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What Is Poverty?

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INTRODUCTION

On November 10, 1999, *The Onion* reported a dramatic reduction in the rate of poverty in the United States, in the following article titled "Eight Million Americans Rescued from Poverty with Redefinition of Term."

> Approximately eight million Americans living below the poverty line were rescued from economic hardship Monday, when the U.S. Census Bureau redefined the term. "We are winning the war on poverty," said bureau head James Irving, who lowered the poverty line for a four-person family to $14,945. "Today, millions of people whose inflation-adjusted total household income is less than $16,780 are living better lives." Said formerly poor Jackson, MS, motel housekeeper Althea Williams: "I never dreamed I'd ever become middle-class. America truly is the land of opportunity." (*The Onion* 1999)

What this satirical example demonstrates is the need for philosophical examination of the concept of poverty, and of certain related questions such as: Is poverty increasing or decreasing? Are there certain groups that tend to be disproportionately overrepresented among the poor, and is such group-associated poverty becoming more or less common? Philosophers have spent little time attempting to answer these questions, perhaps because, as one might imagine, there is apparently little to say philosophically about them. Rather, it may seem, at first glance, that empirical investigation is all that is required to find answers to these questions. Instead, philosophers have focused, to the extent that they have been concerned

with poverty at all, on what moral obligations persons and social institutions have with respect to the prevention and amelioration of poverty.

While it is true that answering these questions requires empirical work, that empirical work cannot be done before some more conceptual questions are answered: for instance, "What is poverty?" and "Does one's likelihood of being poor depend in part on one's social identity relative to others and to institutional structures of domination?" In this paper, we defend certain answers to these questions, and we argue that an adequate definition of poverty must account for the ways in which a person's social position affects both her economic welfare and her ability to make use of the resources she has. We maintain, by applying this desideratum, that some common understandings of poverty are inadequate, and that furthermore, they fail to yield empirical data about poverty that accurately represents who is poor, and who is getting poorer. To satisfy our criterion, and to reflect accurately who is poor, we must understand poverty as the deprivation of certain human capabilities. That is to say, a person is poor if, for any reason, she is unable to do certain things or achieve certain ends.

METHODOLOGY

To be in a position to defend one conception of poverty over others, one must first provide the criteria by which the different conceptions will be evaluated. For this reason, in what immediately follows, we argue that a satisfactory definition of poverty will fulfill three important desiderata: empirical adequacy, conceptual precision, and sensitivity to social positioning. Having explained each criterion in this section, we will then apply them to actual conceptions of poverty, including our own.

Empirical Adequacy

Perhaps the most important and least controversial desideratum for a good definition of poverty is that it be empirically adequate; that is, that it include all and only those who are actually poor. In this regard, we will argue that some definitions of poverty are too broad (i.e., they tend to include those who are not poor). Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, we will contend that those definitions of poverty that are currently most influential are entirely too narrow—they exclude many who are in fact poor. Some definitions of poverty, we will maintain, are both too broad and too narrow.[1]

Conceptual Precision

An adequate definition of poverty must be conceptually precise, by which we mean that it must distinguish the concept and the phenomena of

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poverty from other concepts and phenomena that are correlated with or causally related to poverty, but not constitutive of it. Some conceptions of poverty appear to include in the definition of poverty factors that serve to cause and/or exacerbate poverty, such as political and social exclusion.

Conceptually, it is incoherent to include the causes of poverty in the definition of poverty since, first, this would lead to an infinite regress, and second, it would imply that poverty is self-caused or uncaused—a troublesome thought for anyone who is concerned to reduce the incidence of poverty. At the practical level, such lack of precision in how one conceives of a phenomenon may result in inadequate policies or strategies for dealing with the phenomenon. If one's aim is to reduce poverty, then one must be able to distinguish poverty from phenomena that are correlated with or causes of poverty.

Sensitivity to Social Positioning

What it is for a particular conception to be *adequate* depends on the epistemological and methodological framework in which an analysis is conducted. A primary aim of feminist research is to uncover and eradicate domination and subjugation on the basis of the socially constructed category of gender (as it intersects with race, class, ethnicity, sexual preference and so on). Thus, the values, interests, and assumptions that constitute an adequate feminist methodology will also treat this aim as paramount.

Broadly speaking, feminist philosophy is defined by its aim to expose and amend gender bias within mainstream philosophy. A feminist methodology begins with the recognition that dominant philosophical frameworks are often grounded in narrow, often male-biased assumptions about human beings' relations to each other and to nature. Such distorted views function to create and reinforce social relations of domination and subordination. Because partial and biased assumptions are often masked as neutral and are invisible to those embedded in dominant frameworks, a chief aim of feminist methodology is to expose and transform these distorted assumptions so as to more adequately reflect reality as it is experienced by *situated* individuals.

That is, rather than purporting to embody a neutral or positionless perspective, conceptions, policies, and strategies should be based on ideas and beliefs that are consistent with the experiences of persons understood as positioned within historical, social, material, cultural, and/or religious contexts. Individuals are not isolated units whose experiences can be understood independently of the situation in which they are embedded. Given this, an adequate conception of poverty must reflect the interdependent, interrelated character of individuals with one another and with nature, as well as the social institutions and relations in which they are *situated*.

Understanding poverty as it actually occurs requires recognizing the ways in which multiple factors interact to create and reinforce a state of severe deprivation in which a person is unable to satisfy her most basic needs. Thus, an adequate definition of poverty will incorporate an understanding of how a person's position (socially, culturally, locally, etc.) affects not only her vulnerability to material deprivation, but also whether and how she is able to convert resources to the satisfaction of basic needs. As we will demonstrate throughout the paper, factors such as whether a person has access to state-subsidized services, the costs of goods within her community, her membership in marginalized groups as determined by relations of power in the local, national and global community, her position within the household with regard to power and responsibility, as well as her particular nutritional needs relative to her age, sex, health, etc., are all profoundly important to determining her ability to fulfill her basic needs.

ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTIONS OF POVERTY

Poverty as a Lack of Income

Currently, the World Bank's empirical data on poverty are the most comprehensive estimates on the rate of poverty.[2] They define poverty as "the inability to attain a minimal standard of living," which they identify as anyone whose income has less purchasing power than $1/day, as it is calculated within a particular country in a particular year (World Bank 1990). Yet both the method employed by the World Bank and the conception of poverty on which it is based are fundamentally flawed, resulting in miscalculation of estimates of the global poor (Pogge & Reddy 2003).

Thomas Pogge and Sanjay Reddy point out that the value of a nation's currency as it is used for the national poverty line is determined on the basis of the aggregate consumption pattern of that country, with no division between categories of commodities (Pogge & Reddy 2003, 5). This aggregate consumption model is problematic because goods that are necessary for meeting one's basic needs, such as cheap food, are counted in the same category as services that are "extra"/supplements to one's quality of life. Yet, in general, the economic level of those who consume "supplemental" services is such that they are already able to satisfy their basic needs. In short, no matter how cheap a haircut or a taxi ride becomes, the worst-off must first put their resources to securing food and shelter. If the price of these "supplemental" services drops, while the price of basic goods remains the same or increases, then the poor are not in any sense better off. Unfortunately, in failing to distinguish between goods necessary to fulfil basic needs and services that enhance overall quality of life, the World Bank

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It could be argued that, while the World Bank's method has some fundamental flaws, the best way of defining poverty is nevertheless in terms of "lack of income." Yet foremost among the problems with this definition of poverty is that it is both too broad and too narrow at the same time. In other words, on this definition, certain people are counted as poor who are able to satisfy their basic needs, and others who cannot are not counted as poor. For example, a person who has a high income but who nevertheless cannot provide herself with adequate nutrition or who has no access to basic medical services (because, for instance, she is not permitted by governing social norms and institutions to leave her home alone, or perhaps because she lives in a rural area) would not count as poor despite the fact that she is not able to meet her basic needs.

Additional problems arise from some problematic assumptions income-based definitions of poverty tend to make. For instance, such models tend to view the household solely as a sphere of consumption, with each household counting as a "single unit of consumption" (Jaggar 2006). The problem is that these methods fail to disaggregate within the household, which presupposes equal distribution of income within the household.[4] This ignores the fact that social relations of power based on gender most often result in the "gendered division of authority" (Ibid.), in which women tend to occupy an inferior position within the household, a position in which they have little, if any, control over the allocation of income and resources; insofar as women are seen as less valuable or inferior, women's needs tend to be seen as secondary and negligible. As Amartya Sen points out, this is further compounded by the fact that women often view their own self-interest and well-being in relational terms, that is, their own interest is seen as directly related to the well-being of the members of their family (Jackson 1998). Thus, when there are limited resources within a household, women often forgo fulfilling their own needs to provide for those of their children, spouses, etc. That most societies, as well as the global economic community, are hierarchically structured in a way that subordinates women has crucial implications for people's ability to access and to use commodities to satisfy their basic needs. However, most income-based methods fail to attend to the influence of gendered social positioning and the concomitant contextual factors in its conception of poverty.

Ravi Kanbur and Lyn Squire suggest a third problem for income-based definitions of poverty, namely that "economically marginalized groups tend to be socially marginalized as well," so that they are disadvantaged with respect to both resources and power (2001, 2).[5] They are right to assert that poverty often manifests as a form of powerlessness. However, the relationship between social marginalization and economic marginalization is

much more profound and complex than Kanbur and Squire acknowledge. Individuals are always and everywhere entrenched in a web of power relations, such as racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, classism, heterosexism, etc., that either advance or hinder their life prospects. Where one is positioned relative to social structures of power will not only shape one's ability to access resources, such as income, but will affect one's ability to convert those resources into the fulfillment of basic needs. Income-based definitions of poverty assume that lack of income is the only obstacle to the fulfillment of one's basic needs. However, this assumption overlooks how other institutitional forms of inequality limit individuals' ability to fulfill their basic needs. For example, an immigrant may have a relatively high income, but due to her marginalized social position, may lack the mobility necessary to fulfill her basic needs. To the extent that an individual belongs to multiple marginalized groups, her ability to have command over resources is significantly diminished, leaving her more vulnerable to poverty than others.[6]

Poverty as Lack of Resources

An alternative to the World Bank's income-based definition, a resourcist approach, may be used to provide a meaningful grounding for the development of a poverty line. A resourcist definition of poverty sees it as (in Paul Spicker's words) "lack of material goods or services . . . that people require in order to live and function in society" (Spicker 1999). For example, in 1995, the UN defined poverty as "a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education, and information. It depends not only on income, but access to services" (Ibid, 152).[7] This conception is based on the idea that each person requires a certain basket of goods in order to "live and function in society."

One may wonder, however, whether the resourcist approach sufficiently accounts for how individuals' needs differ. Insofar as poverty is defined in reference to a single basket of goods, it may fail to account for individuals with increased needs, such as the elderly, the sick, children, and pregnant women, as well as for those who care for these persons, and so on. Insofar as differently situated persons relate to resources differently, measuring poverty on the basis of a single basket of goods does not capture the varying adequacy of those goods for those with different needs—thereby resulting in underestimation of poverty. In particular, resourcist approaches to defining poverty neglect the fact that individuals who are members of marginalized groups tend, as a result of their socially imposed marginalization, to convert resources into functionings at lower rates than those who are not

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marginalized. As such, this type of definition systematically overlooks the poverty experienced by members of marginalized groups.[8]

The resourcist definition of poverty misses what is important for avoiding poverty: not having resources per se, but rather, having command over resources. Amartya Sen makes a similar point, using the example of owning a bike: "The commodity ownership or availability itself is not the right focus [for conceiving of poverty] since it does not tell us what the person can, in fact, do. I may not be able to use the bike if—say—I happen to be handicapped" (Sen 1983).

Poverty as Inequality

On an inequality approach to poverty, people are poor if they are among the least well-off in a society. (This can in principle be understood in any terms—income, material resources, social exclusion, or capabilities fulfillment—but it is normally understood in terms of income.) That is, those individuals who occupy the worst-off positions, relative to the material status of others in a particular society, are counted as poor. O'Higgins and Jenkins explain:

> Virtually all definitions of the poverty threshold used in developed economies in the last half-century or so have been concerned with establishing the level of income necessary to allow access to the minimum standards of living considered acceptable in that society at the time. In consequence, there is an inescapable connection between poverty and inequality: certain degrees or dimensions of inequality . . . will lead to people being below the minimum standard acceptable in that society. (Spicker 1999, 156)

Thus, an inequality approach does not conceive of poverty as being any absolute state of life in which individuals are deprived of particular needs or resources, but rather merely as a situation of deprivation relative to others' material position. Yet, as Spicker points out, this view of poverty implies that a reduction in the resources of the better-off is a reduction of poverty, even if the absolute status of the worst-off has not changed. But this clearly would not be a reduction in poverty, and so an inequality-based definition of poverty is unsatisfactory. In addition, on such a definition it would be nearly impossible to eradicate poverty, since some are almost always worse-off than others. It is odd to say that someone is poor simply because she has less than others if she, for example, obtains adequate nutrition, has protection from adverse climatic conditions, and has access to basic medical services.

This definition also implies, counterintuitively, that there could not be a society in which the majority of people are poor. That is, since "worst-off"

entails falling below some average, this group would, by definition, need to be less than half the population. These counterexamples show that an inequality-based definition of poverty is both too broad (since someone may be among the worst-off and yet still be able to live "decently" in an affluent society) and too narrow (since someone may not, for example, be able to obtain adequate nourishment in a society in which more than half of the population cannot obtain adequate nourishment, and so would not be counted as poor).

Poverty as Social Exclusion

Another definition that is cited among international development agencies is the view of poverty as a type of "social exclusion" (Narayan et al., 2000). For example, in the World Bank's *Voices of the Poor*, poverty is defined as "vulnerability to social risks," "powerlessness," or exclusion "from participation in the normal pattern of social life" (Spicker 1999, 154).

Obviously an understanding of such factors is vitally important for the development of anti-poverty strategies and for the analysis of social institutions, especially as the most marginalized members of society experience them. However, our worry is that this type of definition does not reflect what is constitutive of poverty per se. Rather, it seems to explain the impact of the interaction of various social injustices—including poverty—on those who are adversely affected by them. Vulnerability, powerlessness, and exclusion are both created and reinforced by poverty, as well as by various institutions of social, cultural, political and/or economic domination. Given the multidimensional, interactional nature of social injustice, any policy seeking to eradicate it will necessarily require examining this complex web. However, this does not entail that the various social factors are indistinguishable and/or that they can or should all be subsumed under the label "poverty" (Pinker 1999).[9] Furthermore, it would be conceptually incoherent to identify such factors as causes of poverty, while at the same time defining them as part of poverty itself.[10] Thus, while we advocate examining these factors as crucial to human development and poverty alleviation, we reject them as a central defining feature of poverty.

POVERTY AS CAPABILITIES DEPRIVATION

Defending Capabilities

Any reasonable definition of poverty must take into account how a person's social position affects both her economic welfare and her ability to make use of the resources she has (whether income or actual goods and

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services). Although the alternative conceptions of poverty we have discussed are problematic for various reasons, each, most importantly, fails to meet this desideratum—that a definition of poverty must consider how a person's membership in marginalized and/or dominant social groups affects her ability to utilize resources.

In virtue of this criterion, we propose that poverty be defined in terms of a person's capabilities, where this refers to a person's positive freedom.[11] In other words, in order to determine if a person is poor, one ought to consider what that person is able to do or what that person can achieve. A person will count as poor if, for any reason, she is unable to do certain things or unable to achieve certain ends.[12] Poverty, then, on our account, is the deprivation of certain capabilities or positive freedoms.

Defining poverty as "the deprivation of certain capabilities" meets the above criterion in the following way. As we have mentioned in our criticisms of alternative definitions of poverty, a person's material needs can vary in complex ways depending on her social position, among other things. Often, for example, a person who is a member of a marginalized group will have greater difficulty in converting resources (whether income or material goods) into functionings—that is, in making use of her resources—than a person who is otherwise similarly socially situated but not a member of the same marginalized group. To give a specific example, the nutritional needs of a person who works intensively for long periods each day will be higher, other things being equal, than the nutritional needs of a person who does not perform such work. Thus, for example, many women's nutritional needs are greater than they would otherwise be because of the domestic labor that they perform (on top of any paid labor they may also do); however, because that domestic labor is unremunerated, it does not afford them additional resources for meeting those heightened nutritional needs.

There are countless ways in which one person's needs will vary from another's as a result of their respective social positions, each of which shows the inadequacy of defining poverty as falling below some standardized income level, or as having less than some standardized basket of goods. For example, a person who has a physical disability will often need a higher income than a person who does not have a physical disability, but who is otherwise similarly socially situated, in order to achieve the same level of material well-being.[13] (One reason among many for this difference is that an automobile, which may be necessary in certain places in order to obtain food and other basic needs, will cost more if it is made to accommodate a person with a physical disability.)

Defining poverty as "deprivation of certain capabilities" has additional advantages over other common definitions. Consider again Amartya Sen's contention that "commodity ownership or availability is not the right

focus" of defining a minimal standard of living (i.e., poverty assessment), because what is most important is "what the person can do" with those commodities (Sen 1983). On this approach, someone's lacking certain material resources is seen as morally significant *because* such deprivation prevents him or her from being able to do certain fundamental things. This approach, unlike others we've considered here, stresses *why* material deprivation is so important: it reveals the normative implications of such deprivation for human well-being, as well as its inexorable link to the circumstances of particular persons, including their social positions within particular contexts.[14]

As a result, accurately assessing poverty requires examining factors like the availability of state-subsidized services, the costs of goods and services within a particular context, and individuals' needs relative to their situations, including their identities relative to institutional structures of power. In most social contexts, factors such as class, gender, race, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability, and the like systematically disadvantage individuals in ways that affect their ability to access and convert material resources into capabilities. To the extent that a person's social identity influences her ability to function, or to fulfill her basic needs, it must be considered in any adequate assessment of poverty. This set of variables is most fully incorporated by a capability-based definition. Such a definition not only captures the significance of cross-country, intra-country, and intra-household variations in costs, power, etc.; it also underlines Alison Jaggar's point that power structures systematically limit the life prospects of individuals who belong to social groups undervalued by such structures, thus disproportionately increasing an individual's vulnerability to poverty (Jaggar 2006).

Following Sen, the model we advocate is absolute in terms of the capabilities whose lack defines poverty, but relative to individuals in terms of the particular goods and services (and levels thereof) needed to achieve those capabilities (Sen 1983, p. 160). So, while the concept of poverty appeals to a context-independent set of capabilities, we recognize that the resources that one needs in order to satisfy these requirements vary according to the context. As we have stressed thus far, intra-country variations in commodities and prices, as well as other contextual (social, political, historical, etc.) factors that influence an individual's ability to use goods to satisfy her needs, must be accounted for by whatever methods are used to assess poverty. Delineating a universally applicable list of elementary capabilities provides a stable and consistent benchmark for measuring poverty rates, as well as for assessing poverty-reduction strategies. Furthermore, such a global list allows for more uniform modifications to national poverty lines as needed to reveal any variations in the cost of basic necessities. Finally,

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Although it would be quite an undertaking to provide a definitive list of capabilities the deprivation of which constitutes poverty, we would nonetheless like to make some preliminary suggestions. Most importantly, it should be kept in mind that, while the notion of capabilities is often invoked in development theory and as part of theories of justice, in the current context we are concerned with capabilities only insofar as they are relevant to the concept of poverty.[15] For this reason, and to remain consistent with our criticisms of other conceptions of poverty (most notably, that of poverty as social exclusion), we believe that the list of capabilities whose deprivation constitutes poverty should be rather limited and narrowly drawn. For example, this list should include items such as "the capability to be adequately nourished," "the capability to live free of avoidable and easily treatable diseases," and "the capability to be protected from climatic conditions." For the purposes of this paper, we are agnostic about what methods ought to be employed in order to generate a more complete list of poverty-relevant capabilities. Nevertheless, both for conceptual reasons and because eradicating poverty requires an accurate understanding of the phenomena, we believe that such a list should be constructed in a way that avoids conflating poverty with other social ills.

For example, one feature of Sen's argument that we reject is his apparent support of "the capability to live without shame" and the capability for social participation as capabilities the underfulfillment of which constitutes poverty (Sen 1983). This rejection is justified by an argument similar to the one we used against the "social exclusion" definitions of poverty: namely, including such items in the list of the basic capabilities used to identify poverty results in a conception that is too broad. Such conditions, while important, signify multiple injustices and social issues which are related to, but should not be conflated with, poverty.

Objections

Broadness

Most objections to our thesis take the form of counterexamples that aim to show that our account of poverty as capabilities-deprivation is too broad. Imagine, for example, that a billionaire has been kidnapped, restrained, and denied access to adequate nutrition, shelter, and medical care. This person, one might think, will be characterized as poor by our definition of poverty; yet intuitively, one may object, this person, though the victim of moral wrongdoing, is incorrectly identified as poor.[16] Similarly, one can imagine a person who, as a result of a gambling addiction, no longer has

the ability to provide nutrition, medical care, and shelter for himself. Again, the gambling addict seems to count as poor on our definition, and this again may seem intuitively inaccurate. As such, our definition is too broad and must be rejected.

There are multiple counterexamples that all, in a similar way, attempt to demonstrate that our definition of poverty is too broad. Nevertheless, no such counterexamples, we argue, provide sufficient grounds for rejecting our definition. This is so for three reasons. First, similar counterexamples apply, in slightly modified forms, to the other alternative definitions we have considered in this paper. This is because the only way to avoid such counterexamples is to add a set of necessary conditions specifying the *cause* of an individual's material deprivation. The intuitive force, if there is any, behind the case of the kidnapped billionaire has to do with the fact that the cause of her material deprivation is not of a kind normally included within the concept of poverty. But none of the currently popular definitions of poverty (lack of income, lack of resources, being the least well-off, and being socially excluded) take the cause of an individual's material deprivation to be relevant to whether or not she is poor. As such, this line of objection, even if the counterexample is successful, does not count as a reason to reject a definition of poverty in terms of capabilities-deprivation any more than it counts a reason to reject alternative definitions of poverty. (For example, the kidnapped billionaire would also be considered poor on a resourcist definition of poverty, since she is deprived of all of her resources.)[17]

Does this mean that an adequate definition of poverty should take into account the cause of a person's material deprivation? We believe this would be a mistake. Even if concerns about over-broadness could be addressed by adding a set of necessary conditions that specify certain kinds of causes of a person's material deprivation, such necessary conditions would be highly likely to result in an overly narrow definition of poverty. That is, for every person who is allegedly not poor, but who is "mistakenly" counted as poor on a definition of poverty that is not cause-sensitive, there will be at least as many who are actually poor, but who would not be counted as poor on any similar definition of poverty that does require material deprivation to have certain kinds of causes. It seems reasonable to assume, at the very least, that two definitions are equally inadequate if one is too narrow and the other is too broad, provided that the degrees of narrowness and broadness are similar. Furthermore, as we will argue below, in the case of defining poverty, it is better for a definition to be too broad than too narrow. For this reason, we deny that an adequate definition of poverty should take account of the causes of a person's material deprivation.

Secondly, though we consider poverty in general to be morally problematic, our definition does not entail that, if a person is poor, certain others

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have a moral obligation to alleviate his or her poverty. For example, while our definition does indeed require us to say that the kidnapped billionaire is (suddenly) poor, it does not require us to say that his poverty is as morally troubling—or that it imposes on anyone the same kinds of ameliorative obligations—as more ordinarily caused forms of poverty. Much the same qualification applies to the case of the gambling addict. We believe that this clarification substantially mitigates the force of the counterexamples.

Third and finally, we wish to call into question the methodological assumptions behind the use of counterexamples (such as the case of the kidnapped billionaire) as methods for critiquing various philosophical positions. Specifically, we argue that improbable cases, such as the case of the kidnapped billionaire, are too rare to constitute decisive objections—certainly in this context, and perhaps in many others. As we have argued throughout this essay, alternative definitions of poverty systematically underrepresent poverty among, and thereby entrench the oppression of, women and members of groups marginalized along lines of race, age, and ability, among other things. These actually existing people are systematically excluded from definitions of poverty that are entirely too narrow, and as a result, attempts to alleviate poverty, such as promoting economic growth defined in terms of Gross National Products, continually fail to improve these people's material conditions. Under these circumstances, we believe very little weight, if any, should be given to improbable cases like that of the kidnapped billionaire, whom we are more than willing to call "poor" if the alternative is a definition that systematically underrepresents poverty among women and members of other marginalized groups. Other things being equal, narrowness is a more serious vice for a definition of poverty than is broadness, as it is better to include a few kidnapped billionaires in the definition of poverty than to exclude many thousands or even millions of people whose social identity makes them more vulnerable to material deprivation. In summary, we do not think that the kidnapped billionaire case shows that our definition of poverty is too broad; but even if our definition is too broad, the extent to which it is too broad is significantly less than the extent to which competing accounts are too narrow.

Empirical Adequacy

This objection relies on a counterexample meant to demonstrate that resourcist definitions of poverty are more empirically adequate than capabilities-based definitions. Imagine two societies, A and B, the members of both of which are deprived of their capability to be adequately nourished. In society A, the cause of the individuals' capability-deprivation is a lack of food resources, whereas in society B, individuals, though they are relatively

resource-rich, are undernourished, and so deprived of their capabilities, because they have extremely high metabolisms. Since, in both cases, individuals are deprived of the relevant capability, the individuals of both societies will, counterintuitively, count as poor on our definition. But in fact, only the individuals of society A are poor, according to the resourcist. So, our definition must be rejected in favor of a resourcist definition of poverty.[18]

However, the apparent force of this objection relies both on the underdescription of the case and on its improbability. The counterexample trades on the impression of the two groups as geographically and socially isolated societies. Imagine, alternatively, that the two groups are not composed of members of geographically isolated societies, but rather, more realistically, of different social groups in the same geographical area—that, for example, group A is composed of resource-deprived men, while group B is composed of pregnant women, whose nutritional needs are greater than those of the non-pregnant and who therefore, despite having somewhat greater food resources than the members of group A, are nonetheless unable to meet their nutritional needs. Even if one were inclined to believe that our account mistakenly identified the members of society B (in the original counterexample) as poor, what force the counterexample has, if any, is significantly diminished by reconstructing the counterexample in more realistic terms. It does not seem counterintuitive (to us at least) to say that the pregnant women in group B are poor even if they have somewhat greater food resources than the resource-deprived men in group A (whom we would also, of course, consider poor.)

Second, since (as discussed above) our definition of poverty does not entail that if a person is poor, certain others have a moral obligation to alleviate that poverty, our account allows one to say (though we ourselves probably would not) that the poverty of the members of group B is less morally significant than that of members of group A. This consideration diminishes the force of the counterexample.

Third, there is an equally forceful counterexample to the resourcist definition which supports our definition of poverty in terms of capabilities-deprivation. Imagine two groups, A and B. The members of group A are resource-deprived, and so unable to meet their nutritional needs. The members of this group will be considered poor on both the resourcist and capabilities-based definitions of poverty. The members of group B also have scarce food resources, but are able to meet their nutritional needs due to their extremely low metabolisms. The members of group B will not count as poor on the capabilities-based definition (since they are able to nourish themselves), but they will count as poor, counterintuitively, on the resourcist definition (because they lack the specified resources). Whatever force

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Finally, the central problem with this objection, which both our first and third responses suggest, is that (like the resourcist position itself) it requires determining what the needs of the "standard" person are. Since the resourcist approach to defining poverty depends on specifying a single basket of goods or set of resources that a person needs in order to avoid or escape poverty, a defender of the resourcist account must identify who the "standard" person is, and then determine what his needs are, in order to generate the list of resources that are to comprise the single basket of goods. However, the needs of individuals vary significantly, for both idiosyncratic and systemic social reasons. In the original version of the counterexample, the members of society B are said not to lack food resources, despite the fact that they are unable to meet their nutritional needs. But the claim that members of society B do not lack food resources depends on assuming a single basket of goods, conceived of in reference to the needs of some "standard" person whose needs, and thus whose required resources, are less than the needs of the members of group B. In the first reconstructed version of the counterexample, the members of group A are resource-deprived men, and the members of group B are pregnant women who, despite having a greater quantity of resources than the members of group A, are nonetheless unable to meet their nutritional needs. The only way for the resourcist to maintain, as she must, that the members of group A are poor, while the members of group B are not, is to assume a single basket of goods based on the needs of some "standard" person whose needs are less than those of a typical pregnant woman (perhaps the men in group A), while taking the needs of the pregnant women of group B to be an exceptional case. For these reasons, we do not find this objection to be compelling.

Practicality

The final objection concerns the practicality of the capabilities-based definition of poverty as a guide for poverty-reduction. As we have noted throughout the paper, an important advantage of this understanding of poverty is that it recognizes the ways in which an individual's social position can affect her ability to function in society. However, one might object that this very feature of the capabilities model renders it an impractical approach to assessing and measuring poverty. For example, it requires taking into account differences among individuals such as gender, race, age, and disability (and perhaps even metabolic rate and location). Given the resources and time that such an approach appears to require, the practical problems involved in measuring poverty would be insurmountable. This suggests that, as a practical guide to poverty reduction, the capabilities model fails.

One should keep in mind, however, that all definitions of poverty are individualized in a certain sense. Even income-based definitions of poverty require that the income of all individuals (or households, as the case may be) be measured in order to determine whether a person is poor—and, if so, how poor he or she is. (Furthermore, the income model is, at this level, even less practical than it initially seems, for the following reason. While in affluent western states, sufficient infrastructure exists for conducting census surveys, and most income earning occurs in the formal economy, i.e., is indicated in tax records, the same is not true in other parts of the world which, by no coincidence, tend to contain the highest proportion of the world's poor. As such, accurately measuring the income of individuals is not as easy as it seems at first glance.) Similarly, measuring the rate of poverty according to a resourcist definition would also require taking stock of the quantity and type of resources owned by individuals. So in this sense, a definition of poverty in terms of capabilities is no more individualized, and thus no more impractical, than any definition of poverty. However, the capabilities model is individualized in a sense that other definitions are not: while the list of poverty-relevant capabilities is universal (as noted previously), the quantity and type of resources an individual must have command over (not merely legally possess, as in the resourcist model) will vary from one individual to the next depending on their respective social positions. In other words, the threshold of poverty for the capabilities model will vary among individuals. It is for this reason that the capabilities model is thought to be less practical than other models for measuring the rate of poverty globally.

Even with this consideration in mind, however, the capabilities model is not significantly less practical than other definitions of poverty. The work required to determine the thresholds of poverty for different groups of people, based on their particular social positions, though it must be highly empirically informed, is primarily conceptual. Furthermore, similar models already exist in other areas of inquiry and are highly effective. For example, the medical field has been able to capture differences among individuals, thereby improving their ability to target and anticipate the medical needs and vulnerabilities of differently situated persons. The success of these strategies depends upon evaluating factors such as metabolism, age, sex, height, etc. This shows that measuring and responding to such individual differences is not an unrealistically daunting endeavor.

Additionally, in our view, there is little value in knowing for its own sake the most empirically and conceptually ideal meaning of "poverty." Rather, a definition of poverty is valuable primarily to the extent that it helps identify who is poor, and for what reasons, so that strategies for eradicating poverty can be most effective. As we have argued, however, other definitions of

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poverty systematically misrepresent and underestimate the rate of global poverty, particularly among women and members of other marginalized groups. As such, even if these other definitions of poverty are more conducive to the practical measurement of poverty—a claim we have denied—they will nonetheless ultimately fail to result in data about poverty that accurately represent who is poor, and who is getting poorer. That is, at best, they allow us to arrive more efficiently at a drastically inaccurate measurement of poverty. Furthermore, even if a definition of poverty in terms of capabilities-deprivation is less conducive to the practical measurement of poverty (which, again, we deny), this implies that, if adopted and employed to measure poverty, our definition would risk underestimating the rate of global poverty. In other words, at worst, the practical deficiency of the capabilities model would have the same result as the application of other definitions of poverty for accurately identifying the poor. And since this represents the worst-case scenario for the capabilities model, and since, if our previous argument is correct, the capabilities model is no less conducive to the practical measurement of poverty than any other definition, we maintain that this objection presents no reason to reject the understanding of poverty in terms of the deprivation of certain human capabilities.

CONCLUSION

In "The Poorest of the Poor" (2006), Alison Jaggar calls attention to a vital limitation in mainstream literature on global justice: namely, the failure to recognize and analyze women's disproportionate representation among the global poor (the global *feminization of poverty*). Among other things, mainstream literature on poverty is increasingly focused on the role of global economic institutions and affluent countries in exacerbating global inequality and poverty. Yet, insofar as women's overrepresentation is unanalyzed by such theorists, the systematic gender biases of the economic order will also go unnoticed. This omission, however, may be due, at least in part, to the restricted and problematic nature of available poverty estimates, which tell us little about the actual distribution of poverty. In order to determine whether and to what extent women constitute the majority of the world's poor, we first need an accurate conception of poverty. This conception must account for the ways in which one's context, including her social position relative to social relations of power, influences her ability to use resources in a way that allows her to fulfill her basic needs. Unless a definition of poverty includes such concerns, measurements of poverty will continue to be inadequate and, thus, strategies for alleviating poverty—perhaps especially the poverty of women—will be misguided.

NOTES

1. The project of defining a term is inevitably beset by the problem of circularity, particularly to the extent that empirical adequacy is invoked as a desideratum of definitional adequacy. Insofar as empirical adequacy requires that one already know who is poor, our application of this criterion, one may object, is question-begging. However, this objection applies to any case where empirical adequacy is used to test a definition, since one must know the particulars in advance to know the definition, and one must know the definition in advance to know the particulars. As such, all attempts to define "poverty" will be equally encumbered by the problem of circularity; to object that our attempt to justify the understanding of poverty as capabilities-deprivation is circular, then, is to object to the very project of defining "poverty" (and, for that matter, to the project of defining any word).

2. The World Bank's poverty line is arbitrary insofar as it is produced without accounting for many factors that affect whether or not $1/day is sufficient for fulfilling one's basic needs. As we shall argue, the World Bank's poverty line is generated without attention to, among other things, cost of living differentials within countries, the unequal distribution of income within the household (e.g., the impact of gender inequality), as well as neglect of the increasing trend of global consumption toward services over goods. It is in this sense that we characterize the poverty line as "arbitrary."

3. In addition, the World Bank's income-based method ignores the extent to which an income's adequacy for attaining basic necessities will depend on certain key features of one's situation. One important factor is the extent to which one's country provides state-funded public services, such as healthcare and education. Whether someone's circumstances are characterized by unsanitary drinking water, market-based healthcare and education, and the like will have tremendous impact on her standard of living. While an income of $1/day *may be* sufficient for someone who lives in a society that provides quality healthcare and education, as well as public utilities and the like, at no cost, it is far from clear that it would be sufficient in a society in which any or all of these services were provided by the market. This shows that the World Bank lacks a meaningful concept of what basic necessities persons need in order to attain a minimal standard of living. Consequently, one sense in which the World Bank's generation of a baseline income is arbitrary involves its failure to represent the actual resources individuals require to survive.

4. It is possible, however, for any definition of poverty to employ a method of measuring poverty that considers a household a single unit of consumption, and so in principle this can be a problem for any definition.

5. As we will show in the following sections, this is also a problem for other conceptions of poverty that overlook the impact of one's position in relation to social relations of power on one's ability to convert resources into fulfillment of one's basic needs.

6. Different social identities, as they relate to marginalized groups, relate to structures of domination in different ways, which affects their particular experience of this domination, as well as the character of the domination itself. There is no unified experience of racist, sexist, classist, ageist, or heterosexist oppression. Rather

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the different features of an individual's identity interact so as to produce a unique experience of sexism, racism, etc. Alison Jaggar once compared this interactional nature to the character of infused tea. The infusion of different flavors yields a unique tea, the character of which is something beyond the addition of the parts. Similarly, the interacting of various structures of domination yields an experience that cannot be understood by separating the different "types" of oppression. Also see Angela Harris (1990).

7. While Spicker classifies the UN's model differently (1999, 152), it seems that a resourcist approach more accurately captures the UN's definition.

8. Why can't a resourcist approach define poverty in reference to multiple baskets of goods? Conceptually, we argue, it is not possible to do this without essentially altering the meaning of poverty offered by the resourcist approach. If a resourcist wished to account for individuals' varying ability to make use of resources by, say, conceiving of the poverty of the elderly in terms of a different basket of goods than that required by the young, she would need to specify some independent standard in terms of which the needs of the elderly could be differently determined relative to the young. For example, she might say that a person is poor if she lacks the resources to be able to function in society in certain ways; since the elderly in general need a greater amount of resources to be able to function in certain ways than do the young, the quantity and type of resources (or basket of goods) needed by the elderly to escape poverty would be greater than that of the young. In this way, the defender of the resourcist approach could justify conceiving of poverty in reference to multiple baskets of goods. However, in doing so, the defender of the resourcist approach has invoked an independent standard to judge whether some basket of goods is adequate to avoid or escape poverty; in this case, that was "to be able to function in society in certain ways"—i.e., capabilities. Hence, it is not possible for a resourcist approach to define poverty in reference to multiple baskets of goods while remaining a resourcist approach.

9. Robert Pinker (1999) argues that while these factors are causally related to poverty, they are not identical to them.

10. In a similar vein, Jaggar (2006) states that such broad definitions "risk using poverty as a catch-all for a range of varied problems and injustices that deserve more direct consideration and precise analysis."

11. Following Amartya Sen's use of the term in *Development as Freedom*.

12. An individual may not be able to meet her needs due to individual shortcomings such as a gambling habit, and although she will still be counted as poor, we do not regard such poverty as imposing justice-based demands for poverty reduction on an institutional, national and global level. For an extensive and persuasive argument on the importance of distinguishing between institutional, or formal, versus informal harms, see Pogge (2003).

13. It is important to note that we are only addressing capabilities as they are required to meet *basic needs*. For instance, a person with a physical disability who has adequate nutrition and housing may not be able to satisfy other needs such as expensive surgery based on her available resources, yet this would not count as poverty. Similarly, lack of access to certain forms of medical treatment such as medicine and/or surgery required for AIDS or cancer treatment may be unjust for various reasons, but is itself not a mark of poverty.

14. We wish to point out, however, that our account differs from Sen's in two important respects. First, as we discuss below, we diverge from Sen concerning what types of capabilities ought to be included in a list of capabilities the lack of which constitutes poverty. More significantly, our justification for the capabilities-based definition of poverty is markedly different from Sen's. While Sen emphasizes the need for a definition that most accurately represents what he takes the concept of poverty to refer to, we are concerned that a definition of poverty take into account various institutional and individual factors that make women and members of other marginalized groups more vulnerable to poverty than otherwise similarly socially situated individuals.

15. In this respect, among others, our account differs from Martha Nussbaum's (2000) work on capabilities. Nussbaum's work defends capabilities as part of a complete theory of the good, and perhaps of a complete theory of justice, while we merely wish to invoke capabilities in order to define poverty. Our account also diverges from Nussbaum's both in terms of the items we wish to include in the list of relevant capabilities (predictably, given our divergent goals), and in terms of our methodological or justificatory process for defending capabilities.

16. Thanks to Uwe Steinhoff for this example.

17. It may appear that the case of the kidnapped billionaire is a counterexample in favor of income-based definitions of poverty, since what is counterintuitive about claiming the kidnapped billionaire is poor is that she has a very high income (as opposed to what we have claimed—that what is counterintuitive about saying the kidnapped billionaire is poor is that the cause of her material deprivation is not appropriately relevant to the concept of poverty). As such, one might claim, income-based definitions of poverty are best because they would not incorrectly characterize the kidnapped billionaire as poor. However, we believe that any meaningful definition of poverty in terms of lack of income would, to the contrary, find the kidnapped billionaire to be poor. This is because a person's income is important only to the extent that she can actually make use of it. For this reason, we argue, this counterexample might be more appropriately described as the case of the kidnapped former billionaire; that is, she is no longer a billionaire if she cannot make use of her billions. If a definition of poverty in terms of lack of income requires, as we believe it must to be meaningful, that a person be able to make use of her income (rather than merely requiring that she have a certain amount of money in her bank account), then the kidnapped billionaire will also count as poor on an income-based definition of poverty. As such, the counterexample does not work to the advantage of income-based definitions of poverty. In addition, we believe this consideration supports our claim that the intuitive force behind the counterexample concerns the cause of the kidnapped billionaire's material deprivation, not her high income.

18. Thanks to Thomas Pogge for this example.

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