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Ruth Lister argues that it is central to the agenda of anti-poverty politics to give recognition, respect and voice to those living in poverty.

If you put me in chains,
then hatred reigns,
and fear gains control of you.
I will not come as a prisoner,
I will not come broken to you,
I will come with pride,
and stand by your side,
because I am human too.¹

This is an extract from a poem written in a creative writing project involving people living in poverty. Its eloquence about the experience of poverty goes beyond statistics. Poverty is experienced not only as a wretched and insecure economic condition, but also as a shameful and destructive social relation. This article addresses both these dimensions, with particular attention to the latter, and argues for recognition of the agency, human rights and common citizenship of people living in poverty.

**Existing not living**

When people on low incomes are asked to describe their lives the common refrain is that they are ‘existing not living’. Whatever the consequences and

1. Anonymous, reproduced from Liz Prest (ed), *Out of the Shadows*, 2000, with the kind permission of ATD Fourth World. For more poems, see pp99-100.
conditions associated with poverty, an inadequate income and material hardship are at its heart. This is what differentiates the state of poverty from non-poverty. Going without, constrained choices leaving little room for spontaneity, running out of money, debt - all of these are typical of the living conditions of people on low benefits and wages. To be poor is to live a life of insecurity and vulnerability, in which the delicate balancing act of getting by can be upset by minor breakdowns of equipment or losses that the rest of us can take in our stride, cushioned as we are by savings or insurance.

Poverty in an affluent society spells exclusion from full participation, and this exclusion can be particularly painful for children unable to enjoy the wide range of goods and activities seen as a normal part of childhood today. Marketing and the tyranny of the right brand label create a glass barrier between children in low-income families and the consumer society. The children can see and desire the consumer goods on the other side; and from the other side they are seen as lacking these requisites, especially the right trainers and clothes, which means that they then sometimes suffer further exclusion and even bullying.

In turn, parents - notably mothers, who take the main responsibility for managing poverty, often acting as shock-absorbers as they try to protect other family members from its full impact - feel a sense of failure and guilt. The resulting stress can be damaging to their physical and mental health. As one mother put it, ‘poverty … sucks you in and breaks you’. Richard Wilkinson’s recent work demonstrates the psycho-social links between poverty and ill health, and the destructive effects of the glass barrier: ‘second-rate goods seem to tell people you are a second-rate person. To believe otherwise is to fundamentally misunderstand the pain of relative poverty or low social status’.

Unfortunately, many do misunderstand that pain. In a recent deliberative qualitative study carried out by MORI for the Fabian Commission on Life
Chances and Child Poverty, participants who were moved by the evidence that lack of money denied children monthly swimming or a birthday celebration remained dismissive of the idea that the inability to afford the latest trainers spells poverty.\(^7\) We need to find ways of encouraging the general public to think about what constitutes a decent and flourishing childhood, and then demonstrate how poverty denies children so many of its basic building blocks. And we need to demonstrate the pain that poverty can cause in a consumer society.

**Othering ‘the poor’**

That pain is psychological. It derives from everyday social relations, and from the ways in which people in poverty are talked about and treated by politicians, officials, professionals, the media and other influential bodies and individuals. According to ATD Fourth World, who work with families in severe and long-term poverty, what makes poverty so hard to bear is ‘to know that you count for nothing, to the point where even your suffering is ignored … The worst blow of all is the contempt of your fellow citizens’. (For more information on ATD Fourth World and other anti-poverty organisations mentioned in this article, see websites listed at the end.)

This contempt is one manifestation of a process of Othering: people in poverty are thought about, talked about and treated as ‘Other’ to the rest of society. Through this process of differentiation and demarcation, social distance is established and maintained. The dividing line is imbued with negative judgements that construct ‘the poor’ variously as a source of moral contamination, a threat, an undeserving economic burden, an object of pity or even as an exotic species. It affirms ‘our’ identity and legitimates our privilege while denying ‘them’ their complex humanity and subjectivity. In doing so, it all too easily serves to justify poverty and inequality by blaming the ‘Other’ for their own and also society’s problems. An example is provided by the initial stance adopted by participants in the MORI/Fabian study. They demonstrated a deep lack of empathy with people living in poverty, who were seen as different - to the extent that when participants did acknowledge the existence of child poverty they tended to blame it on parental behaviour.

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‘Othering’ can be understood in part as a discursive practice. It shapes how those without experience of poverty think and talk about and act towards those living in poverty, at both an inter-personal and an institutional level. The language and labels used to describe ‘the poor’ have been articulated by the more powerful ‘non-poor’, and are often rooted in history. The most obviously demeaning examples are the labels of ‘underclass’ and ‘welfare dependant’.

However, the less value-laden term ‘poor’ is also a problem. When it is used as a noun - ‘the poor’ - it lumps together disparate groups and individuals as if this were their one defining characteristic. (I do so here only in quotation marks to denote the term’s problematic status.) Used as an adjective, ‘poor’ can carry connotations of inferior, as in ‘poor quality’. Either way, people who are labelled with these words can be bitterly resentful of what they perceive to be stigmatising descriptions of themselves - and of the neighbourhoods in which they live. This has implications for collective identity and agency: ‘proud to be poor’ is not a banner under which many want to march.

These difficulties also raise questions for commentators and campaigners: if, in deference to the understandable sensibilities of those concerned, we avoid all reference to poverty in favour of terms such as ‘low income’ (as did the Thatcher government for very different reasons), it can weaken the moral impetus to act. The pragmatic compromise adopted by some campaigners is to talk about ‘people with experience of poverty’ or ‘living in poverty’. This denotes a more respectful stance, which does not assume poverty to be a defining characteristic, but treats it as a socio-economic condition, and one in which far too many people are living. Nor does the term ‘social exclusion’ solve the dilemma. Not many to whom the label is customarily attached have heard of the term, and there has been no research on how it is perceived by those to whom it refers. There is some disagreement among commentators as to whether or not it avoids the derogatory overtones of existing labels. This is partly because it is deployed politically within a number of competing discourses, which have very different implications for those it describes and for policies towards them.

One of the ways in which political language constructs ‘the poor’ and ‘socially excluded’ is by virtue of contrasting discourses. Most notable at present is the New Labour mantra of ‘hard-working families’, implicitly - or sometimes
explicitly - prefaced with ‘decent’. Since it is generally assumed that people in poverty do not work hard, ‘hard working families readily becomes a counterpart to negative stereotypes of lazy, non-working poor families’, as the Fabian Commission noted (p50).

The Othering of ‘the poor’ is reinforced by media representations, which may be the main source of information about poverty for much of the rest of the population, especially now that wealth and disadvantage have become more spatially polarised. Research has illuminated some of the ways in which media images confirm negative stereotypes and contribute to the development of punitive attitudes towards recipients of benefit. This can be the effect of even sympathetic accounts. An example of this sympathetic Othering can be found in the widely publicised Dark Heart: the Shocking Truth about Hidden Britain, by the campaigning journalist, Nick Davies (Vintage 1998). Davies presents himself as ‘a Victorian explorer penetrating a distant jungle’, ‘another’ ‘undiscovered country’. He frequently uses the adjective ‘different’ to underline the message. This means the book is more likely to distance its readers and instil fear than to inspire a ‘crusade against poverty’ as Davies had hoped. The MORI/Fabian research suggested that images that appeal to pity also create distance and encourage a perception of those in poverty as other.

People in poverty are themselves consumers of the media of course. They see and hear the stigmatising images and language. As a parent on benefit told the All-Parliamentary Group on Poverty, ‘we hear how the media, and some politicians, speak about us and it hurts’. More generally, the Othering of people in poverty means that they are frequently targets of pity or indifference - and sometimes fear, contempt and hostility. As a consequence people in poverty often feel humiliated. The effects of this can be injurious to identity, self-respect and self-esteem. An anonymous participant in a UK Coalition Against Poverty (UKCAP) workshop described what this can feel like: ‘You’re like an onion and gradually every skin is peeled off you and there’s nothing left. All your self-esteem and how you feel about yourself is gone - you’re left feeling like nothing and then your family feels like that’.

Reactions to stigmatising Othering vary. When it is internalised, as vividly expressed in the onion metaphor, shame is a likely consequence. In a visit to the UK, two community workers from south India remarked on the degree of stigma, and associated sense of shame, that they observed among people
living in poverty. An alternative response is anger, as witnessed recently in France, when Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy’s use of the term ‘racaille’ (translated variously as ‘rabble’ and ‘scum’) inflamed the anger already felt by young people in the banlieues. Sarkozy aggravated their sense of exclusion - which derives from the all too common compound of poverty and racial discrimination.

An alternative language: human rights and citizenship

‘Othering’ - whether hostile, indifferent or sympathetic - treats people living in poverty as objects. In contrast, and also as a response, participatory research and action against poverty acknowledges people’s subjectivity and agency; this includes both the agency involved in getting by in constrained circumstances, and the political agency necessary for citizenship. Participatory approaches are increasingly informed by an alternative set of discourses, ones that demand dignifying treatment and respect for people who are fellow human beings and citizens. As Millicent Simms, a young unemployed woman, told a UK National Poverty Hearing (organised by Church Action on Poverty): ‘You shouldn't have to be made to feel as though you are useless. I just feel very angry sometimes that people are ignorant to the fact that we are humans as well and we do need to be respected’. Her anger was reflected in much of the evidence received by the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power (commissioned by UKCAP in 1999), who reported that ‘the lack of respect for people living in poverty was one of the clearest and most heartfelt messages which came across to us as a Commission’.

This is the flipside of Tony Blair’s respect agenda - which tends to ignore the reciprocal nature of respect and the power relations underpinning it (though the Social Exclusion Unit has recently acknowledged lack of respect as a significant issue for disadvantaged groups). The importance of respectful treatment to people living in poverty is underlined in Richard Sennett’s argument: ‘lack of respect, though less aggressive than outright insult, can take an equally wounding form. No insult is offered another person, but neither is recognition extended; he or she is not seen … as a full human being whose

presence matters. An informant in one study described himself as ‘stigmatised through mental health problems, unemployment, poverty and other means of social exclusion’ and as ‘a zero’. As he explained, that ‘nothing at all’ value is ‘a destroying experience … I am invisible’.

Philosophers such as John Rawls and Martha Nussbaum identify self-respect as critical to human functioning. Nussbaum makes clear the link between self-respect and dignifying treatment by others, rooted in recognition of equal worth. But, as a mother in a study I was involved in told us: ‘poverty strips your dignity. You can’t have any dignity with poverty’. This is all the more the case in a society where the better-off are so far socially removed from those living in poverty that they are incapable of recognising the latter as dignified beings who are their equals.

Dignity is at the heart of conceptualisations of poverty based on human rights and citizenship. And such conceptualisations are key elements in an alternative poverty discourse that is emerging in both the global North and South. This discourse seeks to combat the process of Othering; it recognises the humanity and agency of people in poverty and connects with wider political and democratic struggles. And it may offer a language that can help to inspire a domestic campaign rooted in solidarity between non-poor and poor.

The UN has been instrumental in promoting a human rights conceptualisation of poverty. Across Europe, the language of human rights underpins the anti-poverty and social exclusion strategy propounded by the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN). In the US, people in poverty and homeless people have come together in the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign ‘to raise the issue of poverty as a human rights violation’. They have conducted a number of national economic human rights marches. The language of human rights, drawing on the civil rights movement, is being used to counter the negative associations typically provoked by the image of ‘poor’. However, while this offers a valuable mobilising tool, the MORI/Fabian study suggests that it needs to be used with care. For some participants, the language of human rights conjured up images of poverty in the

global South; only after they had been confronted with stark statistics on unequal life chances, such as those showing reduced life expectancy, did they come to see a human rights framework as relevant.

Within the context of individual nation states, human rights translate into more concrete citizenship rights. At the first European meeting of Citizens Living in Poverty participants stressed that they wanted to be seen first and foremost as citizens before they were categorised as people living in poverty (for more on this meeting, see EAPN website). For them this meant staking a common claim and being part of society’s mainstream, able to participate fully in the social, economic, political, civic and cultural spheres. Participation in the political sphere and in decision-making is a particularly significant aspect of citizenship in the civic republican tradition. In the context of poverty, a UN practice note states that:

> the notion of participation is at the centre of a human rights-based approach to poverty reduction. The poor … can no longer be seen as passive recipients; they are strategic partners rather than target groups. Human rights change in a fundamental way the relationship between service providers and service recipients.

Participation is a crucial human and citizenship right because it explicitly acknowledges the agency of rights-bearers, as the UN statement underlines. It also underpins the effective realisation of other rights. It directly addresses the issues of voicelessness and powerlessness that are frequently identified as critical by people in poverty. Calls for the voices of the marginalised to be heard in policymaking and campaigning are becoming more pressing. And these calls also draw on principles of social inclusion and democracy. They represent a demand for recognition of, and respect for, the expertise borne of experience, as exemplified by the poems reproduced at the end of this article. As Moraene Roberts, an activist with ATD Fourth World, told the national poverty hearing mentioned earlier: ‘No-one asks our views … But we are the real experts of our own hopes and aspirations … We can contribute if you are prepared to give up a little power to allow us to participate as partners in our own future’.

Enabling the voices of people with experience of poverty to be heard is one way of counteracting the lack of recognition and respect accorded them.
It is a way of seeing - and hearing - people in poverty as human beings whose presence matters. Voicelessness is also associated with powerlessness: it is symptomatic of the political powerlessness of people in poverty, as well as a cause of their feelings of powerlessness. ‘Power not pity’ is one of the demands of the US Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign. However voice alone, though necessary, is not enough: in the words of John Gaventa of the Institute for Development Studies, it needs to be ‘voice with influence’. One of the clearest messages received by the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power was that ‘people experiencing poverty see consultation without commitment, and phoney participation without the power to bring about change, as the ultimate disrespect’ (p18, see note 7).

**A politics of recognition&respect**

The growing demands of poverty activists for recognition of their human rights, citizenship and voice suggest that the politics of poverty needs to be framed not just as a politics of redistribution - important as that still is - but also as a politics of recognition; or, to reflect the language used by people in poverty themselves, a politics of recognition&respect. I am drawing here on the work of political theorists such as Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth. Although their writings on social justice tend not to address poverty as such, they offer a framework for recasting the politics of poverty. The politics of recognition is typically associated with the assertion of group difference and identity, for example by women, lesbians and gays and racialised groups. However, the last thing that people in poverty want is to be treated as different. Instead, their demand is for recognition of their common humanity and citizenship and the equal worth and respect that flows from that.

Recognition politics also requires us to acknowledge the psychological pain and suffering that poverty can inflict. The author of an insightful study of Australian poverty quoted the people living in poverty to whom he spoke as making it clear that ‘if social justice is a response to poverty … it must be a response to poverty’s psychological and emotional wounds, not just its financial consequences’. He quotes one of the people he spoke to: ‘You can put up with the struggle, you know, just get by, if you get respect and if you’re treated right’.  

A combined politics of redistribution and recognition&respect would aim both to eradicate poverty and thereby remove the need to struggle to ‘get by’, and to ensure that those who nevertheless remain in poverty ‘get respect’ and ‘are treated right’. It reinforces the case for adequate benefits and wages, which must be at a level consistent with human dignity as well as sufficient to meet needs. It points to the need to foster ‘poverty-awareness’ among all those involved in developing and delivering services that affect people living in poverty, for instance by involving the service-users in policy-development and in the training of professionals.13

Poverty politics must combat the process of Othering through the involvement of people in poverty as political citizens. It also needs to combat the tendency to residualise the issue of poverty by embedding it into other political debates such as those about democracy, well-being and inequalities. The continued existence of such high levels of poverty is an affront to democracy and is incompatible with the kind of flourishing and just society to which the democratic left aspires.


Websites of organisations mentioned in the text
ATD Fourth World: www.atd-uk.org
UK Coalition Against Poverty: www.ukcap.org
Church Action on Poverty: www.church-poverty.org.uk

13. For example, ATD Fourth World, the Family Rights Group and Royal Holloway have developed a training module on poverty for social work students to be delivered by people with experience of poverty. In Belgium, ‘experiential experts’, with experience of poverty, are being trained to act as mediators within government agencies.
Living on nothing

Living on nothing is trying not to see the wretchedness and the despair, living on nothing is trying not to feel the loss of hope.

Living on nothing is trying not to taste the anger and the disappointment. Living on nothing is trying not to smell the fear.

Living on nothing is trying not to hear the intellectual arguments and lofty ideals about living on nothing put forward by those who are not living on nothing. Living on nothing is dying.
All people, all human

I'm telling the people with power
that I have power too.
If you stifle my voice,
and deny me a choice,
I will show my power to you.
I will not come with a weapon,
I will not come in fear.
I will come with others
as sisters and brothers
and a voice you will have to hear.

I'm telling the people with knowledge
that I have knowledge too.
If you ignore my words,
and deny what you've heard,
my knowledge will be lost to you.
I will not come in anger,
I will not come in pain,
I will come as me,
with dignity,
and your denial will be to your shame.

I'm telling the people with control,
that I have control too.
If you put me in chains,
then hatred reigns,
and fear gains control of you.
I will not come as a prisoner,
I will not come broken to you,
I will come with pride,
and stand by your side,
because I am human too.

(From Out of the Shadows)