

KEY CONCEPTS

POVERTY

RUTH LISTER



SECOND EDITION

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Poverty

2nd edition

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Dedication

To J. with love and thanks

This second edition is also dedicated to the memory of Moraene Roberts and Peter Townsend, who each, in their own way, contributed so much to the anti-poverty cause.

Preface to the First Edition

As I explain in the Introduction, my understanding of poverty has been shaped in part by my experience with the Child Poverty Action Group and more recently as a member of the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power. Over these years, I have been privileged to learn from many people – with and without experience of poverty – too numerous to name. However, before acknowledging those who have directly assisted me with this book, I do wish to pay tribute to Professor Peter Townsend. He has been an influence on my own career; but more importantly, his lifetime's commitment to the anti-poverty cause continues to be an inspiration to many.

In writing this book, I was fortunate to be able to employ Jan Flaherty as a part-time research assistant for a year. I am grateful to her for the excellent assistance she provided and also subsequently for her insights when commenting on the draft text. I am grateful too to a number of friends and colleagues who have commented on the text. Fran Bennett, Jim Kincaid and Adrian Sinfield gave generously of their time to read the whole draft. John Clarke and David Taylor commented on all or part of [Chapter 6](#). Advice on particular chapters from Dennis Smith, Peter Golding and Mike Pickering – all colleagues in the Department of Social Sciences – was testimony to how much I have gained from working in this collegial, inter-disciplinary department. I thank all these colleagues and friends for their feedback, even though I have not been able always to do it full justice, largely because of space constraints. I would also like to thank Andrew Arden, Saul Becker and Jane Lewis for their encouragement and wise counsel at a moment of

crisis, and Louise Knight, my editor at Polity, for her patient and good-natured support.

March 2004

Preface to the Second Edition

In this second edition, I try to do justice to the extensive and rich literature on poverty that has been published since I wrote the first edition. In particular, I have been able to draw on a growing body of participatory research and psychosocial writing that add depth to many of its arguments. As well as a renewed emphasis on the relational/symbolic dimensions of poverty, including this time its dehumanizing effects and a more in-depth discussion of human rights, I pay greater attention to insecurity. This, I realized, was a serious omission in the first edition. I have also expanded the implications for policy and practice in the Conclusion. To provide space for these developments, I have removed the separate chapter on social exclusion, which is now integrated into other chapters.

The second edition has been a long time in coming. I owe my editors, in particular Jonathan Skerrett and Karina Jákupsdóttir, a debt of gratitude for their patience, as I missed deadline after deadline, largely due to my commitments in the House of Lords. But, as I write this preface a few months into the Covid-19 pandemic, the issue of poverty is taking on a new enormity throughout the world and I hope the book might contribute to public understanding of it. Thank you too to all those who helped me assemble material over the years; to members of ATD Fourth World and other 'experts by experience' for what I have learned from you; to Paul Dornan for his invaluable help with [Chapter 2](#); to Fran Bennett and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on the first draft; and to J for your continued love and support.

May 2020

Abbreviations

APPGP	All-Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty
APLE	Addressing Poverty through Lived Experience
BSAS	British Social Attitudes Survey
CASE	Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion
CLASS	Centre for Labour and Social Studies
CEC	Commission of the European Communities
CESCR	Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
CoPPP	Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power
CPAG	Child Poverty Action Group
CRESR	Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research
CV19	Covid-19
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
EAPN	European Anti-Poverty Network
EC	European Commission
EHRC	Equality and Human Rights Commission
EU	European Union
EU-SILC	European Union Statistics on Incomes and Living Conditions
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPPR	Institute for Public Policy Research
JRF	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
NWRO	National Welfare Rights Organization

OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PSE (Survey)	Poverty and Social Exclusion (Survey)
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEU	Social Exclusion Unit
SLA	Sustainable livelihoods approach
STICERD	Suntory and Toyota International Centres for Economics and Related Disciplines
SUWN	Scottish Unemployed Workers Network
UKCAP	UK Coalition Against Poverty
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

1

Introduction

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

Adorno, 1973: 17-18

In both richer and poorer countries, millions still suffer the indignities and hardships of poverty, described in the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development as ‘the greatest global challenge’ for ‘the entire world, developed and developing countries alike’ (UN, 2015: 1, 3). Poverty as a material reality disfigures and constrains the lives of millions of women, men and children. As a preventable ‘social harm’ (Pemberton, 2015), 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 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 or taking up what we might call voice-space on the issue and treating as objects those with the everyday experience of poverty who are rarely in a position to have their thoughts published. To 'lend a voice to suffering', as Theodor Adorno puts it, should not mean erasing the voice *of* suffering in speaking the 'truth' of poverty. 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 borne of experience.

My aim is to draw on both forms of expertise. My own understanding of poverty derives not just from the academic literature but also from 16 years of working with the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), a campaigning charity; from participatory research with Peter Beresford; and from my membership of an independent Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power (CoPPP), 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). I have also subsequently learned from meetings with members of ATD Fourth World (a human rights organization working with people in persistent poverty) as well as from the academic work of 'poverty-class scholars' (Adair, 2005: 817), writing 'from the inside' (McKenzie, 2015: 108), and more popular attempts 'to walk you through what it is to be poor' from both the inside and outside (Tirado, 2014: xx; McGarvey, 2017; Carraway, 2019; Hudson, 2019; Arnade, 2019).

The importance of incorporating the perspectives of those with experience of poverty into the theorization of and research into poverty, through participatory methods, has tended to be recognized in the context of poverty more in the global South than in the global North. The use of such

an approach in the global 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 global North, which is the main, though not sole, focus of this book, at a time when globalization means that the causes and consequences of poverty are increasingly common to both (Townsend, 1993; Townsend and Gordon, 2002; Atkinson, 2019; Spicker, 2020), and the UN has emphasized the universal applicability of its sustainable development goals (2015: 13–14; Bennett, 2019). The disproportionate impact of the 2020 Covid-19 (CV19) pandemic on people in poverty and other marginalized groups throughout the world has served as a brutal reminder of that commonality. Breaking down the intellectual barriers between global South and North has helped to enrich and revitalize thinking about poverty (Maxwell, 2000; Chase and Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, 2015a).

While I write from a UK perspective, I will attempt to apply these lessons from the global 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 global North and South but also, for instance, as between the US and Scandinavia. Socioeconomic structural and cultural contexts shape the experiences and understandings of poverty. Yet a major global study, which bears out a central theme of this book, ‘demonstrates that, despite massive differences in material conditions, the psychosocial experience of poverty is very similar and is much shaped by the shaming to which people in poverty are exposed and the stigmatizing and discriminatory practices to which they are frequently subjected’ (Walker, 2014b: 197; see also Bray et al., 2019). 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. Yet, 'to suggest that poverty is socially constructed is not to deny its reality, but to implicate the whole of society in the nature of its meaning' (Dean, 2016: 13). For these reasons, and 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. In the words of American historian Michael B. Katz, 'poverty remains a national disgrace in part because of the way we define and think about it – which, in turn, shapes the energy we put into its eradication' (2013: xiii). Concepts of poverty have practical effects. They carry implicit explanations that, in turn, underpin policy prescriptions. The emphasis placed upon socioeconomic 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 these three, as they are frequently conflated and 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 measurements 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, 1994: 2). As we will see, insecurity associated with poverty is experienced more acutely than insecurity as it is increasingly found among those on middling incomes (Hacker, 2019).

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 forums, 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, that are reflected in dominant conceptualizations. The box below contains some examples of how people living in persistent poverty completed the statement 'poverty is'. They bring out both the material and psychosocial dimensions that I will be exploring.

Poverty is:

‘Having all the same dreams for the future that everyone else has, but no way on earth to make them come true.’

‘Saying no to my kids every day of their lives.’

‘Dreading every Christmas and birthday because of the disappointment in the children’s eyes.’

‘Sleeping in a bed that used to be someone else’s, wearing cast-off clothes, and being expected to be grateful.’

‘Being just one crisis away from collapsing – every day.’

‘Being treated like nothing, less than nothing, and accepting it.’

‘Having no hope left in me at all.’

Source: ATD Fourth World workshop, Surrey, n.d.

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. Note: this does not imply ‘a firm boundary between the poor and the non-poor’ (Wolff et al., 2015: 32; Hacker, 2019) for, as we shall see in [Chapter 5](#), there is often movement between the two categories.

Following Peter Townsend’s pathbreaking 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. 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, which are not unique to the state of being poor but are associated with it. Such ‘definitions’ are perhaps better understood as conceptualizations.

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. This is important not least in order to hold governments to account. Official measures of poverty tend to be based on incomes (sometimes complemented by deprivation indicators), while one-off surveys are more likely 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 has also been made for listening to what people in poverty themselves think are the best measurement indicators (Bennett and Roche, 2000).

Why concepts matter

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, 1996b). 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 in EU and UK official statistics 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.

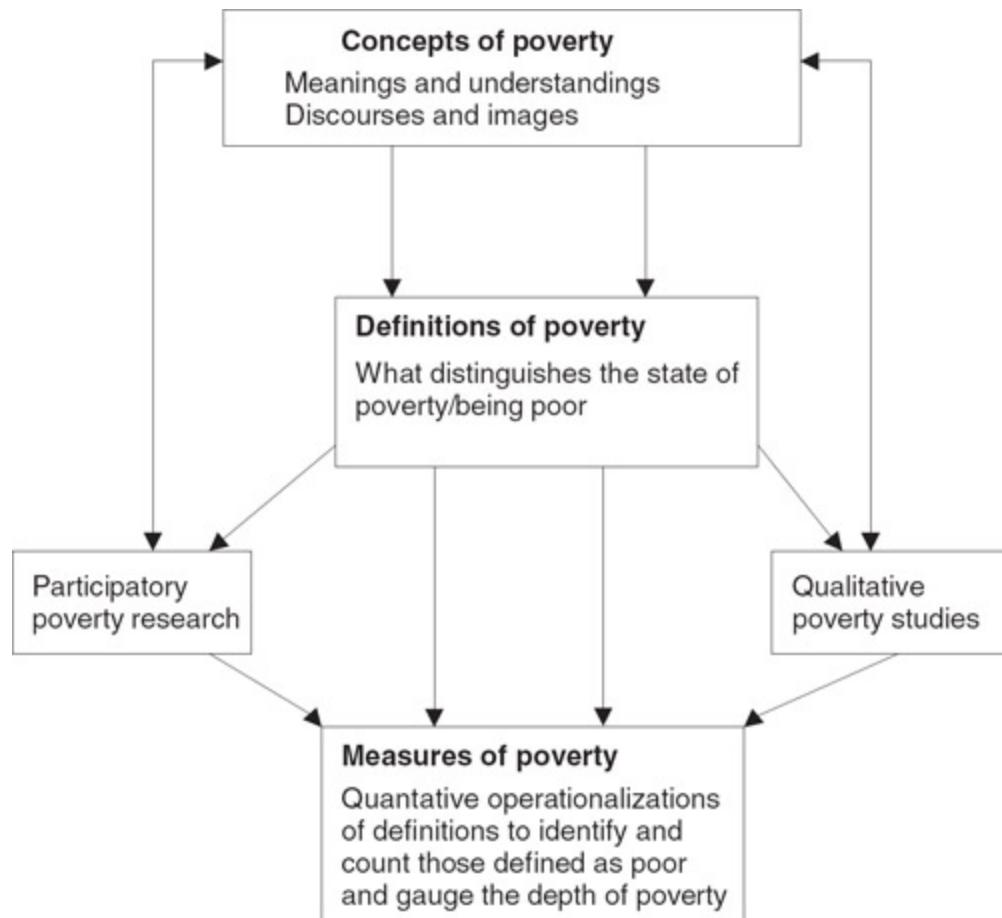


Figure 0.1 The relationship between concepts, definitions and measures of poverty

In both cases, omitting the conceptual level can encourage a myopic, technocratic approach that, in its preoccupation with measuring poverty's extent (and sometimes depth), overlooks how it is experienced and understood. Poverty becomes reduced to statistics, described as 'people with the tears washed off' (Sidel, 1992, cited in Featherstone et al., 2014). In our preoccupation with counting 'the poor', we blind ourselves to how they constitute 'the category of people who do not count' (Ranci re, 2001, cited in Tyler, 2013: 173) and to their suffering. At the end of his book on 'back row America', Chris Arnade warns that, however well-intentioned, in doing so 'we are diminishing them by seeing them as simply numbers to be manipulated' (2019:

283). 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 are the nonmaterial as well as the material manifestations of poverty. This changes the angle of vision so that poverty is understood not just as a disadvantaged and insecure economic *condition*, but also as a shameful and corrosive social *relation* (Jones and Novak, 1999). The latter introduces the psychosocial dimension of poverty, part of the 'psychic landscape of social class' (Reay, 2005: 912; see also Sayer, 2005a, 2005b; Walker, 2014b). At the heart of this psychic landscape of poverty lies social suffering: 'the lived experience of the social damage inflicted ... on the least powerful and the intra-psychic and relational wounds that result' (Frost and Hoggett, 2008: 440). The relational wounds stem from the fact that 'the experience of poverty is determined by others as well as by the self' (Walker, 2014b: 120). People in poverty are wounded at the societal level (through, for example, political and media discourses that shape their experience) and at the interpersonal level (including interactions with officials and professionals) (Ridge and Wright, 2008: 3). This has led one analyst to propose a relational understanding of poverty situations as comprising a web of relations of multiple disadvantage - material and nonmaterial - created by more powerful others (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2006: 481).¹ For those caught in this web, the material and the psychosocial are 'interwoven' in their everyday experience of poverty and social suffering (Hooper et al., 2007: 18).

In his relational account Paul Spicker conceptualizes poverty as '*constituted* by social relationships - relations

such as class, low status, social exclusion, insecurity, lack of rights' (2020: 6, emphasis in original). Applying this globally, he argues that 'a relational perspective' brings out the similarities between countries in the global North and South (2020: 138). In particular, the relational perspective has been illuminated by the participatory approaches developed in the global South. Perhaps surprisingly, given the more extreme forms of material poverty in the global South, such approaches highlight certain nonmaterial 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, which are at odds with 'relational equality' (Wolff and de-Shalit, 2007: 5–6; *Juncture*, 2014). 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' (see [Chapter 4](#)). 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, on the one hand, 'conventional', 'objective', 'technocratic' approaches that reduce poverty to measurable income, and, on the other, consumption and participatory 'subjective' approaches grounded in people in poverty's own understandings. While, at one level, the two approaches reflect different philosophical underpinnings,