Poverty, Exclusion and Agency

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With Simmel's essay about the poor as a point of departure this paper develops three points about the sociological conceptualisation of poverty and social exclusion: (1) Much research on poverty is exceedingly dominated by distributional perspectives on poverty, while there is too little research adopting relational perspectives. (2) On account of the stigmatisation, isolation and powerlessness that poor people often experience, societal reactions, e.g. relief or assistance aimed at them, may be vital in establishing poor people as a distinct social category. (3) Poor people are often seen as socially marginalised in the sense that they are unequivocally excluded from society. On closer examination, however, poor people occupy an ambiguous position; they are in some respects 'outside' society, in other respects 'inside' society.

1. Introduction

In the essay 'Der Arme' Georg Simmel (1858-1918) outlined a sociological perspective on social exclusion and inclusion. This perspective is still topical, and it can be argued that in some respects Simmel's analysis is superior to later treatments of such processes. Simmel's essay is concerned with what Galbraith (1980) has termed 'case poverty', that is, the poverty which afflicts the minority of a predominantly affluent population. The contrast to this is 'mass poverty', i.e. situations where most people are poor. The essay was written around the turn of the century, and is, as we might expect, coloured by the social situation of that age and by the fact that sociology was still a young discipline. Yet it is possible to generalise some of the key points made in the essay. Briefly, these points are related to the conceptualisation of poverty and the social position of poor people. Taking the lead from Simmel we may argue (i) that more research based on relational perspectives of poverty is called for, (ii) that the relief provided to poor people is important in constituting the most disadvantaged segment of society as a distinct social category, and finally, (iii) that poor people tend to occupy an ambiguous position, rather than being completely excluded from society. The common underlying idea here is that poverty may be interpreted as a social relationship, and not only as a lack or deficiency of means.


2. Simmel's line of reasoning

One of the key ideas in Simmel's essay is that while poverty relief appears to stem from a concern for the welfare of poor people, historically this has not been the most significant motive for such assistance. A more important factor has been the interests of the non-poor, especially of those in favourable financial circumstances, in preventing that the poor become active and dangerous enemies of society. In addition, assistance to the poor might be provided from a wish to secure a pool of cheap causal labour, for instance during the spring and autumn seasons of farming. This implies a rather detached means-ends perspective on the poor relief: apparently it is directed towards individuals and the amelioration of want and distress, but actually it is oriented towards the preservation and enhancement of society as such (Gemeinwesen).

If we accept the thesis that the major objective of the assistance to the poor de facto has been to protect society as 'totality' or at least the interests of the dominant groups in society, we may
according to Simmel also understand better the ways in which schemes for poor relief tend to be worked out: they have not been designed to create equality or an equalisation of the living conditions of the poor and the better off. Rather it has sought to modify the most extreme expressions of the social differentiation, and hence the social structure could continue to be based on this differentiation. Since the goal has only been to maintain status quo, the assistance provided is not made more generous than deemed necessary to achieve this objective. For the same reason there has usually been a perplexing relationship between rights and duties in modern poor relief. Often the State has taken on the duty to provide assistance to the poor, without this leading to a corresponding and unquestionable right to assistance on the part of the poor. The party with clear and undeniable rights has been the tax-paying citizens; they have been able to demand that public resources have been spent in such a way that it has furthered the societal goals of the poverty relief. This suggests that poor people have tended to become ejected or excluded from the ordinary society; that they have only figured as objects for the measures of the society around them.

In the next instance, however, Simmel modifies the claim that the poor become excluded from society and that they are just objects for the poverty relief: First, as members of society the poor have to a greater or smaller extent been able to enjoy the rights associated with citizenship in general. In this sense the poor have been inside society, although in a particular way. Simmel compares the poor with the 'stranger' as a distinctive social type or position (Simmel 1908/1950): both find themselves in a certain sense 'outside' the social milieu or group. But at the same time a larger totality, incorporating both, emerges. According to Simmel this larger totality come to be the most significant social circle or unit. Although the poor seen from one angle are 'outside' the social collectivity, as objects of poor relief and other measures of control, this only implies a particular form of interaction or reciprocation (Wechselwirkung) between the two. This relationship has tied the two parties together in a more extensive unit where also the poor have been 'inside'.

Second, Simmel briefly indicates what the 'contribution' of the poor in this reciprocation may be. The poor can let their capacity to work be preserved or restored, be willing to enter or return to productive activity, or resist impulses to resort to violence in order to secure means of subsistence. But in the same way as the poverty relief has not been aimed at specific individuals, the reciprocation in question does not have the characteristics of individual transactions, i.e. of exchanges between poor and other, better-off individuals. The reciprocation is a more collective one, between the poor as a particular category of people and the rest of the community.

Hence Simmel argues that the poor occupy an ambiguous position in relation to the rest of society. He claims that this is the case even if the poor are placed in distance to the community that seeks to assist and control them, live on the mercy of others, and from time to time are seen as the bitter enemies or outcasts of society. One expression of this distance is the fact that poor people in receipt of assistance historically have been deprived of political rights associated with full membership of society. Yet, according to Simmel, the result is still not an absolute separation, i.e. complete expulsion, on the part of the poor, but only a peculiar relationship to the totality. Within this totality the poor figure both as subjects and objects.

But Simmel then emphasises that this line of reasoning does not apply to poor people in general, but only to those who are the targets of specific measures on the part of others, e.g. relief. He elaborates this by referring to the relative character of poverty: in many different social milieus or strata we may find people who are 'poor' in the sense that they have 'too little' to fulfil their wishes and needs or acquire the goods or services perceived as 'necessary' in their milieu or stratum. But although people in very diverse circumstances may in this sense experience 'wants' which are not supplied, this does not mean that they are seen as requiring assistance from others, e.g. public relief. In many kinds of social groups there is a transfer of resources from the more wealthy or well-to-do to those in less favourable circumstances, often disguised in the form of 'gifts'. He takes up themes which he in another context discusses under the heading 'gratitude' (Simmel 1908/1950). He claims that with the gift as a point of departure it is possible to gain insight into a wide range of reciprocal relationships.
According to Simmel we may distinguish between situations where the final consequences of the gift for the recipient are most important, and situations where the gift seen as an expression of the intention of the giver is most significant. In the latter case the process of giving is the real intention of the gift. Poverty or wealth does not play any important role, apart from practical considerations about what the giver feels he or she can afford to give. But when one gives a present to person defined as 'poor', the process is not in focus but what the person requires or needs.

Between these two extremes there may many mixed forms. There may for instance be situations where the recipient actually has a need for useful gifts (e.g. food), but where social norms indicate that only gifts of symbolic nature (e.g. flowers) can be presented. This may be the situation of *les pauvres honteux*; they may not receive useful help to any great extent without appearing as obviously 'declassed'. Simmel claims that it is almost always possible to present substantial gifts when there is either great social distance or particularly great intimacy between the parties. But it becomes more difficult to present such gifts when the social distance decreases or the degree of personal intimacy diminishes. These difficulties may be related to strong concepts of honour; it is experienced as too embarrassing, even threatening, not being able to present gifts in return (cf. 'debt of gratitude'). This is one of mechanisms behind forms of poverty that emerges as *socially invisible*, or in other words, states of individual want which do not result in any apparent social response. On this background Simmel puts forward one of the major theses of the essay:

*Sociologically speaking nobody is poor unless they receive assistance from others or ought to have done so, given the sociological context they are in. In this sense it is not 'poverty' that comes first and then the assistance next. If assistance is not provided, we are faced with personal fate, not poverty.*

In other words, seen as a *sociological category* the poor are not those who have certain needs which are not met. Rather it is people who receive assistance or who ought to have done so according to existing social norms, although they by chance do not. According to this perspective it is insufficient to regard poverty as synonymous with experiencing particular wants or renunciations. Only by looking at the social reactions that this individual state calls forth in others we will achieve a sound grasp of poverty as a sociological phenomenon. The membership function that the poor perform in society does not result from their lack of means *per se*. It is when society - the totality or individuals - react to this lack of means, for instance by providing assistance or exercising other measures of control, that the poor play their particular societal role.

Finally in the essay Simmel raises the question why the poor rarely come to make up acting collectivities despite the apparent similarity between their individual situations. In his answer he recapitulates the argument that the poor are primarily constituted as a sociological category by being assisted by others, rather than through ordinary reciprocation (*Wechelwirkung*) with others. It is as objects for the reactions or measures of others rather than as autonomous subjects that poor people may enter a clearly defined social circle. Simmel also outlines some specific factors which may prevent or hamper the formation of collectivities of or among poor. First, significant differences in background, culture or life style may make a reciprocal identification among poor people difficult. Second, the better off and dominating section of society will from a blend of good and bad motives not tolerate poor people as a visible element in public life. In modern society poor people may even to an increasing extent have felt the need to conceal themselves from the representatives of public authorities, e.g. the police or welfare agencies. According to Simmel this creates a tragic but paradoxical situation: poor people have a similar individual fate, but they only come to play their particular social role to the extent that others - individuals, associations, public authorities - react to their situation by means of measures of ameliorative assistance or control.

### 3. Three challenges raised by Simmel's essay

Simmel's essay raises three related challenges for current research on poverty. The first is one that he only deals with implicitly; the contrast between distributional and relational perspectives on poverty,
and the lack of systematic research and theory development based on the latter. The second is the question of what makes poor people appear as a distinct sociological category, and more specifically, under what circumstances they emerge as social collectivities. The third is the question of whether it is reasonable to regard poor people as unequivocally excluded from society. The field of poverty research might clarify its relevance for sociology in general if it to a greater extent addressed these three issues. In the rest of the paper I will argue in greater detail for this proposition. As already suggested I am primarily concerned with contrasting images of the social position of poor people. I will only indirectly touch upon issues related to the origins of poverty or possible remedies against poverty, such as comprehensive and adequate social insurance schemes integrated with active labour market and anti-discrimination measures.

4. Distributional vs relational perspectives on poverty

By 'distributional perspectives' I refer to approaches to poverty which are primarily concerned with the position of poor people within quantifiable distributions, that is, mainly distributions of income, other material benefits and property. Key questions within these approaches are where to set the boundaries between the poor and the non-poor, and how large, in absolute or relative terms, the poor section of the population will be if one adopts these boundaries. The major difficulty of these approaches tend to be a lack of agreement or clarity on which criteria to use when deciding where to set the boundaries, what relative weight to give different criteria, etc.

By contrast, 'relational perspectives' refer to approaches to poverty which focus on the social relationships between poor people and between poor people and the rest of society. These relationships are obviously of a varying nature. They include the whole range from mutual observability between actors, via face to face interaction or direct exchange of resources, to more indirect relations; links or transfers mediated by others, e.g. through personal networks, public agencies or the mass media. Similarly, the quality of these relationships are also likely to differ substantially; they may be characterised by familiarity or distance; unilaterality or reciprocity, sympathy, identification and trust, engagement or indifference, avoidance, resentment or suspicion. Responsitivity (Asplund 1987) in different forms and degrees is the key issue; that is, the ways in which different actors (and categories of actors) respond to each other, and how the practical acts of others or the anticipation of such acts serve as premises for counter-action. The major problem with relational perspectives is the lack of agreement on how to conceptualise the motivational processes, 'mechanisms', behind this responsitivity (cf. the norm-directed actor vs the rational actor, or empathy and solidarity vs self-interest) and how these are combined or balanced in everyday life.

One of the clearest examples of a relational approach can be found outside the mainstream of empirical poverty research. I have in mind De Swaan's broad historical-sociological study of the emergence of poverty relief in the Western world (De Swaan 1990). By combining Norbert Elias' theory about the collectivisation process with rational choice theory De Swaan analyses how a collective action problem was handled and in some instances transcended. The problem was how members of the dominating elites were to react to the 'crisis of order' represented by many poor people, 'idle and undisciplined', especially able-bodied vagrants. Thus De Swaan's work clearly converges on Simmel's suggestion that the objective of protecting the social totality (read: 'society') was more important than to ameliorate want.

On a more theoretical level Suttles and Street (1970) discuss how modern means-tested public assistance to poor people may contribute to the weakening of informal networks of transactions and help, both between poor people and between poor people and the rest of society. The ways in which poverty relief may contradict important relational norms, e.g. about autonomy, self-help and reciprocity, have been clarified by Coser (1965), Matza (1971) and Pinker (1971). Scott (1993) has outlined the ways in which poverty and privilege are complementary social processes, and how each of them can only be understood in relation to the other and the social construction of 'citizenship'. Unfortunately the propositions developed in these mainly theoretical contributions have only to a limited extend been explored systematically in empirical studies.
It is worth emphasising that a variety of approaches to poverty is called for, and that no approach is inherently 'better' than others. Which approach that is most valid or appropriate depends on the aim or intention of the particular study. At the same time it must be fair to say that recent research on poverty has been dominated by distributional perspectives. One possible reason for this is that political regimes calling themselves 'welfare states' claim that poverty has been more or less eradicated, or at least, that it only remains as a marginal and almost negligible problem, as 'small pockets' or 'laggards' in a general trend. On the other hand, social scientists and commentators may question these claims and argue that poverty, at least of a relative nature, still exists as a significant problem and that it even may be increasing. In order to substantiate this, they present statistical material about the distribution of income, living standards, the consumption of different goods and services, etc. These data are likely to be seized upon avidly and employed as political ammunition by the current opposition or interest groups. This will in itself make results of research based on distributional approaches contentious.

Moreover, the word 'poverty' does not only have a literal meaning, a denotation, but also strong emotional and symbolic overtones, 'connotations'. This can be seen most clearly in countries like the Scandinavian which have officially been defined as egalitarian and solidaristic. In the official political discourse to adopt the word 'poverty' have almost been a taboo, as the mere use of the word to describe existing social conditions imply that consensual efforts over a long period have been a failure. Given these strong connotative elements it makes a major difference whether one says that many people have low incomes and that the distribution of benefits is still unequitable, or one maintains that a substantial minority still lives in poverty. The larger this minority is claimed to be, the stronger interest representatives of the dominating elite will have in denying the validity of the claim. Altogether this makes it understandable that contrasting definitions of poverty, differing ways of operationalise them and problems of measurement (reliability) draw a lot of public attention.

Yet I would like to argue that poverty researchers all in all spend too much energy and time on work based on purely distributional perspectives. First, one may be doubtful whether it is possible to settle the issues of definition, operationalisation and measurement of poverty. Furthermore, the political relevance of a better understanding of the relational aspects of poverty may potentially be greater than more exact estimates of the proportion of poor people in the general population. Against this it may be objected that we in any case need precise definitions of whom the poor are, before we can study their relationships to others or the rest of society. I am not convinced that this objection is necessarily valid. Again it may depend on the aim or objective of the concrete study how important it is to establish precisely where the boundaries between the poor and the non-poor ought to be set. In practice, relational perspectives will often be pursued by means of case study designs, focused on a particular category of poor people (e.g. homeless people, cf. Snow and Anderson 1993) or on a specific locality (e.g. a urban slum or a rural community, cf. Aubert 1970, Wadel 1973). In these cases a precise and universal definition of poverty is of limited practical value.

Some may argue that it will be impossible to undertake comparative research of poverty unless one adopts a standardised specification of the boundaries between the poor and the non-poor, based on a distributional approach. For some research objectives this is obviously true, e.g. if one wants to compare how effective different national governments are in fighting or abating poverty through public transfers like social security schemes (Smeeding 1985, Smeeding et al. eds. 1990, Ringen 1987). But if one is interested in a cross-national comparison of how the relationships between specific categories of poor people, e.g. ethnic minorities, and the rest of society develops over time, for instance in terms of resentment, mistrust or suppression from the majority, exact boundaries defined by the researcher may be of more limited use. In these instance the changing social definitions of the boundaries between 'them' and 'us' may be more significant. To the extent that the actors themselves operate on the basis of fleeting, flexible or fluctuating boundaries between the poor and the non-poor (e.g. Suttles and Street 1970, Wadel 1973), it is not obvious that the researcher will gain much by seeking to lay down more clear and consistent boundaries.

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At the same time comparative research on poverty may clearly do more to identify cross-national similarities and differences in the ways in which specified categories of poor people and the rest of society, especially the dominating elites or coalitions, relate to each other, and to understand the processes or mechanisms behind these patterns. In the final section of the paper I will briefly return to specific issues for comparative research based on this kind of relational perspective.

So far I may have left the impression that distributional and relational approaches to poverty research are incompatible. That this needs not be the case is generally indicated by the early article by Coleman (1959) on the study of relational aspects by means of survey design techniques, for instance snowball sampling and network analysis. Similarly, the more recent work of Granovetter (1973, 1982) on 'strength of weak ties' and the considerable amount of research it has inspired illustrate the general potential of combining distributional and relational approaches within poverty research, especially by means of network methodology.

The recent work of Townsend (1979, 1993) represents one of the most ambitious attempts to integrate distributional and relational approaches to poverty research. Broadly speaking, he has argued that if people fall below a certain level of material living standards this will severely inhibit their capacity for filling ordinary social roles. Partly as a result of withdrawal on the part of the poor person (caused by feelings of inferiority and lack of self-respect), partly as a result of the exclusionary actions of others, people below this level tend to be shut off from regular life styles, established customs and usual social activities, according to Townsend. But the methodological design he adopted in a large survey was not suited to substantiate this reasoning. The units of research were individuals and their households, not networks of relations between individuals or between households. He developed a index of relative deprivation based on ten variables, but only two of these dealt directly with interaction with people outside the respondent's own household. Unfortunately his interview schedule included too few open and retrospective questions to provide systematic information about relational processes. He does, however, present an appalling casuistic material about poor people and their social relations. But the most striking aspect of these illustrative cases is that the respondent's own bad health or care responsibilities for other family members with bad health appeared to prevent the respondent's social interaction or participation outside home. Townsend demonstrates in other contexts that there is a strong correlation between low income and bad health. Yet according to his theoretical reasoning insufficient means to live up to culturally sanctioned roles per se, and not the health-related correlates of poverty, should result in social exclusion and withdrawal. Although it contains an abundance of descriptive material about both distributional and relational aspects of poverty, Townsend's study does not demonstrate convincingly how distributional and relational perspectives can be integrated in practice.

To conclude, recent poverty research has been exceedingly dominated by distributional approaches, while relational perspectives have played a more marginal role. On the other hand there does exist a body of both theoretical and empirical work adopting relational perspectives on poverty. The empirical studies have in most instances taken the form of case and qualitative designs, focused on particular categories and/or localities of poor people. The analytical models appears often to have been inspired by 'symbolic interactionism', cf. the weight attributed to processes, emergent patterns of interaction and interpretation, stigmatisation and avoidance of interaction, and 'social exchange theory', cf. the emphasis on reciprocity vs unilaterality in interaction and transactions. Interpretations of Simmel's work have obviously served as a source of inspiration, at least indirectly, e.g. mediated by American sociologists. Arguably some of these interpretations present Simmel's ideas as simpler and more unequivocal than the original.

More systematic research adopting relational perspectives on poverty is called for. I have indicated how this research can also be comparative and cross-national, by focusing on similarities and differences in the underlying patterns of relationships between categories of poor people and the rest of society.
5. The emergence of poor people as a distinct social category

As will be recalled, Simmel maintains that sociologically speaking only people who receive assistance or ought to do so according to existing social norms, are poor. If we reformulate Simmel's point in more general terms, it might be that only those who are the targets of reactions from others, e.g. measures of relief, help or control, are poor in a sociological sense. How are we to interpret this statement, and how reasonable and relevant does it appear today?

The most obvious interpretation is that Simmel expresses an opinion on which conditions have to be fulfilled if people with little to live on are to emerge as a distinct social category. This refers to the situation where individuals with low incomes or insufficient means are to see themselves and are perceived by others as belonging to a particular category or group in society, 'the poor'. To the extent that they themselves experience this kind of common identity, and by others are attributed one, one could imagine it created the basis for joint action to promote their interests. But Simmel briefly indicates several factors which may impede this kind of mutual identification and spontaneous group formation, leading to collective action from poor people.

First, people with scarce material resources and other benefits have their background in diverse social circles, segments, milieux or strata. We might add that they can be divided along lines of gender, age, race, ethnicity, nationality, labour market status, or territorial locality. They may feel social attachments, loyalties, ideals of self-help, autonomy and honour which overshadow similarities in financial circumstances. This may create subjective barriers to mutual identification. Second, although people with low incomes and other benefits sometimes live in close proximity to each other, e.g. in slums and ghettos, this is not necessarily so. As argued by Aubert (1968: 15) disadvantaged people may live scattered within geographical areas or sections of the population which show few outward signs of material deprivation or want. This has indeed often been the case in Scandinavia. Under these unfavourable conditions for contact and interaction it may be hard to realise that many are 'in the same boat' as oneself. As we have seen Simmel mentions an additional factor behind the paucity of contact between people with little income: official society finds poor people assembling in public places so provoking or threatening that it seeks to prevent this by force. Such reactions do not just belong to the past; only a few months ago we could read about a prime minister in a Western country who called for stricter measures against what he felt to be 'offensive beggars'. All in all such factors may prevent group formation among deprived people.

On the basis of these points Simmel argues that it is only in a negative sense that people with low incomes or insufficient means emerge as a distinct social category; as objects for the measures of others, help or control. Thus the status of being potential or actual targets of such measures is decisive in the social definition of 'the poor'.

One possible objection against Simmel's thesis is that he considers the status of being recipient of public assistance and being poor as equal, and that he consequently neglects or disregards the existence of hidden poverty, created for instance by lack of take-up or arbitrary qualifying conditions within the public transfer system. First Simmel makes clear that assistance to people in need may have diverse providers, not only public authorities; 'Individuen, Vereinigungen, Ganzheiten' (Simmel 1908:493). Second he does make allowance for a certain lack of take-up or underconsumption of assistance. He does not rule out that some people may have obtained help on the basis of existing norms or rules, but refrain from applying for or accepting such assistance, for instance because this would offend their sense of honour or self-respect. Such perceptions have indeed been demonstrated in empirical studies of take-up and the claiming process (e.g. Townsend 1979, Davies and Ritchie 1988).

Another possible objection against Simmel's thesis could be that there are several examples of group formation and even quite forceful collective action among people with low incomes. Both in the United States and Britain this kind of social mobilisation, 'poor people's movements', has been extensive and effective over considerable periods. These movements have put forward common
demands, they have arranged large demonstrations, have organised various forms of self-help services and have acted as pressure groups vis-à-vis public authorities (Piven and Cloward 1972 & 1977, McCarthy 1986, Whitely and Winyard 1987, Croucher 1987). But for three reasons this is not a weighty objection:

First, the empirical examples of the examples of mobilisation and collective action are not particularly numerous, if we take into account the prevalence of material deprivation and substantial differences in living standards, even in the rich Western countries. Many attempts to organise people with low incomes have failed from the start, or it has proved difficult to keep the activity on a high level after a promising start, for instance because the population with low incomes may be relatively transient although the number of people with low incomes at any time is fairly stable or even increasing.

Second, this kind of mobilisation appears often to have been based on other sources of group identification or collective consciousness than being 'poor'. Although their members have low incomes in common, it is not as such, but for instance as young and unemployed, people with disabilities or long-term sickness, prisoners or ex-prisoners, lone mothers and/or as belonging to certain ethnic or racial minorities that these groups or organisations have tended to conceive and define themselves.

Third, one of the main objectives of these groups or organisations has been to demand improved help and support, often in the form of clearly defined entitlements or measures against discrimination, from the government. Sometimes this direction of the groups or organisations is even expressed in their names; 'claimants' unions' or 'welfare rights groups'. Thus it is largely as potential or actual objects of the assistance or support of the rest of society that the activists of these groups and organisations have acted as subjects on the public arena. Admittedly this description of the groups and organisations is not completely fair. They have also formulated visions and demands which have pointed beyond the existing social conditions and the members' situation as dependent on the assistance of others. Yet the short-term demands and policies of these groups and organisations have often overshadowed their more long-term and transcending visions.

To conclude, a strong case can be made for Simmel's thesis. It may still contribute to our understanding of the social position of poor people. At the same time it is a challenge for today's sociologists to highlight the extent to which and under what circumstances people with low incomes emerge as a distinct social category, or whether the status of being 'poor' is so stigmatised that they avoid defining themselves in this way. To what extent has 'poor' become a label only used by social scientists and commentators about others?

6. The ambiguous exclusion of poor people from society

As will be recalled Simmel emphasises strongly that poor people had an ambiguous position in relation to the rest of society: as objects for the measures of others, assistance or control, poor people will in a certain sense be standing 'outside' society. To a varying extent they end up as controlled, occasionally denied all the rights and duties of full citizenship, powerless and marginalised. But Simmel states that this only amounts to a particular way of being 'inside'. He elaborates this statement in different ways: many poor people operate within society, more or less on similar footing as others; they fill at least some of same roles as workers, consumers, pupils, parents, neighbours or members of church congregations. After all they often enjoy many aspects of citizenship. Poor people, especially the young, robust but unemployed, are involved in certain types of reciprocation or perform 'returns' for the assistance they receive from the rest of society. Finally Simmel suggests that the relationships between poor people and the social 'whole' (totality) may be seen from two different angles. First and most obviously, we may focus on the relations between the poor and the rest of society. As long as 'the rest of society' is regarded as the relevant totality, the poor per definition fall 'outside'. Second, one can emphasise that the poor, the rest of society and the relationships (reciprocation) between
them altogether make up a totality of higher order, where the poor consequently are 'inside'.

Some may feel that this ends up in a indeterminate relativisation, and want a more conclusive answer: Are poor people excluded from society, or are they not? I would like to argue that it is neither necessary nor desirable to attempt to answer such questions by 'yes' or 'no'. In the growing literature on poverty - or more generally, on vulnerable, marginal or 'deviant' segments of the population - many authors tend to postulate that various categories of people with low incomes are unequivocally excluded or shut out from ordinary forms of participation in society. In recent policy documents of the European Union 'severe poverty' is made more or less synonymous with 'social exclusion' (European Communities 1989, 1993). A similar understanding is evident in the current debate about the (re)emergence of an 'underclass' in Western countries (e.g. Giddens 1973, Murray 1984, Dahrendorf 1985, 1988, Field 1989, Heisler 1991, Silver 1993, Morris 1993, 1994). But social reality as we meet it in systematic empirical research offers too many contradictory tendencies and possibilities of interpretations to make this image completely convincing (see for example Dean and Taylor-Gooby 1992). In most instances it appears advisable to start from a working hypothesis that members of vulnerable or marginal social categories in some respects are the victims of exclusion; be it of a social, cultural or structural nature, while they in other respects are not, and then examine thoroughly whether we find support for this assumption or have to reject it. This approach implies that complete exclusion and complete integration would only be the extreme points of a wide range of possible configurations, rather than two exhaustive alternatives.

Simmel's openness to the ambiguous and paradoxical character of social phenomena, for instance the social position of poor people, is all in all a strength, contrary to what has sometimes been maintained (Frisby 1981: 73-75). Moreover, it is worth noting that from several different angles it is recently argued that ambiguous aspects of empirical phenomena have been neglected, overlooked or undercommunicated in sociological analysis. For instance, Levine (1985) argues that dominating schools of sociological theory and methodology have for a long time suffered from 'trained incapacity' when it comes to discover and describe ambiguity as an empirical phenomenon, insufficient attention to the ambiguities of the most used terms in the discipline, and when these ambiguities are realised, weak ability to pursue them for constructive purposes in theory development. Related views can be found in Bourdieus's (1990) attempt to capture the ambiguities of practical logic, symbols and rituals, and in Bauman's (1991) far-reaching critique of modern civilisation where modernism's promise about unequivocal meanings is superseded by postmodernism's openness to ambiguity.

However, already in the early 1960s Merton and Barber (1963) started to develop a concept of sociological ambivalence, partly as a reaction to the 'either/or' nature of Parsons' (1951) pattern variables; e.g. in the form of 'detached concern' to capture the professional's relation to his or her clients. Merton and his co-workers have later elaborated the concept of sociological ambivalence in various contexts (Merton 1976, Merton et al. 1983). Similarly, Warness (1984) maintains that rationality of caring at the same time incorporates elements of a 'means-ends' rationality and emotionality and that it in this context is untenable to treat instrumental and expressive rationalities as exhaustive opposites. Similarly, social responsitivity (Asplund 1987) may be conceptualised as expressing both self-protection and compassion in relation to others in less fortunate circumstances than oneself. March and Olsen have together with co-workers highlighted ambiguous aspects of goals and practice within organisational contexts (Cohen and March 1974, March and Olsen 1976), and their propositions may be generalised to social action by and large. In a meta-critique of Merton's (1968) concept of 'latent function' Østerberg (1988) introduces the term amphibious to conceptualise action and interaction that may be effective in producing a certain outcome, e.g. social integration, while the actors in question are apparently pursuing another and usually less consequential outcome, e.g. observance of social rituals. Thus a number of authors have recently emphasised ambiguous or equivocal aspects of social action and interaction.

In spite of these converging tendencies sociology obviously needs to develop its ability to handle
ambiguities, both in its own terminology and in its analysis of empirical phenomena, e.g. poverty and the social position of poor people. Admittedly Simmel's work appears often to be analytically disconnected, scattered and weakly supported by systematic empirical research. Yet it may provide an important source of inspiration in the further development of the discipline, and not the least, serve as a model in the treatment of the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of social phenomena.

7. Concluding remarks
So far distributional approaches have dominated the comparative research on poverty. Hence an important task for future research is to identify cross-national similarities and differences in the ways in which specified categories of poor people and the rest of society, especially the dominating elites or coalitions, relate to each other, and come to grips with the processes or mechanisms behind these patterns. This kind of comparative research ought to be concerned with the extent and nature of social exclusion and inclusion of poor people. One possibility may be to focus on one or several of the following categories: the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, permanently discouraged people of working age, people with disabilities or long-term sickness, alcohol and drug abusers, the homeless, ex-prisoners, the elderly, lone parent families, immigrants, refugees, ethnic or racial minorities. Relevant issues to examine on the basis of a relational perspective could be the following:

- To what extent does the category of poor people in question appear to be segregated from the rest of the population, in terms of physical and social distance?

- To what extent are members of the category in question the rights and duties associated with full citizenship (Marshall 1992), or granted these later than the population at large?

- To what extent are members of this category the targets of special measures of assistance or covered by general ('universalistic') schemes for income support, and to what extent are these tied to practical efforts to promote gainful employment?

- To what extent are there indications that members of this category are discriminated against within secondary distributional systems, as the labour and housing markets or the educational system?

- To what extent are members of the category the victims of special surveillance, extraordinary policing, violence and other forms of 'naked suppression'?

- To what extent are clear prejudices against members of the category in question prevalent in the general population, or are the attitudes of the latter rather more diffuse and unsettled, characterised by lack of attention and concern or 'repressive tolerance'?

- What kind of adjustments, coping strategies or 'techniques of resistance', such as active individual or collective dissent, non-cooperation, avoidance of contact, or concealment
(Bloor and Mcintosh 1990) can be observed on the part of members of the category in question?

Ideally research on these issues should be historical and include many countries, along the lines of De Swaan's (1990) work, but even studies with a shorter time horizon and fewer countries will be valuable.

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