

**SOURCE: [HTTP://WWW.STAFF.NCL.AC.UK/J.VEIT-WILSON/](http://www.staff.ncl.ac.uk/j.veit-wilson/)  
JOHN VEIT-WILSON'S PAPERS  
ON CONCEPTS, DEFINITIONS AND MEASURES OF POVERTY,  
ON INCOME ADEQUACY AND ON MINIMUM INCOME STANDARDS.**

**NB: this is the original text of the article below. If you want to quote the page numbers on which passages appeared in print, you will have to find the book or journal in which it was published. John Veit-Wilson asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of this work.**

Publication data: *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Social Theory* (2005) [[www.routledge.com/](http://www.routledge.com/)]

## ***POVERTY***

When some people live below a level which a society defines as a reasonable minimum, they are in poverty, but there is no agreement on how to define it more precisely. Poverty is often identified as a lack of resources or its causes, or its deleterious consequences in human experience or behaviour, but meanings and usages change over time. Debate often focuses on people in poverty ('the poor') or disparate measurement methods rather than the concept of poverty itself. Many incompatible discourses are separately but simultaneously used to discuss its forms, dimensions, causes and cures, and to address different audiences in industrialised societies and in developing nations, with little attempt to integrate the approaches.

Until the twentieth century, 'poverty' was used to describe the conditions in which much of the urban and rural working population ('the poor') lived. Poverty was an accepted aspect of stratified class societies, where resources were unequally distributed without respect to human needs. Georg Simmel, like Edmund Burke before him, distinguished between normal, unexceptionable, working class mass poverty, and the problematic individual poverty status of dependence on charity or the Poor Law. Personal social status was critical: the 'respectable' poor 'deserving' to be helped were distinguished from the 'rough' or 'undeserving', to be deterred or punished. For the non-poor, the social problem was poverty's extreme and visible manifestations: squalid living conditions, disreputable and criminal behaviour, precarious social and economic marginality, and threats to social order from an 'underclass'.

From 1901, Seebohm Rowntree's systematic attempts to analyse the nature and extent of the causes of poverty led to a focus on measuring the resources, chiefly disposable incomes, needed to escape poverty in marketised economies. To avoid argument about culpability for squalor, Rowntree devised his heuristic 'primary poverty' household expenditure budget sufficient only for physical but not social life, to show what proportion of the poor had incontrovertibly inadequate incomes. But its popularity among social investigators wanting a quantitative measure to count the poor, obscured his emphasis on the social relativity of poverty. Throughout Europe and North America the idea of poverty became synonymous with incomes insufficient for physical subsistence, also called 'absolute' poverty, not least because this was the period of the development of state income maintenance systems which needed minimum standards against which to rationalise cash benefits. The social problem became a political problem of dependence on the state, within which the high risk causes of low incomes (large families, unemployment, sickness and disability, old age) became paradoxically seen as identifiers of the condition, even though found across the income distribution.

This paradigm of poverty as incomes insufficient for levels of living prescribed by experts and politicians was overturned in the 1960s by Peter Townsend. He criticised the normative sources of the evaluative standards of adequacy used, especially 'absolute' notions, as merely ideological constructs and instead emphasised the relativity of all possible conceptions of poverty. While accepting that poverty is a socially-defined concept, subsequent theoreticians have argued over the

authenticity of expressed needs, and how to derive criteria empirically from society as a whole instead of normatively from elites. Derivations of this relativistic approach are now generally used epistemologically and methodologically in social analysis. Poverty measures used include socially-defined deprivation indicators as direct criteria of unmet needs; inadequate incomes as their proxies; and qualitative accounts of the experience of poverty. However, references to 'absolute' poverty persist in debate about deprivation and need on a global basis, and many governments still use elitist stipulative definitions of poverty in their policy-making.

Focus on the adequacy of incomes and other disposable resources to achieve minimally acceptable levels of living also makes comparisons difficult between societies which vary in the kinds of resource flows and stocks relevant to overcoming their poverties. Amartya Sen suggested that instead of the commodities and their characteristics which are analysed as needed to overcome poverty within any society, a more fruitful approach would be to study the capabilities which people in any society should have to meet their needs, poverty being the condition in which they were prevented from doing so. This perspective shifts the focus from static comparisons of commodities to the dynamics of power relations in which people can act or are prevented. Social theorists have become increasingly aware that stipulative formulations of acceptable standards treat people in poverty and its related social and economic exclusions as lacking agency, contradicting the essential human value that all members of society should be ascribed with equal rights to human dignity. Since qualitative social research with and by people in poverty (Narayan et al. 2000) has shown the inadequacy of elitist formulations, for this right to be implemented the experience of living in poverty must be acknowledged as an indispensable perspective on both poverty conceptualisation and policy formation, demanding participation in political as well as social and economic life. The lack of social and economic integration and the sufferings of socially excluded people, traditionally seen as symptoms of morbidity, become expressed as reflections of powerlessness against unjust shares of resources essential to integration and participation.. Nevertheless, research into relative deprivation (Runciman 1966) has shown that many of those who are objectively poor may not want to identify themselves as such, while dynamic studies reveal that many more are poor over time than at one time.

By the late twentieth century, the concept of poverty had many meanings. Paul Spicker (1999) identified eleven clusters, three of which referred to material conditions (inadequate level of living, unmet need, multiple deprivation), three to economic position (lack of resources, inequality of resources, class) and four to social position (lack of entitlements, lack of security, dependency and exclusion). All can be found, though not all congruently, in the seven discourses identified by John Veit-Wilson (1998) in use among government policy-makers in ten countries. Each discourse packaged the poverty concept with its manifestations and appropriate measures in a paradigmatic analysis and vocabulary effecting closure on other competing discourses. Three were asocially abstracted, expressing poverty in terms of a legal status, a theoretical economic model, or a statistical position on an income distribution. Four discourses were humanistic, referring to persons and behaviours. Of these, one was structural: the consequence of an unequal distribution of power over resources through time created the need to ensure that no one's level of living fell below the standards acceptable to society in general. The other three covered poverty as a set of deviant behaviours, as life-experiences too divergent from the acceptable average, and as social exclusion. Each of these meanings and the discourses in which they are expressed generates its apposite definitions and related measures. However, confusions abound, so that, for instance, what is measurable often becomes described as 'poverty' without acknowledgement of the limitations of the measure, or causal proxies (such as low income levels) become identified as the substantive unacceptable level of living. The European Union's institutions express poverty as social exclusions, failing the demands of human dignity, but they measure poverty in terms of arbitrary points on national income distributions with no empirical relationship to income levels demonstrably needed to combat social exclusions and enable dignified lives. Social exclusion is given meanings far wider than the usual market exclusion ideas of poverty. Further misunderstandings arise from the failure to address questions about the variety of standards of need or adequacy used – needed or adequate for what, for how long, for whom, and from whose perspective – each of which elicits different answers from different, often unvoiced, premises.

A synthesis of current widely accepted definitions of poverty in the early twenty-first century would express it as a condition of levels of living and life experiences unacceptable according to relative and unstratified social standards, caused by a lack of power over tangible and intangible resources needed over time to take part in society and achieve those expected levels of living and

experiences, and without which people are effectively excluded both from participation and from full dignified status. But because of the lack of agreement and the looseness of the many definitions used in social theory, social policy and politics, constructive social analysis is vitiated and argument continues on what policy measures are socially and politically feasible to overcome the human suffering embodied in the poverties revealed by different discourses and methodologies.

**References and further readings –**

- Gordon, D. and Spicker, P. (eds) (1999) The International Glossary on Poverty. London: Zed Books.  
Lister, R. (2004) Poverty. Cambridge, UK: Polity.  
Narayan, D. et al. (2000) Voices of the Poor. New York: Oxford UP for World Bank.  
Runciman, W.G. (1966) Relative Deprivation and Social Justice. London: Routledge.  
Townsend, P. (1993) The International Analysis of Poverty. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.  
Veit-Wilson, J. (1998) Setting Adequacy Standards: How governments define minimum incomes.  
Bristol: Policy Press.
-