



Social Advantage and Disadvantage

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CHAPTER

1 Poverty and Social Exclusion

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Abstract

Poverty is an ancient social concept that captures the idea of disadvantage in terms of absence of material advantage. The chapter outlines the classic distinction between absolute and relative poverty; it explains the development of modern scholarship and research around the definition and measurement of poverty; it considers how the meaning of poverty has changed down the ages and the sense in which it is a socially constructed concept with significance as much for the relatively advantaged members of society as for those identified as ‘poor’. The chapter also considers concepts of social exclusion, which can help to explain the processes by which people may be excluded from social participation and/or the benefits of social progress, but may sometimes divert attention from disadvantage by focusing on the behaviour of those who are disadvantaged and portray them as an ‘underclass’ characterized by their supposedly dysfunctional or aberrant behaviour.

Keywords: [deprivation](#), [poverty](#), [privilege](#), [social exclusion](#), [stigma](#), [underclass](#)

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The concept perhaps most commonly associated with ‘social disadvantage’ is poverty. When poverty is equated with *disadvantage* it is defined not in terms of the inherent characteristics of poverty, but in terms of an absence, lack, or denial of advantage. A physicist will tell you there is no such thing as cold; only heat. To describe something as ‘cold’ is to regard it in terms of the absence—or relative absence—of heat energy. By the same token, it has been suggested, there is no such thing as poverty; only the absence of wealth (Jacobs, 1969; and see Piachaud, 2002). Just as heat is a form of energy that is implicated in and necessary for life itself, so wealth is—metaphorically speaking—a form of energy that fuels socio-economic development and personal well-being. Though ‘wealth’ is a term that may be used (as in Chapter 8, this volume) to refer to personal assets as opposed to income, it is also a term that is widely, if ‘loosely’, used in everyday parlance as a simple antonym for poverty (Rowlingson, 2008: 15). Poverty, by implication, is a

consequence of failure: a systemic failure in the distribution of wealth, or a behavioural failure on the part of those who fail to acquire it.

Of course, it might also be argued that there is no such thing as wealth; only power and competitive advantage. The advantage of wealth lies not in the stored value of goods, money, or capital assets, but in the relations of power through which surplus value is created (Marx, 1887). Human fulfilment, as opposed to wealth, is founded not on the pursuit of relative advantage, but in the very substance and realization of our social existence. Poverty is a process of ‘immiseration’: if it is a consequence of failure, this is not a failure to create or distribute wealth, but a fundamental failure to meet human needs (Dean, 2010: ch. 4).

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Poverty is therefore a socially constructed concept that has been perennially discovered and rediscovered as a form of disadvantage concerned not only with material deprivations, but with symbolic meanings and moral implications (Lister, 2004): meanings and implications for society as a whole; for the relatively advantaged members of society as much as for those identified as ‘poor’. Because it is a contested concept, there have been many attempts to introduce synonyms or alternatives. The most salient of these in recent times has been ‘social exclusion’ (Hills et al., 2002). Yet this term too can capture a variety of quite different understandings or concepts. Exclusion might clearly be a form of disadvantage, but *exclusivity* may as easily be associated with relative advantage. The idea of social exclusion focuses attention on the *processes* (Room, 1995) by which poverty or disadvantage occurs. But just as easily as the idea of poverty, it can also divert attention from systemic effects and focus instead on the supposed defects of those who experience disadvantage, by portraying them as an aberrant minority or as an excluded ‘underclass’ (Levitas, 1998).

This chapter will begin with a discussion of competing definitions of poverty and different ways of measuring it, before moving on to discuss poverty not as an objective phenomenon, but as a social construction; and finally, to introduce debates about social exclusion, ideas of underclass and their relationship with poverty.

1.1 Definitions and Measurement

The relief of poverty, or its prevention, is one of the essential goals of social policy. But to address poverty, it might be supposed, we must first have accepted ways of defining and measuring it.

1.1.1 Absolute and Relative

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There is an enduring debate as to whether poverty should be defined in terms of absolute or relative disadvantage, though the distinction can be elusive. In one sense, an absolute definition can be any definition that applies a criterion of sufficiency that pays no regard to the existing social distribution of resources. In theory, therefore, one might arbitrarily apply a more or less generous standard by which to declare a person to be poor or not poor. In practice, the earliest attempts to set such a standard did so having regard to *minimalist* criteria. Charles Booth (1902–3) in his studies of poverty in London in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found it necessary to draw distinctions between ‘the poor’ (who struggled to obtain the necessities of life), the ‘very poor’ (whom he described as living ‘in chronic want’) and a dissolute class of ‘loafers, the vicious and the semi-criminal’. Seebohm Rowntree (1901), who attempted a similar study in York, sought to be more precise. He defined the state of ‘primary poverty’ in terms of the inability of a household to afford the weekly basket of the goods he adjudged necessary for ‘bare physical efficiency’. Rowntree further defined a state of ‘secondary poverty’, which could arise when a household had sufficient income, but was feckless or improvident when spending it. We can see immediately that absolute definitions of poverty, when based on minimalist standards, may invoke judgements about the different ways in which people manage scarce resources (cf. Platt, 2013: 312).

Rowntree repeated his study of poverty in the 1930s (Rowntree, 1941). But whereas in his initial study the basket of goods required for a household to escape primary poverty had not included such things as a daily newspaper, or such wasteful luxuries as a modicum of beer or tobacco, some thirty-five years later these items were counted as reasonable necessities. Expert opinion as to what is an absolute necessity can vary, but more to the point, living standards and social expectations also vary over time. The contemporary UK equivalent of Rowntree's basket of goods, the Minimum Income Standard (Davis et al., 2014), would factor in the possession of a television and some form of internet access as necessities for an acceptable standard of living; things that were undiscovered and undreamt of in Booth and Rowntree's day. Judgements as to what is minimally sufficient may be more or less relative to the social context. In this sense, there can be no such thing as an absolute definition of poverty.

Later theorists of poverty, most notably Peter Townsend (1979, 1993), began to define poverty in relation not to a basket of goods that households could or couldn't afford, but to the extent to which they could *participate* in society; to which they shared in the living standards of their contemporaries and enjoyed comparable access to decent employment and housing, education, healthcare, public amenities and services. Townsend insisted that deprivation is a social phenomenon: for social beings, disadvantage is axiomatically relative and this is how poverty was to be understood. It is now generally accepted that we might have two broad definitions of poverty. The United Nations distinguishes between so-called absolute poverty, as 'a condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs' and *overall* poverty, which the UN says 'has various manifestations, including lack of income and productive resources to ensure sustainable livelihoods', but which may also be 'characterised by lack of participation in decision making and in civil, social and cultural life' (UN, 1995). Another way of thinking about poverty has been proposed by George and Howards (1991), who envision a continuum ranging from the 'deepest' forms of so-called absolute definition—that may be based either on a 'starvation' standard or a less stringent 'subsistence' standard—through to relative definitions that may be based either on a 'coping' standard, or a more encompassing 'participation' standard (see Table 1.1). This allows us to apply the term 'poverty' as legitimately to the disadvantage experienced by victims of famine in the least economically developed countries of the global south as to that experienced, for example, by low income households struggling to survive in poor housing with minimal assistance in the most economically developed countries of the global north.

Table 1.1. Depths of poverty

People are poor if:		
Absolute	starvation standard	they have not enough to eat
	subsistence standard	they lack the means materially to sustain themselves
Relative	coping standard	they are not managing acceptably to 'get by' in society
	participation standard	they cannot play a full and active part in society

Source: Based on George and Howards (1991: 3)

1.1.2 Measure for Measure

Measurement entails judgement as to what to measure and to what end. Practical measurements have long been used in the course of our everyday lives: a hand-full, a cup-full, an arms-length, and so on. But in the everyday world, poverty has been something to be feared or suffered, not measured. Nevertheless, standardized measurements of poverty provide important insights and enable us to draw comparisons: social, spatial, and temporal comparisons relating, for example, to the poverty of particular social groups, neighbourhoods, or countries, and changes in the incidence of poverty over time. Measurement matters in social policy. But standardized measures are imposed by governmental or scientific decree. They impart a particular judgement as to who is poor and, by implication, who or what might be to blame. Measures of absolute poverty focus on material disadvantage and imply judgements about how individuals or households can or should be enabled to survive. Measures of relative poverty focus on social disadvantage and imply judgements about how society is or should be organized.

Absolute measures of poverty can be more or less arbitrary. The most widely known example is the \$1 a day international poverty line first adopted by the UN in 1990, which quantified poverty in terms of the numbers or proportions of people in the poorest countries of the world who were forced to live on less than US\$1 a day (at purchasing power parity). The \$1 a day standard was uprated by the World Bank to \$1.25 a day as indicator of 'extreme' poverty, while \$2 a day was taken as a broader indicator (World Bank, 2001; Ravallion et al., 2009; and see Gordon, 2002). Less arbitrary measures of poverty use variations upon the budget standards approach first pioneered by Rowntree by determining the level of income necessary for a person, or more usually a household, to avoid poverty. Such approaches may use a variety of methods to decide what to include in a household budget (drawing on expert or public opinion).

Relative measures of poverty may seek to draw not a fixed poverty line, but a poverty *threshold* defined with reference to the distribution of resources in society. This was the approach pioneered by Townsend, whose concern was with substantive living standards, rather than imputed living costs. Townsend's classic UK study drew up a list not only of consumables, but of life style requirements including people's ability to sustain family life and social activities. His survey of poverty established, on the one hand, the extent to which people were deprived in terms of their living standards and, on the other, the level of income at which people's participation in prevailing living standards was compromised and below which they were disproportionately likely to be deprived. Townsend's work on social deprivation fomented two important ideas that would lead the measurement of poverty in new directions:

- First, the idea of a deprivation threshold expressed not as a fixed income level, but in relation to the social average. This became the basis for one of the most widely used forms of poverty indicator: measurements based on the proportion of individuals living in households with incomes beneath a set percentage of average household income. Variations of this *households below average income* (HBAI) measure have been used in several countries (e.g. DWP, 2014; and see Chapter 7, this volume), but also in various contexts by the EU (as a social inclusion indicator—see Marlier et al., 2007) and the OECD (2014).
- Second, the idea of a measure of social deprivation that is conceptually distinct from—albeit statistically related to—any measure of personal or household income. This became, amongst other things, the basis for poverty measures informed by social consensus: measurements based on the proportion of people who are obliged to live without access to some of the goods, services, and activities that a majority of the population at large would agree to be necessities (Gordon and Pantazis, 1997; Mack and Lansley, 1985; Pantazis et al., 2006). It also, perhaps indirectly, opened the way to a variety of other non-income-related poverty measures.

There is a considerable array of non-income-related poverty measures: too many to be usefully addressed in this short chapter. Some are readily observable 'proxy' indicators, such as whether people lack access, for example, to a working toilet, or a mobile phone. On their own, these may be crude, but telling statistics. The fact that fewer of the world's 7 billion people have access to a working toilet (4.5 billion) than a mobile 'phone (6 billion) reveals that in many parts of the world infrastructural investment in sanitation remains woefully inadequate (UN News Centre, 2013), but it also says something about the immense importance human beings attach to effective means of interpersonal communication. None the less, in particular societies, whether for example a person lives in a household with access to a motor vehicle may strongly predict whether or not she is likely to be in poverty by other criteria. Increasingly, we are using complex composite or multiple deprivation indices. These may be local measures, such as the Indices of Multiple Deprivation used to evaluate employment, health, education, housing, crime, and environmental conditions in different parts of England (http://data.gov.uk/dataset/english_indices_of_deprivation), or highly specialized measures, such as the UN's Food Security Index (FAO, 2013).

The United Nations Development Programme recently introduced a sophisticated non-income-related Multidimensional Poverty Index, based on a combination of weighted indicators (Alkire and Santos, 2010), as shown in Box 1.1. It is currently applied in 104 countries around the world (UNDP, 2013).

Box 1.1 The UN Multidimensional Poverty Indicator (MPI)

The MPI is calculated by multiplying the **incidence** of poverty in a country (the proportion of people who are ‘MPI poor’) by the **intensity** of poverty in that country (the average MPI score), based on the following ten **indicators**:

Health indicators

Child mortality:	has any child in her family died? (1/6 weighting)
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Nutrition:	is any adult or child in her household for whom there is nutritional information malnourished? (1/6 weighting)
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Education indicators

Years of schooling:	has nobody in her household completed five years of schooling? (1/6 weighting)
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School attendance:	is any school-aged child in her household not attending school up to class 8? (1/6 weighting)
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Standard of living indicators

Electricity:	does her household not have an electricity supply? (1/18 weighting)
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Sanitation:	does her household’s sanitation facility not meet the standard set by the Millennium Development Goals and/or is it shared with other households? (1/18 weighting)
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Drinking water:	does her household not have access to safe drinking water or safe drinking water in more than a 30-minute round-trip walk from home? (1/18 weighting)
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Floor:	does her household have a dirt, sand, or dung floor? (1/18 weighting)
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Cooking fuel:	does her household cook with dung, wood, or charcoal? (1/18 weighting)
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Asset ownership:	does her household not own a motorcar or truck and more than one of the following items: a radio, television, refrigerator, telephone, bicycle, or motorbike? (1/18 weighting)
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- The resulting integer—expressed as a decimal fraction between 0 and 1—is the MPI.
- A person is considered MPI poor if she is deprived on at least one third of the indicators.
- Intensity of poverty is denoted by the proportion of indicators on which a person is deprived.

Note: The MPI replaced an earlier Human Poverty Index, HPI-1, which until 2009 had been used to measure poverty in developing countries. A rather different index, HPI-2, which had been used for highly developed countries, was discontinued, but see Table 1.2 below.

1.1.3 Global Context

However measured, poverty is very much a worldwide phenomenon. Despite this, a great deal of the literature on poverty has been focused on the persistence of poverty as a form of relative disadvantage occurring in the world's richer countries. We have seen that some of the most significant developments in the study of poverty took place in the UK. At the turn of the twentieth century, using different methodologies, Booth had estimated the incidence of poverty in London to be 30 per cent; Rowntree estimated it in York to be 28 per cent. Over a century later and using more advanced methodologies, the UK Government estimates the incidence of poverty across the UK as a whole to be 21 per cent (when measured as the proportion of individuals living in households with incomes less than 60 per cent of the 2012/13 median, after adjustment for housing costs—see DWP, 2014); while a major study in 2012, involving a team of academics funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, estimated that around 22 per cent of the UK population were unable to afford one or more essential household goods and around 19 per cent were too poor to engage in common social activities considered necessary by the majority of the population (PSE UK, 2013).

Though the extent and character of the problem varies, poverty as a form of disadvantage remains a significant issue within rich and poor countries alike, as may be seen from Table 1.2. The table is presented not as an accurate summary of the global situation, but as an illustration of the very different kinds of data available to us and the limitations and potentially questionable value of the picture they can together present. If, nevertheless, one considers the economically powerful countries belonging to the G7 group, it may be seen that poverty appears to be notably worse in the major Anglophone countries (the USA and the UK) than in the major continental European countries (Germany and France) but not quite so severe as in Southern European/Mediterranean countries, such as Italy. If one considers the emerging economies of the so-called 'BRIC' group (O'Neill, 2001) the variation between them is considerable. On the basis of the measures used in Table 1.2, poverty in Russia is lower than in the other BRICs, though some 17 per cent of Russians were living on less than 50 per cent median household income in 2010 (approximately the same as in the USA). Poverty in Brazil, as in other Latin American countries, has been declining (but income inequality remains relatively high). China and India, the two most populous countries on Earth, still experience high levels of poverty, despite recent improvements, especially in rural areas (World Bank, 2013). If one considers the more recently emerging economies of the so-called 'MINT' group (e.g. Fraser, 2011), there is, once again, considerable variation. Countries like Mexico and Turkey, have already become members of the OECD, but—though their poverty levels are low relative to other developing countries—they are high compared to other OECD countries (20.4 per cent and 19.3 per cent respectively in terms of the proportion of their populations living on less than 50 per cent median income). Indonesia, despite economic successes has a higher MPI score than China and half its population is living on less than \$2 dollars a day, while Nigeria has one of the highest MPI scores in the world and over 80 per cent of its population is living on less than \$2 dollars a day.

Table 1.2. Poverty in global perspective

		Human Poverty Index-2 (reported 2009) ¹	% population living on less than 50% median equivalized household income (2010) ²
G7 countries	Germany	0.101	8.8
	France	0.110	7.9
	Canada	0.112	11.9
	Japan	0.116	16.0
	UK	0.146	10.0
	USA	0.152	17.4
	Italy	0.298	13.0
		Multidimensional Poverty Index (reported 2013) ³	% population living on less than \$2 a day (reported 2013) ⁴
BRIC countries	Russia	0.005	0.1
	Brazil	0.011	9.9
	China	0.056	36.3
	India	0.283	75.6
MINT countries	Mexico	0.015	8.6
	Turkey	0.028	9.1

Indonesia	0.095	50.6
Nigeria	0.310	83.9

Notes:

1. HPI-2 was intended to measure poverty in highly developed countries and was computed on the basis of four indicators: (i) probability at birth of an inhabitant not surviving to age 60; (ii) functional illiteracy levels; (iii) proportion of households with less than 50% median income; and (iv) long-term unemployment rates. It was discontinued after 2009
2. Source: UNDP 2009 (index calculated on the basis of data from several recent years)
3. Source: OECD 2014
4. Source: UNDP 2013 (index calculated on the basis of data from several recent years)

By the UN's criterion, however, the most extreme poverty is that experienced by the 1.2 billion people living on the equivalent of less than \$1.25 a day, for whom—within the smaller officially designated 'low-income countries' (most of which are in sub-Saharan Africa)—prospects of improved living standards appear severely constrained. In these countries, contrary to trends elsewhere, the Aggregate Poverty Gap (the aggregate additional income required to lift every individual out of extreme poverty) has over the past two decades been increasing (Olinto et al., 2013).

1.2 Social Construction

'Poverty' is an ancient construct. As Jeremy Seabrook has observed, 'the word itself conceals a multitude of meanings and does not distinguish the diversity of the ways in which it is possible to be poor....But we can see in the changing vocabulary the journey of humanity from a poverty created by nature, into poverties manipulated by ruling castes and hierarchies, and thence into the managed penury of "advanced" industrial society' (Seabrook, 2013: 1 and 3).

1.2.1 Discovery and Rediscovery

Certainly, the biblical proclamation—attributed to Moses—that 'the poor shall never cease out of the land' (Deuteronomy 15: 11) implied that poverty was an irremediable feature of the human condition. The poor were a legitimate object of compassion. But the significance of poverty has been subject to continual rediscovery and reinvention. In Europe in mediaeval times, poverty was, if not potentially an honourable status, quite simply the normal condition of the masses (Lis and Soly, 1979). However, the advent of industrial capitalism rendered poverty both visible and problematic. The spectre of dispossessed labour, urban slums, and conspicuous exploitation posed threats to the maintenance of social order and the protection of public health; threats demanding new modes of governance and control (H. Dean, 1991; M. Dean, 1991). By the nineteenth century, poverty was something to be managed. It could no longer be an honourable or a normal status. To be classified a pauper, according to Bentham, was to become an object not of compassion, but of 'wholesome horror' (cited in Spicker, 1984).

In the twentieth century, the hesitant development of 'modern' welfare states in the industrial nations of the global north brought change: initially, because of such nations' concerns for the quality and fitness of their 'human stock' (e.g. Williams, 1989: ch. 6); but later, because of the self-evident need to compensate civilian populations for the consequences of two world wars (Titmuss, 1955). The poor were therefore constituted as objects for improvement and/or as victims of remediable circumstance. Such was the confidence in the administrative capacities of post-Second World War welfare states that there followed an era of complacency in which, it seems, poverty again became largely invisible (Glennerster, 2004). Before long, however, it became clear that the problem of poverty had not been solved. Welfare states were failing to maintain the living standards of vulnerable groups in rich societies (Abel-Smith and Townsend, 1965; Harrington, 1962; and see Room, 1982), and the richest cities in the capitalist world still contained chronically impoverished neighbourhoods (e.g. Lewis, 1966). The concept of poverty now began to acquire new associations. Whereas the risk of poverty under capitalism in peace-time might once have been principally associated with labour market issues and class inequalities, the risk was increasingly connected with social change and demographic trends; and with issues of gender, ethnicity, disability, and age (Bonoli, 2005; Roche, 1992: chs. 3, 5, and 8; Taylor-Gooby, 2000).

For inhabitants of the global north, in a post-material/post-emotional era (Inglehart, 1990; Mestrovic, 1997), poverty has become an ambiguous concept. On the one hand it is increasingly a personalized risk to be worried about, guarded against, and individually managed (Beck, 1992). On the other, it is a misfortune that befalls distant others for whom one might experience a kind of hollowed-out compassion expressed through support for anti-poverty causes (Dean, 2003: 696; and see Dogra, 2012).

1.2.2 Symbolic Meanings

It may begin to appear that poverty is more ephemeral than real. A criticism aimed at Townsend for his attempt to locate a definitive poverty threshold is that such a quest fails to allow for diversity of lifestyle and human behaviour: one person might feel deprived if she could not eat meat once a week, while another might prefer never to eat meat at all. However, the point about poverty, as David Piachaud has put it, is that the term 'carries with it an implication and a moral imperative that something should be done about it' (Piachaud, 1981: 119). To speak of poverty is to make value judgements, as much as scientific statements. The moral significance of poverty lies in its symbolic as much as its material dimensions. Ruth Lister draws a distinction between the 'unacceptable hardship' that constitutes poverty's material core and what she refers to as poverty's 'relational-symbolic aspects', which she lists as: disrespect; humiliation; shame and stigma; assault on dignity/self-esteem; othering; denial of human rights; diminished citizenship; lack of voice; powerlessness (2004: 8).

p. 13 As we have seen, in days gone by, material deprivation might not invariably have been associated with negative emotions, such as shame or humiliation, but most certainly they can be. In eighteenth-century Scotland, for example, Adam Smith (1776: 691) famously observed the culturally constituted sense of shame that could befall a day-labourer were he so poor as to be unable to present himself in public without a pair of leather shoes on his feet, yet in France it appeared that no shame at all attached to appearing in public in wooden shoes or even barefooted. More recently, particular attention has turned to the idea of poverty as a psychosocial effect (Taylor, 2011) or as a form of 'social suffering' (Bourdieu, 1999). Empirical research in seven very diverse countries has suggested that shame is a common denominator in the social framing of poverty (Walker et al., 2013). Shamefulness is a consequence of the social construction of poverty and of 'the poor' as things envisioned through their 'otherness'; as socially, temporally, or spatially distant. There is a parallel to be drawn here with Foucault's claim that changing social constructions of sexuality and criminality created processes by which distinctions between normal and abnormal behaviour are imposed (Foucault, 1977, 1979). The same might be said about social constructions of poverty (H. Dean, 1991). Qualitative research consistently demonstrates that people experiencing material poverty are inclined to deny that they are poor. Poverty is imagined as something that happens to others: to people in different social circumstances, to people who lived in the past or to people in distant countries (Dean with Melrose, 1999).

1.2.3 The Relativity of Disadvantage

To suggest that poverty is socially constructed is not to deny its reality, but to implicate the whole of society in the nature of its meaning. When Townsend sought to define poverty in terms of relative deprivation he was mindful that the problem of poverty might just as well be regarded as a problem of riches (cf. Tawney, 1913), not only in the sense that it is the rich who monopolize society's material wealth, but in the sense that they actively shape society's standards and values: they are responsible for the 'proselytisation of lifestyles' (Townsend, 1979: 367). However, the relationship between rich and poor—the privileged and the deprived—can be understood in another context. Scott has drawn attention to the common etymological origins of 'privilege' and 'deprivation' in the Latin word 'privatus', which refers to a thing or person that is private or withdrawn from public life (Scott, 1994: 150). The terms privilege and deprivation therefore convey the sense that rich and poor respectively are supposedly withdrawn from the realm of ordinary lifestyles. Riches and poverty represent extremes that lie beyond the pale of the 'normal' social continuum. If this is so, the proselytization of lifestyles entails mediated processes of transmission. This was illustrated in Runciman's (1966) classic study of relative deprivation in England, which demonstrated that people tend by and large to compare their material circumstances with social reference groups that lie within the horizons of their daily lives and personal experiences. Any sense of relative privilege or deprivation is limited by those horizons. This finding has been supported in more recent research, which has confirmed that in an unequal society people may have a limited or distorted sense of how relatively rich or poor they themselves are. However, it also suggested that people's fear of poverty and their horror for the imagined lifestyles of the poor are greater than their desire for wealth and their fascination with the imagined lifestyles of the rich (Dean with Melrose, 1999). By and large, people may worry lest they should ever descend into poverty; they think it might be fun to be rich; but their primary aspiration is to be just 'comfortable'—to achieve or maintain a lifestyle within the bounds they perceive to be ordinary or normal.

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1.3 Social Exclusion

This leads us to a discussion of a concept that attained particular fashionability in the 1990s and 2000s, namely 'social exclusion'. It has been suggested that the concept may be distinguished from the concept of poverty insofar as it is concerned with *relational* issues and focused on processes of disadvantage, whereas poverty is concerned with *distributive* issues and focuses on states of disadvantage (Room, 1995). This is helpful up to a point, but three things should be borne in mind:

- Social exclusion, like poverty, is a protean concept with competing and contradictory definitions;
- Social exclusion has been widely used as a synonym for poverty, or else has been casually conflated with the concept of poverty;
- Some conceptualizations of poverty—as we have seen—are very much concerned with relational issues and processes of disadvantage and already effectively embrace the idea of social exclusion.

1.3.1 Paradigms, Discourses, and Clubs

This section will draw on three overlapping conceptual frameworks relating to social exclusion. The first is that of Hilary Silver (1995) who defines three *paradigms* of social exclusion: the ‘solidarity’ paradigm, which is concerned with the failure of a society fully to incorporate all its members as social participants; the ‘specialization’ paradigm, which is concerned with the difficulties an industrialized society can have integrating some of its members into its complex division of labour; and the ‘monopoly’ paradigm, which is concerned with the way dominant classes in society mobilize so as effectively to exclude subordinate classes. The second framework is that of Bill Jordan (1996), who extrapolates from a version of economic club theory to argue that—from the level of the global clubs established by rich nations (such as the G7 or the European Union) down to the level of local amateur sports and social clubs—the world is divided into competing and mutually exclusive communities or clubs: clubs, which by regulating competition among their own members can mobilize more effective competition against rival clubs. Jordan’s approach connects with key elements of Silver’s solidarity and monopoly paradigms. The third framework is that of Ruth Levitas (1998), who identifies three political or popular *discourses* of social exclusion, each identified by a three letter acronym: the ‘social integration discourse’ (SID) resonates with key aspects of Silver’s specialization paradigm insofar as it is preoccupied with the social consequences of labour market exclusion; the ‘redistributionist discourse’ (RED) resonates with some aspects of Silver’s monopoly paradigm insofar as it is preoccupied with the exclusionary consequences of unequally distributed resources; the moral underclass discourse (MUD) is preoccupied—as we shall see below—with the dysfunctional consequences of the behaviour of aberrant social minorities.

Focusing for a moment on the *solidarity* paradigm, it may be seen that the concept of social exclusion has certain roots in an older concept of ‘marginalization’; with concerns, for example, about the exclusion of minority ethnic immigrants in the 1920s from dominant White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture in the USA (Park, 1928); or the plight of impoverished rural–urban migrants in the 1980s throughout much of Latin America (Faria, 1995; Germani, 1980). The origin of the term social exclusion is widely attributed to Lenoir (1974), whose concern was with the exclusion of those social groups in France who had slipped through the protective net of the welfare state. The International Labour Organisation has explored the concept of social exclusion (Rodgers et al., 1995) framing it in terms of a process by which groups or even entire populations can be excluded from the benefits of social protection and the right to social development.

The *specialization* paradigm became dominant in Western Europe with the development of the EU’s Social Inclusion process and Social Inclusion strategies (Marlier et al., 2007). The seeds of that process had begun with the European Poverty Programmes in the 1970s but, it has been suggested, the subsequent flowering of the EU ‘social agenda’ had been impeded in the 1980s—at least in part by the opposition of the Conservative government in the UK, which denied the existence of poverty as a significant problem and objected to the use of the term (Bergman, 1995). The impasse was strategically resolved by the adoption of the language of social exclusion. Such language was whole-heartedly embraced across the whole of Europe during the subsequent ‘Third Way’ reform era (Lewis and Surender, 2004), dominated as it was by a neo-liberal economic consensus that prioritized social inclusion through labour market activation (Levitas, 1998).

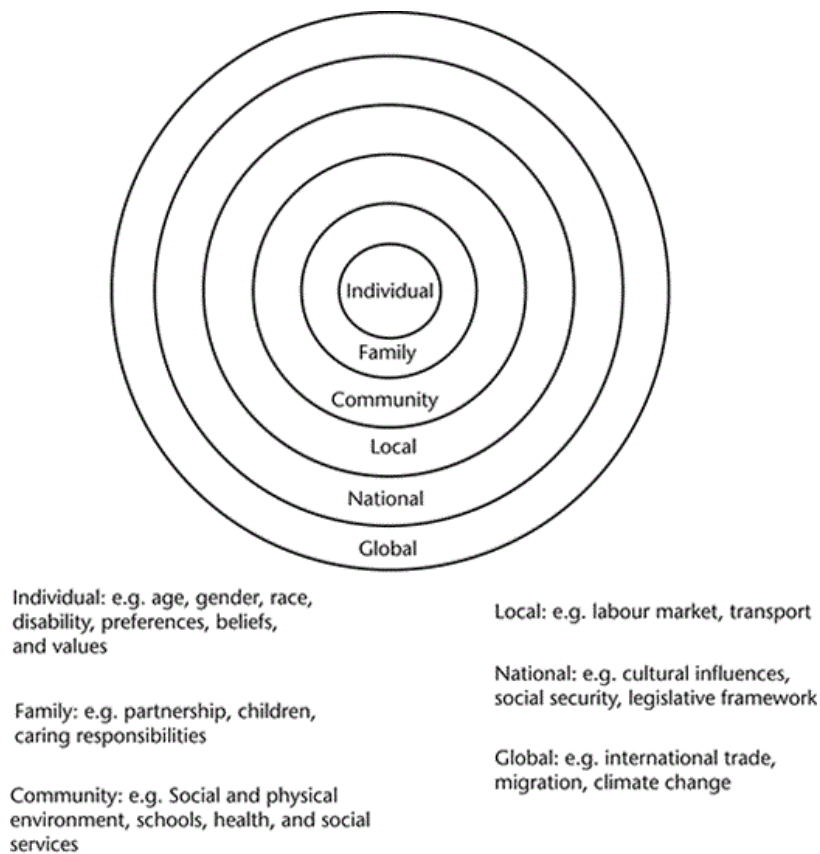
The *monopoly* paradigm is portrayed by Silver as an essentially socialist or social democratic approach. More radical examples of the genre may be found, for example, in the work of Byrne (2005). And Jordan’s club theory approach captures the sense in which privileged communities by excluding deprived communities, monopolize access to resources: ‘communities of choice’ have the freedom unfairly to maximize their advantages, while the options open to ‘communities of fate’ are unjustly constrained (Jordan, 1996: ch. 5).

An influential strand of ideologically moderate scholarship that *combines* the focus on distributive and social justice issues associated with the monopoly paradigm with an emphasis on participation similar to that of the solidarity paradigm is to be found in the work of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) at the LSE. CASE’s working definition of social exclusion is essentially consistent, if not coterminous, with Townsend’s definition of relative poverty:

An individual is socially excluded if he or she does not participate in key activities of the society in which he or she lives...[including] Consumption (the capacity to purchase goods and services); Production (participation in economically or socially valuable services); Political engagement (involvement in local or national decision making); Social integration (integration with family, friends and community). (Burchardt et al., 2002a: 30–1)

CASE’s intention was that the definition should inform an integrated approach, capturing different layers of social exclusion, effected by influences operating at a variety of levels, ranging from the individual to the global (Burchardt et al., 2002b: 7). This they illustrated with the ‘onion’ diagram reproduced as Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1.



An integrated approach to social exclusion

Source: Burchardt et al. (2002b: 7), by permission of Oxford University Press

1.3.2 A socially Excluded ‘Underclass’?

We turn finally to address the notion of ‘underclass’. The MUD discourse identified by Levitas may encompass certain implicit as well as explicit notions of underclass. The ‘New’ Labour government in the UK in 1997 created a Social Exclusion Unit with a broad cross-departmental remit to tackle complex social problems. Its definition of social exclusion was pragmatic:

A short hand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown. (SEU, 1997: 1)

p. 17 Though this makes no explicit mention of ‘underclass’, there is nonetheless an implication that social exclusion is associated with undesirable outcomes at the margins of society. Early initiatives undertaken by the SEU were focused on such aberrant behaviours as rough sleeping, teenage pregnancy, school truancy, and young people not in education, employment, or training (SEU, 1998a, 1998b, 1999a, 1999b). This use of the term social exclusion is redolent of past concerns with what the English Victorians had called society’s ‘residuum’ (Stedman-Jones, 1971); with the dysfunctionality of the class Booth had defined as the ‘very poor’ and the corrosive presence of ‘loafers, the vicious and the semi-criminal’ (see above); with what policymakers in the inter-war years had alluded to as ‘social problem groups’ (Macnicol, 1987).

p. 18 The term, ‘underclass’, first emerged in the USA in the 1960s where it was associated with a conspicuously racialized conception of poverty (Myrdal, 1963) and in some contexts this has continued to be the case (as may be seen in Chapter 12, this volume). But it was popularized in the 1980s, partly by a journalist, Ken Auletta, who claimed to have observed a social stratum of destitute and/or state welfare-dependent people, including ‘the passive poor...the hostile...the hustlers...[and] the traumatised’ (Auletta, 1982: xvi); and partly through the arguments of the controversial paleo-conservative political scientist, Charles Murray. Murray’s claim was that the USA was beset by a rising tide of ‘illegitimacy’ (i.e. unmarried motherhood), violent crime, and labour-force drop out. His quest was to reintroduce traditional family values, the work ethic and the idea of moral blameworthiness (Murray, 1984). The rise of this ‘underclass’ Murray attributed to the perverse incentives created by the welfare state, a trend he later also detected in Britain (1990), so refuelling a debate ignited by interpretations of Oscar Lewis’s ‘culture of poverty’ thesis (see above) and a belief that such a culture was transmitted from generation to generation (e.g. Welshman, 2002).

However, the notion of an ‘underclass’ has not invariably been associated with moralistic accounts of social exclusion. A number of commentators have sought to define an underclass in structural rather than behavioural terms. Most importantly, William Julius Wilson (1987) used the term ‘ghetto underclass’ when describing the social ecology of inner-city neighbourhoods rendered dysfunctional by job-losses, out-migration, and the dislocation of communities. There have been other attempts to legitimize the idea that social groups systemically excluded from the benefits of labour market participation in advanced industrial societies constitute a class in itself, rather than a detached portion of the working class (Field, 1989; Runciman, 1990). Critics nevertheless suggest that the concept is too deeply discredited: estimates of the size of the underclass in countries such as the US and the UK vary wildly (from 1 per cent to 12 per cent of the population); the posited membership of the underclass is too diverse and transient for it properly to be accounted for as a class; and there is little satisfactory evidence for the alleged existence of a distinctive underclass culture (Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1992; Lister, 1990, 1996; Shildrick et al., 2012).

Use of the underclass concept has been largely confined to the Anglophone world, but despite the controversy it has generated it continues to surface in a wide variety of contexts. In the UK, a Conservative think tank with significant influence on the Coalition government that came to power in 2010 used it to identify those whose lives are ‘characterised by dependency, addiction, debt and family breakdown’ (CSJ, 2007: 5). The UN-HABITAT agency has used it in relation to the condition of the world’s 1 billion slum dwellers (UN-HABITAT, 2003). And various terms that are in many respects similar to ‘underclass’—such as ‘informal proletariat’ (Davis, 2006) and ‘the detached’ (Standing, 2009)—continue regularly to emerge.

p. 19

1.4 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter provides a foundation for the book by tracing the contours of some of the classic debates relating to social advantage and disadvantage.

The original conceptual framing of social advantage and disadvantage is to be found in ideas and concepts of wealth and poverty. The chapter has briefly visited the well-worn distinction between absolute and relative poverty: concepts that articulate different, but not necessarily incompatible, criteria or standards by which to determine what constitutes advantage and, by implication, disadvantage. Of particular importance is the conceptualization of poverty as relative deprivation: as a form of disadvantage that can only be understood in the context of what is adjudged advantageous to human well-being. The measurement of poverty imposes assumptions about what is meant by advantage and disadvantage. As a result, advantage and disadvantage can be indicated by a variety of means. Contemporary poverty measures allow us insights into the variation and extent of advantage and disadvantage in a global perspective.

Secondly, the chapter has focused on the social dimension and has illustrated how the meaning and significance of poverty has been socially constructed and reconstructed throughout history. Insofar as poverty has been regarded as an inevitable background to the human condition it has not always impinged on general awareness and its visibility may fluctuate according to the social context. Poverty is more than material or economic disadvantage: it has symbolic meaning that is constituted through the processes by which social advantage may be acquired. Poverty is or can be 'otherness'. It can entail social stigma. Advantage and disadvantage are social experiences and relative deprivation results from the awareness of social difference and the moral and emotional significance that attaches to social differences and degrees of social difference.

Finally, the chapter has discussed concepts of social exclusion that, arguably, either subsumed or broadened our thinking about poverty as a form of relative deprivation. Concepts of social exclusion focus on the systemic processes by which advantage may accrue to some and be denied to others. However, that focus may be directed to different kinds of exclusion: to exclusion from social rights, from social belonging, or from the social division of labour. The term social exclusion can also be used to refer to the exclusion of a supposedly morally culpable minority or 'underclass'.

p. 20 Poverty and social exclusion are, self-evidently, contested or even controversial concepts. But they are concepts that provide much of the language, the social science, and the moral grammar through which social advantage and disadvantage may be apprehended.

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