Poverty, Perceived Economic Strain and Psychological Distress among Older Thai Adults

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Introduction

Indeed, poverty among older persons is still a major problem in many developing countries as well as several developed ones (Glasgow, 1993). It has been widely documented that poverty is negatively associated with health and well-being (Chan et al., 2002; Zimmer, 2008). Hence, the older persons living in poverty may be vulnerable to economic hardships and health problems. Prior studies conducted in the United States have found that rates of transition into poverty in old age are higher for women, ethnic minorities, those with lower educational attainments, the disabled, widows and widowers, those living alone, and those living in rural areas (Angel et al., 2003; Glasgow, 1993). However, there have been only a few studies which explored the impacts of poverty on health and well-being in older persons, particularly in the poor countries (Zimmer, 2008).

Poverty is significantly related to subjective measures of economic conditions such as perceptions of income adequacy or economic strain (Malmgren et al., 1996). Much evidence has shown that financial strain influences psychological health and well-being of the elderly (Chou & Chi, 2000). The work by Cheng and colleague (Cheng et al., 2002) indicated that perceived financial sufficiency is the strongest predictor of elderly mental health. The 3-year longitudinal study of Chou and Chi (2002) also found that financial strain is the strongest predictor of life satisfaction among Chinese elderly in Hong Kong. In the 18-month longitudinal study of American elders, Krause (1987) reported that financial strain at baseline brought to bear a significant impact on depression at follow up. Chi and Chou (1999) similarly found that financial strain influenced depression for both older men and women.

In Thai society, family members, particularly children, play a major role in providing resources and assistances to older parents. At present, family structure has become predominantly nuclear, co-residence with children has declined and living alone or only with a spouse has increased (Knodel & Chayovan, 2009). However, children are still the most common source of income for older Thais (Zimmer & Amornsirisomboon, 2001). Knodel and Chayovan (2009) reported that 52.3 percent of the elderly income come from their children, and 28.9 percent come from their paid work. Financial dependence on children increases for the older persons aged 70 years and over and for female elderly, whereas income from work decreases with age because labor force participation and income generating activity decline with increased age.

Amid social changes and economic constraints, intergenerational relationships may be impacted. Given the projected demographic changes, the old age economic dependence ratio will increase and this trend is expected to continue into the foreseeable future. The potential support ratio (PSR), which denotes the ratio of working age people aged 15-59 years per person aged 60 years and over, is shrinking from 10.3 in 1980 to 5.7 in 2010 and 2.4 in 2030 (Knodel & Chayovan, 2009). This means that the elderly will be supported by fewer working age people and the burden on family members caring for their elderly parents will increase significantly in the near future.

While numerous studies in Western countries have focused on the social and economic constraints facing older persons, especially older women, few studies have focused on those among Thai older people (Thanakwang & Soonthorndhada, 2007). There is also lack of previous research on socioeconomic status and its impacts on health and well-being among older adults in non-Western society, particularly in Thailand (Zimmer & Amornsirisomboon, 2001). Although it is well established that more than one-fourth of Thai elders have an annual income below the
poverty line and that children are their main income source, little research has focused on whether poverty and family support influence their economic strain and psychological well-being. To date, there are still significant gaps in our understanding of the intervening mechanisms of objective poverty and family support on perceived economic strain and psychological distress. Therefore, the present study attempts to explore the relationships between poverty, measured by having income below the poverty line, perceived economic strain, and psychological distress among older Thai adults. The mediating role of perceived economic strain in the relationship between poverty and psychological distress is examined, and the moderating effects of sources of income and family support in the links between poverty and perceived economic strain and psychological distress are assessed.

**Conceptual Framework**

The Stress Process Model proposed by Pearlin and colleagues (Pearlin et al., 1990; Pearlin & Skaff, 1996) was used to explain the effects of poverty on psychological distress via perceived economic strain, sources of income, and family support. The Stress Process Model includes five major conceptual domains: (a) contextual characteristics, (b) sources of stress both objective and subjective stressors, (c) role and intrapsychic strains, (d) internal and external mediators, and (e) outcomes of health and well-being. Therefore, the impact of stress on psychological distress is through a function of the external social resources available and internal resources of individuals. Specifically in the Thai context, the cultural aspect of filial support is believed to be important intrinsic mediator.

This present study contributes to knowledge of objective poverty on psychological distress and examines the effect of mediators. The analysis uses of nationally representative data for Thailand and the conceptual model for this study is shown in Fig. 1 below.

![Fig 1: A Conceptual Model of Psychological Distress of Older Thai adults](image)

**Material and Method**

**Data Source**

The source of data was the 2002 Survey of the Elderly in Thailand conducted by the National Statistical Office (2002). Stratified two-stage sampling was employed to produce nationally and
regionally representative samples. Seventy-six prov inces in five regions (North, Northeast, Central, and South, including Bangkok) of Thailand in the year 2002 were allocated. All persons aged 50 years and over in selected households were eligible to be interviewed. Data were collected from April to June 2002, yielding 43,447 completed interviews. In this study, the analysis was restricted to the older population aged 60 years and over, which reduced the number of the samples to 21,417. Sampling weights were applied in order to make the sample nationally representative.

Data Analysis
Descriptive statistic and bivariate analysis were used to describe correlations among the study variables. Second, the mediating effect of economic strain on the linkage between poverty and psychological distress was examined after controlling for socio-demographic and health status variables. The analytic method suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986) was used that the 3 conditions must hold. The first condition is that the independent variable must significantly affect the mediator variable. The second condition is that the independent variable must significantly affect the dependent variable. The third condition is that the mediator must significantly affect the dependent variable. A mediating effect exists if the following conditions are met: (a) variations in the independent variable (poverty) significantly predict variations in the mediator (perceived economic strain), (b) variations in the mediator variable significantly predict variations in the dependent variable (psychological distress), and (c) when the association in (a) and (b) are controlled in the model, the direct relationship between the independent variable (poverty) and the dependent variable (psychological distress) becomes non-significant. If the direct relationship between the independent variable (poverty) and the dependent variable (psychological distress) is significantly reduced, it indicates the presence of a partial mediating effect.

Lastly, the moderating effects of sources of income and family support were tested using a hierarchical multiple regression analysis. Nine control variables of socio-demographic and health status variables were entered in the first step, followed by main effect variables (second step), and interaction terms (third step). If the interaction terms explain a statistically significant amount of variance in the dependent variable, a moderator effect is present (Bennett 2000). Centered variables were used for poverty, four sources of income, and family support to reduce multicollinearity problems that could be augmented between the direct effects and interaction terms (Aiken and West 1991).

Results
Mediating Effect of Perceived Economic Strain
After controlling for socio-demographic and health-related variables, poverty was significantly and positively associated with the mediator, namely perceived economic strain. Poverty was also significantly and positively associated with the dependent variable, namely psychological distress. Perceived economic strain was significantly associated with psychological distress. The beta coefficient for poverty became statistically insignificant when both poverty and perceived economic strain were included, indicating that perceived economic strain is a complete mediator in the relationship between poverty and the elderly psychological distress.

Moderating Effect of Sources of Income and Family Support
The moderating effect of source of income from working, the sign of multiplicative term was positive, indicating that the impact of poverty on perceived economic strain was higher among elderly respondents who had source of income from working than those who did not. The sign of multiplicative term of poverty and source of income from government welfare was positive, indicating that the impact of poverty on perceived economic strain was higher among the respondents who had source of income from government welfare than those who did not. In case
of the moderating effect of source of income from pension or saving/interest, the sign of multiplicative term was negative, indicating that the impact of poverty on perceived economic strain was lower among the respondents who had a source of income from pension or saving/interest than those who did not. Similarly, the sign of multiplicative term between poverty and source of income from children was negative, indicating that the impact of poverty on perceived economic strain was lower among the respondents who had the source of income from children than those who did not. Thus source of income from pension or saving/interest and from children significantly moderated the harmful impact of the elderly poverty on perceived economic strain.

The impact of poverty on perceived economic strain was lower among the respondents who had a higher level of family support than those with a lower level of family support. Similarly, the impact of poverty on psychological distress was lower among the respondents who had a higher level of family support than those with a lower level of family support. This suggests that family support significantly moderated the harmful impact of both the elderly poverty on perceived economic strain and the elderly poverty on psychological distress.

The findings of the present study can contribute to the important practical implications to alleviate poverty, economic strain, and psychological distress among Older Thai adults. As projected for demographic changes that the rate of the aging population is dramatically increased whereas the rate of fertility is declined, which have resulted to diminish the potential support ratio. Undoubtedly, there are fewer family members available to care and assist older parents in the near future. Intergenerational solidarity within family and filial obligations should be continuously promoted, including economic preparation before aging among the working ages to ensure economic security in the later life should be also encouraged.

References


