

PART 2

UNPACKING THE PROBLEM

In Part Two of the thesis I unpack the ethical problems involved in poverty. To do so, I first give my understanding of the phenomenon of poverty in Chapter Three. This understanding is based on social science reports that provide in-depth analyses of poverty.

Next I show in Chapter Four why poverty raises major moral issues that deserve careful consideration, serious reflection, and strong action from all people.

In Chapter Five I analyse the moral issues raised by poverty in terms of the categories provided by our contemporary understanding of the demands of justice, that represent questions raised by the public morality embodied in a society.

CHAPTER THREE

THE COMPLEXITY OF POVERTY

What is poverty? Could it be that we still do not adequately understand this phenomenon present in most human societies? Poverty is easily recognisable everywhere in the world and most people are capable of identifying cases of poverty correctly. However, its causes and effects are often not fully understood. Non-poor people react differently to people suffering from poverty, ranging from complete indifference or blaming the victims, to giving aid to strengthen dependency or restore dignity and self-worth. If persons, groups, organisations, or governments commit themselves wholeheartedly to address problems of poverty and inequality it becomes imperative to understand all the complex dimensions and multiple causes of the easily recognisable phenomenon of poverty.

This chapter wants to contribute to a better understanding of the complexities of one of the most devastating and degrading conditions human beings could find themselves in. For Christians to articulate their deepest moral values appropriate for dealing with poverty, they need to understand exactly what poverty involves and where it comes from. Understanding the concept of poverty and its causes thus becomes important background knowledge in any attempt to develop a moral response to poverty. Such guided moral responses could then be translated into appropriate action to provide help that can make a real difference to poor people's lives.

In the first section I will attempt to define the concepts "poverty" and "poor" as it is mostly used in everyday language. In the second section I want to illustrate how social science research on poverty extend, modify, and refine everyday explanations of poverty and present us with deeper insight into the

complex nature and causes of poverty. Everyday explanations of poverty justify people's attitudes and actions towards poor people. Insight gained from social science research can enable us to get a firmer grip on what is really going on in the lives of poor people, thus leading to appropriate measures to alleviate poverty. In this way misguided aid that waste resources can be avoided.

In this chapter I will use social science research to deepen our understanding of the concept of poverty and its causes. The social sciences can deepen our insight into the nature, extent, and causes of poverty, whereas moral reflection by philosophers can give a systematic and coherent account of the different sets of moral values present in a society and demonstrate their full implications for addressing complex phenomena of poverty. Unless we challenge people's perceptions of the nature, incidence, and causes of poverty in society, we will not be able to design effective policies, get access to adequate resources, or be able to motivate non-poor people to take the issue of poverty seriously. Theological reflection on the values contained in Scripture for dealing with poverty needs a detailed understanding of poverty to highlight the central ethical issues involved.

1. Poverty and Wealth in Everyday Language

1.1 The meanings of "poverty" and "poor"

The dominant shade of meaning of the concepts "poverty" and "poor" refers to a condition where people do not have sufficient means to procure either the comforts or the necessities of life. Ordinary language use refers to two kinds of poverty, differing in degree. In the one case, it refers to people unable to afford the comforts of life, i.e. people without sufficient money, wealth, or material possessions to afford anything more than the barest necessities to keep themselves alive and well. They are described as poor

because of their position relative to other people in society who have the means to afford much more of the comforts of life, once they have provided for their more urgent needs.

The second meaning of poverty refers to people who do not have the means to provide for the necessities of life, i.e. their basic human needs, such as food, shelter, or clothing. Such people cannot secure their survival and are dependent on others for help. Gifts, allowances, or charitable relief stand between their subsistence and ill-health or even death. This kind of poverty, where people are in desperate need of the minimum food, clothing, or shelter and dependent on the goodwill of others for their survival, is often called absolute poverty.

The concepts "poverty" and "poor" are used with several meanings related to the ones above. These related uses further clarify the dominant meaning of these concepts. One example is the meaning of poor as lacking an essential property, for example, when someone speaks of spiritual poverty, or poor soil. The soil has a deficiency in the desired qualities and thus yields little and is described as unproductive, inferior, and of little value. In the case of soil, the desired properties needed for a good crop are scanty and inadequate. Growing crops in that soil does not go well, but rather badly. The soil cannot be used with any success. The words used to explain the meaning of "poor" and "poverty" in this context clarifies the ordinary language understanding of the condition of poverty as a situation where people lack means, experience deficiencies in the provision of their needs, and have access to scant or inadequate resources.

People in such unfortunate circumstances deserve some kind of pity. This is reflected in the use of the concept "poor" as referring to people who deserve pity, who are unfortunate, unhappy, miserable, and pitiable. For example, one could speak of the poor fellow who was killed in a car accident, regardless of this fellow's socio-economic status. In this use the focus is on the person afflicted by unfortunate circumstances, who deserves to be pitied.

Again, this use clarifies the dominant use of the concepts "poor" and "poverty." Poor people are often pitied, seen as miserable and unhappy, and regarded as unfortunate to suffer from desperate circumstances.

Everyday use of the concepts "poor" and "poverty" also suggests that poor people are sometimes to blame for their poverty. The concept "poor" is often used to refer to a performance unworthy of a person's position or ability. The cricket player played a poor shot that cost him his wicket, or the ballet dancer gave a poor performance of the lead role of Swan Lake. It could be that both stars gave performances far below their ability, or that they do not have the ability to perform according to the standards required of top performers in their field. This clarifies the condition of poverty by pointing to some people's inability to provide adequate means for their survival, or their below standard performance – for whatever reason – that fails to deliver the required goods.

The insignificance and low position of poor people are also reflected in the everyday use of the concepts "poor" and "poverty." Sometimes we speak of someone as a poor creature, or refer to a person's view as a poor opinion. This can mean that person and opinion are despicable, insignificant, humble, lowly, or of little consequence. Sometimes people refer to themselves, their performances, belongings, or what they offer to others as being poor. In such cases they are either modest or apologetic, attempting to depreciate themselves, what they have, or offer to others. Again this clarifies the human condition of poverty by pointing to poor people's low position in society, without substantial influence. For this reason many people look down on them. Many poor people resist identifying themselves as poor. To identify themselves thus, would be a negative portrayal of oneself as someone with a pitiable problem in need of help. Poor people trying to live with dignity in a society prejudiced against them might not voluntarily want to adopt "poor" as a self-description (Alcock 1997: 208).

The main dimensions of the meaning of the concept of poverty can now be

drawn from the discussion above. The concepts poverty and poor refers to people who might

- have insufficient means to procure the comforts or necessities of life
- lack essential properties, have deficiencies in desired resources, or who have access only to inadequate or scant resources
- have a low position in society without substantial influence
- perform unworthy of their position or ability

To contrast the meanings of "poor" and "poverty" in everyday language with the meanings of their opposites, i.e. "rich" and "wealthy," might be highly illuminating.

1.2 The meanings of "wealth" and "wealthy"

When we use the concept of wealth in everyday language, we refer to things considered to be valuable, precious, or luxurious. Wealth refers to goods, money, commodities, land, possessions, or products which some people own an abundant share of. Their wealth have utility and can be exchanged in various ways, as wealth can be appropriated in exclusive possession. The concept of wealth only applies in cases where the abundance owned far exceeds the shares of the majority of members of a community or country. This concept thus denotes something that is relative to the communal or societal context where it occurs.

Being wealthy refers to something of great worth or value that is rich in any sense. The word wealthy refers to prosperous or flourishing people or conditions that reflect comfortable or luxurious conditions of life. Wealthy people have more possessions, qualities, or advantages than most other people. They are more plentifully furnished or supplied with something appreciated for its monetary or economic value. People described as wealthy have abundant means, usually possessions or money, at their command. Similarly, wealthy communities or countries command substantially more riches than others.

The main dimensions of the meaning of the concept of wealth can now be drawn from the discussion above. The concepts wealth and wealthy refers to people who might

- have valuable, precious, or luxurious possessions of great value or worth
- have an abundant share of material goods or command abundant means that far exceed those of the majority of the population
- have goods with utility that can be exchanged
- be prosperous, flourishing people living in luxurious, comfortable conditions

1.3 The meanings of "riches" and "rich"

The concept of riches refers to a condition of having a lot of money or possessions, or more generally, having abundant means considered valuable in society. Riches thus refers to the total of valuable means and possessions of individuals, families, groups, or countries. Riches furthermore refers to qualities of great value that things or persons have in abundance. Examples include references to the riches of our language or to the country's riches in petroleum.

People are called rich when they are amply provided with money or possessions. Having large quantities of money or possessions means being regarded as people with abundant means to fulfil your purposes or dreams. The words "abundant," "amply provided with," and "large quantities" suggest that people are rich in comparison to the majority of members in their society.

The other dimensions of the word rich extend the meaning described above. When we talk of a mine rich in iron ore, we mean that this mine contains large amounts of valuable resources. A rich imagination produces many creative, new ideas. A rich country abounds in natural, material, or human resources that yield many things judged valuable. Similarly rich soil can produce good crops because the soil abounds in qualities conducive to the

production of good crops.

An important dimension of the meaning of the word rich is that things or persons described as rich possess something precious that is of great worth or value. A rich voice is full and rounded, abounding in sweetness and harmony. Rich food has choice ingredients and therefore particularly strong stimulative or nourishing effects. A rich interpretation of a musical work describes a highly developed or cultivated performance demonstrating superior skill, knowledge, and insight.

The main dimensions of the meaning of the concept of riches can now be drawn from the discussion above. The concepts "riches" and "rich" refers to people who might

- have large amounts of valuable resources, be amply provided with or have a lot of money or possessions, or command abundant means considered to be valuable in a society
- possess precious things considered to be of great worth
- have qualities of great value
- yield or produce things considered to have great worth

A comparison between poverty and wealth and riches reveals the following. In the case of poverty the focus is on negative terms like inadequate, insufficient, deficient, unworthy. People whose living conditions are described in these terms deserve pity and have a low position in society. The meanings of wealth and riches turns on positive terms such as precious, valuable, luxurious, prosperous, worth, and abundance. Rich people are described in similar positive terms—signalling the admiration they often receive—and the focus is on their power to command a large share of the valuable resources available in society. The comparison between the meanings of these concepts points to major inequalities concerning people's everyday living conditions and well-being. How can these inequalities be adequately described and interpreted? How do they arise? These are

questions to be answered in the following sections.

2. Indicators of poverty

Social scientists sometimes take a basic definition of poverty and operationalise it so as to provide indicators that can lead to a detailed description and measurement of poverty (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 16; Townsend 1993; Haralambos and Holborn 1991; Erikson 1993). Operationalisation of concepts is common practice in social science, as scientists need to carefully select observable phenomena representative of the set of meanings of the abstract concepts they investigate. Despite the possibility of misleading figures, skewed statistics, and scientists deliberately ignoring the non-measurables, such measurements and figures can provide extremely useful profiles of various aspects of a multidimensional phenomenon such as poverty. Poverty emerges as a complex human phenomenon in the multiple indicators available thereof. However, no indicator is sufficient in itself to describe all dimensions of poverty. Several indicators combined can provide a profile or index of a specific case of poverty.

However, the limitations of these quantitative measurements and statistical profiles must be kept in mind (cf. Alcock 1997: 115). What counts as poverty in these profiles often depends on the standards or indicators designed by middle class experts doing poverty research, as well as the standard of living accepted in a given country at a certain time (cf. Allardt 1993). Furthermore, there are dimensions of poverty that are not easily measurable. How would one quantify the degradation or loss of human dignity often associated with poverty? Or could one measure the inability to adapt to changing circumstances that sometimes causes poverty? Not all aspects and dimensions of poverty are measurable. Nor does quantified descriptions of the extent and reach of poverty tell us all we need to know about poverty. We must also note qualitative indicators of poverty and

integrate them with statistical profiles of poverty. Qualitative indicators make dry statistics vivid and insightful. The strengths of quantitative measurement and qualitative description can be combined for a profile of greater depth and clarity (Alcock 1997: 128). For this reason scientists must involve poor people in their research by attentively listening to their subjective experiences of poverty (Alcock 1997: 128).

An illustration of an approach that takes qualitative indicators of poverty seriously can be found in the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in South Africa (Wilson & Ramphela 1989: 14). The leaders of the project sent their researchers into the field without any explicit theoretical or operational definition of poverty. Their reason was not to restrict the meaning of poverty to characteristics which researchers "living within the sheltered walls of an urban university" think important. Rather, field researchers were to go out in the country and listen to how people who experienced poverty, and those who lived or worked with such people, understood the concept. From such an understanding of poverty they were to develop their indicators, make their measurements, give descriptions, and interpret people's experience. Their assumption was that the use of the concept of poverty in everyday language—amongst those knowledgeable about the experience of poverty—is the one to be operationalised into reliable indicators of poverty.

The concept poverty refers to insufficient means to adequately sustain human well-being. Social scientists take these means to be income and employment, health, food and water, basic services, housing, and education. More general measurements of poverty include measurements of the distribution of poverty and people's levels of satisfaction with their lives. Statistical manipulation of the vast amount of information yielded through these measurements enables social scientists to draw different kinds of poverty profiles. The use of these indicators and resulting profiles needs to be explained in somewhat more detail.

2.1 *Income*

Income and employment can be measured in different ways (cf. Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 18–21, 54, 171). Income can be measured as an individual's annual income and compared to patterns of income found in a society. Often household income is taken as the basic unit to be measured, as several members could contribute to, or live on, the income of a single household. Annual income might, however, not reflect some people's access to productive resources, such as land (however small) to farm on. To take such access into account provides figures useful for comparison. Income thus measured give a good indication of the financial resources a household has access to. Sometimes researchers prefer to use expenditure patterns rather than income. Gaining information on how people use income often gives a better indication of whether people are poor or not. It is possible to estimate a minimum level of consumption needed in a specific society (or region) to fulfil basic needs adequately. People with lower levels of financial resources available for consumption can be considered to be poor, or, to live under the poverty line.

2.2 *Employment*

Similarly, employment can be determined by taking into account whether someone has a job or not, whether it is full time or part-time, permanent or temporary, and seasonal or non-seasonal. Furthermore, the time of unemployment can be measured, as well as the attempts made by a person to find new employment. The effect of unemployment in causing poverty can be determined by linking the figures on the income or expenditure of households with the number of unemployed in those households (cf. Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 54, 234–244; May 1998a: 4, 37, 75–83; May 1998b: 45, 80).

2.3 *Health*

Health provides various measurements regarded as reliable indicators of

poverty (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 99–120). Ordinary human bodily development provides one indicator. Poor children are often stunted in their growth, as they are more often than not undernourished, do not have access to adequate health care, and suffer from many avoidable diseases poor people are susceptible to. A good example of such a disease is gastro-enteritis. Vulnerability to this disease increases with poor nutrition, sanitation and water supply. As people living in poverty often suffer from these conditions, social scientists have found that the incidence and severity of gastro-enteritis provides a "fair reflection of socio-economic status" (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 112). For this reason the incidence of such diseases, including also diarrhoea, tuberculosis, and fever, which are easily controllable by affordable and available medicine, provide necessary information for drawing profiles of the diseases and living conditions poor people are subjected to (cf. RDP 1995: 23).

Not only bodily development or the prevalence of diseases are indicators of poverty, but also figures on the incidence of death at various ages. The general rate of life expectancy often reflects people's access to adequate nutrition or affordable health care. So too does the infant mortality rate, determined as the number of children who die before their first birthday out of every 1000 children born alive. An even better indicator of poverty is the child mortality rate. This is the number of children who die before their fifth birthday out of every 1000 born alive. This death rate reflects factors such as nutrition, sanitation, communicable diseases, and accidents in and around the home. Although not all deaths in these rates are affected by poverty, comparing the rate amongst poor people with the rate amongst the better off provides important insight in the often deadly effect of poverty on people's lives.

2.4 Food

There are also various ways for measuring poor people's access to food and water (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 100–107; May 1998a: 116–117). One

can analyse and quantify the daily diet of poor people and compare its nutritional value to the accepted daily requirements in a society. The required diet of individuals can vary according to their body size, daily activities, and their social roles and responsibilities. The types of food produced in a society and available at markets will also influence poor people's diets.

Poor people's diet is often severely deficient in nutritional value, whether through lack of resources or ignorance. They often do not have easy, or any, access to clean water for household use. Indicators of poverty are the daily use of water per household, the quality of the water available, and the time and distance travelled to obtain water. Limited and low quality water resources have a major effect on bodily health and personal hygiene.

2.5 Access to services

As in the case of water, poor people often have no access to services thought to be basic in a society (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 62–65; 123–131; May 1998a: 136–137, 139). Access to energy for lighting, cooking, and heating is a good example. One could determine the amount of people with access to electricity, wood, coal, and so on. Social scientists also measure the time and cost involved in securing these energy resources. Sometimes the energy resources of poor people cost more per unit than those readily available to non-poor people (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 46). The kind of sanitation available and whether refuse are collected can also be determined and compared with the geographic distribution of income groups. Such comparisons often illustrate the neglect of poorer areas, sometimes due to the relative lack of bargaining power poor people have with local authorities.

The presence or absence of public services and utilities, such as libraries, recreation areas, open spaces in urban environments, transport, medical services, postal and telecommunication services, and policing can often

significantly influence the quality of life that poor people have (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 132). The presence, quality, and quantity of such services and utilities can be measured and compared with the geographic distribution of different socio-economic groups. Such comparisons often show a clear bias toward the richer areas, whereas poor people have difficulty in reaching and making use of such facilities and amenities. This kind of profile of urban and metropolitan areas can assist town planners and local councillors to significantly improve poor people's quality of life by placing public services and amenities where they can be to the benefit of poor people too.

Access to welfare services, such as old age and disability pensions, is also important in determining people's rank order in terms of poverty and wealth in a society. For example, many poor households and even smaller communities in South Africa would collapse if no such benefits were provided by the government.

2.6 Shelter and clothing

Although housing is often regarded as a public service, it needs not necessarily be so. Nevertheless, the nature and quality of housing can be important indicators of poverty (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 123–130). The nature of people's accommodation can already be significant. One could quantify the number of households living in houses, flats, rented rooms, shacks, huts, or who just have a bed for themselves (as in migrant hostels). The size of people's accommodation could be determined by looking at the number of rooms and how many people they are used for. These data must be correlated with what is customary available to members of a society, the nature and severity of the climate, and the social meanings that people in a society attach to a dwelling. In some societies houses (dwellings) are used for a variety of social purposes that are not universally found in human societies. Space to cook, play, or for privacy of different family members have different meanings in different societies.

People's available clothing often reflects whether they are poor or not. Poor people are unable to buy clothes needed for protection against cold weather, or clothes minimally appropriate for social gatherings at places of education, business, employment, and recreation.

2.7 Education

Poverty is often associated with a lack of education or illiteracy (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 138–149). Literacy and appropriate education are almost prerequisites for successful living in modern industrial and information societies. The literacy rate can be determined by using years of schooling completed or through designing a literacy test. This rate could indicate the link between literacy and socio-economic status. It can also measure the successes and failures of the educational system of a society. In the same way one could measure the levels of education present in a society by asking people about the years of schooling completed. Social scientists also measure government spending on education to determine whether regions, educational sectors (primary, secondary, and tertiary), and various groups within the society are equitably treated.

One of the effects of education is to enable citizens to read for various purposes. Social scientists can measure which books, newspapers, and magazines people have access to, as well as their reading habits. Especially important is reading for self-improvement or enhancing job performance. In some cases of poverty, the closing of minds associated with nearly absent reading habits contributes to reinforcing cycles of poverty.

2.8 Self-respect and dignity

Qualitative indicators of poverty are also important. People suffering from poverty carry a heavy burden, additional to the burdens of life shared by all human beings. These burdens have various origins, some are self-inflicted, some are inherited, some are imposed on them, some follow from or are caused by being poor. Regardless of their origins, these burdens of poverty

complete our picture of the description of poverty.

Self-respect is defined as a moral notion, where people have a proper regard for the dignity of their own person, a sense of their own value. Self-respect also refers to people's confidence in their abilities to live their lives valuably and dignified. This implies that people who do not value their own lives cannot live them fully, or with joy and pleasure. Those with little or no confidence in their abilities cannot successfully pursue what they regard as valuable in life.

However, not just a person's own judgement is relevant. Other people and social institutions affirm or deny people's sense of their own worth, appreciate and confirm people's person and their deeds, or not. Thus, people and institutions can substantially influence the self-respect of others.

Self-respect within a democratic context is closely aligned with the idea that citizens are free and responsible agents, autonomous persons who are fully participating members of their political community (Walzer 1983: 279). Poor people often lose their self-respect, as they feel less than full members (Grosskopf 1932: xviii). They become dependent on others, unable to make independent contributions to society. Often other people treat them as such, stigmatise them and use aid to show them their proper place in society: "in, but not wholly of the community" (Walzer 1983: 77).

One of the important burdens associated with poverty is a loss of self-respect and human dignity. Poor people often view themselves negatively and develop feelings of degradation and humiliation (Willcocks 1932: 173–174). These negative self-images are reinforced by similar negative stereotyping by the rest of society and by the visibility of poverty. Other people will obviously notice your lack of good clothes, the accommodation you make use of, or your limited means for providing in your family's needs. Your personal situation is open for public viewing. That could be humiliating.

2.9 *Fear and insecurity*

Another burden associated with poverty is fear and insecurity. Poor people fear unemployment or the high crime rate associated with lower socio-economic areas (Alcock 1997: 93; May 1998b: 108; Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 130–131, 134, 152–154, 158–159). The insecurities created by limited financial resources is exacerbated by alcohol abuse (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 159–160). Alcohol abuse often accompanies poverty, and leads to gripping fear amongst non-abusers about the behaviour flowing from the abuse. Domestic violence often results, adding to the insecurities of a family life already difficult to maintain under adverse conditions (May 1998a: 41; May 1998b: 54; Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 270–271). Domestic violence is mostly committed by men and directed at women, whose lives can be shattered (Alcock 1997: 94). Poor people's bodies are not only affected by alcohol abuse and interpersonal violence, but also through lack of adequate medical care and a poor diet. These factors often combine to undermine school achievement and job performance through lack of concentration and motivation.

2.10 *Participation in the lifestyles of a community*

Poverty can also be gauged by noting the extent to which people do not have the resources to participate in the lifestyle and activities available in their communities (May 1998a: 3; May 1998b: 38, 45, 109). Poverty is a burden in the way it restricts possibilities available to poor people. In a culture dominated by the electronic and print media with all their advertising, poor people must live knowing they can only have the barest minimum of everything the commercial sector of society has to offer. Poverty restricts their options for diets, clothing, recreation, reading, housing, interior decorating, travel, education, and entertainment. This means the development of their person—through a healthy diet, interesting experiences, exploring new worlds, and beautifying themselves and their surroundings—is severely limited. Although these restrictions generate

feelings of anger and bitterness, people exposed to poverty over time often have feelings that their poverty is inescapable. They acquiesce in their situation and accept their lot as inevitable.

Poor people sometimes find it difficult to perform the roles customarily expected of them as adult members of a society. They might have problems maintaining friendships due to lack of time or not being able to reciprocate gifts, invitations, and visits. Sometimes poor communities have good relations of trust. Such relations between people loosely networked together in society enable individuals to be collectively productive and stimulate mutual co-operation. Mutually beneficial productivity and co-operation strengthens social cohesion which in turn becomes an important social asset in the struggle to escape from poverty or the vulnerability of becoming poor. Relations of trust and resultant social cohesion solidify into a social fabric. In poor communities this social fabric can easily be threatened by the influx of large groups of strangers or through crime, violence, and its related manifestations.

Poor people's involvement with community organisations may dwindle for lack of funds for membership and participation in scheduled activities. Lack of time and suitable clothing, as well as feelings of worthlessness can detract poor people from participation in communal activities, often forfeiting opportunities to be part of decisions directly affecting their lives. They often also do not get to know of opportunities and aid already available to them (May 1998b: 124). The cumulative effects of poverty on poor people can cause them to lose self-respect. For these people it is difficult to appear in public without shame. When their material conditions deteriorate seriously, the social relations of poor people might also deteriorate significantly.

2.11 Personal abilities to use and convert resources

Poverty often varies greatly between households who command similar levels of resources. The cause of such variations is the abilities of

individuals in charge of household resources to effectively utilise and convert them into instruments for the satisfaction of important needs (cf. Terreblanche 1977: 105; Sen 1993: 30–36). Individuals differ in their relationship to, and use of, resources. Households might also differ according to the abilities of those in charge to convert income into buying nutritious food at affordable prices, for example.

In some poor households men might lay claim to disproportionate shares of income for buying alcohol (Budlender 1998: 70). Such behaviour increases risks of violent conflict with outsiders, as well as emotional or physical abuse among members of the household, with accompanying feelings of fear and insecurity. At the same time income is not converted effectively to address the consequences of poverty.

2.12 Power

Some people regard the loss or absence of power as one of the defining characteristics of poverty (May 1998a: 41; Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 152–158). What does this mean? If humans are defined as active beings who use resources to satisfy their needs, pursue their interests, and follow their goals and dreams, then their rank order in terms of wealth or poverty at least partially determines their scope of action. By commanding resources individuals can consciously control and direct part of their lives to satisfy needs and fulfil goals. The fewer resources people have, the smaller their area of command becomes and the lesser their influence on the circumstances of their lives. When the resources they command are so far below the resources commanded by most of the other members of society, poor people become excluded from the generally available lifestyles and activities that most other people have a choice to engage in or not.

2.13 Profiles of poverty

By using both qualitative and quantitative indicators of poverty as those described above, social scientists can give various profiles of poverty in a

society. Profiles of regions, specified groups, individuals, age and gender groups can be given. A profile of a poor rural region could include figures on the carrying capacity of the area compared with the actual population density. This profile can indicate the extent of overpopulation that leads to wasteful exploitation of the land. Such profiles can be extremely useful as descriptions of the extent of poverty in selected cases.

Profiles of poverty should not only be cross-sectional, but also longitudinal. The interpretation of poverty through time is important, as some kinds of poverty are transient, while others are chronic. What does this mean? Chronic poverty is long term poverty, something poor people are trapped in and cannot easily escape. This kind of poverty can have many causes, but characteristic is the inability of people to shake of its shackles, as well the ways in which one generation transmits their poverty to the next. Transient poverty is temporary and are resolved over a shorter term. An example would be poverty due to unemployment that gets resolved after members of the household secure stable employment again. Some kinds of transient poverty are seasonal, depending of the seasonal availability of food produced by poor people themselves, the demands of a colder climate in winter on energy resources, or the availability of seasonal employment as a result of holidays, etc.

Profiles of poverty might also indicate which sections of a population show a vulnerability to become poor. This vulnerability manifests in some people's inability to deal with threatening changes due to their lack of backup resources or inadequate strategies for coping with crises.

The indicators of a person or household's rank order in terms of wealth or poverty in a society suggest the relativity of poverty. What does this mean? Rank order in terms of poverty and wealth is connected to and stands in relation to factors that are subject to variation within and between societies. The factors mentioned above are all relative to the context of the people where they are observed and described. For example, resources do not

have value regardless of the societal context where they are used. Certain kinds of skills training, such as mining skills, might not be considered valuable in societies where mining activity does not exist. Some skills, such as manual labour skills, might become obsolete if machines can manufacture similar products more efficiently and productively.

3. Causes of poverty

3.1 Everyday explanations of poverty

Ordinary people know how to apply the concepts "poor" and "poverty" and have a reasonable understanding of the conditions they refer to. The explanations of the causes of poverty prevalent in a society fulfil a strong guiding role for non-poor people's actions and attitudes toward poor people. They guide people to what is going on in their society and how they should react to it. These explanations are socially shared amongst large groups of people and thus influential in determining social policy and collective action to address poverty. Everyday explanations of poverty are the result of people's lived experience of their own or others' poverty over a period of time, their moral values, their prejudices, and a possible trickle down of the results of social scientific studies. There is no guarantee that such explanations provide appropriate understandings of poverty or give us adequate guides for addressing and alleviating poverty. The main reason why many of these explanations of poverty fail is their simplicity in dealing with complex problems.

For this reason we must note such explanations and challenge them if they are distorted, misguided, or simply wrong. The results of social science research can make us aware of the complex nature of poverty and deepen our understanding of this complex phenomenon. Through public criticism of everyday explanations and by presenting better explanations of poverty, we might be able to convince non-poor people to act differently towards poor

people.

A striking feature of everyday explanations of poverty is whether poor individuals are held responsible for their own poverty. Some explanations hold individuals wholly responsible, while others blame societal structures and institutions for poverty. This issue is important, as aid for poor people often depends on whether non-poor people hold them responsible for their poverty. If people are responsible for their own misery, other people are less inclined to help than when misery results from unforeseen and uncontrollable circumstances. Although it is debatable whether responsibility for misery ought to play a role in determining aid, it nevertheless does.

There is another reason for determining persons' responsibility for their own poverty. Through knowing the nature and extent of people's responsibility for their own poverty, it becomes easier to determine the kinds of aid needed to alleviate their poverty. For this reason the responsibility of people for their own poverty deserves investigation. To know how to help poor people escape from poverty we need more information. We must therefore ask about the causes of poverty.

In the rest of this chapter I will focus on ways how insights from social science research can enable us to criticise, correct, extend, and modify everyday explanations of poverty prevalent in a society. The results of good social science research, based on well developed theory and carefully planned empirical investigation, are more detailed and sophisticated, logically more coherent, and probably have a higher truth content than everyday explanations of poverty (Rainwater 1984: 162).

South Africans are fortunate to have access to several major social science studies on poverty. These studies – the two Carnegie reports (1932 & 1989), the Theron Commission (1973), the RDP study (1995), the study commissioned by Deputy President Thabo Mbeki (1998), and the National Speak out on Poverty (1998) – were done over the past seven decades and cover

different sectors of the population. Despite their shortcomings, they provide a wealth of information describing vividly the conditions of poverty at various stages amongst different groups of people. They also give in-depth analyses of the causes of specific kinds of poverty, which are thoroughly placed in a wider societal and historical context.

These research reports are extremely useful for the following reasons. They involved all kinds of research methods, such as descriptive, explanatory, liberatory, and normative methods. These methods were used complementary, as they use “hard” statistics and “soft” interviews to get a fuller picture of poverty. The researchers listened to the poor and involved them as participants. They took both a broad view and an in depth one so as to get a holistic picture and particularistic details. They noted general (statistical) trends and individual stories of poor people. They focused their studies diachronically, looking at developments through time, as well as synchronically, noting links and relationships between all relevant factors now. Their scope was multidimensional, exploring all factors that could possibly be relevant. In all these research projects various scientists were co-operating. They co-operated in the inter-disciplinary sense of scientists from different disciplines working together and sharing a theoretical framework. They also co-operated in the multi-disciplinary sense of scientists from different disciplines adding their own perspectives and contributions without having a shared theoretical perspective.

There are striking common features in these reports. One such feature is a resistance to individualising poverty, as if it is a human condition which individuals involved caused themselves and for which they are therefore responsible. The tendency to individualise poverty is avoided by the second striking feature common to these reports. This feature is a persistent attempt to understand poverty in a broader context, that include major current, recent, and past events, whether they are of a political, economic, or social nature. This awareness of multiple factors involved in the phenomena of

poverty leads to a third striking common feature. The reports refuse to view poverty in isolation, or to look only at some aspects of its various manifestations. The emphasis is squarely placed on a global or holistic view of poverty, which emphasises the complexity of its various causes, circumstances, and factors interlocking with, and reinforcing, one another.

An approach based on these features immediately neutralises any attempt at simplifying poverty, or its solutions. It also stimulates an awareness of the complexities of this human phenomenon and challenges everyone to carefully consider all possible factors involved in causing and sustaining poverty. The complexity of poverty means that an adequate explanation of a specific case of poverty must take into account multiple possible causes. These causes could operate alone or in different combinations. Whether individuals are affected by poverty would depend on whether such causes touch their lives, and the extent of their vulnerability and susceptibility to such influences.

What can we learn from the experiences and interpretations of poverty documented in these reports? The challenge is to combine insights from South African social science reports on poverty with social science research done elsewhere in the world. Maybe these insights can be developed into a coherent theory that can help us better understand the complexities of poverty. Part of such a coherent theory of poverty ought to be an explanation of the different causes of poverty. I will discuss the more common ones.

3.2 Inadequacies and shortcomings of poor people

The first two explanations of poverty find the causes of poverty in shortcomings, inadequacies, and deficiencies of individual poor people themselves, whether it be their own fault, the will of God, or biologically (genetically) determined. One such explanation is a religious one (cf. Forgey 1994: 11). Influenced by the Calvinist work ethic, this explanation contends that poverty indicates either God's punishment for sin – whether their own or

their forebears' – or the fact that God has not chosen them for his blessings. Closely related is a moral explanation of poverty that blames poverty on a lack of moral integrity and deficient moral characteristics. These poor people do not want to change their lives; they do not have the moral inclination to better themselves (Terreblanche 1977: 122). They lack motivation, are deficient in traits that lead to success, have no self-discipline, or have an inferior set of values that disables them in a quest for survival (Willcocks 1932: 172–173). As a result of their character deficiencies they are unwilling or unable to provide for themselves (Grosskopf 1932: xvii–xviii). Sometimes poverty relief is believed to engender similar attitudes, as poor people become dependent on aid. They develop expectations that others will look after them and therefore they do not have to take responsibility for themselves.

Thus, either God wills that some people should be poor, or some people do not have the moral character to provide resources adequate for their own well-being. These people are seen as poor in morality or religious blessing. This explanation leads non-poor people to pity poor people for their misfortune, but they are not inspired or obligated to help them improve or change their lives. If they do attempt to help poor people, the religious explanation demands that the poor sinners must be saved through programmes of evangelical outreach. The moral explanation requires that the immoral behaviour of poor people must be punished or controlled and poor people themselves must be reformed.

A second explanation finds the cause of poverty in an analogous poverty that poor people exhibit, viz. a biological poverty (Terreblanche 1977: 122). In this case they are seen to be less gifted or have physical deficiencies. They are inadequate or deficient in terms of the human characteristics that ensure success in society. Through natural selection they are the losers in the struggle for survival and are thus eliminated from society. This explanation is applied to individuals, but sometimes also to groups. In racist

versions a race group is viewed as biologically below standard or genetically inferior. Again, such people deserve pity, but should not actually be helped. Poor people are losers in the economic struggle for existence. It is in the interest of the majority that the strongest shall prevail and that poor people ("the weak") should go under as a result of a natural economic process. If anything should be done, those better equipped and more suitable should take decisions on their behalf and for their benefit.

A variant of the biological or genetic explanation of poverty is to argue that mental or physical disabilities lead to poverty. People that have serious mental or physical disabilities are not easily employed and thus become dependent on family, welfare organisations, or the state. Many disabled people need specialised care or treatment that implies they need more resources for their daily needs than other people. The cost of their specialised needs can also have an impoverishing effect on the households of their families (cf. Alcock 1997: 182).

3.3 *Disasters*

Most of the explanations and causes of poverty discussed so far are the result of individual or collective human behaviour. This is not to deny the role of natural disasters or misfortunes in causing poverty. The familiar experiences of drought, floods, severe storms, epidemics, disease, and pestilence can all play significant roles in causing poverty to certain sectors of a population (May 1998b: 31). Drought, with its slow onset, can lead to a loss of jobs, food, or assets (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 170). Similarly, sudden disasters such as floods, fires, or earthquakes can plunge many people into poverty as a result of the loss of life, property, and livelihood.

A human-made disaster, such as war, can also lead to widespread poverty (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 227). The loss of productive family members, the harm to an economy, and the cost involved in waging war can impoverish large sections of a society (Grosskopf 1932: 85). A personal

disaster, such as the death, long illness, or permanent disability of a productive family member can be a severe shock to a household, especially those close to the poverty line (May 1998a: 130).

3.4 *Poverty*

Poverty can perpetuate itself, thus poverty can cause more poverty. Many negative personal characteristics are often associated with poor people, whether they be the cause or consequence of poverty. These associations, and the blame they involve, might not be justified or fair, but their effect on the employment of poor people are far-reaching. Purported negative characteristics, such as irresponsibility, lack of ambition and industriousness, and instability, often make poor people unwelcome candidates for employment or unattractive employees in low-paying jobs (Terreblanche 1977: 92). Poverty can also be perpetuated in farming areas, where poor people often have inadequate resources to farm with (May 1998b: 104–105). Money for seed or fertiliser is not available, nor for fencing or labour (Budlender 1998: 25, 36). Poor people often do not have the money to buy materials needed to make goods to sell (Budlender 1998: 18). Similarly, poor and unemployed people in towns in remote rural areas often cannot afford to travel to large urban and metropolitan areas in search of employment, nor can they afford lodging in those areas.

In some cases a culture of poverty can develop in a poor community. The younger generation can learn and share a community's inadequate responses to breaking the cycle of their poverty. The adults transmit their strategies and life styles for coping with chronic poverty to the next generation, causing a perpetuation of chronic poverty (cf. Terreblanche 1977: 62–65).

Not only can poverty cause further poverty, but some of the remedies for poverty can do the same. Aid for sufferers from poverty can perpetuate poverty. Certain kinds of aid can demoralise poor people through stifling

their personal responsibility and by making them lose their independence (Grosskopf 1932: xxxi–xxxii). Paternalistic aid, whether from government agencies or other benefactors, can immobilise personal initiative and create feelings of inferiority (Willcocks 1932: 87–89). In this context, some poor people develop the idea that they have a right to such aid, so they abdicate their own responsibility to do things for themselves (Grosskopf 1932: 172, 219). Although this negative dependence on aid is a consequence of poverty, it perpetuates poverty by creating expectations amongst people that they have a right to be fully dependent on the benevolence of those with means (Willcocks 1932: 96).

3.5 Education

The inability to adapt to changing circumstances has featured prominently amongst the various causes of poverty discussed so far. The social science reports under discussion value education as one of the primary means of facilitating people's ability to adapt (Grosskopf 1932: viii). It can fulfil this function only if the correct contents and teaching methods are used, and if acceptable facilities and teachers are available. Lack of education results in illiteracy, not being qualified for any career, and an inability to use the resources of the written media for self-improvement. There are strong correlations between low formal education and poverty (May 1998a: 33; Malherbe 1932: 351, 366).

A recent South African report on poverty estimates that among the unemployed poor 50% have only completed primary education or less. Those who are employed but poor are judged to have had inadequate access to education and training. These judgements by poverty researchers are confirmed by poor people themselves who regard education as their highest priority need, as they view education as the most effective route out of poverty (May 1998a: 96).

Education itself can cause poverty if its contents are regarded as irrelevant

to both the world of the children and the society they are living in. The contents may not be expanding children's experience of their own world, and fail to present them with skills for coping with a changing world. The methods of teaching can contribute to poverty, when they lead to an authoritarian atmosphere where children must listen, be quiet and passive, rather than employing methods stimulating self-reliance, initiative, and co-operation (Grosskopf 1932: xxvi; Malherbe 1932: 363). The contents and methods can either reinforce existing attitudes and actions perpetuating poverty, or can be used to counter them and develop independent, self-reliant citizens capable of taking care of themselves and co-operating with others. Lack of education, or inadequate education can thus cause poverty, or reinforce it. In good cases, however, education can be one of the positive forces to eradicate poverty.

Not providing good quality education for black people in apartheid South Africa was deliberate, so as to exclude them from better positions in society. Glaring inequalities in expenditure per head of population clearly testify to that.

3.6 Gender

Gender can be a significant cause of poverty (May 1998b: 36, 48–49, 54, 59, 79–80, 102, 111). The expression "the feminization of poverty" is often heard in discussions of poverty. This expression refers to the ways that women are impoverished in societies as a result of oppressive and discriminatory measures based on their gender. Researchers have found significant differences between women's and men's experiences of poverty (Alcock 1997: 135).

Poverty based on gender can start at home as a result of the unequal distribution of resources within a household. Some women can be judged to be poor although they live in non-poor households. This poverty results from the gendered power relations within patriarchal households where husbands

(or male partners) unilaterally allocate resources—mostly unequally. However, women have to manage the limited resources so allocated and make tough decisions on priorities so as to cover the main household expenses (Alcock 1997: 136). Many women still accept such dominance – for different reasons which need not concern us here – and fail to actively press their claims on the income of male partners (Budlender 1998: 65–67).

Such claims to significant portions of the income and other resources of male partners can be justified by most women's unpaid labour, such as taking responsibility for most household duties, rearing children, and caring for sick, disabled, and elderly family members. The demands of these unpaid labours have another consequence for women. The endless demands on their time and energy limit their options for pursuing further training or education. Many women rely on men for income, thus creating dependency which make it difficult for them to break off abusive and exploitative relationships (Alcock 1997: 150).

The exploitation of women in the personal sphere of family relations is not the only factor contributing to the impoverishment of women. Many women still suffer from unequal pay and lesser opportunities for promotion. Their employee benefits are sometimes still inferior to those of male colleagues and married women often lose benefits such as old age pensions, that they had access to before their husbands died or divorced them. These discriminatory practices are often explicitly endorsed by the state or implicitly sanctioned through the absence of rights to equality or legislation to terminate gender discrimination.

3.7 Economics

This explanation finds the causes of poverty in systemic or structural aspects of the economy of a society. The assumption often is that the cause of poverty is the wealth of the powerful, self-interested members of society. Some people believe that the capitalist economic system is designed to

reinforce the favourable economic position of those already wealthy. For these reasons it is useful to discuss poverty in relation to the wealth available in a society to become aware of the degree of inequality sanctioned or tolerated by a society. The justice of the distribution of resources in a society needs critical examination. Although supporters of this explanation pity poor people, they also want to mobilise poor people to demand fundamental changes of the economic system. They believe that changes are possible and ought to benefit poor people, rather than making the rich even richer.

Various economic factors can lead to poverty. Macro-economic trends can impoverish many people unable to adapt or without adequate reserves to see them through. Poor people do not have any control over events such as economic depression, a lack of employment opportunities, a downturn in the economy, or the ways in which an economic system limits their options. Similar macro-economic trends with major impacts on poverty are recession and inflation. Recession can cause massive unemployment resulting in poverty, whereas strongly rising prices of consumer goods can be devastating for poor households and those close to it (May 1998a: 54). They have little savings or other reserves for lessening the impact of price hikes on essential goods (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 251–253).

A rapid macro-economic change, such as from an agrarian to an industrial economy, can rapidly and unexpectedly cause widespread unemployment and poverty amongst people unable or unwilling to adapt to new circumstances (Grosskopf 1932: viii, 48–53). If the new economy demands a foreign (international) language, such as English, for participation, many newcomers could be sidelined from a potential remedy for their poverty (Malherbe 1932: 364).

Modernisation of sectors of the economy can also cause poverty. For example, technological and scientific developments in agriculture has led to

the mechanisation of ploughing, harvesting, and weeding of maize. As a consequence the need for manual labour vastly diminished, causing major unemployment for workers dependent on the agricultural sector (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 242–243). Whereas technological and scientific developments benefited farmers, while disadvantaging the labourers no longer needed, inadequate or wrong farming practices often led to the impoverishment of farmers themselves. Wasteful exploitation of land and outdated farming practices often led to poverty. Furthermore, many farmers failed to adapt from one style of farming to another. For white farmers in South Africa at the end of the 19th century the transition from living as conquering pioneers and settlers off the richness of the African land to becoming farmers on small patches of land, was difficult. Many farmers showed an inability to adapt. This was compounded by the practice of fairly dividing a farm between sons (and sometimes daughters) which led to farms becoming smaller and thus non-viable economic units (Grosskopf 1932: 115–116; Willcocks 1932: 170).

Besides macro-economic trends, lack of economic know-how and business practices can significantly harm poor people and those at risk of becoming poor. Some people become poor as a result of their own lack of knowledge, sophistication, and experience of consumer matters. They waste money on non-essential goods, and spend money in ill-considered ways (Terreblanche 1977: 105). They literally impoverish themselves. Some businesses exploit these consumer weaknesses through shrewd marketing, offering easy credit to people who do not have adequate financial means and who cannot foresee all the implications of easy credit schemes (Terreblanche 1977: 106–109). In default of monthly payments, these people often lose the purchased item and lots of urgently needed money. Similar patterns manifest themselves in the way poor people borrow money from relatives, friends, acquaintances, shop-owners, and micro-lenders (May 1998b: 63). Micro-lenders who lend small amounts of money to poor people exploit their

vulnerable position of being unable to loan money from commercial banks. Some of these lenders charge exorbitant interest rates of up to 100% and more. Shrewd exploitation of consumer weaknesses thus impoverishes many people.

3.8 *Politics*

Quality of life are significantly influenced by events in the present or the recent past, especially events of a political or economic nature (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 152–166). For this reason such events figure prominently as explanations of causes of poverty. In a country where sections of the population were excluded from participation in the political processes at national, regional, and local levels, one can expect politics to have a major impact on the incidence and degree of poverty (Budlender 1998: 9; cf. Bundy 1992).

One obvious reason for the impact of politics on poverty is that politicians at different levels of government make decisions about the use of public resources. Systematic and prolonged bias in public expenditure in favour of a section of the population can substantially impoverish those who are excluded. Local, regional, and national governments decide on priorities for public spending, thus determining the allocation of public resources to what they think worthwhile causes. Their priorities determine the amount and placement of public facilities, and the people who benefit from them. Areas inhabited by poor people often do not have infrastructure accepted as normal by other sections of the population. Services such as street lighting, telephones, decent public roads, and public transport are often unavailable. The absence of such services further detracts from poor people's quality of life and makes crime prevention more difficult.

In contrast to an unjust society where one group dominates political institutions to benefit its own members, a constitutional democracy opens up opportunities for every citizen to participate in political processes. Citizens

elect their own representatives to speak on their behalf during the formulation and implementation of policy. In addition, citizens can mobilise themselves to form pressure groups advocating policies to benefit the poor, or use opportunities for public comment on draft policies offered by a democratic government.

The issues and interests of poor people are often not heard or noticed by politicians, even in constitutional democracies. Due to their lack of income, poor people do not have sufficient resources to influence public opinion through costly ways, such as advertisements, lobby groups, or paid officials. Their public action is often constrained by the shame of poverty and others often champion their cause. The lack of power of poor individuals and their resultant weak bargaining position make them vulnerable to be politically ignored (cf. Alcock 1997: 207; Terreblanche 1977: 115–116).

Racism can play an important role in causing poverty. In a political system based on race some races get benefits and privileges, while the others—victims of racism—are disadvantaged to the point of being severely impoverished. The view of the ruling racists on the place that the subordinate races ought to have in society can lead to various measures with the function to keep them there. The view that ruling racists have of subordinate races are often based on vague impressions, single cases, and prejudice. Such a view combines with rationalisations of their privileged position to distance themselves from any responsibility for the conditions of poverty or their improvement. In this way poverty is both caused and maintained by racist attitudes.

But racism can also impoverish racist people—the perpetrators of racism—who look down on other races. Poor racist people have often refused to do work that are done by members of the supposedly inferior race. It is not whether the nature of work is hard, difficult, gruelling, or degrading that counts, but whether it is work only done by members of the

disadvantaged race (cf. Grosskopf 1932: 166–172). This attitude led to many missed job opportunities; thus, also to continued unemployment and poverty.

Politics can influence the extent of poverty in various other ways. Banning or restricting special interest groups aiming to mobilise people already poor or at risk of becoming poor, can substantially weaken their bargaining position (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 161). For example, banning trade unions leaves many workers in low paying jobs without effective bargaining power against exploitative employers. Similarly, if people are not allowed to mobilise themselves they cannot effectively resist government policies aiming to relocate them elsewhere without their consent. Such relocations often caused poverty in apartheid South Africa, because people were dumped at places where making a living is impossible because of overcrowding or adverse climatic conditions (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 161; Budlender 1998: 27). Relocations also destroyed communal and family ties which functioned as buffers against the worst effects of poverty, thus further weakening people's resistance against poverty.

Relocations were part of the comprehensive apartheid policy to relocate people belonging to certain groups in specified areas, rather than *ad hoc* measures to remove people from large dam sites or proposed industrial areas. If a government tries to contain members of a group to a specific area, it can severely impoverish such people. Laws restricting people's movement from rural to urban areas, as well as constraints on housing construction in urban areas, can lead to the overpopulation of rural areas, pressing their carrying capacity far beyond its limitations. It leads to an overwhelming pressure on the land, which cannot carry the burden being placed on it (Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 39, 43). Under these circumstances normal production quotas are significantly lowered, leading to further impoverishment (Budlender 1998: 22–23).

The political actions referred to above are examples of acts of commission

that governments at various levels can do to impoverish people. There are numerous acts of omission that can do the same, or simply perpetuate existing conditions of poverty. No provision for unemployment insurance, inadequate old age pensions, or no proper schooling can all contribute to poverty. Though there are limitations on government spending, acts of omission will only be acceptable if government actions and policies are judged to be equitable. The result of pursuing unjust policies often is the impoverishment of sections of the population.

Related to acts of omission is the lack of knowledge, expertise, and skills of government officials to formulate or implement appropriate policies for addressing poverty. Lack of management skills to co-ordinate governmental programs across different government departments or bureaucratic attitudes unsympathetic to poor people can also slow down the delivery of services to poor households and communities.

3.9 History

Most people are not aware how events in the past function as causes for people's poverty in the present. However, the assumption that the past has shaped and formed the present leads to significant perspectives for understanding poverty. If we do not understand how the present has grown from the past, we will not be able to transform the present into a different future. Many examples exist of how events – even from the distant past – still influence poverty today (cf. Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 5, 7, 190–204).

Some South Africans are descended from slaves. Slavery as practice existed from the 17th century up to the early 19th century in South Africa. The slavery experience of many generations made them dependent on, and subordinate to, people who owned them as property. Slaves were also subject to the racist attitudes of their owners which had to keep them down and in their place, being that of lowly servants with meagre incomes. These experiences were internalised as negative self-images and transmitted from

generation to generation. The interaction between bad working conditions, few opportunities for development, racist attitudes and practices, and low self-esteem created an interlocking set of circumstances forming one of the main factors leading to chronic poverty amongst their descendants. This shows how events in the distant past can still have effects on the quality of people's lives in the present (Terreblanche 1977: 80–88).

The more recent past of apartheid policies based on privileging whites at the expense of blacks will reverberate through the South African society for many years to come. Many social science studies done in South Africa convincingly show that the inequalities resulting from apartheid might become self-perpetuating. The contemporary high levels of inequalities were established over decades by a government manipulating public funds to enrich a racial defined minority whilst impoverishing the majority of black people. The history of mining and capitalist development over the past century is deeply intertwined with the growth of inequalities and governmental exploitation of the blacks (cf. Bundy 1992). To undo the impoverishing effects of more than a century's exploitation, domination, and oppression will take time, resources, expertise, and an attitude of self-reliance.

3.10 Immorality

Various kinds of immoral behaviour can cause poverty. Losing an employed family member through death or injury as a result of violent crime can significantly impoverish a household. Theft of valuable goods or robbery of income gained through employment or state grants can also cause short term poverty for vulnerable households. A recent study in South Africa found robberies of pension pay points to be a frequent occurrence and thus a serious problem.

Immoral behaviour that has effects on more people is corruption by government officials (cf. Camerer 1997). Some officials exercise power in

governmental departments without sufficient checks and balances and they therefore have opportunity to misuse their discretion to use public office and to appropriate public funds for their private purposes. Corruption flourishes where governmental institutions are not transparent in their operations and they do not require stringent accountability from officials.

In South Africa analysts estimate that approximately 10% of the country's budget for social security gets lost through corruption. Besides reducing resources available for poverty relief, widespread corruption in a society has indirect effects which impacts on long term efforts to reduce poverty and inequality. Corruption can deter economic growth and foreign investment, increase the costs of government and business, and create a culture where people steal public property. Widespread corruption can harm public trust in a government and undermine its credibility.

4. Profiles of Poverty as Complex Phenomenon

To what extent are individuals, communities, societies, and countries responsible for their own poverty? To what extent are other people, circumstances, or natural causes responsible? Can we draw a profile of every case of poverty consisting of [1] a clear description of all factors involved and [2] an adequate explanation of the causes and reasons for the poverty?

The answer to this question depends on how one deals with the complex interweaving of the contingent circumstances of each case. The preceding discussion points to several factors beyond the control of any individual, such as institutionalised racism, changing macro-economic trends, and no access to decent education. Other factors point to individual responsibility for poverty, such as the inability to adapt to new circumstances or unwillingness to acquire new labour skills. What is clear though, is that no simple answer is possible concerning who are responsible for poverty. Each

case needs detailed investigation of all possible factors involved in causing poverty. Through such investigations poverty will emerge as a multi-dimensional complex human phenomenon requiring aid in diverse forms, depending on what is needed in each case.

What does it mean to describe poverty as a multi-dimensional complex human phenomenon? Something is described as complex when it consists of a number of parts that vary in kind and importance. Language is a common example of something described as complex. It consists of many kinds of words and sentences, that can combine in endless ways according to many rules. In complex phenomena the relationships between parts differ, are intricate and complicated. Human beings are often described as complex, in part because of the intricate and complicated relationships between differing parts, such as mind, hormones, emotions, and body. Nevertheless, in complex phenomena these parts combine into a complicated whole with characteristics of its own. A skyscraper requires the complex construction of many different materials in varying relationships, but nevertheless the skyscraper forms a complicated whole with describable characteristics.

The combination of parts into a whole can be described in various ways. The parts can be interwoven, connected together, involved in various degrees, intimately mixed, intricately intertwined, entangled, or united. The way different parts are combined in human beings differ from the combinations of parts found in skyscrapers or language. When phenomena, events, or behaviour are called complex in ordinary language, this indicates that people judge such events, phenomena, or behaviour not to be easily analysed or understood. Rather, it is difficult to determine the factors involved and disentangle them. Not even the best minds in medical science can easily analyse the functions of the parts of human brain as a complex phenomenon, nor explain their complicated interactions.

When poverty is called a complex human phenomenon, it means the

following. What poverty consists of, the effects it has on persons, and the causes of poverty consist of many different parts related in many ways (cf. Wilson and Ramphela 1989: 14). These parts combine to form a unique configuration in each individual case. Nevertheless, the configuration exhibits characteristics easily recognised as belonging to the complex, multidimensional phenomenon of poverty. The complexity of poverty can be seen both in its multitude indicators and causes.

How can we draw a profile that would do justice to the complex configuration of indicators and causes operative in each case of poverty, whether personal, communal, national, or continental? In what follows, I want to present a checklist of factors involved in poverty as causes, effects, or associated phenomena that can be used to draw a profile of the poverty experienced by specific cases of individuals or groups. The checklist of factors is based on Julian May's revision of Singh's proposal (May 1998a: 7). The factors are organised into four categories called human capabilities, social and institutional factors, natural factors, and human-made factors.

4.1 Human Capabilities

Human capabilities are those things that enable human beings to function effectively to earn an income. Capabilities include a diversity of skills, such as technical, administrative, entrepreneurial, artistic, intellectual, numerical, leadership, and social skills. Having one or more of these skills enable people to function effectively in jobs where they can earn money, provided the skills are relevant to the contents of their jobs. A combination of skills are usually needed to enhance a person's labour power, although knowledge and virtues appropriate to a specific job are necessary as well. The level of knowledge and education, whether gained formally or informally, through textbooks or experientially, determines the level of skills and how effectively they can be applied. One can gauge the relevance, the quality as well as the quantity of a person's education and training. Continuous, lifelong learning impacts on personal growth and leads to improved job performance. The

degree of a person's employability is finally determined by the ability to employ various capabilities simultaneously to do a job and earn an income.

Capabilities like skills and knowledge mean little if a person does not also have appropriate personal, interpersonal, and social skills. People without capacities for coping behaviour are bad employees for failing to deal with conflict, stressful situations, disappointment, and change. Employees unable to articulate their ideas and feelings and thus unable to speak for themselves might cause lots of trouble at work. Inabilities to co-operate with colleagues, or negotiate effective working relations can further diminish employability. A capacity and willingness to work hard, a commitment to honesty and fairness, perseverance to reach goals, and reasonable loyalty to colleagues and employer can enhance employability. Lack of self-confidence and self-respect can diminish effective performance in the work place. Not only psychological health contributes to employability, but physical health as well. Disabilities may seriously impact on a person's employability, as may being prone to illness. The quality of nutrition may also have negative effects on a person's job performance.

4.2 Social and Institutional Factors

Various social and institutional factors are related to poverty and have effects on the incidence and degree of its occurrence. The extent to which people can make legitimate claims for aid, loans, support, advice, and friendship on their households, extended family, and their communities determine part of their vulnerability to the ravages of poverty. The nature of the community life in which poor people share plays an important role whether they have access to friendships, advice, role models, mentors, creative and recreative activities, and the sharing of resources for survival.

Another part of people's vulnerability to poverty is determined by the legitimate claims they can make on governments and employers for pensions, medical aid, and housing subsidies – benefits that provide for

urgent needs in difficult or desperate situations. Governments might have policies favouring poor people, but whether promised aid and benefits reach the poor depends on the pool of managerial, administrative, and governing skills available to implement those policies and serve the citizens with diligence and care. Corrupt officials who abuse governmental positions to benefit themselves, their families, and friends can significantly drain the resources to alleviate poverty and block attempts to improve the lot of the most vulnerable people in society.

Whether governments have policies beneficial to the plight of the poor depends on poor people's access to, and influence on, decision-making power and structures at communal, local, regional, and national levels. Without significant voices making them audible and meaningful political activity making their situation visible, poor people would not have any significant impact on public policies. The extent to which a society takes care of the poor people in its midst depends on the culture and value systems according to which they live. If altruism plays an important role, then poor people might benefit from that. Racism, ideology, and other prejudice might negatively influence poor people's chances for receiving appropriate aid if they possess the offending or supposedly negative characteristics. Many comprehensive moral and religious views stress the value and importance of aid to the poor. However, whether those values are actualised depends on the degree to which adherents are prepared to overcome a tendency to stand by and refuse to get involved in the need of other people.

4.3 Natural Factors

Many natural factors can influence the profile of poverty in specific cases. Access to land as means of production of food and associated consumer goods plays a definitive role. Land itself does not ensure escape from poverty. The availability of ground and surface water in part determines the fertility and productivity of the land. Often the climate plays a dominating

role. Low rainfall and high temperatures can devastate whatever productive capacity land might have. Natural disasters like drought, floods, storms (tornadoes), and earthquakes can devastate whatever productive activities are done on any kind of land. Epidemics and disease can decimate a population and many economically active and productive members of households might die, leaving the remaining members destitute.

The ground cover and biodiversity of land are important when judging the economic potential of the land. Forests, wildlife, and good plant material for grazing enhance the value of land as buffer against poverty. Whether the possession of land is individual or communal can make a major difference. Communal grazing land is notoriously known for overgrazing.

4.4 Human-Made Factors

Several factors made or fashioned by humans influence the degree of people's poverty. Although many of these factors come from natural origins, all are shaped by human activity. A good example is time. Although time seems like a natural factor, determined by the earth's rotation around the sun, both people's experience of time and their available time are strongly influenced by themselves and other people. Household demands of taking care of others strongly influence the time poor rural women have available for income-earning activities. Household duties prescribed by traditional gender roles, such as washing clothes and dishes, and fetching wood or water, further limit women's available time.

Several other human-made factors impact on poor people's ability to do something about their poverty. The amount of savings available to them and their access to credit determine whether they have money available to start new ventures. If they have debt to repay, they might be unable to generate new income for productive investment. Part of the requirements of being able to do a job is to have the tools of the trade. Today that could imply having the right machinery, equipment, books, livestock, or seed and

fertiliser to produce crops. Adequate housing and other buildings for setting up a small business and protecting assets are important as well. Clothing appropriate for different purposes and for different settings can influence people's poverty as well. People look down on poorly clad employees and job-seekers. Inadequate clothing often enhance susceptibility to illness and disease.

Available infrastructure of different kinds plays an important role in removing or reinforcing poverty. Productive infrastructure include those kinds of infrastructure that facilitate economic activities like production, marketing, and consumption. The availability of transport networks to enable movement of people and goods impacts heavily on people's ability to find and keep jobs and to buy and sell goods. The availability of basic resources for the production of goods and personal use, like energy, water, and information can stimulate activities for generating jobs and income. Their absence can complicate matters and stifle initiative. The means of communication that poor people have access to can enable them to utilise and create opportunities, or lose them.

The social infrastructure of a society includes schools, centres for further learning, institutions providing medical care, and services ensuring safety and security. The absence of such services means lack of growth and development, the prevalence of ill-health and disease, and fear and loss through crime. Even the presence or absence of non-productive infrastructure affect the lives of poor people. Their residential areas are often neglected in the provision of non-productive infrastructure, like spaces for recreation and facilities for sport. Lack of opportunities for recreation and sport diminish their quality of life even further.

Several larger social forces created by human decisions from individual to international level can drastically influence the wealth or poverty in people's lives. Gender is a good example. Many women all over the world suffer poverty as a result of a gendered division of labour that shift the bulk of time-

consuming household duties onto their agenda. In this way the numerous social constructions of gender throughout the world benefit mostly men, while disadvantaging and impoverishing women. A hefty struggle lies ahead to fully eradicate the disastrous results of sexism in many countries and communities of the world.

Many economic factors can impoverish – or enrich – people; it is not as simple as to say that the industrious are rewarded and the lazy penalised. Macro-economic trends like inflation or recession can impoverish many skilled, knowledgeable, industrious, and hard-working people. A modernising shift to new ways of production, like industrialisation or the move to a knowledge and information driven economy can cause widespread poverty and wealth, outdating certain skills and mainstreaming others previously only on the periphery. Even at micro-levels of the economy people can be impoverished through inadequate consumer skills and knowledge, while trusting buyers and sellers are easily exploited.

Further social forces impacting on people's level of wealth and poverty are their histories. People's personal, family, communal, regional, national, or continental histories might have had and still have adverse effects that impoverish people. The burdens that legacies of the past impose on people might be strongly contributing causes to their present poverty. A history of conflict and especially war often have particularly devastating consequences that often directly cause poverty. Loss of lives, destruction of property, loss of the economic contribution that soldiers would have made, and the cost of financing weapons and personnel can cause poverty on a major scale in a country. The impact of smaller social conflicts are similar, though perhaps less severe and more restricted to specific geographical areas.

The remedies for poverty, the way aid is given for example, might themselves contribute to reinforcing poverty. Aid given to humiliate people and keep them dependent does a lot of harm. Such aid does not create

circumstances conducive for poor people to escape their poverty. Often circumstances are unfavourable to some individuals and by chance or lack of luck they lose major investments, property, health, or loved ones. In such cases the unpredictable nature of human life with all its troubles and traumas is behind a person's experience of poverty.

5. Conclusion

What does this chapter contribute to our understanding of, and coping with, individual cases of poverty? The chapter implies that to understand the poverty of an individual person, a community, or a country is an extremely complex matter. A detailed (quantitative) description of the scope and extent of a specific case of poverty is needed. Added to that a detailed analysis of all possible factors involved in causing or reinforcing poverty must be given.

Often individuals, communities, or countries find themselves where several complex societal systems, such as local, regional, or national governments or economies intersect. The manner of such intersections could amplify the effects of some factors and strengthen their causal role. Furthermore, it has to be determined why a specific individual, community, or country were susceptible or vulnerable to the set of circumstances and factors that led to poverty. The combined results of such a detailed investigation, constructed to present a personal, communal, regional, national, or continental profile, are the necessary prologue to any appropriate and effective aid. Such profiles are also prerequisites for any detailed moral evaluation of the manifestation of poverty in a given context. The next chapter analyses the moral issues raised by poverty.