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# Autonomy and Poverty – An Empirical Study of Long-Term Recipients of Social Assistance

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenologically and hermeneutically oriented interview study is to explore the subjectivity and life-worlds of the poor. It focuses on experiences of inhibition or loss of autonomy among people living in relative poverty in an affluent welfare state<sup>1</sup>. Different psychological perspectives and theories, especially those related to social psychology, needs and emotions, aid the interpretation of the findings, which are discussed in relation to contextual factors and methodological issues.

Conventional poverty studies have tended to be dominated by economists, sociologists and other social scientists who have sought in the main to define, operationalize and measure poverty and conduct comparative macro-level studies (Øyen, Miller & Samad, 1996). Themes related to psychology are barely raised in this research tradition, and in psychological research poverty is conspicuous by its absence (Lewis, Webley & Furnham, 1995). This is surprising given that poverty is the world's most endemic and oldest social problem. Psychologists should have much to contribute to poverty studies.

In this article I attempt to bring poverty as a social problem into the realm of psychology as a science. Poverty is understood and investigated with the aid of psychological perspectives as a *human* problem. The goal is to help found a new research area, the *psychology of poverty*. It is a bold ambition, especially for a chapter in a book. We need therefore to narrow the field with regard to type of poverty, psychological issues and theoretical perspectives we are going to be dealing with.

The *type of poverty* we investigate here is the variant that occurs in contemporary Norway (and Scandinavia). Norway is one of the world's richest countries and boasts a relatively well-developed welfare system. It has during many years been singled out across a range of social welfare indicators as the best place in the world to live in (UN, 2010). Norwegian poverty differs from absolute and total poverty which was common throughout history and

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<sup>1</sup> This is a part-study; social devaluation, insecurity and self-image and self-esteem are described under the same umbrella, "psychology of poverty", in separate articles (Underlid, 2004; 2005; 2007). Therefore, some of the text which focus on general aspects, e.g. method, may have similarities with these previous publications. However, this is an original contribution about poverty and autonomy.

in developing countries today (UN, 1995), and also from the destitution we find in ghetto-like districts in affluent developed countries like the US.

It is this form of poverty, as it is experienced day by day by the poor, that is the intentional object of the respondents of this study – the object of their experience – and the object of this study. I bracket, however, the objective factors to concentrate instead on the experiences of poverty of the respondents. I want to discover the subjective meaning of *relative poverty of affluent welfare states* as experienced by the poor themselves. The general properties of this type of poverty have been identified as relative deprivation, social exclusion and the 'tyranny of scarcity' (Stjernø, 1985; Townsend, 1979).

The second point concerns the psychological issue. As mentioned above, I restrict the 'psychology of poverty' to the *experience* of poverty, with a more specific focus here on experiences of inhibition or loss of autonomy.

The third point relates to theoretical perspectives. Although psychology is a young science, it has a wide range of sub-disciplines and theoretical approaches. The 'psychology of poverty', as defined here, takes social psychology and perspectives on needs and emotions as its starting point. Social psychology is that area of psychology that attempts to understand and study individuals in its interpersonal, social, societal and cultural contexts.

From the point of view of the individual, poverty is also about *needs*, generally unsatisfied needs. But not so much biological needs. The relative poverty of affluent welfare states causes psychological and social distress (which is materially conditioned and constituted). It is therefore pertinent to focus on *psychological* needs in the study of the consequences of this type of poverty. Psychological needs are loosely and tentatively conceived as categories of deep-seated, general, continuous and widespread urges, desires or wants that may be more or less conscious/ unconscious. If they are not satisfied, psychological, social or somatic harm may result, in the short and/or longer term. Satisfying psychological needs will therefore also be in the interests ('objective needs') of the subject. Psychological needs of this nature differ from likes, preferences and (short lived/superficial) wants in the sense in which these terms are generally used and understood. All needs contain a cultural, situational and personal element, which dispose towards certain types of behaviour.

Numerous theories of needs have been developed over the years covering varying numbers of basic (generally understood as universal) psychological needs (Franken, 1994). In a psychological study of 'modern poverty' a natural question would be to ask about the needs most involved. There are several candidates. During the interview sessions with the long-term recipients of social assistance, some important details came to light. Many of the respondents reported feeling 'locked in', 'paralysed', 'constrained', 'incapacitated', 'powerless', 'at the mercy of' an impersonal and intractable bureaucracy, etc. These findings instigated a search for relevant need-related categories and terms to serve as allies in the attempt to achieve theoretical grasp of the situation. They were not found in Maslow's (1970/1954) famous theory of human needs. One of the 27 psychological needs Murray (1938) enumerates in his classic work on motivation theory corresponds in part to the findings: *autonomy*, and particularly interpersonal autonomy factors associated with power, influence, dominance, independence and self-determination. Murray defines autonomy as follows: 'To resist influence or coercion. To defy an authority or seek freedom in a new place. To strive for independence' (p. 82). Deci (1980) and Deci and Ryan's (1991) theory of self-determination captures other germane aspects of self-expression and self-development more generally. *Self-determination* is defined as

follows: 'Behaviors that either are intrinsically motivated or stem from well-integrated personal values and regulatory processes...' (Deci & Ryan, 1991, p. 238).

Although notions of autonomy and self-determination are not particularly visible in the literature, it is possible nonetheless to trace Murray and Deci's ideas in a number of psychological theories that utilise related concepts. Haworth (1986) listed more than a dozen such theories. The concept of autonomy has additionally been applied in political philosophy (Raz, 1986), the philosophy of law and moral philosophy (Dworkin, 1988; Haworth, 1986) and the social sciences (Doyal & Gough, 1991).

Doyal and Gough maintain that the overriding universal objective, from a socio-political need and welfare standpoint, would have to be the avoidance of severe harm in the form of disabled social participation. They refer in this connection to Townsend's (1979) definition of poverty as relative and objective deprivation.

According to Doyal and Gough, two basic conditions must be met for a person to participate in social settings. The one is survival and a modicum of physical health. The second is that the person must not be impeded by other causes, i.e., internal or external barriers (autonomy). Doyal and Gough believe, therefore, that survival/physical health and autonomy constitute the only basic (universal) human needs. Doyal and Gough define autonomy as the ability to make informed choices about prospective actions and how to execute them. This presupposes an ability to set goals and devise strategies to achieve them, and to evaluate the realism of both in the light of the evidence.

Although Doyal & Gough's theoretical frame of reference and research goals do not necessarily align with those employed in this study, their points of view are worth mentioning - without going into the details in their rather comprehensive theory of human needs. Their concept of objective needs could prove important and fruitful in many research contexts, not least in poverty studies. That said, the research area 'psychology of poverty' aims at gaining access to the subjectivity and life-world of the poor, and for that purpose it is more relevant to focus on experiential autonomy/inhibition or lack of autonomy. It is important to emphasise that the experiences in question are of an objective reality, independent of the mindset of the observer, because poverty is basically a material phenomenon. It is relevant therefore to focus on the interplay between subjective and objective factors.

In line with the above discussion and my own conception of the term, for the purpose of this study *personal autonomy* is defined loosely and tentatively as *self-determination, co-authorship of one's life in the short and long term, and the ability to pursue one's desires within reasonably wide and flexible limits of a biological and social/societal nature without being at the mercy of inner or external constraints*. In particular, autonomy is conceptualised and viewed in connection with activity in the social arena and with significant role responsibilities and actions within relevant role domains. Autonomy is further conceptualised as a *continuum*, not a dichotomy. As a value and ideal, autonomy gains significance in relation to values of a more collective nature.

This is a 'mild' version of need: autonomy is not necessarily considered to be a biological/innate drive like the need for food. It is partly cultural, an 'acquired taste' shared by most societies and cultures, but where variation must be expected and allowed for.

From a psychological point of view, poverty is also about *feelings*. Needs and feelings are closely connected, of course. For the sake of simplicity, I use 'feelings' to denote emotions (short-lived affective reaction to perception of a significant change in own circumstances), sentiments (permanently focused affective state) and moods (permanently non-focused affective state) (Ben-Ze'ev, 2000). I want here to address feelings related to inhibition or loss of autonomy in situations of poverty.

The question in this study is how inhibition or loss of autonomy is experienced by the poor. What does it mean to them subjectively, and how should the meanings they ascribe to it be interpreted?

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Research design

Several contingent factors affected the choice of research strategy: current state of knowledge (i.e., lack of research); topic under investigation (poverty and inhibition or loss of autonomy); and theoretical perspectives (social psychology, need and emotion perspectives). It is an interview study with an exploratory objective. It is phenomenological insofar as I provide descriptions of the lived experiences of the poor (Giorgi, 1985). It is also hermeneutical insofar as I attempt to interpret and understand these descriptions of lived experiences (Ricoeur, 1998). The study is therefore phenomenological and hermeneutical (Van Manen, 1992). Unfortunately there is no single, widely recognised phenomenological hermeneutical method. The method should not be taken as a closed and static system either, without the leeway for imaginative innovation and ideas from other theoretical and methodological traditions. The method also needs to reflect the object of study. This is why this study is a phenomenologically and hermeneutically *oriented* study.

The status and function of the theoretical perspectives in this study must be understood on the basis of the phenomenological and hermeneutical grounding. I have attempted to retain an open mind in dealing with the phenomena in question, i.e., experiences of inhibition or loss of autonomy. That is, I have made an effort to bracket my pre-understandings (including theoretical perspectives) as far as possible. The theoretical perspectives consist largely of sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1969). They are not defined in any complete sense of the word, and their purpose is basically heuristic, to aid interpretation. By translating the verbal responses of the poor into psychological terms, we can proceed to reflect over and interpret them according to hermeneutical principles.

### 2.2 Participants, data collection and analysis

The selection criteria were as follows: a) registered as a long-term recipient of social security payments at a social security office in Bergen, Norway; b) equal numbers of females and males; c) within the age-range 18–67; d) of Norwegian nationality; e) and the presence of an ability (competence, especially cognitive) and will (motivation) to take part in long interviews of a relatively personal nature on psycho-social concerns.

A preliminary assessment of potential subjects based on my verbal and written instructions was undertaken by social security office's assistant chief officer in collaboration with case officers. A letter signed by the chief officer was sent to these individuals informing them of

the study and inviting them to take part. The letter offered a number of incentives, among them, a promise of one thousand kroner in compensation for taking part. Forty-four individuals were invited to take part in the study. Twenty-six accepted, 2 declined and 16 did not reply. I called each of the 26 (mainly by telephone), to arrange a meeting. One decided to pull out after initial contact, but none left during or after the interviews.

The total number of participants was 25; ages ranged between 20 and 66 years (mean age = 41, SD = 11,71). Thirteen were female, 12 male. Ten lived alone; 6 in a two-person household; 8 in a three-person household; and 1 in a household of four. Eleven had children living at home. Two lived with their mother. Seven had a partner; none were married. Two had (low level) university/college training; the educational achievements of the rest were low: 11 had only completed compulsory schooling. Two had part-time jobs and a further two were on sick leave absence from a part-time job. The rest (21) had no connection with the labour market. One was on a disablement pension and one was in training. They were all, to a greater or lesser degree, *affected* by poverty. They all fulfilled from three to seven of the following poverty criteria: client status; income poverty; wealth poverty; debt poverty; general deprivation poverty; housing deprivation poverty and subjective poverty (an average of 5.4 criteria). For a more detailed discussion of the concept of poverty in psychological studies and the operationalization of poverty, see Underlid (2001, 2003).

The interviews followed an interview guide organised around ten themes: why the respondent is in economic difficulties and requires help from the state ('ways in - individual level'); views of causes of poverty ('ways in - macro level'); income status; expenses status; wealth status; debt status; material properties; the most salient problem; future prospects as poor/social security recipient ('ways out - individual level'); views of solutions/of alleviating the situation in general ('ways out - macro level').

The interviews were recorded on a tape recorder. About a third of the interviews took place at the author's office, the rest at the homes of the participants. The conversations lasted two to four days. All interviews were conducted by the author. The interview technique I applied followed the basic tenets of qualitative interviewing (Kvale, 1996).

Coding was based on a review of the transcribed qualitative interviews. The transcriptions ran to 1808 pages in all (29-130 pages per interview). This corresponds to the first step in Giorgi's (1985) phenomenological method, Sense of the Whole. During this stage four main psychological themes emerged: insecurity, inhibition or loss of autonomy, social devaluation and a threatened self-image/self-esteem. In a discrete analysis, I separated out units of meaning based on psychological perspectives with a focus on the phenomenon under investigation, i.e. inhibition or loss of autonomy. This analysis addresses only those parts of the text that deal with inhibited or lost autonomy, and corresponds to step two of Giorgi's phenomenological method. The inclusion/exclusion criteria applied to textual excerpts are relevance, quality (i.e. clarity) and success in depicting the breadth of the respondents' experiences. The purpose was to generate a text that was oriented, strong, rich and deep (Van Manen, 1992). At a later stage of the research process the two remaining steps of Giorgi's method were undertaken: 1) the transformation of the subject's everyday expressions into psychological language with an emphasis on the phenomenon under investigation and 2) the synthesis of transformed meaning units into a consistent statement.

### 2.3 Interview environment and ethical reflection

Efforts were made to establish and maintain a frank, respectful, personal, trustful and confidential interview environment. It was deemed necessary to establish a relationship that would facilitate dialogue, communication and respondent validation, i.e. *communicative validity* (Kvale, 1989), to encourage the presentation of sensitive personal information from a socially vulnerable group.

A comfortable interview climate was also necessary from the *ethical* point of view. Certain ethical research standards had to be maintained, and the respondents should under no circumstances feel their dignity was being undermined or that they were being exploited. The interviews needed also to be a positive experience. There was an ethical side to the offer of financial compensation as well: as a token of my respect and reciprocation. The respondents spoke of sensitive issues over quite a lengthy period of time, they were in a difficult situation and belonged to a vulnerable social group. After the completion of the interviews, the respondents were given practical information on possible routes with regard to assistance. I gave them my business card if they needed to get in touch, for instance to obtain copies of reports issuing from the study. All of the respondents were assured that confidentiality would be maintained, and they all gave their informed consent. Possible ramifications of the study for the respondents, pertinent institutions and social policy remained an integral concern throughout the process.

## 3. Findings

Excerpts taken from the qualitative interviews are used to illustrate the experiences of inhibition or loss of autonomy. The choice of topics is not random: it is a product of an interplay between the analysis of the data and the theoretical or conceptual frame of reference.

### 3.1 Reduced scope of opportunity and subjective experiences

The focus in this subsection is on subjective experiences of objective poverty and material factors associated with poverty that work to diminish life opportunities. For example, *debt* may be experienced as a burden by the poor. As one of our interviewees said: 'Yea, it's like a claw... a fist inside you like an insurmountable problem' [*Inger* (38), Kjell Underlid, 24 February, 2000]. Several respondents talked about the meaning of money in relation to autonomy: 'If you haven't any money, you won't get anywhere' [*Marit* (46), Kjell Underlid, 10 January, 2000]; 'You do have a bit of freedom if you've got money... The choices are greater, you know, generally speaking' [*Agnete* (52), Kjell Underlid, 9 February, 2000].

Another woman maintained that it is difficult to see any *opportunities* because *a*) tunnel vision, 'You're blinkered... I mean you can't see. There are masses of other things you can't see, because you're completely cornered', *b*) lack of strength to think about it, 'There are so many things, really, you just can't think about all this, you see, so you push it all away... just to keep going', *c*) vicious circles, 'You get into a spiral, a circle... and it's then you just forget to see...', *d*) no way out, 'Forget to feel that you could try and get out of all this, because in many areas you may have to... Like, you see what's stopping you, you don't see your chances', *e*) overcome by misery, 'Cause in a way you sink more and more into the misery of

it all...’, *f*) hopelessness, ‘... and you really can’t see any hope. That’s when the sense of hopelessness comes over you...’, *g*) loose ends, ‘It’s, er, because there are so many things you ought to be trying to get hold of... Like gathering a loose end, finding a way out of...’, *h*) consequences, ‘And the one thing often leads to the next... there are those kinds of effects, yes’, *i*) losing one’s balance, ‘It’s just like you... lose your balance at the same time a bit... your grounding’, *j*) preoccupied with keeping one’s head above water, ‘Like you’re spending so much time and energy just... um, just keeping your head above water... you forget to look towards the horizon...’, *k*) entangled in a web, ‘It’s just that sense of... quicksand?... And then you get caught in a sort of web... and you’re entangled in a ... whatever you do, like, ‘cause you’re trying many...’. [Trine (38), Kjell Underlid, 7 April, 2000].

There may be dreams and a little hope, but it is not easy to *plan*: ‘Because that feeling of hope – you see there’s so much hope in my life that’s been... and plans in my life that have been crushed... The dreams are there! But no plans... and little hope’ [Inger (38), Kjell Underlid, 24 February, 2000]. A man said that because he had no savings and was not able to save, it was difficult to make plans: ‘Not being able to plan for the future.... It’s hard to find the woman of your dreams... a flat of your own...’ [Steinar (30), Kjell Underlid, 24 November, 1999]. The poor preserve, however, their *wishes*: ‘Just being able to... shop once in a while without having to count the pennies... to be able to take a trip abroad with these boys and see...’ [Kari (50), Kjell Underlid, 1 November, 1999].

The poor lack a role which for most people in their age groups is regarded as central, namely the *work role*. This role has several important functions (Jahoda, 1982), and is generally deemed to be very attractive: ‘I’d do anything to go to work, just given a chance to work, ‘cause it’s driving me mad sitting at home...’ [Inge (28), Kjell Underlid, 29 March, 2000]. The lack of work role may impact on non-job-related roles and *social participation*: ‘Having something meaningful to do in my spare time would make up for the situation I’m in. But you can’t because of the lack of money and, you know, social reasons – that others will probably look down at you’ [Steinar (30), Kjell Underlid, 24 November, 1999]; ‘And then you’re pushed to the side lines. And there you stay. It’s awful. It’s nearly like looking at life from the outside’ [Trine (38), Kjell Underlid, 7 April, 2000].

Poverty may also affect *parental role*, ‘...you feel like you’re not a proper mother because you can’t give them the support’ [Laura (44), Kjell Underlid, 11 February, 2000], role as *child*, ‘You know, she (mother) says I shouldn’t feel embarrassed at all. And “that’s what I’m here for, isn’t it? You’re my only child and bla, bla, bla.” But I’m grown up now, and you grow with age – thoughts and everything. And I feel it’s pretty embarrassing’ [Charlotte (33), Kjell Underlid, 15 November, 1999], and *partner* (the woman has to ask for money from her partner), ‘I can’t make my own choices about big economic things...’ [Lise (33), Kjell Underlid, 14 December, 1999].

The role as *social welfare client* was not experienced as an attractive role, ‘You feel you’re banging your head against a wall, against a massive system, against red tape and stiff regulations’ [Steinar (30), Kjell Underlid, 24 November, 1999], and may influence other roles as well, i.e. the role as *member of the public*, ‘What can I do?... A social welfare client... Who’s going to be bothered to listen to what I’ve got to say?’ [Inger (38), Kjell Underlid, 24 February, 2000] and the role of *householder*, ‘The social welfare people, if you’re a client there

for a long time and if you own a house, they'll ask you to sell it' [Steinar (30), Kjell Underlid, 24 November, 1999]; 'Because we're only tenants here. There are many things I can't do or decide about' [Nina (24), Kjell Underlid, 1 March, 2000].

The role of *consumer* is clearly important in societies like Norway (Bauman, 1998; Edwards, 2000), and lack of money can be felt as a tyranny of scarcity, 'You know, it's a colossal crisis if your shoes are worn out' [Martin (32), Kjell Underlid, 30 November]; 'Tied hands and feet... the money situation means you have very little leeway... means that you can't do anything... And, like, you go round feeling you're banging your head against a wall... you're condemned to go round and find something else - like, you can't do anything...' [Ole (54), Kjell Underlid, 4 January, 2000]; 'So if I've got a list of priorities, a wish list, I'll have to rub about everything out' [Steinar (30), 30 November, 1999].

### 3.2 Further explication/interpretative reflection

The respondents in this study live under conditions of *relative deprivation*, that is, their financial resources are so meagre that they are excluded from particular ways of life, customs and activities otherwise considered normal and desirable in the Norwegian society. The inhibition or loss of autonomy must therefore be understood objectively and against the background of the immediate social context. This context is not supportive of autonomy to any extent.

Inhibition or loss of autonomy penetrate into many different *areas of life and role domains* (Braybrooke, 1987). The actual objective *range of opportunities* is reduced. There is little to support autonomy in the immediate context of the poor and it is partly overstructured (for instance in encounters with the social welfare office) and partly understructured (due to joblessness; Jahoda, 1982). But the range of opportunities can be felt and dealt with subjectively in a variety of ways which can be more or less functional or dysfunctional in relation to practical problem-solving strategies and affective experience.

Generally, the findings highlight the lack of *control* felt by the poor over their lives, along with an inability to feel any sense of co-authorship of their lives. At the level of everyday life, they feel their decisions or choices are restricted to trivial things, like choosing between going to a cinema or buying food for the next day. Many feel they have hardly anything to choose between at all. They feel tied and often have to forsake things they like and do things they dislike (such as shopping with coupons or going to the social welfare office). Many refer to a sense of paralysis. They live under the *tyranny of scarcity* (Stjernø, 1985), despite the existence of small, restricted domains of autonomy (Nozick, 1981). Experiences like these, which are often accompanied by a sense of vulnerability and loss, but also anger, occur daily and are often triggered in autonomy-threatening situations (Argyle, Furnham & Graham, 1981) such as shopping or visiting the social welfare office. Freedom to act and make choices is felt to be severely curtailed over the long term. The poor may dream of a better life, but planning one and realising life projects in line with their interests and values are mostly considered to be unrealistic. Their economic situation hinders them from achieving key goals in life and living up to important values and ideals. The recurring themes are lack of autonomy, a sense of oppression, of being tied, bound, controlled, of dependence and subservience. There is little room in their lives for agency and intrinsic motivation.

### 3.3 Coping and resources

One coping strategy was not to think about poverty and related problems, 'I don't want to think about it... I suppose I take every new day as it comes' [*Siren* (36), Kjell Underlid, 20 December, 1999]; another to approach problems one at a time, 'Yea, I work on problems one by one... I mean, I finish one thing before starting on the next. I get a problem out of the way before I start on the next one' [*Knut* (20), Kjell Underlid, 22 March, 2000]; a third to reduce the time frame, 'And if I get through that day, and I'm happy when I go to bed in the evening when I've managed to cope that day... And done something constructive that day, then I'm happy about it, and I can start with a fresh outlook the next morning' [*Inger* (38), Kjell Underlid, 24 February, 2000].

A young man told that he relied on his psycho-social competence with regard to *a*) ability to reflect critically, 'I do have an ability to think critically about things, and it's been stimulated and developed in the environment I belong to now' and *b*) coping ability, '...I know I'll be able to manage... even if I hadn't got a penny's worth of help from the social welfare people, I'd get by anyway' [*Kim* (34), Kjell Underlid, 17 February, 2000]. Another man, however, thought that such resources might be inadequate to make his own future, 'They say you can succeed if you want to, on your own, don't they?... So if what you need is some metal, and it's there, you can make a horse shoe. But if it's not, like, then you've got problems' [*Terje* (48), Kjell Underlid, 28. March, 2000].

Informal social safety nets can play a significant role: 'But I've got a couple of friends who I've known since I was ... that big... You know, and in a way it's a safety net' [*Agnete*, (52), Kjell Underlid, 9 February, 2000].

### 3.4 Further explication/interpretative reflection

These experiences show that the poor, far from being passive victims of their financial situation, are active agents doing their utmost to find a balance in their lives. They mobilize all available resources. The respondents make use in particular of emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), such as different cognitive techniques to prevent or mitigate negative effects. Many also looked for comfort in and used different psychological and social resources available to them. Informal social networks can act as a vital buffer against poverty. Psycho-social resources can help to allay the subjective distress, but are often inadequate in the face of practical and financial problems.

### 3.5 Metaphors

In describing her experience of being poor, one woman used a *prison metaphor*: 'It's like living in a prison in a way...'. Her main points were as follows. *a*) Prisoners have a better life: '...people in prison, it's better for them than for us, they're given things without having to pay for them: they can watch films, go and play at things, get on a training course...'. *b*) Prisoners tend to give up: 'It's like being a prisoner, because you have to give up practically everything, like...'. *c*) They suffer from a lack of freedom, from obstructions: 'You can feel it, because you can't go out and do anything you want whenever you want... That's how I've been feeling, that I'm incarcerated, because there's

always something that stops you when you go out... Because when you can't do anything, you have no freedom...'. *d*) They are monitored by prison warders: 'Prison warder, that's me that is'. *e*) Prison life is passive: 'So it turns out that you don't do much on the inside either, because you're not motivated and... and don't like doing much anyway'. *f*) But there's prison leave: 'True, I'm off on leave from time to time, but as a rule I suffer for it afterwards'. *g*) Plans for making an escape: 'No, that's why I think it's unfair and really... because if I'd been a man then: Right I'm off, then, bugger everything, I can't put up with this any more']. *h*) Will to live: 'You really lose the will to... live'. *i*) Lengthy sentence: 'It's like I've been here for ever...'. *j*) Apprehensive about the future in prison: 'But I get dreadfully anxious about the future, because I know that living like this for just a few more years... I start doubting myself, how strong I've actually been, that it's not enough, because there's too much trouble'. *k*) Fearful of release: 'If you're up for release... there's often so much trouble, you have to make calls, ask others, to get it over with... and degrading yourself and spilling the beans, sorry I was born, that's how I feel it... It really kills any pleasure you're feeling when you leave here, like'. *l*) Fair sentence? 'No, it wasn't fair... those things have left their mark in a way... Just starting to brood over things: why this and why that? I never deserved it, and... I've got myself to blame partly because I never got an education... married young' [Laura (44), Kjell Underlid, 11 February, 2000].

A man used a *mountaineering metaphor* to describe his feelings of loss of control over his life: 'You start off on a plotted route. A route that's your life. But then you find out that for you there's not enough to hold onto on the mountain side to get further. It's so hard that route. You fight and fight, but you don't get anywhere. You're stuck half way up that wall... Some (grips) are fragile, and some are missing, and... And they're terrible' [Steinar (30), Kjell Underlid, 11 February, 2000].

### 3.6 Further explication/interpretative reflection

*Metaphor* means that a literal meaning is given a non-literal meaning. Although metaphors can oversimplify, mask, deceive and lead astray, they can often serve as a springboard for the creation of meaning and communication of understanding. They can structure experiences and understanding, act as reference points around which to organise data and build bridges between things we comprehend and things we are trying to comprehend (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul, 2001).

Although poor people as individuals share characteristics with the rest of humanity and other disadvantaged groups, as individuals they are nonetheless unique, and their subjectivity belongs to them as unique individuals. Their metaphors and expressions may create empathy with and insight into their life-worlds, because they are based on particularistic and ideosyncratic experiences.

The *prison metaphor* highlights the almost claustrophobic sense of oppression, of being tied hand and foot, accommodating to the greyness of everyday poverty, resigned hopelessness in relation to the future, and self-reproach. The *mountaineering metaphor* illustrates the sense of powerlessness, of a sense of the ground giving way, accompanied by a fear of losing one's footing and falling.

#### 4. General discussion

I shall now discuss the findings in light of *a)* theories of needs and emotions, *b)* contextual factors, and *c)* methodology.

The inhibition or loss of autonomy experienced by the respondents in the sample can be understood on the basis of a concept of *subjective needs*. They have a subjective need for autonomy but experience that it is either blocked or frustrated by poverty. The typical affective reaction to this blocking or frustration is usually expressed in *anger- or sadness-related states*, although many also react with other feelings, e.g., fear and anxiety.

Affective reactions associated with inhibition or loss of autonomy varied in intensity from moderate unease to very strong feelings. There were instances of short-lived emotions linked to actual events, focused and permanent sentiments and diffuse, negative moods linked to existential questions of a poverty-related nature. Feelings associated with inhibited or lost autonomy in situations of poverty affected all respondents in the sample, penetrated different life domains and role arenas, and had shaped the lives of several of the respondents over a period of years and even decades. There was nonetheless wide variation in the sample with respect to type and intensity of feelings.

These variations in the experience of inhibition or loss of autonomy may have something to do with differences in the objective poverty situation. Poverty can be deep and wide, deep and narrow, shallow and wide, shallow and narrow and permanent/chronic or short-lived/acute. On the other hand there is no strict correlation between objective inhibition or loss of autonomy and subjective feelings. Poor people's objective situation will manifest itself in their *horizon* – as the concept is employed in phenomenology and hermeneutics – to different degrees and in different ways (Husserl, 1970; Gadamer, 1989). The poor do not necessarily reflect over the likely consequences of inhibition or loss of autonomy. It is not certain that the entire range of such inhibition or loss of autonomy is intentional (in the philosophical sense, i.e., consciousness as directed at something) and aspects of inhibited or lost autonomy are not necessarily objectivised (made into an object of consciousness). In general, experienced inhibition or loss of autonomy is multifaceted, multidetermined and expressive of an interplay between subjective and objective factors.

From an emotion theory perspective (Ben-Ze'ev, 2000), the negative feelings associated with inhibited or lost autonomy felt by the respondents originate in a negative evaluation of the desirability of their perceived situation, or of the situation of people close to them (especially their children). In other words, there exists a threat to key values and aspirations. The intensity of the feelings is determined by the level of desirability and importance of these aspirations as perceived by each individual and how potent, real and relevant they perceive the threats to be. Other factors of significance in this connection are what/who is held to be responsible for the threats, how controllable/uncontrollable they are felt to be, whether the respondent is prepared or unprepared to meet the threat, and how certain/uncertain it is that it will actually materialise, and when and how. The extent to which the situation is considered deserved or undeserved will also have an impact as will the person's general circumstances, formal and informal safety networks, personality factors, use of defence mechanisms (A. Freud, 2000/1936) and emotion- and problem-focused coping strategies

(Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Other relevant factors are salience (stimulus properties in a particular context), perception (which is selective), social comparison along different dimensions, interpretation of the situation (attribution), needs (general autonomy orientation) and general attitude to life (ideology). Negative feelings associated with inhibition or loss of autonomy can also be interpreted as the activation of deeper and more generalised *anxiety* related to personality and background, current circumstances (for instance too little/too much external structure), belonging, social exclusion, identity and fundamental existential issues. Such experiences can therefore also be elucidated from the perspective of anxiety theories (Roth, Noyes & Burrows, 1988–1992). Need and emotion theories are, however, as an interpretative basis, far too narrow.

The experiences of the respondents may be understood more broadly in relation to the structure and culture of the society in which they live, i.e. *contextually*. It is a society for which commercialism (a system dominated by economic interests), materialism (Fournier & Richins, 1991) and consumerism (Bauman, 1998) are key characteristics (Hellevik, 1996). Money in this type of society exerts a wide-ranging and decisive influence on feelings of autonomy, and lack of money is in many ways an autonomy killer. This is the context in which relative poverty in affluent welfare states should be understood in relation to experienced autonomy.

Other groups may also experience inhibition or loss of autonomy due to such contextual factors, but the type of inhibited or lost autonomy reported by the respondents in this study is *poverty-related*, and in this sense their experiences are relatively exclusive. Since the questions put to them in the interviews concerned their experiences of their poverty-related situation, a control group of non-poor would have been irrelevant and meaningless. However, many of the same attributes exist among other socio-economically deprived groups.

The findings also need to be seen in connection with the study's *methodological* approach. In the interviews information was generated by both parties in conversation or dialogue. Now, there is good reason to ask if my own understanding and values, i.e. preconceptions, may have influenced the information that was created. I tried to act as an interested, concerned and empathic researcher, but also emphasised a professional and neutral approach and the use of open, non-leading questions. Whatever may have been non-verbally communicated is not easy to say.

It is also difficult to estimate the impact of the 1000 kroner promised for taking the trouble to take part. It may well be that it was perceived by respondents as such a large amount that they felt compelled to take part in the study. The rate of participation in this study was higher than usual in poverty research, despite this study's increased number of questions and time to complete it. The themes for inquiry were also both more personal and more intimate. The fact that none of the participants pulled out, and that after the interviews many said unprompted they were pleased with their own participation, may be taken to indicate that factors other than money contributed to them remaining in the study or even to them becoming respondents in the first place.

The study's external validity is low, and findings should not be generalised without great care to other people suffering from poverty either within the same socio-cultural bracket or

beyond. It is a small, biased and judicious sample of long-standing recipients of social security in a city in one of the wealthiest countries in the world on the cusp of a new millennium. On the other hand, the study may also have touched on experiences of poverty that are almost universal and invariant. That said, conventional criteria relating to representativeness are not equally relevant in qualitative research where one is more interested in the uniqueness of different experiences and in contextual, interactional and interpretative concerns (Van Manen, 1992).

## 5. Synthesis and concluding remarks

The purpose of this summary is to conclude the study as a whole, to see it, as it were, from a bird's eye view. It offers in addition a synthesis of transformed meaning units into a consistent statement (Giorgi, 1985).

The 'psychology of poverty' has preoccupied me for a considerable time. I have studied experiences of inhibited or lost autonomy among the poor and attempted to understand what it means. During this process I have sometimes been physically distant from the phenomena under investigation (while reviewing the literature and analysing the data for example) and sometimes closer (I spent more than six months with the respondents, generally in their own homes). I was granted access to the subjectivity and life-worlds of the poor in the shape of lived everyday experiences (the 'taste and smell' of poverty), verbalised and reflected upon within a framework of a trustful dialogue. These experiences were fixed in the form of a transcribed text, selected excerpts from which I have attempted to explicate and interpret. The interviews were encounters between people whose lives, circumstances and horizons differed – between poor and non-poor, between the horizon of the lay person and that of the professional psychologist and researcher. Both of us existed, however, in the same society and historical period. The findings and interpretations are the product of the fusion of horizons made possible by these encounters.

Inhibition or loss of autonomy is a key meaning of relative poverty in affluent welfare states, generally accompanied by a sense of anger or sadness. This is a subjective reality for the poor. The sense of inhibited or lost autonomy is an existential verity for the poor in affluent welfare states. It is a psychological *essence* of this type of poverty. This does not mean that experienced inhibition or loss of autonomy is the only or most significant nucleus of the 'psychology of poverty'. Experiences of insecurity (Underlid, 2007), social devaluation (Underlid, 2005) and a besieged self-image or sense of worth (Underlid, 2004) are examples of other potential essences.

Whether the data from this in-depth study of a small number of respondents corroborate the claim that experienced inhibition or loss of autonomy is a psychological essence of relative poverty in affluent welfare states may of course be questioned. Nevertheless the study provides a platform on which to base further studies in the 'psychology of poverty' – either with the same methodology and theoretical perspectives or others. It is my hope that these tentative steps into largely virgin territory – for recent contributions, see for example Mullainathan's (2011) excellent article - will inspire others to embark on similar research and that future studies will succeed in fitting the various pieces of the 'psychology of

poverty' puzzle together. The subject is challenging from a theoretical and methodological point of view and is important both socially and politically. Poverty is the oldest social problem in the world and is described as the 'scar on humanity's face' (Øyen, Miler & Samad, 1996). It concerns not only distribution of money and material assets, but also distribution of immaterial benefits like autonomy (freedom), which is one of the most hailed values and ideals in the world today. From a normative or ethical point of view, poverty is about human suffering and social justice (Underlid, 2009), and it demands effective political responses.

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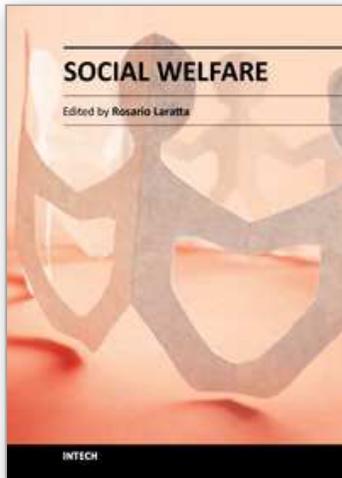
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