

## POVERTY: ITS DEFINITION AND MEASUREMENT

Poverty is a term with negative connotations. Poverty is associated with words such as deprivation and lack. To be poor is to be deprived. To be poor is to lack what others - the rich, the 'comfortable' - possess. Poverty is sometimes also found associated with deprivation. Poverty is understood to be a stain or stigma on an individual's or social group's identity. Poverty is sometimes understood to be the consequence of deprivation.

Poverty is also an 'essentially contested concept' (Gellner). If one were seeking an unambiguous and fixed definition of poverty one is bound to be disappointed. For the definition, measurement and explanation of poverty are three areas of sociological analysis which are underwritten by controversy and debate.

### DEFINING POVERTY:

Absolute poverty is defined according to an absolute minimum standard, often called the 'poverty line'. Absolute is used here to indicate a fixed and minimum set of basic resources which all individuals are said to require in order to physically sustain life. As you might expect such a definition of poverty is most often used and applied to humankind as a whole. In this sense we might expect to see such a definition used by international and global organisations such as the United Nations.

Many sociologists have criticised the idea of an absolute definition of poverty. They argue that such a general and global definition fails to take into account important socio-economic differences between countries and nations. The relative definition of poverty is offered as an alternative to the absolute definition. This definition is based upon two sets of assumptions: First, that 'poverty' can only be defined and understood within the broader socio-economic context of the society in which individuals live. Relative poverty measures whether or not an individual is poor in relation to those around them. The relative definition of poverty suggests that the 'poor' in any given society are in part defined by their opposite - the 'rich'.

Secondly, to the extent that a society has a distinctive set of cultural values and norms, any definition of poverty must be attentive to the sets of choices and expectations that individuals have in any society. The relative definition of culture points to the necessity for all individuals to be able to participate in the salient institutions of their society and to share in all the goods and services that are basic to that society. Thus an elderly person living alone in Britain may be argued to be in need of a telephone in order to be able to communicate with distant friends and relatives. However it might be difficult

How do we define poverty?
How do we measure poverty?
How do we explain poverty?

to make the same argument for an elderly person living in Ethiopia.

Of course societies do not possess a consensus of cultural values (apologies to unreconstructed Durkheimians!). In fact all societies possess social divisions of one sort or another, whether they are of class, gender, race or age etc... A relative definition of poverty would need to 'relativise' definitions in accordance with such divisions.

As a consequence of these two points it follows that any 'poverty line' must be drawn relative to given societies and further to the social divisions therein. Moreover such a line could not be fixed for all time since as conditions change in a society so too must measures of poverty and wealth.

However there are at least two sets of objections to the relative definitions of poverty. First that the use of such definitions suggests that we cannot ever eradicate poverty since as societies experience increases in living standards so too will the relative poverty line simply move upward 'shadowing', as it were, those living standards.

Secondly, there arises the not uncontroversial issue of whom or what institution constructs the definition of poverty and the corresponding poverty line. Given that all societies possess some form of social division there will necessarily be dispute as to question of definition.

### **MEASURING POVERTY:**

Income poverty means that you are poor if you have less money than the defined poverty line for your country. Measuring poverty is always a problem, especially if you recognize that just using money is not enough.

Human poverty takes into account other factors, such as life expectancy, infant malnutrition, illiteracy and lack of food or clean water. Basic needs definitions also go beyond money, to include all the things that a person needs in order to survive – including employment and participation in society.

Cultural poverty is an important idea. It asks us to make the links that exist, but are often not explicated, between economic deprivation and marginalisation on the one hand and the politics and culture of a society on

the other. Thus can someone be said to be 'impoverished' because of their 'social exclusion' from the core institutions of any given society? Thus many individuals in democratic societies are often excluded from their full rights as voters and citizens. Thus it has been said by many commentators that in the U.S.A., it is easier to get a credit card than to register to vote!

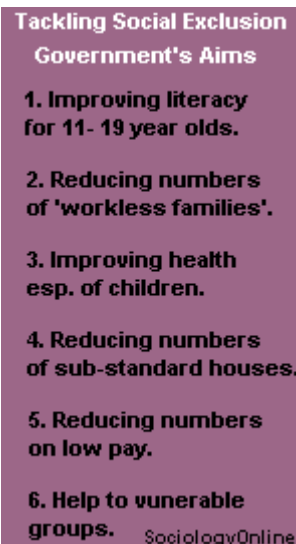
The Rowntree Trust/New Policy Institute uses 50 indicators with which to measure poverty in Britain.

## GLOBAL MEASURES OF POVERTY

There are a number of new measurements emerging, such as the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare. This measures 'quality' economic activity by, for example, making a subtraction for air pollution and an addition for unpaid household labour.

Another method is the Human Poverty Index. This is ranked according to three main areas of deprivation: survival; knowledge and a decent standard of living. In the industrial world, where the Index also includes social exclusion, some 7 to 17% of the populations are classified as poor. The higher the percentage figure, the greater the poverty in that country.

Another set of measures is the Gender-Related Development Index. This is a measure of female poverty and development across a number of variables.



## EXPLANATIONS OF POVERTY AND THE POOR

There are two broad sets of explanations on the question of poverty and its causes. It must be remembered that within each of these two explanations there exist distinctive theories. However, especially since the increasing use of the term 'underclass' by many sociologists and commentators alike, with which to designate the poor, these two

explanations can be seen, in many instances, to take up alternative and extreme positions in relation to one another.

### **CULTURAL DEPRIVATION EXPLANATIONS.**

These types of explanations are often referred to by their opponents as 'victim-blaming' explanations. For the essential quality of such explanations is their tendency to pinpoint the cause of poverty as being a result of the poor themselves! In short, such explanations suggest the poor are individuals who have been either badly socialised such that they possess deviant values or are part of a 'deviant subculture'. They are said to be 'work-shy', preferring instead to live on state welfare benefits. This explanation of poverty argues that the poor's subculture may be so pervasive that these deviant attitudes are reproduced from one generation to another by parents who act as 'deviant role-models' to their children. In this way the poor are said to be part of a subculture which is somewhat antagonistic to the mainstream culture of society.

Since the 1970s the concept of an underclass has been increasingly used with which to categorise the poor. Both in North America and western Europe the underclass is said to consist of the following constituent groups: Single-parent families, the unemployed, the low-paid, those who survive on state benefits and the homeless.

What is said to link these social groups into the larger category of the underclass is said to be the commonality of their (deviant) attitudes.

Zygmunt Baumann has recently cast doubt on this presumption that there is an underclass with 'deviant' values. He suggests that in fact the term 'underclass' is an 'invented category' which, sadly, belongs:

"..to the imagery of a society which is not all-embracing and comprehensive....Underclass evokes an image of a class of people who are beyond classes and outside hierarchy, with neither chance nor need of readmission; people without role, making no useful contribution to the rest, and in principle beyond redemption." (page 66, Z. Bauman (1998) 'Work, consumerism and the new poor' Open University Press)

In many of these theories of an underclass there will be references to their so-called 'depraved' and 'criminal' attitudes.

### **STRUCTURAL EXPLANATIONS OF POVERTY**

Structural, or as their sometimes referred to Material Explanations of poverty are of greater sociological importance because they seek to demonstrate the wider social determinants of poverty. Such explanations will variously consider the economic, or the political, or the social structures and institutions of society as being the causes

**and reasons for poverty and the poor. In some senses these explanations may be referred to as 'society-blaming' explanations.**

**Neo-Marxists, for example, would suggest that the structures and institutions of the capitalist economy necessarily entail the impoverishment of millions across the globe.**

**Feminists might argue that the structures and institutions of patriarchy necessarily entail poverty and in particular 'the feminisation of poverty'**

**Here the attempt is made to construct a holistic account of the place of poverty in society-as-a-whole and not to place the blame for poverty on the poor. In short these explanations reject the individualistic approach to poverty of the cultural deprivation theorists.**