

Definitions of poverty: twelve clusters of meaning

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Words acquire meaning from their use, and words that are used extensively are liable to acquire not a single meaning, but a range of meanings. Wittgenstein analysed, as an example, the word 'game' (Wittgenstein 1958). The different meanings of 'game', he argued – for example, a form of play, a sporting event, fighting spirit and the target in hunting – arose not simply as distinct uses, but as part of an interrelated network of meanings, a 'family'. Each member of the family could bear a resemblance to any of the others, but there is no reason to suppose that because A is like B, and B like C, that A is like C. Terms which are linked by family resemblance do not, then, necessarily have any single element in common; there is no 'essential core' of meaning. Rather, there are clusters of meaning. Terms are used if they are judged to be appropriate and like other usages, not because they fit a set of agreed criteria. This tends, over time, to lead to new layers of meaning being added onto other uses.

Debates on poverty have been bedevilled by an artificial academic formalism, which has insisted that there must be an agreed core of meaning, that contradictory examples showed that certain uses were 'right' while others were 'wrong', and that disagreement was based not in a difference of interpretation or the focus of concern, but in a failure to understand the true nature of the problem. Poverty does not, however, have a single meaning. It has a series of meanings, linked through a series of resemblances.

TWELVE DEFINITIONS

In the social sciences poverty is commonly understood in at least twelve discrete senses. The senses overlap; many of the main protagonists in the debate take two or three positions simultaneously. They are discrete because they can be logically separated, so that circumstances which apply in one sense do not necessarily apply in others.

POVERTY AS A MATERIAL CONCEPT

The first group of definitions concern poverty as a material concept. People are poor because they do not have something they need, or because they lack the resources to get the things they need.

NEED The first set of definitions understands poverty as a lack of material goods or services. People 'need' things like such as food, clothing, fuel or shelter. Vic George writes:

poverty consists of a core of basic necessities as well as a list of other necessities that change over time and place. (George 1988: 208)

Baratz and Grigsby refer to poverty as

a severe lack of physical and mental well-being, closely associated with inadequate economic resources and consumption. (Baratz and Grigsby 1971: 120)

The factors which go to make up well-being include 'welfare' values, including self-esteem, aspirations, and stigma and 'deference' values, including aspects of status and power. These views stem from apparently opposed positions: George is advocating an 'absolute' view of poverty, Baratz and Grigsby a 'relative' view. But these are interpretations of the social construction of need, not different definitions of poverty. Both agree that poverty is a lack of something, and they are largely agreed on what is lacking. The main disagreement is about the source and foundation of the needs.

A PATTERN OF DEPRIVATION Not every need can be said to be equivalent to poverty, and there are several interpretations of what makes up poverty. Some interpretations emphasize certain kinds of need, like hunger and homelessness, as particularly important. Some emphasize

the seriousness of the deprivations that are experienced: food and shelter are often seen as more important than entertainments and transport (though there may still be grounds to consider people who are deprived of entertainments and transport as 'poor'). The duration of circumstances is potentially important: a person can be homeless because of a natural disaster, but still be able to command sufficient resources to ensure that needs are met, and met rapidly. Poverty generally refers not just to deprivation, but to deprivation experienced over a period of time (Spicker 1993). Delecek et al. write:

Poverty is not restricted to one dimension, e.g. income, but it manifests itself in all domains of life, such as housing, education, health. (Delecek et al. 1992: 3)

People may experience particular needs (like homelessness or cold) without this being sufficient to constitute 'poverty' – though needs are still clearly important as primary indicators of poverty (Whelan and Whelan 1995). Duration is important, because temporary deprivations (like those experienced by the victims of catastrophes) are not enough to constitute 'poverty'. Poverty is defined, then, on the existence of a pattern of deprivation, rather than by the deprivation itself. Following the argument about lack of basic security, it would be possible for a poor person to be subject to multiple deprivation even though that person was not experiencing a specific deprivation at a particular point of time. The definition of poverty would depend, rather, on cumulative experience over time. *Voices of the Poor*, a series of studies for the World Bank, refers to the idea of the 'web' of deprivation (Narayan et al. 2000) – an expressive metaphor, referring to a constellation of issues where people might suffer from shifting combinations of problems over time (Coffield and Sarsby 1980; Kolvin et al. 1990).

LIMITED RESOURCES Needs are closely linked to resources; every need is a need for something. Poverty can be taken to refer to circumstances in which people lack the income, wealth or resources to acquire or consume the things which they need. Booth wrote that

The 'poor' are those whose means may be sufficient, but are barely sufficient, for decent independent life; the 'very poor' those whose means are insufficient for this according to the usual standard of life in this country. (Booth 1971: 55)

Ashton writes:

Deprivation is surely about 'essential' needs that are unmet. This may be due to a lack of money resources – but it need not be (since adequate resources may be misspent). Poverty, on the other hand, must refer to a lack of the money necessary to meet those needs. (Ashton 1984: 97)

Limited resources, or more precisely a limited command over resources, does tend to imply low consumption, but the terms are not equivalent; some feminists argue that women with limited resources in the household may be poor if they do not have an income in their own right (e.g. those cited in Millar 1996: 56–7). This would apply even though their consumption and standard of living are high.

It is possible to hold to a definition of poverty as limited resources while accepting the preceding definitions; poverty can be a form of need caused by limited resources. The UN has defined poverty as:

a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to services. (UN 1995: 57)

If poverty is defined primarily in terms of need, a need which was not caused by limited resources would be sufficient to make someone poor; if poverty is only a result of limited resources, it would not.

POVERTY AS ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES

If poverty is related to a lack of resources, it can also be understood in economic terms. One of the most widely used approaches to the measurement of poverty is in terms of income, to the point where some social scientists have started to think that poverty is low income.

STANDARD OF LIVING The idea of 'need' supposes that some items or issues are particularly important or necessary. Although the idea of a standard of living is intimately linked with need, it is in its nature a general concept, referring not to specific forms of deprivation but to the general experience of living with less than others. The International Labour Organization suggests that

At the simplest level, individuals or families are considered poor when their level of living, measured in terms of income or consumption, is below a particular standard. (ILO 1995: 6)

Rowntree's *Poverty* did not define poverty precisely, but the chapter in which he begins the discussion of the topic is called 'The Standard of Life' (Rowntree 1902). Ringen argues that poverty is 'a standard of consumption which is below what is generally considered to be a decent minimum' (Ringen 1988: 354). The World Bank defines poverty as 'the inability to attain a minimal standard of living' (World Bank 1990: 26). Their poverty line, probably the most widely used standard of poverty internationally, is based on an arbitrary figure (one or two dollars a day) and used to identify poverty by reference to the overall standard of living which such an income must command.

The distinction between this and what people 'need' should be clear. We might not 'need' tea, newspapers or concerts – three examples used by Rowntree in his definition of the conditions of primary poverty – but people who cannot afford what they do not need might still be considered poor. The standard which can be set might, like the World Bank's level, be set rather below what people need; it might be set above it, at a level appropriate to maintain decency, or at a level relative to wages, or whatever else is thought appropriate. In *The Poor and the Poorest*, Abel-Smith and Townsend argue that

Whatever may be said about the adequacy of the National Assistance Board level of living as a just or publicly approved measure of 'poverty', it has at least the advantage of being in a sense the 'official' operational definition of the minimum level of living at any particular time. (Abel-Smith and Townsend 1965)

INEQUALITY People may be held to be poor because they are disadvantaged by comparison with others in society. O'Higgins and Jenkins write:

Virtually all definitions of the poverty threshold used in developed economies in the last half-century or so have been concerned with establishing the level of income necessary to allow access to the minimum standards of living considered acceptable in that society at that time. In consequence, there is an inescapable connection between poverty and inequality: certain degrees or dimensions of inequality ... will lead to people being below the minimum standards acceptable in that society. It is this 'economic distance' aspect of

inequality that is poverty. This does not mean that there will always be poverty when there is inequality: only if the inequality implies an economic distance beyond the critical level. (O'Higgins and Jenkins 1990)

This approach has important defects: the effect of defining poverty in these terms is that reduction in the resources of the better-off is equivalent to a reduction in poverty, and it becomes impossible to talk of a society in which the majority of people are poor. But that is not to say that the use is necessarily illegitimate, or that it is not widespread.

ECONOMIC POSITION A 'class' of people is a group identified by virtue of their economic position in society. Class is an aspect of inequality, but the inequality it represents is a matter of the social structure, not of the inequality of resources or consumption; resources and consumption are at best an indicator of social position. Miller and Roby argue:

Casting the issue of poverty in terms of stratification leads to regarding poverty as an issue of inequality. In this approach, we move away from efforts to measure poverty lines with pseudo-scientific accuracy. Instead, we look at the nature and size of the differences between the bottom 20 or 10 per cent and the rest of society. (Miller and Roby 1967)

The argument that poor people should be understood as a class is based in a range of different arguments. In Marxian analyses, classes are defined in terms of their relationship to the means of production, and in developed countries poor people are primarily those who are marginalized in relation to the economic system. Miliband argues:

The basic fact is that the poor are an integral part of the working class – its poorest and most disadvantaged stratum. ... Poverty is a class thing, closely linked to a general situation of class inequality. (Miliband 1974: 184–5)

In the Weberian sense, classes refer to people in distinct economic categories: poverty constitutes a class either when it establishes distinct categories of social relationship (like exclusion or dependency), or when the situation of poor people is identifiably distinguishable from others. Charles Booth explicitly identified poor people in terms of classes; the famous 'poverty line' was not based on a measurement of income, but on the lowest wage rates available for a man in full-

time work, and so in the distinction between those who were working and those who were not (Booth 1902, vol. 1: 33; vol. 5: 266).

SOCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

SOCIAL CLASS The consideration of class shades into the social circumstances of poor people. The idea of 'social class' identifies economic position with socio-economic status, a concept based on the linkage of class with social and occupational roles. The concept of class is used both as a means of conceptualizing the position of the poor in structural terms, and as the basis for empirical research on the distributive implications of policy (for example, relating to education or health care) (Edgell 1993). The main description of poor people as a 'class' in recent years has been in terms of the 'underclass', and in that sense it has been roundly criticized by many observers who see the term as a condemnation of the poor. At the same time, many of those who have used the term academically have been leading writers in the study of poverty, including Myrdal, Titmuss and Townsend (cited in Macnicol 1987).

DEPENDENCY Poor people are sometimes taken to be those who receive social benefits in consequence of their lack of means. The sociologist Georg Simmel argued that 'poverty', in sociological terms, referred not to all people on low incomes, but to those who were dependent:

The poor person, sociologically speaking, is the individual who receives assistance because of the lack of means. (Simmel 1908: 140)

Engbersen has described poverty as

the structural exclusion of citizens from all social participation, along with a situation of dependence in relation to the state. (cited Cantillon et al. 1998: 19)

This usage may seem initially unfamiliar, because it has featured very little in the social-science literature. There is, rather, a tendency simply to elide any distinction between poverty and the receipt of social assistance – an elision apparent, for example, in *The Poor and the Poorest*, or in Buhr and Leibfried's study of social assistance recipients (Abel-Smith and Townsend 1965; Buhr and Leibfried 1995).

By contrast, dependency is a major element in the discussion of poverty in the media and popular culture, particularly in discussions in the USA (see, e.g., Critchlow and Hawley 1989 or Schram 1995, for measured analyses). In this discourse, 'the poor ... are increasingly with us, breeding future generations of uneducated bastards dependent on welfare, mugging and drug dealing' (Steizer 1995). As such, the reference to poverty as dependency is still appropriate as a description of how the term is used, and so of its meaning.

LACK OF BASIC SECURITY Although a lack of basic security has been defined in terms directly equivalent to need (Duffy 1995: 36), it may also be seen in terms of vulnerability to social risks. Charles Booth referred to poor people as 'living under a struggle to obtain the necessities of life and make both ends meet; while the 'very poor' live in a state of chronic want' (Booth 1902, vol. 1: 33). Wresinski identified poverty with 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 ... chronic poverty results when the lack of basic security simultaneously affects several aspects of people's lives, when it is prolonged, and when it seriously compromises people's chances of regaining their rights and of resuming their responsibilities in the foreseeable future. (Wresinski Report of the Economic and Social Council of France 1987, cited in Duffy 1995: 36)

By this argument, it would be possible for someone to be poor who is not in need; the distinction between this definition and the first is strong. Although lack of basic security and limited resources are linked, the link is not direct. There are cases, in particular in developing countries, where the effect of increasing resources is also to increase vulnerability.

Diversified subsistence farmers may be poor but are not vulnerable. When they enter the market by selling specialised cash crops, or raising their earnings by incurring debts, or investing in risky ventures, their incomes rise, but they become vulnerable. There are trade-offs between poverty and vulnerability (or between security and income). (Streeten 1995)

LACK OF ENTITLEMENT Wresinski, above, defines lack of security in terms of a lack of rights. Drèze and Sen argue that both depriva-

tion and lack of resources reflect lack of entitlements, rather than the absence of essential items in themselves (Drèze and Sen, 1989). Homelessness results from lack of access to housing or land, not from lack of housing; famines, Drèze and Sen argue, result not from lack of food, but from people's inability to buy the food that exists. The lack of entitlement is fundamental to the condition of poverty; people who have the necessary entitlements are not poor.

EXCLUSION The idea of exclusion has become the dominant paradigm in the discussion of poverty in the European Union, where the idea was seen as a means of avoiding some of the political controversy that had attended the concept of poverty itself.

Social exclusion affects individuals, groups of people and geographical areas. Social exclusion can be seen, not just in levels of income, but also matters such as health, education, access to services, housing and debt. Phenomena which result from social exclusion therefore include:

- the resurgence of homelessness
- urban crises
- ethnic tension
- rising long term unemployment
- persistent high levels of poverty. (Tiemann 1993)

The arguments about exclusion stress the multidimensional nature of the problems. The same case has, of course, been made in relation to poverty.

Poverty can be seen as a set of social relationships in which people are excluded from participation in the normal pattern of social life. The European Community has defined poverty as exclusion resulting from limited resources:

The poor shall be taken as to mean persons, families and groups of persons whose resources (material, cultural and social) are so limited as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life in the Member State in which they live. (European Community 1985)

This extends beyond the experience of deprivation to include problems which result from stigmatization and social rejection, though there is a tendency to use 'exclusion' more specifically in relation to material needs. Clerc sees this as the distinction between exclusion and marginality:

Exclusion results from penury, while marginalisation comes from distance – voluntary or not – from social norms. (Clerc 1989: 625)

POVERTY AS A MORAL JUDGEMENT

Poverty consists of serious deprivation, and people are held to be poor when their material circumstances are deemed to be morally unacceptable. Piachaud argues that poverty consists not just of hardship, but of **UNACCEPTABLE HARDSHIP**. The term ‘poverty’, he writes, ‘carries with it an implication and moral imperative that something should be done about it. Its definition is a value judgment and should be clearly seen to be so’ (Piachaud 1981). To describe people as poor contains the implication that something or other should be done about it. One of the reasons why the existence of poverty in Britain has been challenged is that in accepting that poverty exists people also accept the moral imperatives relating to poverty. It is also why so many critics on the political right discount poverty in moral terms; often the only effective way to argue against a moral position is to adopt a different moral position.

The moral elements of the definition of poverty make it difficult to establish agreement about the elements of the concept, though the consensual approach to poverty pioneered in the Breadline Britain survey identifies a method by which it can be done; the views expressed about minimum standards represent not simply a jumble of opinions, but an indicator of the norms that define what is and what is not acceptable in a society (Mack and Lansley 1985; Gordon et al. 2000).

CLUSTERS OF MEANING

There is some arbitrariness in any classification of this type. This presentation is concerned with the senses in which the term ‘poverty’ is used, rather than with the elements of definitions; it would be possible to introduce a wide range of subcategories. For example, ‘need’ includes measures of subsistence, ‘basic needs’ in the sense used by the UN, and socially constructed needs; exclusion covers social exclusion, economic exclusion, and marginality; class includes Marxist, Weberian and sociological definitions. Looking at different operational measurements of, for example, resources, income, needs or deprivation, it would be possible to present more ‘definitions’ if

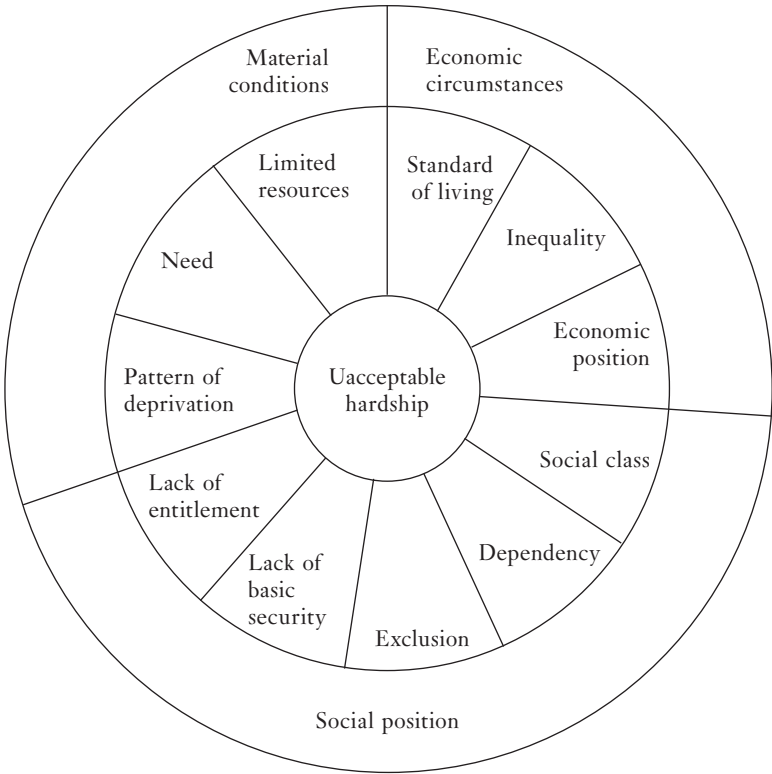
a 'definition' is taken to refer to every particular of the description of poverty.

The omission which may surprise many people in the field is that of absolute and relative poverty. Both are composites, but the core of the distinction between them is a debate on the origin of social need, not on the meaning of poverty itself. The classification also does not consider as distinct categories some synthetic definitions of poverty which have been proposed, such as Paugam's 'social disqualification', which covers class, exclusion, dependency and lack of basic security (Paugam 1993), or Townsend's concept of 'relative deprivation' (Townsend 1979), which incorporates elements of the standard of living, limited resources, exclusion, class and inequality. There is no problem, in principle, with a model that cuts across a range of definitions – though there may be some risk of arbitrariness in determining which factors to include and which not.

The definitional clusters focused on here are conceptually different meanings of poverty; need is not lack of resources, lack of resources is not dependency, and so on. These definitions are discrete, in the sense that they are logically separable and can refer to distinct circumstances. They also overlap; in certain cases, all these interpretations could be applied simultaneously to the same set of circumstances – whether that refers to a homeless person in Calcutta or a single parent claiming benefit in Britain. And the definitions are linked by family resemblance; need is closely related to standard of living, standard of living is closely related to resources, and so on. None of the concepts considered falls so far away from the others for a relationship to be impossible, though there is a gap between, for example, the view of poverty as inequality and of poverty as lack of basic security, or poverty as standard of living and poverty as dependency.

The figure shows the definitions in a ring; each is closely related to the adjacent definitions. The definitions have been classified, for heuristic purposes, as relating to economic position, social position and material circumstances, but the boundaries of each category are fuzzy, and permeable. There are also links across the circle: exclusion and lack of entitlements can both be identified with low resources, and multiple deprivation is sometimes linked with class position. The view that poverty is a moral term can be applied to any of the other concepts of poverty. Alcock argues:

FAMILY RESEMBLANCES BETWEEN DIFFERENT CONCEPTS OF POVERTY



in understanding poverty, the task is to understand how these different visions and perceptions overlap, how they interrelate and what the implications of different approaches and definitions are. (Alcock 1997: 4)

Poverty needs, then, to be seen as a composite concept, embracing the range of meanings.

UNDERSTANDING POVERTY

The process of understanding poverty has been characterized by two very different approaches. On one hand, many academics have sought to give authoritative definition of the concept. This approach is exemplified by 'An International Approach to the Measurement of Poverty', signed by Peter Townsend and seventy-nine of the leading academics in the field. This declaration states:

European social scientists are critical of the unwillingness at international level to introduce a cross-country and therefore more scientific operational definition of poverty. . . . Poverty is primarily an income- or resource-driven concept. It is more than having a relatively low income. . . . If criteria independent of income can be further developed and agreed, measures of the severity and extent of the phenomenon of poverty can be properly grounded. That will lead to better investigation of cause and more reliable choice of priorities in policy. . . . All countries should introduce international measures of these basic concepts and take immediate steps to improve the accepted meanings, measurement and explanation of poverty, paving the way for more effective policies. (Townsend et al. 1997)

This represents an influential school of thought. The central argument for a unified approach is that policies have to be judged by their practical effects, and it should be possible to develop unified criteria by which the effects of policy can be judged.

The main alternative is represented by the World Bank's participative study, *Voices of the Poor*. The Participatory Poverty Assessments sponsored by the World Bank have approached poverty in a different way altogether: examining, not a defined problem, but the terms in which poor people themselves identify and understand the problem. The reports bring together more than 20,000 subjects in twenty-three countries. Irresistibly, with such a large number of participants, this gives a diverse, complex set of understandings of the idea of poverty. Poverty is treated as a multidimensional issue. The researchers focus on ten interlocking dimensions of poverty: precarious livelihoods, excluded locations, physical problems, gender relations, problems in social relationships, lack of security, abuse by those in power, disempowering institutions, weak community organizations and limitations on the capabilities of the poor. Statements from different people in different cultures are classified and brought together in a complex structure. The inclusion of diverse views of poverty at the same time is, to some extent, a product of the method, but it represents a view of poverty: poverty is not a single, easily identifiable condition, but a fluctuating set of circumstances. It may be that the issues which poor people point to are not the issues that other people think of as being part of 'poverty', but the issues still matter to the people they affect. This approach to understanding poverty is strongly linked, then, with a commitment to working from the perspective of the

poor. It is, Lister comments, 'less a method than a philosophy' (Lister 2004: 47).

The alternative approaches have significantly different implications for policy. A unified understanding of poverty implies a definable set of problems and clear criteria. This should make it possible to demonstrate the relative effectiveness of alternative responses. A multidimensional approach, by contrast, implies a flexible response to a wide range of problems, judged by several criteria rather than by a single standard. Perhaps more significantly, the multidimensional understanding of poverty is linked to participative methods and responses to poverty. This is not just about concepts and definitions; it is also about empowering the poor.

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