

## Conceptualising poverty Smith Institute Seminar. 13 October 2004

This is a presentation made by Ruth Lister at a Smith Institute Seminar to mark the publication of *Poverty*. A full record of the seminar will be published by the Smith Institute, [www.smith-institute.org.uk](http://www.smith-institute.org.uk)

- Thanks. Your invitations said I would be drawing out some policy implications from one of the central arguments of my book. I will do that but I hope you won't feel you were brought here under false pretences if I first set out part of the argument itself.
- I plan to make three main, related, points:
  1. It's important to think about poverty at the conceptual level and also to make a clear distinction between concepts, definitions & measurements.
  2. We need to listen to what people with experience of poverty themselves have to say. Why? Because it helps us understand better the meaning of poverty, in particular how it is experienced as a shameful and corrosive *social relation* as well as a *material condition*.
  3. This then has implications for politics and policy, which I sum up under the rubric of a politics of social justice that combines redistribution and 'recognition&respect'.

### 1. Conceptualisation, definition & measurement

- When I was asked to write a book on the concept of poverty, before agreeing, I asked myself what it might add to the poverty literature. I decided that it allowed me to focus on the *meaning* of poverty in a way that texts that are preoccupied with definition, measurement and material impact do not.
- My first step was to make a clear distinction for myself between concept, definition and measurement. And though it may seem rather obvious, people seem to have found it really helpful because in practice the three are all too often conflated and thus confused.
- How often have you heard someone say that the government defines poverty as 60% of median income? This is not a definition, it's a measure. Measures attempt to operationalise definitions within the constraints of methodology and available data. The function of a definition should be to distinguish the state of poverty from non-poverty. The literature points to a number of key elements: inadequate material resources and living standards and consequent inability to participate fully in society.
- People working in the international development field would probably respond that that is too narrow. UN definitions, for instance, include elements such as 'lack of participation in decision-making', 'violation of human dignity', 'powerlessness'. These are vitally important. But I would argue they are better understood at the level of conceptualisation rather than definition because they are not unique to the condition of poverty.

- And because they are so important to understanding the meaning of poverty, the starting point of my book is that we must not lose sight of the conceptual level in the understandable preoccupation with measurement of trends and material impact.
- Concepts of poverty operate at the more general level of meanings and understandings and also discourses, as articulated through language and images. Traditionally, it has been the understandings held by more powerful groups – politicians, journalists, academics [though we may not feel very powerful!] – that have been reflected in dominant conceptualisations. This is beginning to change thanks, in part, to the work of organisations (like Oxfam and ATD Fourth World) that call on us to listen to the ‘voices of the poor’ (a phrase used as the title of a series of World Bank reports). Important too has been the growing acknowledgement of the value of participatory approaches to poverty research. As explained in the recent JRF report by Fran Bennett with Moraene Roberts, this means enabling people with experience of poverty to have greater authority, influence and control throughout the process of researching poverty.

## 2. Poverty as a social relation as well as a material condition

- Accounts by people in poverty of the contempt and disrespect with which they are treated and the sense of shame and worthlessness this can engender have helped me to understand better how poverty is experienced as a destructive social relation as well as a material lack. The two aspects are, of course, inter-related, most acutely perhaps for children. Tess Ridge’s research shows how children in poverty can be bullied and generally excluded from the social activities of their peers if they don’t ‘fit in’ because of the ‘wrong’ clothing. The children spoke of ‘their fears of social difference and stigma’. Mothers, as the main managers of poverty, feel their children’s exclusion particularly keenly.
- And the stigma and humiliation of poverty are painfully injurious to the identity and self-respect of adults also. Two quotes illustrate this: ‘The worst blow of all is the contempt of your fellow citizens. I and many families live in that contempt’ and ‘You’re like an onion and gradually every skin is peeled off you and there’s nothing left. All your self-esteem and how you feel about yourself is gone – you’re left feeling like nothing and then your family feels like that’.
- What people in poverty are reacting to is a process that I call Othering i.e. they are treated and talked about as people who are ‘other’ to the rest of us. It is a process of differentiation and demarcation by which social distance is established and maintained.
- Language is an important part of the process. As a parent living on benefit, participating in a meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty put it ‘We hear how the media and some politicians speak about us and it hurts’. Labels like ‘underclass’ and ‘welfare dependant’ are

applied without thinking of the consequences for their recipients. Even 'poor' is an adjective that many people in poverty experience as stigmatising. Typically they are not asked how they want to be described.

- This reflects a more general unwillingness to listen to what people in poverty have to say and to treat them as *subjects* of their own lives, who possess the expertise borne of experience, rather than as the *objects* of professional judgement, research and policy. As I said earlier, this is beginning to change and that brings me, at last, to some political and policy implications.

### 3. Politics and policy

- We can identify two principles at the heart of an alternative approach pursued by organisations that promote the participation of people with experience of poverty. One is respect for the dignity of all human beings, which represents the core of the human rights conceptualisation of poverty articulated by the UN. The other is the notion of 'voice with influence', which encapsulates the desire not just to be heard but to have one's ideas taken seriously by those with power. In the language of social justice theory they reflect a politics of 'recognition' (or 'recognition&respect' as I call it because of the emphasis placed on respect by people in poverty themselves).
- As such it is intertwined with a politics of redistribution – be it of material resources or opportunities – which is the traditional stuff of poverty politics. I think you'd fall off your chairs if I said a politics of redistribution was no longer important! Of course, it's still absolutely central to any anti-poverty strategy. Indeed, the notion of human dignity is a touchstone for judging the adequacy of benefits and also of low wages (as Polly brought out so well in her book and Smith Institute pamphlet). Back in 1992, the EU recommended that member states 'recognise the basic right of a person to sufficient resources and social assistance to live in a manner compatible with human dignity'.
- But linking in a politics of 'recognition&respect' encourages us to think also about the 'how' of policy – *how* we can develop mechanisms that enable people in poverty to participate in decision-making that affects their lives, if they wish to do so; *how* we can ensure that the professionals and officials who staff our public services respect the dignity of people in poverty.
- To end on a positive note, we can learn from initiatives that point the way. A project at Royal Holloway, in conjunction with ATD Fourth World and Family Rights Group, is involving parents with experience of poverty in the training of social workers. The aim is to enable social workers better to understand the implications of poverty and to reflect self-critically on how they treat their clients. As one participant put it, 'it is about how we are treated, we just want them to treat us the same way they want us to treat them – with respect'. Research into parenting in poor environments highlights how necessary this is. It is a lesson that could have wider implications for the training of professionals and officials. And perhaps

there is something to be learned from the attitudinal campaign the government has launched to tackle the stigma associated with mental health?

- With regard to 'voice with influence', a participation working group, established by the DWP, has produced a toolkit to facilitate the participation of people with experience of poverty in the drawing up of the next EU National Action Plan on Social Inclusion. The goal was 'a real partnership between people living in poverty...and government at all levels in order to improve anti-poverty policy and practice'. This represents a real step forward but I'm sure all would acknowledge there is a long way to go in achieving a genuine 'partnership at all levels'.
- Such a partnership would help strengthen social inclusion and citizenship. Moreover, if those people with experience of poverty, who wanted to be, were themselves engaged in the development and promotion of anti-poverty strategies, it might help reinvigorate the government's anti-poverty crusade and, as the Chancellor put it to the Labour Party conference, 'win more people to this cause'.