

Primary Poverty: Evolving definitions, scope and implications

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What is the face of poverty? How should a phenomenon so dynamic and fluid be ever captured by data? Seebohm Rowntree's introduction of primary poverty as depiction of the poorest of the poor in the 19th century provided the impetus that simplified the complicated nature of poverty and, likewise, raised questions about the generalizability of its context. Criticisms as to the nature and method of Rowntree has dominated poverty literature; yet, many of social scientists also assert the groundbreaking contributions of Rowntree's work as pivotal to government policy and poverty-oriented institutions. Upon the release of Rowntree's data about primary poverty of the working-class in York, there have been several attempts as to how to modify, enrich and even discredit the findings of Rowntree and all these efforts pave the way for the gradual transformation of several poverty measures that have provided so much data to governments in the world today.

Primary poverty refers to the state or condition of complete or sheer poverty where people live below the minimum level necessary to sustain physical subsistence. The term "primary" distinguishes this kind of poverty from other types as it signifies not having the basic or fundamental means to live and survive. Seebohm Rowntree is the forerunner behind this categorization of poverty from which he constructed the poverty measure, the primary poverty line, in 1899.

There are two defining characteristics that characterize primary poverty when it was conceived by Rowntree against the backdrop of the Victorian era of England in the 19th century. First, when Rowntree launched his scientific inquiry in York in 1899, he wanted to find out the nature of poverty. What is poverty like? Who are living in utter destitution? A house-to-house visit of the investigator and documentation of people's state or conditions were used to des-

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cribe the “nature” of their poverty as “primary”. Second, the visible manifestations of people whom Rowntree assumed were poor were considered principal in his inquiry. People who were living in obvious decay and starvation constitute this group.

Rowntree’s induction of primary poverty as a category of people in poverty was met with criticisms from several scholars and social scientists despite the statistical depth of his study that highlighted nutrition, housing, health, work hours, wages, clothing and household items. The primal objection to the construction of primary poverty as a category of poverty is its narrowness and limited depiction of people’s state of being. Peter Townsend, the author of relative deprivation, asserts that poverty is relative to the population being studied as opposed to Rowntree’s well-defined line that serves as the be all and end all in categorizing people in poverty. The seemingly impressionistic method that Rowntree employed in the conduct of his research through ocular inspections of people’s abode and physical appearance is the second criticism. Most critics say that judgments based on what one sees or what is manifested before you would not suffice the complicatedness of poverty as a phenomenon. Some people may live in shanty homes or may not have the amenities that constitute a decent life but they may have some money in their bank accounts or may hold a few properties and these details about life cannot be extracted from simply looking at their state of being.

Despite the waves of criticisms against Rowntree’s concept of primary poverty and the primary poverty measure, scholars both before and in the contemporary time, defend Rowntree’s indomitable contribution to poverty studies. J. H. Veit-Wilson in-depth analysis and reflection of primary poverty as a category argues that a closer examination of Rowntree’s methodology and findings reveal that his concept is not actually absolutist but relativist as he based the qualifiers and descriptions of people in primary poverty based on the general situation of the people who belong to such category and not to a measure or social construct that is generic and derived from a global or worldwide scale. The construction of primary poverty measure in the cultural landscape such as York in the 19th century adds credence to Rowntree’s concept as it elevates the importance of the context from which poverty is defined and described. This strengthens the validity of Rowntree’s inquiry as to the real situation of people on minimum subsistence.

Rowntree’s launch of primary poverty as a depiction of people in complete poverty is considered by many the hallmark of social research. For the first time, the conceptual messiness of poverty is given a face – what it is like and who experiences it. Primary poverty in York in the 19th century was brought to the fore and it raised social concerns to the government as it mirrors the probable and systemic failures of the state and the ineffectiveness of their system. It also provided the impetus for the government to review policies and laws that affect the working class that despite work, they fall below the minimum level of subsistence. Rowntree’s groundwork was also pivotal in elevating the problem of poverty to a bigger and wider scale as his first study in York depicted the sad plight of the working class in a town’s life. Poverty was not limited to big cities like London; it was practically everywhere during the Victorian era.

As poverty continued to evolve, Rowntree conducted two more major studies in York. The second one was conducted in 1935 and the other was in 1951. From these studies, poverty measures continued to dominate most economic and social policy papers. The first primary poverty measure of Rowntree, undoubtedly, laid the groundwork that has led to the creation, production and adoption of more complicated, embracing and comprehensive poverty measures in today's globalized world order.

The establishment of the human needs standard in the 20th century, the use of national samples of data such as the Ministry of Laborer's Family and Expenditure Surveys in the mid-1960s, the adoption of relative deprivation approaches, Amartya Sen's capability and functioning concepts and the formulation of the human development index clearly signify the evolution of poverty and how it is contextualized to best depict the changing landscape of the world. There is no doubt, however, that Rowntree's concept of primary poverty was the head-start of everything that followed.

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