

# Introduction

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The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth.

Adorno, 1973: 17–18

At the start of the twenty-first century, almost half the world's people suffer in a state of 'deep poverty amid plenty', measured (somewhat arbitrarily) as an income of less than \$2 a day (World Bank, 2001: 3). Deep poverty is not just a phenomenon of the global 'South' but exists also within the affluent 'North'. In the US, the official poverty rate is over one in ten. In the EU, the latest figures indicate 15 per cent live below the (higher) poverty threshold. In the UK, the proportion is even larger: over a fifth of the population, including more than a quarter of children, compared with one in seven in 1979 of both children and adults.<sup>1</sup>

Poverty as a material reality disfigures and constrains the lives of millions of women, men and children and its persistence diminishes those among the non-poor who acquiesce in or help sustain it. It is therefore not surprising that many who write about poverty emphasize the word's moral and political claims:

If the term 'poverty' carries with it the implication and moral imperative that something should be done about it, then the study of poverty is only ultimately justifiable if it influences

## 2 *Introduction*

individual and social attitudes and actions. This must be borne in mind constantly if discussion on the definition of poverty is to avoid becoming an academic debate worthy of Nero – a semantic and statistical squabble that is parasitic, voyeuristic and utterly unconstructive and which treats ‘the poor’ as passive objects for attention, whether benign or malevolent – a discussion that is part of the problem rather than part of the solution. (Piachaud, 1987: 161)

I write this book with that warning ringing in my ears. There are also ethical issues involved when writing a book about poverty from a position of relative affluence. These include the danger of silencing and treating as objects those with the everyday experience of poverty who are rarely in a position to have their thoughts published. It is therefore important to acknowledge that, in addition to traditional forms of expertise associated with those who theorize and research poverty, there is a different form of expertise born of experience.

My aim is to draw on both forms of expertise. Moreover, my own understanding of poverty derives not just from the academic literature but from sixteen years working with the Child Poverty Action Group, a campaigning charity; from participatory research with Peter Beresford; and from my membership of an independent Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, half of whose members had direct experience of poverty. The last experience involved ‘an extraordinary journey’ in enhanced comprehension, as those of us without direct experience of poverty learned from those who live it daily (CoPPP, 2000: v; del Tufo and Gaster, 2002).

The importance of incorporating the perspectives of those with experience of poverty into the theorization of and research into poverty, through participatory methods, tends to be recognized more in the context of poverty in the South than the North. The use of such an approach in the South has provided new insights into what poverty means and feels like for those experiencing it. The results also offer important lessons for poverty analysis in the North, which is the main focus of this book, at a time when globalization means that the causes of poverty are increasingly common to both (Townsend, 1993; Townsend and Gordon, 2002). Breaking down the intellectual barriers between South and North

could do much to enrich and revitalize thinking about poverty (Maxwell, 2000).

While I write from a UK perspective, I will attempt to apply these lessons from the South to my own analysis. I will also be referring to material from the wider continent of Europe and from the US. Nevertheless, it has to be remembered that what it means to be poor can be very different in different societies, not just as between North and South but also, for instance, as between the US and Scandinavia. Socio-economic structural and cultural contexts shape the experiences and understandings of poverty. Thus 'poverty is at the same time culture-bound and universal' (Øyen, 1996: 4).

## Concepts, Definitions and Measures

This means that there is no single concept of poverty that stands outside history and culture. It is a construction of specific societies. Moreover, different groups within a society may construct it in different ways. Because of the moral imperative of poverty and its implications for the distribution of resources both within and between societies, it is a political concept. As such it is highly contested. Concepts of poverty have practical effects. They carry implicit explanations which, in turn, underpin policy prescriptions. The emphasis placed upon socio-economic structural conditions, power relationships, culture and individual behaviour varies. The policies developed to tackle poverty reflect dominant conceptualizations. In practice, concepts are mediated by definitions and measures and it is important to differentiate between the three, as they are frequently conflated. Thus, for instance, 'concept' and 'definition' are often used interchangeably. A clearer separation between the three terms helps to avoid confusion and unnecessary polarization between broader and narrower notions of poverty.

### Concepts: the meanings of poverty

Concepts of poverty operate at a fairly general level. They provide the framework within which definitions and measure-

#### 4 *Introduction*

ments are developed. In essence, they are about the meanings of poverty – both to those who experience it and to different groups in society. An example would be a ‘lack of basic security’, understood as ‘the absence of one or more factors that enable individuals and families to assume basic responsibilities and to enjoy fundamental rights’ (Wresinski Report, 1987, cited in Spicker, 1999: 153).

A study of concepts of poverty also embraces how people talk about and visualize poverty: ‘discourses of poverty’ as articulated through language and images. These discourses are constructed in different fora, most notably politics, academia and the media. Each of these influences the ways in which poverty is understood by the wider society. In general, it is the understandings held by more powerful groups, rather than by those who experience poverty, which are reflected in dominant conceptualizations. However, this may be changing in the international development context, if powerful bodies such as the World Bank are genuine in their claims to be taking on board the meanings of poverty for those who experience it.

#### **Definitions: distinguishing poverty from non-poverty**

Definitions of poverty (should) provide a more precise statement of what distinguishes the state of poverty and of being poor from that of not being in poverty/poor. The following examples, taken from the British Social Attitudes Survey, are designed to assess the extent to which the general public subscribes to ‘absolute’ or ‘relative’ definitions of poverty (discussed in chapter 1). Is poverty where someone has ‘enough to buy the things they really need, but not enough to buy the things most people take for granted’ or where they do not have ‘enough to eat and live without getting into debt’ (Hills, 2001)?

Following Peter Townsend’s path-breaking work (e.g. 1979), poverty researchers commonly define poverty in relative terms, as having insufficient resources to meet socially recognized needs and to participate in the wider society (as reflected in the first BSAS statement). However, as we shall see in chapter 1, definitions differ not just according to the

absolute–relative yardstick but also in their breadth. Thus, in practice, there is sometimes a degree of overlap between definitions and concepts. For example, broader definitions like those deployed by some UN bodies incorporate notions such as a violation of basic rights and human dignity that are not unique to the state of being poor but are associated with it. Such ‘definitions’ are perhaps better understood as conceptualizations. Other ‘definitions’, such as those sometimes deployed by the UK Government, are more akin to descriptions, listing a number of aspects such as ‘lack of income and access to good quality health, education and housing, and the quality of the local environment’ (DSS, 1999: 23).

### **Measures: operationalizing definitions**

Measures of poverty represent ways of operationalizing definitions so that we can identify and count those defined as poor and gauge the depth of their poverty. Official measures of poverty tend to use income levels while one-off surveys tend to deploy indicators of living standards and of different forms of deprivation. Examples of such indicators are whether someone does not have and is unable to afford two meals a day or is unable to visit friends and family because of lack of resources. Increasingly, it is argued that a rounded measure of poverty needs to combine both income and living standards (see chapter 2). The case is also being made for listening to what people in poverty themselves think are the best measurement indicators (Bennett and Roche, 2000; Galloway, 2002).

As figure 0.1 shows, the movement from concepts to measures involves a steady narrowing of focus. To move straight to definitions and measures without first considering the broader concepts can result in losing sight of wider meanings and their implications for definitions and measures. In particular, it can exclude the understandings of poverty derived from qualitative and participatory approaches. These frequently highlight aspects of poverty that lie outside definitions focused on income and material living standards and that can be difficult to measure in surveys designed to monitor trends over time and between countries (Baulch,

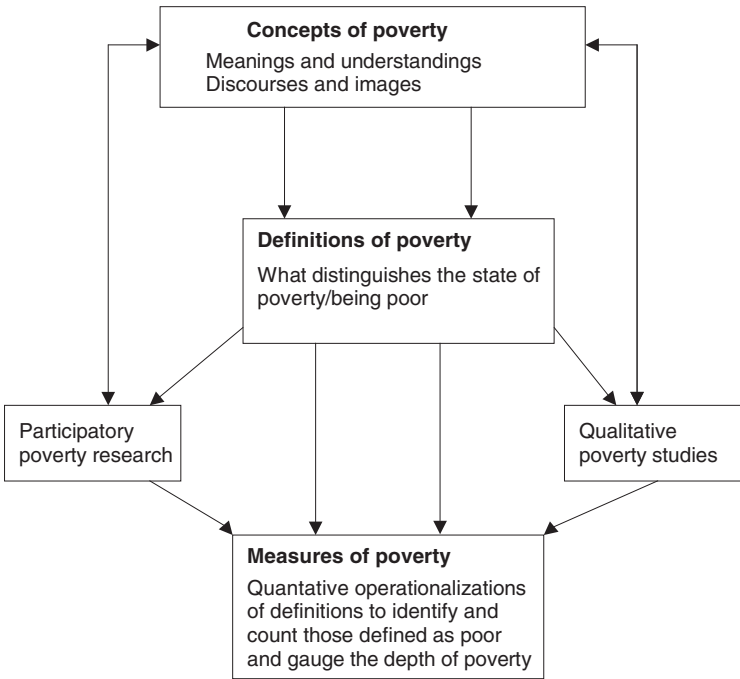


Figure 0.1 The relationship between concepts, definitions and measures of poverty

1996b; Chambers, 1997). Likewise, starting at the bottom with measures can encourage confusion between measures and definitions, so that arguments about competing definitions of poverty often turn out to be about competing measures. The measure of 60 per cent of median income used by the EU and the UK Government is frequently referred to as a definition. The result of treating it as such is an attenuated and highly limited technical definition, which is constrained by limitations of methodology and available data. Measurement is then in danger of becoming a substitute for analysis (McGee and Brock, 2001).

In both cases, omitting the conceptual level can encourage a myopic, technocratic approach that, in its preoccupation with measuring poverty's extent and depth, overlooks how

it is experienced and understood. As Else Øyen argues, some of the energy devoted to 'measurement research' could profitably be channelled to trying to achieve greater 'poverty understanding' in terms of what it means to be poor (1996: 10). If we are to achieve greater understanding, we must pay adequate attention to the conceptual level.

What is at issue here is the non-material as well as the material manifestations of poverty. Poverty has to be understood not just as a disadvantaged and insecure economic *condition* but also as a shameful and corrosive social *relation* (Jones and Novak, 1999). This perspective has been illuminated in particular by the participatory approaches developed in the South. Such approaches highlight non-material aspects of poverty such as: lack of voice; disrespect, humiliation and an assault on dignity and self-esteem; shame and stigma; powerlessness; denial of rights and diminished citizenship. These represent what I shall call the 'relational/symbolic' aspects of poverty. They exemplify what Nancy Fraser terms 'symbolic injustice', 'rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication' (1997: 14). In other words, they stem from people in poverty's everyday interactions with the wider society and from the way they are talked about and treated by politicians, officials, the media and other influential bodies. Terms such as the 'the poor' and 'poor people' can themselves be experienced as dehumanizing and 'Othering' (chapter 5). They are therefore avoided here except where appropriate to the context, when they are placed in inverted commas.

As Caroline Moser (1998) observes, some of the development literature sets up a dichotomy between 'conventional', 'objective', 'technocratic' approaches that reduce poverty to measurable income and consumption on the one hand and participatory 'subjective' approaches grounded in the understandings of people in poverty on the other. While at one level the two approaches reflect different philosophical underpinnings (Shaffer, 1996), arguably they offer complementary rather than incompatible research agendas (see chapter 2). Bob Baulch (1996b) reaches a similar conclusion. He uses the image of a pyramid to schematize these different approaches. The apex of the pyramid focuses on private consumption or

## 8 Introduction

income. Moving down, the pyramid broadens out to embrace access to public resources and amenities and also to assets (including human capital such as education). The base widens further to include 'dignity' and 'autonomy', which 'are stressed by local people in participatory poverty assessments'. As Baulch points out, the last two 'challenge the hierarchy implicit' in the pyramid itself (1996a: 3).

Given the hierarchical nature of the pyramid image, figure 0.2 proposes an alternative 'poverty wheel' to represent a relationship of parity and interdependence between the material and the relational/symbolic aspects of poverty. Within the wheel, the material core of poverty represents the hub. This core is referred to as 'unacceptable hardship' in an alternative schema, developed by Spicker (1999: 159). The rim of the wheel represents the relational/symbolic aspects of poverty as experienced by those living in unacceptable material hardship. Both hub and rim are shaped by social and cultural relations. Thus, material needs at the hub are socially and culturally defined and they are mediated and interpreted at the relational/symbolic rim, which itself revolves in the sphere of the social and cultural.

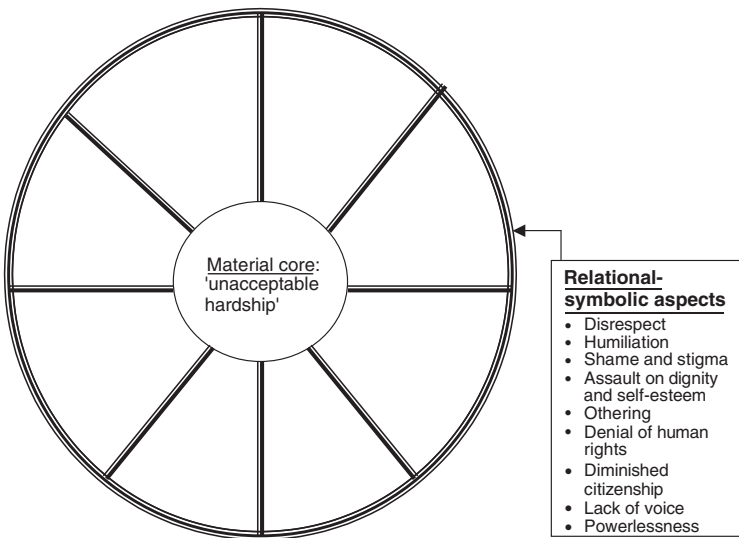


Figure 0.2 Material and non-material wheel of poverty

## Chapters and Themes

This is a book about the concept of poverty. Where appropriate, general reference is made to debates about causes and policy responses. Although these are not the book's main focus, it is important to bear in mind the interconnections between explanations, policy responses and concepts, definitions and measures.<sup>2</sup> The book's structure mirrors the move from the material hub to the relational/symbolic rim. It starts, in chapter 1, with definitions of poverty, which are the bread and butter of many textbooks on the subject, but nevertheless raise some tricky questions. The chapter considers the current state of the debate and locates what is a relatively narrow approach to definition within a broader social scientific literature. The operationalization of definitions is the subject of chapter 2, which gives a flavour of the increasingly sophisticated literature on measurement.

Chapter 3 looks at the structural inequalities that frame, shape and interact with poverty. In addition to the more general context of socio-economic polarization that exists both globally and within many societies, it details how poverty is both a gendered and a racialized phenomenon. It also looks at how disability and age interact with poverty and at how poverty is experienced at the level of the individual, household and wider community. Analysis of socio-economic polarization focuses on vertical hierarchical relations of inequality between those at the top and bottom of society. In contrast, the increasingly influential concept of social exclusion constructs a dichotomous horizontal relationship between those inside and outside of society's mainstream.

Chapter 4 is devoted to the concept of social exclusion, which is now a well-established element in discourses about poverty. It is, though, highly contested. The chapter provides an overview of the growing literature on social exclusion and the controversies it has generated. It will consider what, if anything, it adds as an alternative to the concept of poverty and its potential as a lens through which to illuminate previously somewhat neglected aspects of poverty. As well as the relationship between the material and the relational/symbolic, these include issues of dynamics, processes and agency elaborated in later chapters.

## 10 *Introduction*

Social exclusion can be understood both as a phenomenon and as a discourse. Discourses of poverty are the subject of chapter 5. It represents a further shift of focus towards the relational/symbolic through a concern with how ‘the poor’ are represented in political and academic discourses and media images. It discusses the language of poverty, and its historical associations, together with contemporary discourses of the ‘underclass’ and ‘dependency culture’. It argues that such discourses serve to ‘Other’ and stereotype ‘the poor’ and emphasizes the importance of language and image both to how those in poverty are perceived and treated by the wider society and to how they may perceive themselves.

The cultural meanings created by such discourses create the context within which people in poverty exercise their agency as social actors. These meanings all too often label ‘the poor’ as passive, be it in the role of benign ‘victim’ or malign ‘welfare dependant’. Within the structural framework developed in chapter 3, chapter 6 in contrast draws on contemporary sociological and international development theory as well as poverty research to explore how people in poverty can be characterized as actors in their own lives, exercising agency, including political agency. This then leads into chapter 7. Here, the focus is on human rights, citizenship, voice and power. One of the most striking developments in the contemporary politics of poverty is the growing demands for poverty to be understood as powerlessness and a denial of fundamental rights and for the voices of those in poverty to be heard in public debates.

The Conclusion draws out a number of key themes. They point to a conceptualization of poverty that gives due regard to four key aspects: its relational/symbolic/cultural and discursive facets as well as its material core; the agency of those living in poverty (within structural constraints); the importance of process and dynamics as well as outcomes; and, underpinning each of these, the perspectives and views of those with experience of poverty. Such a conceptualization, it is argued, could help to overcome the false dichotomy between the material/socio-economic and the symbolic/cultural, and underpin a combined politics of redistribution and recognition. More generally, it aims to integrate the, all too

often marginalized, concerns of those in poverty into wider political and theoretical debates about citizenship and democracy and to locate the analysis of poverty within a broader social scientific framework.