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## Defining Poverty

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The concept of poverty is translated into policy through a more precise set of definitions and measures. While, as argued in the Introduction, it is important not to confuse definitions and measures, some of the issues raised straddle the two and loop back into conceptualizations. Definitions are the subject of this first chapter; measures are dealt with in the second. After a general discussion of different approaches to defining poverty, chapter 1 looks at the traditional opposition between ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’ definitions and at alternative formulations that attempt to reconcile the two.

### Approaches to Defining Poverty

How we define poverty is critical to political, policy and academic debates about the concept. It is bound up with explanations and has implications for solutions. Value judgements are involved. Definition thus has to be understood as a political as well as a social scientific act and as such has often been the source of controversy. There is no single ‘correct’ definition. However, as we shall see, most researchers now accept that any definition has to be understood, at least in part, in relation to particular social, cultural and historical contexts. This has implications for studies that attempt to compare poverty in very different kinds of society.

## Broad or narrow?

Definitions vary according to their narrowness or breadth, that is in terms of: whether they are confined to the material core; the nature of that material core; and whether they embrace also relational/symbolic factors associated with poverty, as identified in the Introduction. Nolan and Whelan are among those who argue for a definition towards the narrower end of the scale on the grounds that too broad a definition runs the danger of losing sight of the distinctive 'core notion of poverty' (1996: 193). Following Townsend, they define poverty in terms of the inability to participate in society (which is broader than more 'absolute' definitions confined to subsistence needs), but emphasize that what is distinctive is the 'inability to participate owing to lack of resources' (1996: 188). This confines their definition 'to those areas of life where consumption or participation are determined primarily by command over financial resources' (1996: 193; Veit-Wilson, 1998, 2004).

By implication they exclude non-material elements found in broad UN definitions, for example: 'lack of participation in decision-making', 'a violation of human dignity', 'powerlessness' and 'susceptibility to violence' (cited in Langmore, 2000: 37). Similarly, they exclude some of the non-material aspects emphasized by people in poverty themselves, such as lack of voice, respect and self-esteem, isolation and humiliation (UKCAP, 1997; Galloway, 2002). Given that, as argued in the Introduction, the function of a definition is to differentiate the condition defined (poverty) from other conditions (non-poverty), it makes sense to pitch the *definition* of poverty towards the narrower end of the spectrum. Aspects such as 'lack of participation in decision-making', 'susceptibility to violence' and 'humiliation' are not unique to the condition of poverty; they are also associated with other conditions such as being Black in a White-dominated society. However, in order not to lose sight of the condition's wider meanings and of the interpenetration of the material and the relational/symbolic, it is important that definitions of poverty are not divorced from wider *conceptualizations* such as that developed in subsequent chapters.

### Income or living standards?

Another source of variation in definitions of poverty, reflected in the literature on measurement, lies in whether they are rooted in conceptualizations that are concerned with, on the one hand, a person's material resources, especially income, and, on the other, with actual outcomes in terms of living standards and activities (Nolan and Whelan, 1996). As Stein Ringen puts it, 'in the first case, poverty is defined indirectly through the determinants of way of life, in the second case, directly by way of life' (1987: 146). In practice, these two approaches are often treated as complementary (as in Nolan and Whelan's definition above and Townsend's below). Indeed, Ringen's own definition is not unusual in combining the two: 'a low standard of living, meaning deprivation in way of life because of insufficient resources to avoid such deprivation' (1987: 146). Put simply, someone is "poor" when they have both a low standard of living and a low income' (Gordon et al., 2000b: 91).

A. B. Atkinson makes a related, but more fundamental, distinction between a concern with standard of living and a concern with a citizen's '*right* to a minimum level of resources' (1989: 12, emphasis added). The former is more common in the literature and as the basis for empirical research. The latter might be said to be implicit in measures of poverty based on the numbers falling below a certain point in the income scale or the level of income provided by a country's social assistance scheme (see chapter 2). While the 'right to a minimum level of resources' has not been widely adopted as an explicit definition of poverty, it does have a value as one element in a broader conceptualization of poverty. It means that people 'are entitled, as citizens, to a minimum income, the disposal of which is a matter for them' and which 'may be regarded as a pre-requisite for participation in a particular society, as a guarantee of "positive freedom"' (A. B. Atkinson, 1990: 8). As we shall see in chapter 7, poverty is increasingly being conceptualized as a denial of human and citizenship rights.

The conceptualization of poverty in this way is also helpful from the perspective of understanding and combating women's poverty. Following Atkinson, Stephen Jenkins sug-

gests that a feminist concept of poverty can be described in terms of an '*individual* right to a minimum degree of potential economic independence' (1991: 464, emphasis added; see chapter 3 below). Although the feminist definition propounded by Millar and Glendinning is not couched in the language of rights, it focuses on the individual's capacity to be self-supporting on the grounds that 'people who are financially dependent upon others must be considered vulnerable to poverty' (1992: 9). The notion of vulnerability is helpful to understanding the situation of women without an independent income who nevertheless enjoy a comfortable standard of living.

### Income or capabilities?

So far, I have outlined a focused approach to defining poverty in terms of an inability to participate in society, involving both a low income and a low standard of living. The work of Amartya Sen offers an alternative perspective on the role of low income in the definition of poverty. It has been hugely influential within the international development context, contributing to a paradigm shift in the meaning of development away from economic growth and GDP to a focus on 'poverty as a denial of choices and opportunities for living a tolerable life' (UNDP, 1997: 2; Vizard, 2001). The human poverty and development indices published in the annual UNDP Human Development Report reflect Sen's approach. Although its initial impact on thinking and research about poverty in the North was less marked, increasingly Sen's ideas are percolating through. His approach offers insights that are helpful to poverty's broader conceptualization in the North. It also, as we shall see below, throws light on the absolute–relative question.

Sen takes a step backwards from both income and living standards to ask why they matter. His answer is that they don't matter in their own right, for they are simply instrumental to what really matters, namely the kind of life that a person is able to lead and the choices and opportunities open to her in leading that life. At the heart of his approach is an understanding of living as involving 'being and doing'. Sen

uses two key terms to express this idea: 'functionings' and 'capabilities'. 'Functionings' refer to what a person actually manages to do or be; they range from elementary nourishment to more sophisticated levels such as participation in the life of the community and the achievement of self-respect. 'Capabilities' denote what a person *can* do or be, that is, the range of choices that are open to her. Critical here is the freedom people enjoy 'to choose between different ways of living that they can have reason to value' (Sen, 1990: 114).

Money, Sen argues, is just a means to an end and the goods and services or 'commodities' it buys are simply particular ways of achieving functionings (1985a, 1992, 1999). The role of money in achieving functionings depends on the extent to which goods and services are commodified (i.e. are exchanged for money), so will vary between societies. Moreover, the relationship between money and capabilities/functionings depends in part on how the former is converted into the latter by individuals. This can vary according to personal factors such as age, sex, pregnancy, health, disability or even metabolic rate and body size, which can affect the level and nature of a person's needs. For instance, the capability to function of a disabled person may be lower than that of a non-disabled person even if the former's income is higher than the latter's. This is because of the costs associated with the additional needs disabled people may have to meet in order to achieve similar functionings to non-disabled. Sen's argument is that poverty should therefore be defined in terms not of income and actual living standards but of capability failure: 'the failure of basic capabilities to reach certain minimally acceptable levels' (1992: 109).

There are thus two main planks to the case Sen makes against defining poverty in terms of low income or material resources. The narrower one, concerning the differences in the ability of people to convert income into capabilities, is addressed by Nolan and Whelan. They point out that, as Sen concedes, it is possible to take some account of such interpersonal factors in the setting of income poverty lines. However, on the basis of their own research they conclude that, other than in the case of disability, 'it is not clear that interpersonal variation is so pronounced as to pose a major problem' (1996: 184). Moreover, there is a danger that too great

an emphasis on physical factors that affect the conversion of income into capabilities could encourage a narrow focus on physical needs and their physiological rather than social construction (see below).

The more fundamental plank concerns the relationship between low income and a person's ability to live the kind of life she or he values. Sen's formulation of this relationship is helpful in a number of ways. It reminds us that income is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. It focuses on the individual, thereby rendering gender inequalities more easily visible (Jackson, 1998; Razavi, 2000). It also constructs human beings as people with agency for whom the freedom to be able to make choices about what they want to be and do and about how they deploy the resources available to them is of fundamental importance (see chapter 6).

What is at issue is 'a life that is worthy of the dignity of the human being' (Nussbaum, 2000: 5). In effect, capability theorists focus on the positive – of the kind of life we want people to be able to achieve in order to 'flourish' (Nussbaum, 1995: see also Pogge, 2002) – rather than the negative – of the lack of material resources that can prevent them from achieving it. In doing so, they usefully integrate poverty into the wider concerns of the population as a whole and into a wider social scientific literature, rather than ghettoizing it in a separate box. In the context of the South this is reflected in ideas of 'human development' and 'well-being' (UNDP, 1997, 2003; Narayan et al., 2000). Indeed, the concept of 'well-being' is gaining currency in the North also, where a similar approach can be discerned in the notions of 'quality of life' and 'social quality'. These too involve 'a shift of perspective from negative to positive' (Baars et al., 1997: 302). Both Sen and Martha Nussbaum have made the link between their capabilities approach and the notions of 'well-being' and 'quality of life', 'to be assessed', Sen suggests, 'in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings' (1993: 31). They point to the strong parallels between their own work and the 'level of living' surveys conducted by Scandinavian social scientists (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993). Motivated by a broader concern with inequality rather than poverty, these focus on how individuals as 'active beings' are able to use their resources (material and non-material) to 'control and

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consciously direct [their] living conditions' (Erikson, 1993: 73; see chapter 6 below).

Parallels can also be drawn with the concept of 'social quality' developed more recently by European social scientists (Beck et al., 1997, 2001). However, looking at the notion of capability-failure through the lens of social quality helps to illuminate not just the strengths of the notion's positive focus but also its weaknesses as a *definition* of poverty. Social quality is defined as 'the extent to which citizens [and other residents] are able to participate in the social and economic life of their communities under conditions which enhance their well-being and individual potential' (Beck et al., 2001: 7). Although poverty is 'central to the concept of social quality' and its reduction would represent an indicator of social quality, it is only one of a number of conditions that serve to diminish social quality and cannot serve as the sole measuring rod (Beck et al., 1997: 11; 2001). Moreover, the opposite of well-being is ill-being which may, or may not, be associated with poverty (Baulch, 1996b; Bradshaw, 2002)

The problem with defining poverty as capability-failure is that it is in effect conflating a wider condition – be it capabilities, quality of life, well-being or social quality – with what is conventionally understood as one aspect of that condition, namely being in poverty or not. If the two are treated as synonymous, it becomes impossible to separate out poverty as conventionally understood from other conditions that serve to undermine capabilities, well-being or social quality. Sen himself acknowledges that 'the perspective of capability-poverty does not involve any denial of the sensible view that low income is clearly' a major factor in poverty, 'since lack of income can be a principal reason for a person's capability deprivation' (1999: 87). He also makes clear that low income is not the only influence on capabilities. The question then arises as to whether it makes sense to describe as poverty a situation of capability deprivation that has nothing to do with low income. For example, if a wealthy person's ability to be and do is constrained by serious illness, it is confusing to call this a state of poverty.

One way to get round this is to distinguish between the related notions of 'capability' and 'income poverty' – that is, 'poverty as capability inadequacy' and 'poverty as lowness

of income', as Sen himself does on occasion (1999: 90). The UNDP similarly distinguishes capability-based 'human' poverty from 'income' poverty (1997, 2003). However, such formulations still involve an elastic use of the term 'poverty' to embrace situations which might not involve lack of material resources at all. It might therefore make more sense to talk of 'capability deprivation', as Sen sometimes does (see 1999: 20), so that poverty can retain the more focused meaning discussed above. Alternatively, Karel Van den Bosch suggests a definition of poverty 'as a situation where people lack the economic resources to realize a set of basic functionings' (2001: 1). This ties capability deprivation firmly to income poverty.

While income is, as Sen rightly points out, a means and not an end, the symbolic and actual significance of money – and lack of it – in commodified, wage-based societies should not be underestimated. As Karl Marx understood, money may be instrumental but it is also inseparable from the power that it confers: 'I can carry [money] around with me in my pocket as the universal social power . . . Money puts social power as a thing into the hands of the private person, who as such uses this power' (1987: 431–2).

One danger of downplaying income when defining poverty is that it can be used to justify a policy stance opposed to raising the incomes of those in poverty. It has been argued, for instance, that a capability approach 'requires a change in public policy focus from the reduction of monetary inequalities to the reduction of inequalities in "capabilities"' (Raveaud and Salais, 2001: 61; Williams and Windebank, 2003). This was, in effect, the stance adopted initially by the UK New Labour government. Instead of 'cash handouts', it promised 'hand-ups' – 'opportunity' through education and paid work. Its subsequent anti-poverty policy, in fact, combined a strong emphasis on investment in education, skills, health and public services with some benefit improvements. Although New Labour's policy documents do not refer explicitly to Sen's capability approach, Anthony Giddens, frequently described as Tony Blair's 'guru', makes the link.<sup>1</sup> He suggests that the approach 'provides a solid philosophical grounding for meritocratic policies, and one that dovetails well with the emphasis of the new social democracy

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upon investing in education and skills' (2002: 39). Although this is an interpretation that Sen himself might not necessarily endorse, for those who still believe in the importance of a more equitable distribution of income and resources to tackling poverty, it serves as a warning. Valuable as the notion of 'capability deprivation' is to the conceptualization of poverty, it should complement rather than supplant more conventional, resource-based, definitions.

Moreover, it is important to locate a capabilities approach, with its focus on individual agency, firmly within a broader structural analysis (see chapters 3 and 6) in order to avoid Townsend's stricture that it 'represents a sophisticated adaptation of the individualism which is rooted in neo-classical economics' (1993: 136). Neither capabilities nor functionings are free-floating, but are shaped by structural positioning and also by welfare institutions and levels of collective provision (Raveaud and Salais, 2001; Veit-Wilson, 2004). These also impact on the ability to convert material resources into functionings. The capability framework is thus able to accommodate the structural constraints and opportunities faced by individuals (Robeyns, 2000), even though it does not address inequalities as such (Phillips, 2001).

To conclude this section, I have explained how, on the one hand, Sen's capability approach can enhance our understanding of poverty but why, on the other, it does not constitute a definition of poverty and why it needs to be deployed with caution. We shall return to Sen's work in the next section in the context of the distinction made between 'absolute' and 'relative' poverty.

## Beyond the Absolute–Relative Dichotomy

### 'Absolute' and 'relative' poverty

This distinction has been central to post-war debates about how to define poverty. Definitions deployed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree, the pioneers of modern poverty research, were supposedly 'absolute' in the sense that poverty was said

to be understood as lacking sufficient money to meet basic physical needs. At its most basic, absolute poverty is defined in terms of survival; more commonly it refers to subsistence, linked to a basic standard of physical capacity necessary for production (paid work) and reproduction (the bearing and nurturing of children). Nutrition is central to such definitions: 'an absolute standard means one defined by reference to the actual needs of the poor and not by reference to the expenditure of those who are not poor. A family is poor if it cannot afford to eat' (Joseph and Sumption, 1979: 27).

Implicit in this statement is a rejection of the alternative 'relative' definition, developed by Townsend and articulated most fully in his monumental *Poverty in the United Kingdom*. Townsend criticizes the narrow subsistence notion of needs, divorced from their social context, upon which absolute definitions of poverty were based. According to his alternative, relative, definition:

Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns and activities. (1979: 31)

The European Commission's definition, adopted in 1984, is similar in tone: 'The poor shall be taken 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.' Unlike Townsend's, though, it does not spell out explicitly the dimension of *social participation*, which is key to the concept of 'relative deprivation' upon which his definition of poverty is built. Relative deprivation occurs when people 'cannot obtain, at all or sufficiently, the condition of life – that is, the diets, amenities, standards and services – which allow them to play the roles, participate in the relationships and follow the customary behaviour which is

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expected of them by virtue of their membership of society' (Townsend, 1993: 36).

Relative deprivation is thus a multi-dimensional concept, embracing 'all of the major spheres of life' (1993: 36). Where relative deprivation occurs because of lack of material resources, people can be said to be in poverty. In line with our earlier discussion on the relationship between income and living standards, Townsend emphasizes the need to distinguish between the two: deprivation 'turns on the level of conditions or activities experienced', poverty 'on the incomes and other resources directly available' (1987: 140). He also draws a distinction between 'material' and 'social' deprivation. The former refers to material goods and amenities; the latter to 'ordinary social customs, activities and relationships' (1987: 127). He further differentiates his use of the term to denote 'objective' '*conditions* of deprivation relative to others' from its deployment by W. G. Runciman to denote 'subjective' '*feelings* of deprivation relative to others' (1979: 47, emphasis in original).

The notion of 'relative', which links the concepts of relative poverty and deprivation, needs unpacking, as it embraces a number of different meanings. Broadly these fall into two, interrelated, categories concerning, first, the nature of the *comparisons* to be made in judging whether poverty exists and, second, the nature of human *needs*. We will look at each in turn. The essence of the *comparative* element of relative poverty lies in the idea that it is only possible to judge whether or not someone is in relative poverty in relation to other people living in the same society at the same point in history. This breaks down into three elements: the historical, the cross-national and the intra-national. It is common for those who lived through the terrible hardship of 1930s Britain to claim that 'real' poverty no longer exists. From the perspective of an understanding of poverty as relative, such a comparison is misplaced for it says nothing about what people need to live a decent life in the early twenty-first century. Within shorter time-scales, at a time of a steady rise in general living standards and rapid technological change 'we constantly manufacture new forms of poverty as we drive forward the living standards of the majority without thinking what we are doing to those who cannot keep pace'

(Donnison, 1982: 226). Examples range from expensive forms of heating and inaccessible supermarkets to the spread of new technologies such as personal computers. This has implications for the measures used to monitor trends in poverty (see chapter 2).

Another common response to claims that poverty is prevalent in the rich countries of the North is to point to the deep poverty experienced by millions in the South. Again, the comparison is unhelpful to an understanding of what poverty means for those who live in the former and who face the demands, expectations and costs of living in an affluent consumer society. However, it does open up wider questions of global comparators between the South and the North. In a globalized world, in which countries are more closely bound together through trading systems, electronic communications and cultural networks and diaspora, it may increasingly become 'necessary to accept the relativity of need to the world's as well as to national resources' (Townsend, 1987: 99). This places the issue of poverty in the South firmly in the context of global inequalities.

The final comparative element of relative poverty places poverty in the context of inequality *within* societies. The act of comparison – be it between those on lower and higher incomes, women and men, minority and majority ethnic groups – inevitably highlights any inequalities of material resources that may exist between the groups being compared. This is not, however, to say that relative poverty and inequality are synonymous, as is sometimes claimed. Inequality is concerned solely with the comparison between groups. Relative poverty adds to that comparison the notion of the incapacity to meet certain needs, broadly defined to include participation in society. It is logically conceivable, though unlikely, that a society could be very unequal but without poverty, if all its members had the resources necessary to participate fully in that society.

## Understanding needs

Underlying the various comparative dimensions of the notion of relative poverty is a particular understanding of human

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needs. How needs are understood is critical both to the absolute–relative poverty dichotomy and to the ways in which the debate has moved beyond that dichotomy.

A helpful definition of human needs, which emphasizes the social and psychological, is provided by John Veit-Wilson:

the full range of intangible and material resources that are required over time to achieve the production, maintenance and reproduction of the fully autonomous, fully participating adult human in the particular society to which he or she belongs. . . . Material resources may support the physical organism but it is the full range of social and psychological resources which are required for the experience of humanity. (1999: 85)

Elsewhere, he defines the adequacy of such resources ‘in terms of acquiring and maintaining dignity and being able to take a respectable and recognised part in one’s own society’ (Veit-Wilson, 1994: 14). Human needs are thus located at both the material hub and the relational/symbolic rim of the poverty wheel described in the Introduction. The importance of the theorization of human needs to social policy has been recognized in recent years. A key issue of relevance to definitions of poverty is whether it is possible to identify needs as an ‘objective fact’ or whether they have to be understood as ‘socially constructed’, that is, as a product of a (contested) process of interpretation and labelling. A related question, discussed below, is whether there exist ‘universal’ needs that we share as human beings or whether all needs are conditioned by social, historical and cultural context.

Townsend’s (1979) exposition of the nature of needs places him firmly in the latter camp. Human beings are social as well as physical beings; in addition to physiological requirements our needs reflect a range of social expectations and responsibilities, and also the dictates of laws. Research in the UK suggests that the general population subscribes to just such an understanding of needs. In addition to items connected with basic nutrition, clothing and shelter, well over half of those questioned in the 1999 British Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) Survey and in a follow-up Northern Ireland Study

defined as necessities items such as a refrigerator, washing machine and telephone and activities such as celebrations on special occasions, visiting friends or family and a hobby or leisure pastime (Gordon et al., 2000a; Hillyard et al., 2003). While more 'luxury' items such as videos and home computers were considered necessities by only a minority, the proportion defining them so had increased since a similar survey in 1990.

The other element of Townsend's argument is that even physiological needs, such as for nutrition, cannot be divorced from social, historical and cultural context:

The amount and cost of the food which is eaten depends on the social roles people play and the dietary customs observed as well as the kinds of foods made available socially through production and availability in markets. In short, food in all kinds of society is 'socialised'. . . . The specification of the costs of meeting minimum dietary needs in any society is as problematic as the specification of the costs of fulfilling the entire roles, participative relationships and customs enjoined of a people. (1993: 31)

More recent work on 'food poverty' within industrialized societies throws further light on the significance of the fact that people consume 'food not nutrients' (Dowler and Leather, 2000: 208). Dowler and Leather maintain that 'food is an expression of who a person is, what they are worth, and of their ability to provide for basic needs' (2000: 200). Shopping around for cheap food (often in expensive and inadequately stocked local shops); the attempt to maintain conventional eating patterns, particularly where there are children; the risks of experimenting with new diets when there is no margin for error or waste, if family members reject them; and the inability to enjoy eating as a social activity are all examples of how, for people in poverty, food represents a social as well as a physiological need (Dowler et al., 2001).

As Townsend (1979) acknowledges in a footnote, his conceptualization of need is not new, but, he maintains, the implications had not been fully articulated previously. Indeed, he (together with many other contemporary scholars) cites

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the economist Adam Smith who, in the late eighteenth century, wrote:

By necessaries, I understand not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without. A linen shirt, for example, is strictly speaking not a necessity of life. . . . But in the present time . . . a creditable day labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt. (1776: 691)

The other example Smith gave was leather shoes; had he been writing today, he might have substituted designer trainers, particularly in the case of ‘credible’ young people. The social and cultural conditioning of needs is more pronounced in the context of a modern consumer society. When people are defined increasingly by what they have, ‘the poor . . . are re-cast as “flawed consumers”’ (Bauman, 1998: 2). Commercial pressures, often targeted through television advertising at children and young people, contribute to ‘a common culture of acquisition’, which makes it that much harder for parents in poverty to meet their children’s needs (Middleton et al., 1994: 5). When brand and label take on more significance than the item itself, meeting the most basic needs for clothing and shoes cannot be achieved cheaply (Farrell and O’Connor, 2003). Yet, the cost of failure can be shame, humiliation, bullying and ostracism for children and young people (see chapters 3 and 5).

Jock Young (1999) describes a bifurcated process of ‘cultural inclusion’ and ‘structural exclusion’, in which the delights of mass culture are dangled in front of those without the means to enjoy them. Although most immediate in the wealthy, industrialized societies of the North, globalization means that the process is no longer confined to these societies. Marshall Wolfe observes that ‘people throughout the world are now exposed to messages concerning diversified and continually changing norms for consumption’ and that even the most extreme forms of poverty ‘are being penetrated in incongruous ways by elements of the consumer culture’ (1995: 90–1).

## Rereading Rowntree and the implications for the notion of absolute poverty

One implication of an understanding of even the most basic physiological needs as socially conditioned is that the conventional notion of absolute poverty falls apart (Ringen, 1987). A number of scholars have questioned the previous conventional wisdom that Booth and Rowntree established an absolute subsistence definition of poverty, which was subsequently challenged by Townsend's relativist approach. In other words, the argument goes, the standard account of the paradigm shift in thinking – from an absolute to a relative definition – that took place during the second half of the twentieth century turns out to be a myth, based on a misreading of these pioneers.

Rowntree had an enormous influence on the study of poverty, which is still felt today (Bradshaw, 2000a). The most detailed rereading of Rowntree can be found in Veit-Wilson's 'rehabilitation' (1986), although elements of his thesis appear in J. C. Kincaid's earlier study (1973). Veit-Wilson argues that the distinction Rowntree drew between 'primary' and 'secondary' poverty and his use of a subsistence standard, based on 'merely physical efficiency', to measure the former have been widely misunderstood. Rowntree did not, himself, believe that only those living in subsistence 'primary poverty' were poor. However, he used this standard as a device to convince the wider society that a significant number of those in poverty could not meet their basic physical, never mind their social, needs. Therefore 'the life-style of the poor was at least in part caused by low income and not by improvidence', as was widely believed (1986: 69).

In one of his later works, Rowntree's response to the question 'why do poor people spend their inadequate incomes on social recreational activities instead of food?' revealed his understanding that basic needs are social and not just physical:

The explanation is that working people are just as human as those with more money. They cannot live on a 'fodder basis'. They crave for relaxation and recreation just as the rest of us do. But . . . they can only get these things by going short of

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something which is essential to physical fitness, and so they go short. (1937: 126–7, cited in Veit-Wilson, 1986: 85)

Moreover, the very subsistence level used to measure ‘primary’ poverty included in its list of necessities tea, which has no nutritional value, but is socially and psychologically important in Britain (Ringen, 1987). Indeed, Townsend himself uses the example of tea to illustrate how items deemed to be necessities can derive from social and psychological rather than physical needs (1979: 50). In his later surveys, Rowntree also adjusted his list of commodities in recognition of changing social norms and rising living standards. Earlier, Booth had likewise defined poverty in relation to customary living standards. Thus, while neither Rowntree nor Booth developed a notion of relative poverty of the detail and sophistication of that expounded by Townsend, it is more accurate to describe Townsend as building on their work rather than overturning it.

### The reconciliation of absolute and relative

Having seen how even supposedly absolute definitions of poverty involve an element of relativity we turn to the other source of challenge to the absolute–relative dichotomy. This lies not in a denial of absolute poverty but in a reformulation of its relationship to relative poverty so as to integrate the two into one framework in place of two competing definitions. Such a framework, it is argued, can then be applied to both richer and poorer countries. Of particular significance here is Sen’s work, discussed earlier, and its deployment by Doyal and Gough in the construction of their influential theory of human needs. An alternative attempt at combining absolute and relative within one framework can be found in the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, agreed at the 1995 UN World Summit on Social Development. We will look at each in turn.

*Sen and the ‘absolutist core’* One criticism made of a purely relativist definition of poverty was that its application to countries where the great majority had insufficient resources for an adequate life would mean that only those at the very

bottom would be classified as poor (albeit not in a global context). On its own, it therefore fails to capture the nature of much of the poverty experienced in the South. Sen's contribution has addressed this dilemma in a way which 'reconciles the notions of absolute and relative poverty' (UNDP, 1997: 16). In a controversial paper, he argued that the notion of relative poverty augments rather than displaces that of absolute poverty. There is, he contended, an 'irreducible absolutist core in the idea of poverty', the most obvious manifestation of which is starvation and malnutrition (1983: 159). This absolute core operates in the space of capabilities but frequently takes 'a relative form in the space of commodities' (1983: 161). In other words, what one is able to do or be is a question of universal *absolutes*, whereas the goods needed to translate this ability into actual being and doing take us into the sphere of *relativities*, because the things that people need to do or be vary according to cultural and historical context.

Sen gave the example of Adam Smith's labourer to demonstrate the nature of *relative* poverty. Indeed, he acknowledged that in terms of the 'commodity' of the linen shirt poverty takes a relative form, involving the dictates of custom and comparison with the situation of others. However, in terms of 'capabilities' there is, he contended, an *absolute* requirement of the avoidance of shame: 'not so much having equal shame as others, but just not being ashamed, absolutely' (1983: 161). Following his introduction of the notion of 'functionings', Sen elaborated the relativist side of the argument: the amount needed to buy the commodities necessary to achieve the functioning of appearing in public without shame varies according to the wealth of the country (1992, 1999). His overall conclusion was that

there is no conflict between the irreducible absolutist element in the notion of poverty (related to capabilities and the standard of living) and the 'thoroughgoing relativity' to which Peter Townsend refers, if the latter is interpreted as applying to commodities and resources . . . When Townsend estimates the resources required for being able to 'participate in the activities of the community', he is in fact estimating the varying resource requirements of fulfilling the same absolute need. (1983: 161)

Townsend disagreed and there ensued a debate (summarized in Townsend, 1993), which is generally viewed as having generated more heat than light. At times, it appeared as though they were arguing past each other. Part of the problem lay in different meanings given to the terms 'absolute' and 'relative'. Thus, for example, in response to Townsend's accusation that he was perpetuating a narrow subsistence conception of poverty, dominated by nutritional requirements, Sen made clear that his use of the term 'absolute' differs from its conventional, subsistence, meaning. It is about lacking the basic opportunity to be or do in vital ways, regardless of comparisons:

The characteristic feature of 'absoluteness' is neither constancy over time, nor invariance between different societies, nor concentration merely on food and nutrition. It is an approach of judging a person's deprivation in absolute terms . . . rather than in purely *relative* terms vis-à-vis the levels enjoyed by others in the society. (1985b: 673, emphasis in original)

Had the protagonists separated out and made explicit the different meanings of 'relative' (i.e. as involving various kinds of comparison and as an understanding of needs as socially constructed), they might have avoided arguing at cross-purposes. As it was, Sen was arguing mainly against a purely relativist approach, which, in its use of comparison and on its own, he maintained conflated poverty and inequality (although Townsend himself was, in fact, careful to distinguish the two). He contended that Townsend was wrong in asserting 'the untenability of the idea of absolute needs' (Sen, 1983: 161). Yet, as an aside, he also expressed agreement with Townsend's view of the social nature of needs (Sen, 1985b). This notion of needs was, though, at the heart of Townsend's own argument. In particular, his view, explored above, that even the most basic physical needs are socially determined, was crucial to his rejection of the idea of an 'absolutist core'. Thus he asked, 'are not nutritional requirements dependent upon the work roles exacted of people at different points in history and different cultures?' and 'isn't the idea of "shelter" relative not just to climate and temperature but to what society makes of what shelter is for?' (1993: 135).

*Doyal and Gough's translation into a theory of human needs*  
This is where Doyal and Gough's theory of human needs offers a path out of the thicket of confusion, even though it is not a theory of poverty as such. Doyal and Gough (1991: 156–9) articulate a universalistic understanding of human needs, sensitive to social, cultural and historical context, which draws on and makes more concrete Sen's capability framework. They make the case for a universal conceptualization of basic human needs as 'the universal pre-requisites for successful . . . participation in a social form of life' (Gough, 1992: 8). These pre-requisites are identified as 'physical health' (sufficient for social participation) and 'autonomy of agency' or 'the capacity to make informed choices about what should be done and how to go about doing it' (Gough, 1992: 9).

These pre-requisite needs are close to Sen's capabilities and functionings, although they do not embrace his requirement of the avoidance of shame. They are universal, Doyal and Gough contend, because they are necessary in any culture before any individual can participate effectively to achieve any other valued goals. They are, though, very general and thus not a very helpful guide to social policies. They do not tell us what is required to satisfy those basic needs. Doyal and Gough therefore add a further layer of 'intermediate' needs, defined as 'those characteristics of need satisfiers which everywhere contribute to improved physical health and autonomy' (Gough, 1992: 11). Examples given are: adequate nutritional food and water; adequate protective housing; economic security; and basic education. These intermediate needs provide 'the crucial bridge between universal basic needs and socially relative satisfiers' of them (Doyal and Gough, 1991: 157). These 'socially relative satisfiers' refer to the actual commodities through which these needs are met, which clearly vary according to time and place. They may also vary between groups within a society. The significance of this in increasingly diverse societies has perhaps not been adequately addressed in conceptualizations of relative deprivation, which appear to assume an undifferentiated society with shared cultural norms (Parekh, 2000).

In Sen's framework, intermediate needs link the absolute core in the space of capabilities with the commodities through

which these capabilities are transformed into actual doing and being (functionings) within a particular, relative, context. Arguably, a tiered conceptualization of needs, such as Doyal and Gough's, provides the underpinning for Sen's claim that his absolutist core is reconcilable with Townsend's relativism. Indeed, Townsend himself would appear to have subsequently accepted this in a public international statement on poverty that he has promoted. This asserts: 'absolute or basic material and social needs across societies are the same, even when they have to be satisfied differently according to institutions, culture and location' (cited in Townsend and Gordon, 2000: 17).

*The Copenhagen Declaration* Moreover, Townsend has now championed a two-part definition of poverty, which emerged from the 1995 UN Copenhagen Summit. This offers a rather different way of combining absolute and relative notions of poverty, even though it shares with Sen's a definition of 'absolute' which 'is neither constant over time nor invariant between societies' (Gordon, 2000: 51). Absolute poverty is characterized as 'severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information' and is related to 'access to social services' as well as income (UN, 1995: para. 19). It is distinguished from, but is also part of, a much broader notion of 'overall poverty' that refers to 'the total number of people living in poverty in a country' (Langmore, 2000: 36). The definition of 'overall poverty' is, in fact, as much a conceptualization, expressed through a list of manifestations of poverty. These range from 'lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure sustainable livelihoods' through 'increased morbidity and mortality from illness' to 'social discrimination and exclusion' and 'lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social and cultural life' (UN, 1995: para. 19).

Townsend and colleagues in the Townsend Centre for International Poverty Research have adopted this two-level definition on the grounds that it 'was designed to bridge industrialised and developing countries and to afford a basis for cross-national measurement' that would, it was believed, be acceptable to all governments (Gordon et al., 2000b: 86).

(This is despite his earlier rejection of any notion of absolute poverty and of the basic human needs approach, reflected in the absolute definition.) Although this definition was endorsed by many European social scientists in the public statement promulgated by Townsend and has been applied in a range of studies conducted by the Townsend Centre, its wider impact on thinking and policy has hitherto been fairly limited.

## Public perceptions and political functions

The various articulations and re-articulations of the notions of and relationship between ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’ serve to illustrate that they represent different constructions of poverty, based on different understandings of human needs, rather than two distinct realities. As such, these notions still serve a political function. They are also used to try to make sense of public perceptions of poverty, which will themselves reflect a mixture of academic and political definitions, percolated through the media, as well as personal experience and observation.

UK research suggests that, at one level, there is still a distinction in many people’s minds between poverty as an absolute subsistence-oriented and as a more relativist phenomenon, although the distinction is not necessarily that clear-cut. The annual British Social Attitudes Survey has consistently found only about a quarter of the population willing to subscribe to a thoroughgoing relativist definition of poverty as someone having ‘enough to buy the things they really needed, but not enough to buy the things most people take for granted’; at least nine out of ten, by contrast, accept that ‘not enough to eat and live without getting into debt’ constitutes poverty. Around three-fifths also agree that those who have ‘enough to eat and live, but not enough to buy other things they needed’ are living in poverty (Hills, 2001).

This last formulation, of course, begs the question of what constitutes ‘other things they needed’ and can be read in two ways. Dean with Melrose label it as ‘a breadline definition’ and conclude that the ‘popular preference therefore is for “hard-nosed” definitions’ (1999: 36). In contrast, John Hills

suggests that other BSAS findings indicate that people have 'in mind a poverty line which rises in real terms in some way over time'. This, he argues, implies 'some form of relative definition', which goes beyond mere subsistence (2001: 4, 8, 10). As indicated earlier, support for this view comes from the PSE Survey where substantial majorities identified 'social customs, obligations and activities . . . as among the top necessities of life' (Gordon et al., 2000a: 16).

Qualitative focus group research with people with experience of poverty points to a complexity of views that is not adequately captured in simple, dichotomous terms of either 'absolute' or 'relative'. Instead, people are able to subscribe to elements of both simultaneously:

Although when asked, some participants subscribed to a relative definition, *all* the groups tended towards an absolute definition of poverty. They thought that it was of a different kind and magnitude to poverty experienced in the Third World and that the kind of poverty they associated with the South was 'real' poverty. Interestingly, when talking about poverty generally and talking about their own experience, as opposed to definitions as such, participants tended to see poverty in more relative terms. Furthermore, when we asked people to define poverty in their own words, their definitions tended to be idiosyncratic and personal [such as 'apologizing for having a decent lawnmower' and 'when I've got to avoid the charity box that I'd want to put in']. (Beresford et al., 1999: 176, 61–2, emphasis in original)

To understand the heat generated by the absolute–relative debate, it is important to remember my earlier point about the political implications of poverty definitions and the moral imperative implied by the term. The terms do not simply act as descriptors of poverty but also signify opposing political positions: absolutist definitions are traditionally associated with the political 'right' and relativist with the 'left'. As David Green argues, 'the manner in which a writer defines poverty reflects his [*sic*] underlying assumptions about the human condition and his preferred role for government' (1998: 12).

If poverty is defined in narrow, absolutist terms, the role ascribed to government and the resource implications for the

policies needed to eradicate it are considerably more limited than if it is defined to take account of social needs and obligations and the living standards the wider society takes for granted. Thus, Rowntree's subsistence standard was taken at face value and was incorporated into the post-war social security system as justification for setting benefits at subsistence level (Kincaid, 1973; Veit-Wilson, 1986). Townsend's defence of his relativist position against Sen's critique was in part fired by his belief (disputed by Sen) that the latter's position 'opens the door to a tough state interpretation of subsistence rations' (1993: 132). Conversely, the idea of relative poverty has been attacked from the right as a political weapon wielded by the left in order to inflate the numbers counted as poor and to foster envy of the rich, by conflating it with inequality, thereby justifying more extensive state action (Dennis, 1997; Green, 1998). Yet, some who subscribe to a relativist definition have warned that, politically, it may rob poverty of some of the moral force of a starker definition, thereby making it easier for politicians to dismiss its importance (Saunders et al., 2002). The fear is that emphasis on poverty's relative nature serves to obscure the ways in which, as we shall see in chapter 3, it can still mean very real hardship and suffering even in wealthy societies.

## Conclusion

These debates underline how the issue of definitions cannot be divorced from the political use to which they are put. Moreover, implicit in definitions are explanations of poverty and its distribution, which generally reflect individualistic or structural perspectives. The former attribute the main responsibility for poverty to the 'the poor' themselves; the latter point to how economic, social and political structures and processes – from the global to the local – create and perpetuate poverty.<sup>2</sup> Together, explanations, definitions (and their translation into measurements) and broader conceptualizations combine to shape policy responses to the phenomenon called 'poverty'.

The phenomenon of poverty has to be understood both as a painful reality experienced by millions of human beings and as a construction of competing conceptualizations, definitions and measures. The category of 'the poor' and what we describe as 'poverty' is thus, at one level, an artefact. How we approach the question of definition has important implications for policy and for the treatment of those categorized as 'poor' more generally. The approach favoured here is unambiguously relative, but acknowledges the existence of universal absolute needs. The point is that these can only be satisfied in particular historical and cultural contexts. In this way, we are able to transcend a rather sterile debate between absolute and relative definitions.

Although I have argued for a focused material definition of poverty in order not to lose sight of what is unique to the phenomenon, this must be set within the broader conceptualization articulated in the Introduction and developed in later chapters. Moreover, such a definition needs to be understood within a wider social scientific framework concerning 'well-being', 'capabilities', 'human flourishing', 'quality of life' and 'social quality' so as not to ghettoize poverty in a residual category of little or no apparent import to the wider society.