationality		Social Status		Gender		Total
	Japanese	Foreign	Working adults	Students	Women	Men	
Financial and economic	35	24	37	22	28	31	59
Emotional, psychological and mental	25	22	24	23	32	15	47
Restrictive	19	7	8	18	14	12	26
Relational and class-based	8	12	14	6	10	10	20
Labor and time-related	6	13	10	9	12	7	19
Educational	5	2	4	3	4	3	7
Health-related	1	5	0	6	2	4	6

FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC

In terms of how poverty is understood, statements related to financial and economic aspect were more frequent among Japanese participants than foreign participants, among working adults than among students, and among men than among women. In particular, the first and most immediate understanding was that poverty means "having no money," "no stable income," and "no savings."

However, the data reveal a notable pattern. When participants described poverty as "having no money," 9 of the 27 statements framed it in terms such as "poverty means that because I have no money, I cannot do what I want to do" or "poverty means that having no money makes me feel anxious and uneasy." These statements are closely related to the restrictive, emotional, psychological and mental aspects discussed later. Nevertheless, because the participants explicitly attributed these experiences to a lack of money, the author categorized these statements under the financial and economic category.

In addition to the lack of money, participants' remarks frequently touched on how poverty is a matter of survival: being unable to meet basic daily needs, such as food, clothing, and housing; being unable to pay rent and utility bills; and experiencing financial strain in covering fundamental daily costs.

- I think poverty is related to survival. It means you can't even do the bare minimum needed to get by. (JWM Group)
- I eat the same thing every day, buy dried noodles, and split them into multiple meals. I also buy cheap retort curry on sale and eat it little by little over several meals. (JWW Group)

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- Poverty means not having a private room. I want to live alone. Right now, two people share one room, and eight of us live together. There are too many people, and we have to share the kitchen, shower room, and toilet. There is no personal privacy at all. (FWM Group)
- When I was little, I knew my family was poor. So, when I went grocery shopping with my mom, I would immediately check the prices and pick the cheapest items. (JWW Group)

In addition to the statements discussed above, the Japanese working-adult men's group defined poverty in terms of Japan's administrative criteria, such as the non-taxable status and receipt of public assistance. This statement suggests that such administrative standards have, to some extent, shaped how people understand what poverty means.

EMOTIONAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND MENTAL

In this study, statements concerning the emotional, psychological, and mental aspect of poverty were the second most frequent. This indicates that poverty significantly influences people's emotional, psychological, and mental well-being that cannot be overlooked. As shown in Table 3, women made significantly more statements on this aspect than men, whereas the numbers were generally similar between Japanese and foreign participants and between working adults and students. This suggests that women are more attentive to these aspects, or experience a greater impact in this regard.

- I think poverty is about not having any room to breathe, no leeway, or slack. It's not just economic; it means having no spare capacity. (JWW Group)
- I think poverty also means having to swallow regret and just suffer in silence, sometimes even going to bed in tears. (JSM Group)
- Because of COVID-19, my part-time job told me I no longer needed to come in. Now, I'm looking at the little money I have left, and I don't know how long I can hold on. The pressure is intense every day. (FSW Group)
- It makes me anxious, and because of that, I can't really look forward to life. (FWW Group)
- When I'm talking with friends and listening to what they bought, where they went, and what they did for fun, I realize I don't have any of these things. It makes me feel inferior. (FSW Group)
- Poverty is being in a state of constant mental depression. (JSW Group)
- There are too many things lacking, and in the process of pursuing them, I have so much to think about, many failures and setbacks, and a lot of mental anguish to endure. (FSM Group)

Observing the data, it may be found that the boundaries among the emotional, psychological, and mental dimensions are not clearly distinguishable; instead, they often operate in tandem. Short-term emotional experiences such as having no room to breathe, regret, or crying readily connect with psychological sensations, such as pressure, anxiety, and inferiority. Over time, these can lead to mental impacts, such as depression and anguish.

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RESTRICTIVE

Overall, participants highlighted two forms of constraint: restrictions on present-day activities and restrictions on future planning. In particular, in terms of social status, the student group (mainly Japanese students) produced more statements than the working-adult group, and these statements were more concentrated on constraints related to future plans.

- I think poverty is when you go to the market and you can't even afford to buy food that's a little tastier and you can't go out somewhere for fun with your family on weekends. You can only maintain the minimum of daily life, and you can't do any of the "extra" things. You want to do them, but you're unable to do so, that is poverty. (JWW Group)
- I think the biggest meaning of poverty is that you don't have choices for your future. Because you are poor, your path could be cut off. You can't really steer your life toward what you want to do. (JSW Group)

To avoid the impression that students' constraints relate only to future planning, a brief clarification is needed. Although students mentioned limited choices for the future more often, this limitation does not occur in the abstract. Rather, it is built through a series of everyday restrictions at each step toward the future. In other words, students focus on the future because what they can do right now is constrained. Participants in the student groups frequently mentioned immediate limitations, such as being unable to attend cram school or join extracurricular activities, having their study time reduced by part-time work, and lacking resources for learning. Consequently, even if they have dreams or goals, they may be forced to abandon them. In addition to the points noted above, some participants specifically emphasized that having choices is a right that affirms one's ability to live in a meaningful and concrete way, and that poverty, by restricting choices, effectively violates this right (JSM Group, JWM Group).

RELATIONAL AND CLASS-BASED

Foreign participants made more statements than Japanese participants, and working adults made more statements than students, while no clear gender difference was observed. Notably, by nationality, Japanese participants primarily understood "poverty" in relational terms, linking it to "discrimination" and "social conformity pressure," whereas foreign participants more often emphasized it in a class-based sense. However, as shown in the data below, both groups define poverty through their relationships with others.

- I feel like "poverty" is a discriminatory term. Wealthy people, I mean not the superrich, just ordinary, average people, just don't hang out with those in poverty; they avoid getting involved with the poor, right? That's why people living in poverty sometimes pretend to have money. They don't want others to think that they are poor. (JWM Group)
- I think poor people face harsh treatment. But it is not only poor people; single mothers, LGBT people, and others who are on the margins or seen as different from the mainstream face it too. In Japan, the social pressure to conform is really strong. (JSM Group)
- What is poverty? We are poverty. Aren't Japanese employers hiring us because we're poor, because they think we're easy to control and can pay us low wages? They say they bring us

here to "learn farm work" and name us as [—]. But in reality, both sides know what it is–they hire us to work, and we come to earn money. That's all. (FWW Group)

- I think poverty happens because there are people who get rich, and then there are workers who get used and exploited. This does not disappear in capitalist societies. (FWM Group)

The data above reflect a characteristic feature of Japanese society in which two logics operate in parallel: a stratified (status-based) social order and a class-based social order. As Iwata (2017) notes, Japan entered a phase of rapid economic growth after a brief period of post–World War II recovery. Subsequently, with the spread of slogans such as "a society of 100 million middle-class people," most of the Japanese (not only the general public but also many researchers) widely believed that social stratification was the primary issue, while class-related issues inherent to capitalism were rarely discussed (Shiga, 2020). In this study, discussions among foreign-worker groups brought these class-related poverty issues into sharp relief. This indicates that, in today's globalized Japanese society, class-related poverty issues have not diminished or disappeared; rather, they have shifted to more marginalized groups.

LABOR AND TIME-RELATED

Foreign participants discussed this aspect more than Japanese participants. This may be because many foreign working adults in this study engaged in physically demanding labor, and many international students also had to work part-time to sustain their lives in Japan while studying.

- To me, poverty means that life is always rushed. People who are better off have more time to spare. But doing physical labor every day means that one cannot build up any skills or abilities. If someone like me, who does nothing but physical labor, is not poor, then who is? I hope that in the second half of my life, I won't have to run around everywhere to get by. (FWM Group)
- When I first saw the recruitment notice for this research, I thought, "That's unbelievable. How could someone studying abroad be poor?" But then I thought about my own situation, and it was true. Japan is the only country in which one can earn enough to cover living costs by working part-time. So, if you ask me what poverty means, it means having to work. Besides going to school, all my time is spent at part-time jobs, and I have no time to rest at all. Now, due to the pandemic, everyone is losing their jobs. I might lose mine, too, and I feel terrible. (FSM Group)

As illustrated by the above foreign student group, this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many international students who relied on part-time work lost their jobs. This not only created financial hardships but also intensified their anxiety and psychological distress (see the "Emotional, Psychological and Mental" subsection of the Results section). These findings suggest that poverty is a dynamic concept; its different aspects may coexist and, at times, shift from one to another.

In addition, although foreign participants made notably more statements than Japanese participants in the "labor-related/time-related" aspect of poverty, the Japanese working women's group was the only Japanese group that showed no significant difference compared to the other four foreign groups. This may be because all four participants in the Japanese working adult women group were single mothers. According to survey data published by Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (National Survey of Single-Parent Households, FY2021 and

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Comprehensive Survey of Living Conditions, 2022), single mothers in Japan have a notably high employment rate (86.3%, of whom 48.8% were in regular employment, 42.4% were in non-regular employment, and 8.8% were self-employed or in other forms of work). At the same time, nearly half of single-mother households live below the poverty line. This paradox of high employment alongside poverty highlights the issue of low pay in Japan's nonregular employment sector, which is further supported by the survey data below.

- I'm raising two children and working two jobs to make ends meet. I only get one day off every other week. But when I think about my children's future education costs, I push myself even when I'm exhausted. (JWW Group)

EDUCATIONAL

Regarding the education-related aspect, no clear differences were observed across participant attributes. As many scholars have criticized (Nishimura, 2016; Katada, 2019), in Japan, policy responses to poverty, especially child poverty, have focused more on educational support measures (such as expanding school social workers to help prevent school dropouts). However, in this survey, participants more often framed education as a basic human right and suggested that educational support for poverty should go beyond only schooling, and instead extend to financial assistance that enables access to educational resources. This indicates a gap between policy priorities and the expectations of those experiencing poverty.

- Poverty is educational inequality. Poverty affects the right to equal education. Poor families don't have the money to attend better schools, which lowers their chances of succeeding in many areas. While all my classmates attended schools in big cities, I had no choice but to attend this local night school program. Poverty leads to inequality in education, and ultimately, inequality in life. (JSW Group)
- Poverty means not being able to provide children with a good education. Wealthy families send their children to kindergarten instead of daycare, pay for their children's extracurricular lessons, and have access to all kinds of educational resources. In our family, we can't do these things, and I feel sorry for my children. (JWW Group)

HEALTH-RELATED

The health aspect of poverty was discussed only by two groups of foreign students and a group of male Japanese students. The foreign female student group mainly discussed being unable to maintain a healthy diet because of poverty. The two male student groups focused on medical care and lack of health insurance coverage. However, a shared theme across these groups was that all recognized that poverty has implications for poor health.

- I can't afford a nutritionally balanced diet with milk, meat, and vegetables like other people. Vegetables are very expensive in Japan. (FSW Group)
- Poverty means you can't cook and eat properly. Poverty is when you end up eating instant food all the time. I'm really busy, especially during long university vacations. I work an eight-hour part-time shift every day, and when I get home, I'm completely exhausted. So, I often just buy something quickly, heat it in a microwave, and eat right away. Continuing this way of life is unhealthy. (FSW Group)

- Even if my stomach hurts a little, or I get a skin inflammation, I won't go to the hospital. If I go, it would cost a few thousand yen, right? So I usually just put up with it and tell myself that it will improve in a few days. (FSM Group)
- Being late on National Health Insurance payments happens a lot. During these times, I worried about whether I would receive medical care if something happened. (JSM Group)

The analysis shows that participants shared a common understanding of poverty, which was organized into the seven aspects identified in Chen (2024), while these aspects were emphasized and expressed differently across participant groups. Although financial and economic meanings formed the most common basis of poverty understanding, participants also connected poverty to non-material dimensions such as emotional burdens, restricted choices, social relationships, class position, labor and time pressures, education, and health. This suggests that the participants' understanding of poverty was closer to relative poverty than to a narrow view of poverty as mere subsistence deprivation. Furthermore, from the analysis of this study, it can be seen that poverty has multiple aspects, so the meaning of poverty should not be regarded as a fixed category. Instead, when it intersects with different attributes of those who are living in poverty, it emerges as a more complex and multilayered form.

CONCLUSION

This study conducted a secondary qualitative analysis of the first-session data from Chen's (2024) participatory poverty research project in Japan. Building on the seven-aspect framework of poverty meanings identified by Chen (2024), this study further examined how these meanings are differently emphasized and expressed across nationality, social status, and gender. The main findings of this study are summarized below.

First, regarding nationality, the Japanese respondents tended to understand poverty more in relational terms, linking the poverty to discrimination, social conformity pressure, and their fear of being seen as poor. In contrast, foreign participants expressed poverty more often in relation to labor, time pressure, and class-based labor exploitation. By including foreign residents in the same analytical framework as the Japanese participants, this study offered a more complete picture of poverty in Japanese society and showed how stratification and class-based inequality operate together.

Second, regarding social status, both working adults and students addressed the financial and economic aspects of poverty. However, working adults were more concerned about immediate economic challenges, such as unstable incomes, living costs, and family responsibilities. Hence, poverty seemed to be experienced as a pressing struggle to survive day-to-day life. By contrast, students were more likely to discuss poverty's restrictive meaning, especially limited current opportunities for learning and other extracurricular activities, as well as limited choice for the future. That is, poverty not only affected present-day lived circumstances but also future life trajectories, limiting what people can imagine, plan, and do about their future.

Third, regarding gender, women referred more often to the emotional, psychological, and mental aspects of poverty than men did. This finding suggests that the non-material effects of poverty, including anxiety, pressure, lack of emotional space, feelings of inferiority, and mental exhaustion, may be particularly severe for women. It also indicates that gender differences must be considered when examining how poverty is experienced emotionally and psychologically.

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These findings suggest that knowledge of poverty generated from lived experiences is internally diverse. Based on participants' lived experiences of poverty, their accounts collectively constitute a shared basic knowledge framework of poverty. However, within this framework, they tend to express the meanings of poverty differently according to their attributes. This is an aspect of participatory poverty research. While Participatory poverty research seeks to include the voices of people living in poverty, it should not be assumed that those voices are singular or unified. The present study showed that participatory research can incorporate the experiences, interpretations, and concerns of people living in poverty into a research framework without erasing their internal diversity. In other words, participatory research can make visible the different voices of people living in poverty.

This study has some limitations as well. As this is a secondary analysis of the data generated in Chen's (2024) participatory poverty research project, the analysis is based on the existing research design and the seven-aspect framework developed in an earlier study. Therefore, the present study examined the differences in the meaning of poverty within this framework, focusing specifically on nationality, social status, and gender. Beyond this framework, future research should examine other important differences among people living in poverty, such as family structure, employment status, and other factors, as well as how these differences relate to how people understand and express the meaning of poverty.

In conclusion, this study showed that the meaning of poverty is both common and internally diverse. Building on Chen's (2024) seven-aspect framework, this study clarified how participants shared a basic understanding of poverty while emphasizing and expressing its meanings differently according to their nationality, social status, and gender. When these meanings intersect with participants' diverse attributes, poverty emerges as a more complex, multilayered concept. Participatory poverty research can generate a substantial amount of rich data grounded in lived experiences. Through a secondary analysis, this study brings these data into the analysis more meaningfully, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of poverty in Japan.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding this research.

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