

Relative poverty and social exclusion for evaluating sociology essay



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Townsend defines relative poverty as being in a state where people do not have sufficient resources to support the kind of lifestyle and living conditions which are considered 'normal' in the society that they live in, and which results in their exclusion from everyday activities. (Townsend, 1979) He also states that the standards of relative poverty differ across countries and cultures and over time and place. This is because social scientists need to consider traditions and necessities which are not fixed but flexible to change. When determining the meaning of 'relative', two aspects have to be considered; that is, "the nature of comparisons and the nature of human needs". (Lister, 2004: 22) Human needs are thought to be socially constructed and reflect the priorities along with the mind-set of the members within that particular society. Hence, using this concept to measure the degree of poverty ensures that the results obtained are relevant to the current situation within the society. However this poses a challenge if poverty is to be compared between different societies.

Another issue is the difficulty of deciding which units to use when estimating the extent of poverty in today's western societies. There have been arguments for the units to be individuals or households, but the unit chosen should be practical and representative of the aim of measurement. (Lister, 2004) The dissimilarities living standards can be attributed to, among other things, the ways and costs of living, not forgetting the availability of commodities to groups of people. The understanding of these distinct components varies along with people's opinions and perception. (Townsend, 1979) Therefore it is hard to outline a general standard of relative poverty as it does not conform to any set criteria within contemporary western

societies. The question this raises regarding the measurement of poverty is the validity and compatibility of indicators used. Should income or material deprivation be used as the proverbial yardstick with which to show the extent of poverty? Lister believes that income only gives a restricted perspective of one's material resources. (Lister, 2004) In relation to material deprivation, it has been argued that not every individual or society values the same things, and even what people classify as basic necessities may differ between cultures or ethnic groups. (Townsend, 1979)

As for recognising the problems faced by people living on very low incomes, those who fall into the category of being in 'relative poverty' are often understood as not being able to enjoy life opportunities and other experiences which are normally attainable by the majority of the population. (Townsend, 1979) Low income may account for the inability to support a family and the failure to ensure that each member possesses equal chances to develop themselves personally and pursue any areas of interest. However, the level of income may not be reflected accurately by the idea of 'relative poverty', so precautions need to be taken when using it to gain insight into the everyday lives of those classified as relatively poor.(ibid.)

Social exclusion has been conceptualised in various ways. One of those is of social exclusion as an expression of poverty. (UN, 1995 ; cited in Lister, 2004: 32) Others may see it as a process, not a state in which an individual or a household finds itself in. (Lister, 2004) It provides a method of contemplating the idea of poverty; with social exclusion having the potential to be either a source or a consequence of poverty. (Council of Europe, 2001)

In the United Kingdom, the concept of social exclusion is linked to "<https://assignbuster.com/relative-poverty-and-social-exclusion-for-evaluating-sociology-essay/>

participation in paid work” (Levitas, 2005: 26). To be socially excluded does not always mean that one is living in poverty, as it is possible for one to be subjected to other kinds of situations, such as social and moral deprivation.

According to Gordon et al in a report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, there are “ 4 types of exclusion: impoverishment, service exclusion, labour market exclusion and exclusion from social relations”. (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2000: 54) Social exclusion may be judged on the basis of one’s material possessions, which links it to the measure of poverty. People receiving low income may lack bare necessities resulting in them having to forgo certain aspects of social life or fail to adopt ‘ normal’ social behaviour. Thus one’s social experiences are severely neglected. Poverty is but one dimension of social exclusion; to also include the other three aspects would assist in obtaining a clearer understanding of the lives of people surviving on low-paying jobs. So it could be said that social exclusion is better suited to the comprehension of experiences undergone by the people subsisting on extremely low incomes.

Levitas has put forward 3 discourses of social exclusion: “ the redistributionist egalitarian discourse, the moral underclass discourse and the social integrationist discourse”. (Levitas, 2005: 7) The first discourse centres upon poverty based on income levels or material resources; the second on morals and the third on paid labour as being an agent of integration. From the redistributionist view, poverty is seen as a main cause of social exclusion and exclusion is thought to result from inequality.

Therefore it pushes for the minimisation of inequalities and “ redistribution of resources and power” within the society. (Levitas, 2005) This may not be of <https://assignbuster.com/relative-poverty-and-social-exclusion-for-evaluating-sociology-essay/>

much value in gauging the severity of poverty within a population as it is concentrates more on the establishment of equality rather than the various strata of poverty and how to categorise them. The second outlook presents the “ culture of dependency” among the “ underclass” as the cause of exclusion from society. Taking examples such as unemployed young men and single mothers, who are likely to have low or no income, it argues that benefits and assistance are detrimental for those who receive them. Hence it can be said that this particular approach is instrumental in the interpretation of the lives of those who get by with very little money in life.

Focusing on the third approach, what can be gathered is that it is merely concerned about unemployment and economic inactivity as factors of exclusion from the wider society. Unemployment does not bring about chances to build relationships with fellow workers and results in the absence of a social network. Limited chances for education due to poverty result in the incapability of one to stay abreast with the latest technological, scientific and intellectual developments occurring in present-day societies. (Barry, 2002) So people who are socially excluded in this aspect feel disconnected from the rest of society and lack a sense of belonging.

Alternatively there may be cases where individuals voluntarily and consciously exclude themselves from the rest of society. (Barry, 2002) In these cases, it is often the extremely rich who do this as they have the capability and resources to reduce their dependence on the whole population. Conversely, there are possibilities that people in poverty may not be excluded by their community; they could be bound together by a strong sense of solidarity owing to the mutual sharing of bitter experiences and <https://assignbuster.com/relative-poverty-and-social-exclusion-for-evaluating-sociology-essay/>

their determination to face and overcome the odds. Generally, the establishment of differences between “ self-exclusion and involuntary non-participation” in social activities is intensely demanding. (Burchardt et al, 2002) Thus the use of social exclusion in measuring poverty must be carried out with awareness of the subjects’ background and should not just focus on the position that they are occupying at the moment.

In conclusion, the concept of relative poverty is applicable for measuring the poverty level in current societies as long as the indexes used are relevant and up-to-date. In spite of that, it must be kept in mind that the standards of relative poverty depend on the context in which groups of people are located within their respective societies. It is the same factor that renders this concept less suitable in attempts to perceive the experiences of low-income earners. In comparison, the idea of social exclusion is more helpful because it is often the poor that find themselves socially excluded. However, there are exceptions to every rule and one important point to remember is that this method is not necessarily representative of the whole population being studied.