

**THE 'RELATIVISM' OF POVERTY: CONCEPTUALIZING  
POVERTY IN VANCOUVER'S DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE  
AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES**

by

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# APPROVAL

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## **ABSTRACT**

The development discourse on poverty has tended to focus too narrowly on measurement while qualitative research methods are more effective in deepening understanding and creating context-specific strategies of reduction. The purpose of this paper is to compare conceptualizations of poverty of the poor in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) with those of the poor in developing countries. Local understandings of poverty in the DTES are examined through life histories, and the World Bank's 2002 report, "Voices of the Poor: From Many Lands" is used to explore understandings of poverty of poor people in the developing world. The comparison of these conceptualizations reveals a need to devise approaches to poverty reduction that are influenced by both the outside expertise of development actors and the poor themselves.

**Keywords:** poverty; conceptualizations; Downtown Eastside (DTES); developing countries; the development discourse

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# 1: INTRODUCTION

The problem of poverty affects the societies of both developed and developing countries around the world. As a result, over time significant progress has been made toward formulating a comprehensive contemporary definition of poverty. Recently, researchers have become interested in re-examining the depth and parameters of the poverty concept. Whereas in the past poverty was conceptualized as an economic issue- characterized by monetary values and basic needs, in recent years a more comprehensive, holistic understanding has become prominent. Now understood as a multidimensional construct, the concept of poverty encompasses factors beyond the lack of basic needs and income to include capabilities, rights, and entitlements.

Definitions of poverty become problematic when global perspectives alone take precedence in understandings of poverty. Globalization in recent decades has prompted a need to more collaboratively 'combat' poverty across international borders. Saith (2005) elaborates on the cross-cultural experience of poverty, "Poverty and its handmaiden, inequality, in their myriad incarnations, are everywhere for all those with eyes to see: every landlord's house in each village, every five-star hotel is surrounded by them, every posh colony has its attached anti-thesis outside its gates" (p. 4601). The fundamental challenge, however, is the development of effective strategies of poverty reduction. Should poverty

alleviation programmes capture the diversity of situations that may be regarded as poverty, or should they be singularly directed by a universal idea of poverty?

This paper aims to explore this question by comparing conceptualizations of poverty in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) with those in developing countries. These comparisons of 'emic' or 'insider' perspectives may help reveal whether or not poverty alleviation programmes should be universal or context-specific in nature. While everywhere in Canada there are destitute people, Vancouver's Downtown Eastside was chosen to exemplify poverty in a developed country because it illustrates a quite high level of deprivation. Commonly referred to as Canada's 'notorious urban slum', the DTES has been the most researched, written about, photographed, painted, and drawn area in all of Canada (Robertson, 2007). The DTES houses a diverse population including many prostitutes, addicts, drug dealers, the mentally ill, Aboriginal people, and immigrants. The congregation of such a varied assembly of people in one neighbourhood results in a sometimes very accepting and thriving community. To understand how the poor in the DTES conceptualize poverty, I collected, transcribed, and analyzed five life histories of DTES residents. I then contrasted these narratives with conceptualizations of poverty of the poor in developing countries. These were located in the World Bank's latest publication in the series, "Voices of the Poor" entitled "From Many Lands" (2002). This project was inspired by the work of Robert Chambers, beginning with "Rural Development: Putting the Last First," published in 1983, advocating the value in taking of the poor's own perceptions.

The narratives of the poor are a powerful tool for understanding poverty and thus are imperative for expanding poverty literature, research, and improving poverty alleviation strategies. This paper argues that because perceptions of poverty can be so different, strategies for poverty reduction must be context-specific. In order to argue this, I first examine poverty with a discussion of the multidimensionality of the concept and dualisms that are used to differentiate experiences of poverty. Second, in the section entitled, the 'relativism' of poverty, I show that context matters by illustrating differences in the poverty discourse between developed and developing countries. The third chapter is dedicated to the transformation of the DTES from an industrialized centre to the core of Vancouver's problems with poverty. Finally, the fourth chapter is divided into three parts: the first two-the identification of the poor and mainstream analyses of poverty- set the stage for understanding the conceptualizations of poverty that are influenced by the ideas of the poor. Factors that act as determinants of movements into and out of poverty established by the poor themselves, frame the analysis of conceptualizations found in developing countries and in Vancouver. The comparison of these factors proves that differences in perceptions are influenced by context and further emphasize multidimensional aspects of the experience of poverty.

## 1.1 The Multidimensionality of Poverty

In the twentieth century, poverty research and international development discourse have become integrated.<sup>1</sup> Organizations such as the World Bank, under the auspices of President Robert McNamara (1968-1981), made the study and eradication of poverty a priority on the international agenda for development. Today, poverty is the central focus of the Bank's endeavours making this institution the number one "attacker of poverty" globally. Other international institutions have also taken a stance on the global 'fight' against poverty. For instance, in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations General Assembly formed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to work towards targets established at the world summits of the 1990s. The halving of extreme poverty by 2015 is the overarching goal of the MDGs.

In the early 1970s, poverty was defined by only two aspects: basic needs and income. Definitions of poverty focused on the deprivations of 'basic needs' for food, water, shelter, and clothing. Poverty was defined in terms of the income required in a particular context to reach some minimum standard of consumption. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, poverty came to be understood as being more complex than these income measures suggested. Expanding the previous two-dimensional understanding, researchers established a definition of poverty that included intangible elements such as rights, entitlements, and capabilities (Green, 2006). Multifaceted, the current understanding of poverty pervades

<sup>1</sup> The phrase "the development discourse" refers to the extended thought on 'development'. 'Development' is a term that entered popular discourse in the 1980s and encompasses governance, healthcare, education, gender equality, disaster preparedness, and human rights to improve quality of life in developing countries.

more comprehensive alleviation strategies that cover a range of factors such as health, education, governance, and environmental degradation. Despite developments in the understanding of poverty, almost twenty percent of all people worldwide continue to experience extreme poverty (UN International Forum on the Eradication of Poverty, 2006). This section explains the concept of poverty, how poverty has been viewed in strategies of poverty reduction, and the 'relativism' of poverty for further discussions of poverty in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and in developing countries.

## **1.2 What is 'Poverty'?**

Most definitions of poverty associate it with a 'lack' of necessities required for human survival. Definitions are influenced by a multiplicity of disciplines and vary in the aspects used to define the concept. While economic definitions emphasize deprivations of material resources, definitions developed by anthropologists often focus on non-material indicators. The most apparent dualisms in poverty definitions involve quantitative or qualitative dimensions, chronic or transient, rural or urban, and relative or absolute poverty.

### **1.2.1 Quantitative or Qualitative Dimensions?**

'Economic' approaches to poverty focus on measurements based on a nationally representative income and expenditure. Wratten defines income as "command over resources over time or as the level of consumption that can be afforded while retaining capital intact" (1995, p. 12). Poverty lines are at the core of most discourses on poverty. They refer to the critical threshold of income,

consumption or access to services and materials below which individuals are considered poor. Poverty lines may vary across countries to represent the minimum level of “acceptable” economic participation in a society (Ray, 1998).

Since the recent construction of a more multidimensional view of poverty, ‘economic’ or income-defined approaches to poverty are widely determined as inadequate. Based on assumptions concerning nationally accepted standards, poverty lines have come under attack for not capturing the full experience of poverty (Francis 2006; Sumner 2003 in Misturelli & Heffernan, 2008). Indeed, poverty lines are blunt. For example, one may be deemed poor or not poor and differences within and between groups of poor and not poor are not recognized. Multiple deprivations that interact to define the experience of poverty are also ignored: powerlessness, vulnerability, social discrimination, and access to food, shelter, and water. Saith (2005) argues that the “reductionist nature” of poverty lines overlooks the multifaceted nature of human deprivation. Additionally, Saith feels that the long history of poverty thresholds (since the 1950s) has done a great disservice both to conceptualizations of poverty and to anti-poverty policies. Saith’s argument is based on the assumption that middle and upper classes have more input in determining ‘socially acceptable minimum standards of living’ that are necessary for basic survival’ (Saith, 2005, p. 4602). Ray strengthens this argument, explaining, “poverty lines are always approximations to a threshold that is truly fuzzy, more because the effects of sustained deprivation are often felt at a later point in time” (1998, p. 253). While the quantification of poverty is useful for comparative data purposes and in order to target resources for poor

populations, it is particularly inadequate because outsiders determine who is and is not poor (Wratten, 1995).

Anthropological understandings of poverty have revealed major differences between poor people's conceptions of poverty and those of outsiders or professional 'experts'. Wratten (1995) argues that a high valuation may be attached to qualitative dimensions such as security, independence, self-respect, identity, decision-making freedom, and legal and political rights. Within the discipline of anthropology, poverty is understood to be a consequence of social relations between people rather than as an absolute condition. According to Green (2006), "If poverty as a state and status is the manifestation of social relations it is also a category of representation through which social agents classify and act upon the world" (p. 19). Green (2006) argues that focusing on the social relations that produce poverty will reveal more about the actions and strategies of the rich and poor alike.

Participatory definitions of poverty, developed by anthropologists, have emphasized two concepts- vulnerability and entitlement- which expand the outsider's view of the process by which people become and remain poor. Vulnerability refers to the experience of defencelessness, insecurity, and exposure to risks and shocks. Although it is not synonymous with poverty, vulnerability is linked to resources such as health and education, access to community infrastructure, and productive assets such as houses (Wratten, 1995). Closely linked to the idea of vulnerability, is that of entitlement, which refers to the ways individuals command resources. The concept of entitlement is closely

examined in Sen's (1981) work on poverty and famines. Sen's work on entitlements is intricately linked to statements about food such as, "starvation is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there being not enough food to eat" (1981, p. 1). Therefore, statements concerning starvation are in fact statements about an individual's relationship to commodities and ownership. According to Sen, entitlement can be understood in terms of 'entitlement relations' that are applied to ownership, which connects one set of ownerships to another through 'rules of legitimacy' (1981, p. 2). This leads to 'exchange entitlement', referring specifically to the exchange of items owned for other commodities. Determined by a person's position in the economic class structure of society, an individual's ability to acquire commodities depends on these entitlement relations (Sen, 1981). Ways to command commodities or resources vary from individual to individual or from household to household, and change over time and in response to shocks. They may include wage labour, the sale of assets or reduced consumption. The significance of both vulnerability and entitlement to the poverty discourse is useful for identifying those who are at risk of being or becoming poor (Wratten, 1995).

### **1.2.2 Chronic or Transient?**

Poverty research has led to the study of fluctuations in the experience of poverty. Differences in the duration of deprivation have led to two accepted descriptions of poverty: transient and chronic. Transient poverty refers to individuals who have a high probability of overcoming their experience of poverty.



Shorter-term periods of poverty could be due to seasonality or temporary household shocks (Green & Hulme, 2005). In contrast, chronic poverty concerns those “[...] people who remain poor for much of their life course, who may pass on their poverty to their children, and who may die of easily preventable deaths because of the poverty they experience (CPRC, 2004-5, p. 3). Chronic poverty has been the main concern for many international organizations’ development agendas.

The first Chronic Poverty Report (CPR) 2004-2005 estimated that there are between 300 and 420 million people trapped in chronic poverty (p. 9). The ‘chronically poor’ experience deepened poverty that usually extends to subsequent generations. The majority of people who are most often exposed to poverty over an extended duration may have previous experiences of discrimination, marginalization or of belonging to a particular religious, ethnic or indigenous group. The causes of chronic poverty are not clearly delineated, rather the CPR (2004-5) attributes the causes to a multiplicity of factors interacting and reacting together. Factors include ill health, widowhood, disability, social injustices or poor governance which work together to sustain chronic poverty. In addition to these day-to-day occurrences, people may experience ‘shocks’ which propel them into poverty and include incidences such as natural disasters, violence, the breakdown of law and order and/or institutional support. Shocks such as these can have long-term effects on populations, assisting in maintaining the status of chronic poverty over many years (Chronic Poverty Report, 2004-5). Overall, whether people experience transient or

chronic poverty, there is no grand theoretical framework explaining the persistence of poverty.

### **1.2.3 Rural or Urban Poverty?**

The urban-rural divide has become evident in poverty literature overtime. Traditionally, literature on poverty has focused on the gap between the poor rural areas and the better-off urban centres. Currently, due to processes of globalization and urbanization, poverty is more prevalent in urban areas than in the past. Though there is an extensive literature on the rural-urban divide in poverty, problems continue to arise over what constitutes a 'town' and what constitutes a 'rural community'.

The common tendency to 'romanticize' rural life in literature leads to neglect of the challenges that rural people may face in attempting to stay above the poverty line. Problems including fewer employment opportunities and lower levels of service provision are the most cited challenges of rural living. Other features of rural living include challenging types of economies. The majority of researchers view agriculture as the single most important sector of rural economies. Agriculture poses significant challenges for young populations living in rural settlements due to economic restructuring and land depletion (Commins, 2004). Large groups of young people leave rural settlements for hopes of work in urban centres. Consequently, the migration of young people negatively affects the wellbeing of the elderly who most often rely on their children for support. While these features of rural poverty are generally accepted, Commins (2004) argues that 'cultural invisibility' is also a characteristic of poor people living in

rural areas. Commins explains 'cultural invisibility' as rural cultural norms that predispose people to consider being 'poor' the consequence of their own personal failings (2004).

In the 1980s and 1990s when poverty became more concentrated in urban settlements than in previous years, researchers sought to understand the mechanisms underlying this change. 'Urban poverty' generally refers to poverty found in cities and towns. Wratten (1995) describes characteristics that are found in urban, but not rural, areas. The first characteristic involves challenges that arise from commercialization in urban areas which make it difficult to buy basic items that are less expensive in rural communities, or can be produced by people themselves. Second, social diversity due to migration into cities can create tensions in society, and there may be a lack of established social networks as compared with rural areas. Finally, the urban poor may have more contact with state agents and the police than their rural counterparts, which may lead to a negative experience of the state (Wratten, 1995). These three principle characteristics have contributed to the existence and persistence of poverty in urban centres worldwide.

#### **1.2.4 Absolute or Relative?**

The notions of 'absolute' and 'relative' quite often play a role in defining poverty in the development discourse. On the one hand, it can be agreed that regardless of the society, people everywhere need food, water, and shelter. These three aspects are thought to be 'absolute' conditions of poverty. According to Ray, "[...] there is something absolute about the notion of poverty.

Regardless of the society we live in, people need adequate levels of food, clothing, and shelter [...] (and though) there are variations in what might be considered “adequate,” nobody would deny the biological imperative for nutrition, for instance or the near-universal norms of adequate clothing” (1998, p. 251). On the other hand, aspects such as “acceptable levels of participation” may not be valued in all societies. Owning a television in some societies is deemed as necessary for living a ‘full life’ but for other societies, this item may not be necessary for wellbeing. These standards of living are ‘relative’ to the socioeconomic context in which they are found (Ray, 1998).

The ‘dualisms’ of poverty presented here including quantitative or qualitative dimensions, chronic or transient, rural or urban, and relative or absolute poverty are reflected in the main theories developed in poverty literature over time. These ‘dualisms’ have been established in the literature but little consideration has been given to ‘emic’ perspectives outside of anthropological understandings of poverty. The lack of valuation of local definitions of poverty is also seen in the development discourse and strategies of poverty reduction.

### **1.3 Poverty in the Development Discourse and Strategies of Poverty Reduction**

The approach to poverty alleviation promoted by the World Bank has evolved over the past 50 years in response to the deepening understanding of the complexity of poverty. There have been several shifts of emphasis in the development discourse regarding approaches to poverty. During the 1950s and 1960s, many believed that large investments in infrastructure and physical capital

were key aspects for development. In the 1970s, education, health, and nutritional services were held to be important to promote the growth of income for poor people. Health and education were articulated in the World Development Report 1980 (WDR) as important not only in their own right but also to promote the incomes of poor people. The debt crisis and global recession in the 1980s led to an emphasis that focused on market forces and economic management. Governance, the role of institutions, and issues of vulnerability provided the latest focus of development actors in the 1990s. The World Development Report 2000/2001 built upon these earlier strategies to propose a programme for attacking poverty in three ways: promoting opportunity, facilitating empowerment, and enhancing security (World Development Report, 2000/2001).

The development discourse has recently been criticized for misrepresenting the conceptual view of poverty because it fails to include an adequate 'insider's perspective'. According to some scholars, development actors depict poverty as a neutral fact or a consequence of external circumstances rather than of social relations and policies (Yapa, 1996; Green, 1998; Hulme, 2005 in Misturelli & Heffernan, 2009). Misturelli & Heffernan (2009) while researching the reality of poverty among pastoralists and urban dwellers in Kenya found the discrepancy between perspectives of poor people and those offered by development actors were apparent. They found that although the poor equated poverty with a lack of material possessions (as do development actors) they do not consider it an outcome of external factors. Rather, the poor described poverty as a "contested perception" in which values,

judgements, beliefs, and experiences were intertwined (Misturelli & Heffernan, 2009, p. 181). The poor themselves cast moral judgements towards others trapped in poverty. For example, the poor in Misturelli & Heffernan's study identified 'laziness' as a cause of poverty and thus held strong views about the responsibility of the poor. "Poverty, as defined within the development discourse, does not fully capture the reality in which the poor live, which is formed also by values and beliefs specific to a given culture and setting [...] development actors often utilize a Western construct which does not entirely reflect the values and beliefs of the poor" (Misturelli & Heffernan, 2009, p. 167). Rather than viewing themselves as 'victims' of external circumstances, poor people 'own' their poverty, and perceive options that should enable them to overcome their personal deprivation (Misturelli & Heffernan, 2009). This conceptual divergence in the understanding of poverty exposes the origin of problems that exist in ill-designed programmes that are not responsive to the experiences of the poor. It also raises significant concerns over 'one-size-fits-all' approaches to poverty alleviation and the lack of 'relativism' in the poverty discourse.

#### **1.4 The 'Relativism' of Poverty**

Global efforts toward poverty alleviation should be influenced by specific contexts around the world. The actions of the international community are crucial for the world's poorest countries. Without the help from developed countries and multilateral organizations, these countries cannot construct financial stability or make major advances in health, agricultural research or education on their own (World Development Report, 2000/2001). Frameworks for poverty should, then,

be relative to the culture or context in which they are embedded, yet many agencies and organizations are guilty of standardizing experiences of poverty.

Development organizations have a tendency to homogenize the experience of poverty despite the diversity of social, political, and economic contexts. Numerous development organizations have used poverty as the reason for intervention and as a way to rank countries or regions on a poverty index ranging from poor to nonpoor. According to Green, "The quantification of poverty permits the homogenisation of poverty across time and space" (2006, p. 28). Hulme & Shepherd (2003) share similar views of international organization and in particular of the MDG programme: "Its consequences may not be beneficial [...] in particular, it encourages the conceptualization of the poor as a single homogeneous group whose prime problem is low monetary income and (this) has lead policymakers and their advisors to seek for 'the policy' that increases the income of the 'poor'" (p. 403). Considering poverty from the perspective of poverty indexes and poverty lines leads to comparison of the amount and "depth" of poverty rather than its causes and consequences (Green, 2006).

Context-specific characteristics shape individual conceptualizations of poverty. The Chronic Poverty Report (2004-5) identifies three types of factors that may be associated with an individual's experience of poverty. These factors include structural factors, idiosyncratic factors, and life cycle factors. Structural factors pertain to labour and markets, ethnicity, race, gender, religion, and disability. Idiosyncratic factors involve natural disasters, ill health or impairment.

Finally, life cycle factors can be anything from widowhood or being the youngest or oldest (Chronic Poverty Report 2004-5). Each of these describes factors that maintain or cause poverty in different contexts.

The following section will look at the poverty discourse in developing and developed countries. The differences in contexts between the poorest countries and the most developed countries have greatly influenced the research that has been conducted concerning poverty.

#### **1.4.1 The Poverty Discourse in Developing Countries**

War, political upheaval, and conflict describe the context in which many people in developing countries experience and conceptualize poverty. These challenges are often commonplace in developing countries alongside experiences of extreme hunger and malnutrition. The poor often lack adequate food and shelter, and education and health. Poor people in developing countries are also extremely vulnerable to ill health and natural disasters. Many who are poor in developing countries are powerless to fight against suffering multiple dimensions of poverty.

Poverty literature concerning developing countries has tended to focus on poverty measurements based on purchasing power parity and the World Bank's US\$1 a day measurement. The overemphasis on economic circumstances and monetary values in developing countries leads to narrow, economic solutions for poverty. For some, this is an adequate approach. Bhalla (2002) argues that growth is sufficient to enable individuals to have some purchasing power and to



receive some public goods. While economic explanations or alleviation programmes are of value they fail to uncover the reasons why people fall well below the poverty line.

The poverty discourse has been dominated by economic studies that fail to get beyond quantifiable values, and research that examines the reasons for impoverishment has been pursued much less. Nandy (2008) examines the 'maintainers' of poverty in developing countries and argues that 'economic sectors', 'ethnicity', and 'age' are among the causes of poverty. Agriculture in developing countries is the main economic sector in which the poor are engaged. Many of the poor involved in agriculture face significant challenges arising from pressure on land and the inadequacy of their resources that may be exacerbated by degradation. Ethnicity in developing countries can negatively affect social status and ability for upward movement in society. Certain ethnic groups in developing countries experience discrimination that makes it impossible for individuals to escape poverty. The absence of pensions or old age security plans forces the elderly in developing countries to depend on their children for security. With limited employment prospects for future generations, the elderly are often extremely vulnerable. All three principal causes of poverty explain why issues of access and resource inequality also become the focus in poverty literature concerning developing countries.

The majority of what is known about poverty in developing countries has resulted from World Bank research efforts. The World Bank's annual World Development Report (WDR) has focused on poverty specifically in two reports,

the World Development Report 1990 and the World Development Report 2000/2001. The two reports reflect the gradual change in the treatment of poverty in developing countries, from an economic viewpoint to a focus on the multidimensional nature of the concept. The WDR 1990 focused on a twofold strategy of poverty reduction: to encourage the most productive asset of the poor, labour and to provide basic social services such as health, education, and family planning to the poor. The majority of the discussion concerning poverty in this report was phrased in terms of economic growth, and failed to elaborate on multidimensional aspects of poverty (World Development Report, 1990). The WDR 2000/2001 reflects the recognition that poverty encompasses more than inadequate income or human development- it also involves vulnerability and the lack of voice for many who are powerless in society. This report encourages the active participation of both national and international actors to follow through with comprehensive strategies of poverty reduction that focus on, as stated earlier, opportunities, empowerment, and security (World Development Report, 2001).

#### **1.4.2 The Poverty Discourse in Developed Countries**

Similarly, poverty literature in developed countries has focused on many aspects such as income, consumption, and measurements of the poor as in developing countries. In contrast, social exclusion and 'derogatory' associations of the poor are much more prevalent in the poverty discourse in developed countries. These two aspects are embedded in the DTES as the poor in this area experience the pressures of being the "disreputable poor" from the perspective of outside observers, that lead to feelings of exclusion.

The literature on poverty in the Western world has largely focused on the theory of 'social exclusion'. Emerging mainly in Europe in the 1980s, social exclusion refers to the dynamic processes through which people are isolated from some or several of the systems that influence economic and social integration in a particular society (Commins, 2004). Certain groups or individuals in society experience differential treatment and become socially excluded based on race, gender, age or ethnicity (Global and Social Development Resource Centre, 2006). Furthermore, social exclusion can occur through differences in lifestyles, for example, some are discriminated against because they engage in activities and social relations that perpetuate their experience of poverty (Green, 2006; CPR, 2004-5). There is no single criterion for identifying those who are socially excluded, nor is it necessarily visible. People may be excluded because they are born into an excluded group (being born with a disability), due to changes in circumstances (such as migration), or because of where they live (for example, urban slums). Exclusion can take place across several dimensions: economic, social, cultural, and political by official systems including health or education to unofficial arenas of the household or community (Global and Social Development Resource Centre, 2006). Hills & Stewart (2005) emphasized four aspects of social exclusion including education, employment, health, and political and social participation. Therefore, social exclusion is a process that focuses on "who" is being excluded and by which institutions they are denied access. According to Commins (2004), the rights of citizenship need to be recognized

and the collaboration of institutions needs to be established in order to promote integration into mainstream society for many on the margins.

The theory of “social exclusion,” ingrained in Western society, produces exclusionary practices against individuals claiming welfare. Welfare in many developed countries is accompanied by an ideology that regards poverty as being the outcome of individuals’ failures to satisfy their economic responsibilities. This way of thinking implies that poverty is a condition that is caused by ‘rational choice’ (Green, 2006). Much literature concerning poverty in developed countries is concerned with ideas about ‘derogatory poor’ or ‘dangerous classes’ (Matza, 1966 in Valentine, 1968). Valentine (1968) argues that it is rare to see poverty research that does not directly refer to the pathology or disorganization of the poor in relation to the middle classes. Matza (1966) in his work “The Disreputable Poor,” describes the poor who remain unemployed or casually employed. Matza further elaborates on his theory of the “disreputable poor” using a nineteenth-century conception of the pauper or those who have lost all self-respect and ambition. Therefore, for Matza, the ‘paupers’ in modern societies are the “underclasses” including the beggars, prostitutes, and drunks who have fallen into poverty at the hands of today’s privileged classes (Matza 1966 in Valentine, 1968).

Matza’s theory of “the disreputable poor” or the “dangerous classes” contributes to the assumptions of outsiders, many of which are widespread but often fail to represent the reality of the poor. For example, outside perspectives on the DTES include the belief that all the poor need to do in this area is learn

the value of work. This mindset does not do justice to the complexity of deepening poverty in the DTES and the context in which it began. The following chapter describes the historical events in the DTES that influenced the composition of the area, centred on East Hastings, through time.

## **2: FROM COMMERCIAL HUB TO CANADA'S 'NOTORIOUS SLUM'**

For the first half of the twentieth century, the 200 hectare area that today constitutes the Downtown Eastside was the city's commercial hub. At this time, this area was comprised of the working-class community of people who were employed at canneries, meatpacking plants, metalworking shops, and sawmills (Woolford, 2001). Deindustrialization and disinvestment over the past couple of decades has undermined the economic viability of this area and without former sources of employment, some have been forced to rely on the social services that are available in this area (Mason, 2007). Today, Vancouver's 'notorious urban slum' continues to experience deepening poverty, an open drug market, increasing crime rates, and widening disadvantages. The density of the population of the poor concentrated in the DTES has been influenced by two major factors including exclusion from city planning and preservation, as well as forced displacement as a consequence of EXPO '86. The combination of these two factors and other circumstances such as the gradual closure of mental health facilities and the introduction of intravenous drugs have contributed to the changes that have taken place and to the deepening poverty that is prevalent in this area today.

In the late 1950s, the area had changed from the boom of industrialization to having become Canada's 'skid row' complete with drugs, alcohol, prostitution,

and a concentration of social services in the area. Attempts in the 1960s to improve DTES conditions included Project 200, backed by a number of developers, business interests, and three levels of government, to build approximately 36 high rises and a freeway extension (Smith, 2002). Successful lobbying on the part of the residents of Gastown and the DTES who were concerned to preserve “Vancouver’s birthplace and first ethnic enclave” dismantled this project (Smith, 2002, p. 498). In February 1971, the protection of Gastown and Chinatown as historic sites under the Archaeological and Historic Sites Protection Act led to the exclusion of the DTES from city planning (Smith, 2002). The revitalization of the surrounding areas has contributed to its stigmatization and the experience of social exclusion for those living there.

In addition to the revitalization of surrounding areas such as Gastown and Chinatown, the DTES also contended with the aftermath of EXPO '86. In 1986, Vancouver hosted the World’s Fair (EXPO '86) and as a result, accommodation was needed to house visitors. The Fair provided an easy way to make money for many hotel owners in the DTES, who converted the majority of Single Room Occupancy housing (SROs) into tourist lodgings. Several hundred long-term tenants of these SROs were displaced, many of them elderly, impoverished, and in frail health. In the end, playing host to EXPO'86 caused the loss of approximately 2,000 low-income housing units (Olds, 1989 in Smith, 2002, p. 499).

The gradual closure of Riverview Hospital for the mentally ill located in Coquitlam, British Columbia, just outside of Vancouver, has significantly

influenced the composition of the population living on the streets in the DTES. In the early 1900s, the establishment operating under the governance of BC Mental Health & Addiction Services built extra buildings on the property to meet the growing needs of mentally ill patients. The new buildings called the West Lawn (1913), the East Lawn (1924), and the North Lawn (1955) immediately began treating patients. Eventual cutbacks in funding and a move to deinstitutionalize the mentally ill resulted in fewer people receiving mental health services across the province. The closure of the first building, West Lawn, occurred in 1983 and was followed thereafter with the closures of the East Lawn building in 2005 and of the North Lawn building in 2007, after the provincial government sold 57 hectares of Riverview's property. By January of 2009, only 256 patients remained at Riverview (BC Mental Health & Addiction Services, 2009). The initiative to deinstitutionalize reflected the good intention to correct the questionable care that patients received in such institutions but it left many without a sense of real life in the outside world. While these initiatives valued the opportunity for patients to live in dignity, they did not provide a sufficient support system that would enable them to integrate into community living. Harald Urstad of the Coquitlam NOW, a local newspaper, commented that "It was not well-recognized that institutions themselves had created symptoms beyond the mental illness and often acted as more formidable barriers to successful community living than the psychiatric illness itself" (Urstad, 11 April 2008). Therefore, without support for establishing a normal lifestyle and social networks,



many of the previous patients of Riverview found themselves on the streets of the DTES, further changing the makeup of the area.

In the late 1980s, the population of the DTES started to change and evolve. Younger tenants, a growing Aboriginal population, mentally ill patients, and new immigrants (Ley, 2008) were occupying the remaining SROs. It was not long before drug use and criminal activity increased in the area. The introduction of intravenous crack cocaine in the DTES also led to the makings of an HIV/AIDS epidemic, along with other infectious diseases such as Hepatitis C and syphilis. By 1997, between 6,000 and 10,000 addicts either living in or frequenting the area were infected with HIV (Smith, 2002, p. 500). In the same year, the Vancouver Health Board declared a state of health emergency in response to the levels of known HIV/AIDS infections in the DTES. The changing landscape of the DTES also involved the deterioration of many shops along Hastings between Cambie and Main Street. Pawnshops, second-hand stores, pubs, and twenty-four hour coffee shops replaced many of the previous stores and some acted as a front for the local drug trade (Smith, 2002).

The evolution of the DTES has resulted in its containing Vancouver's highest concentration of low-income housing. Two types of housing exist in the area including SROs in rooming houses or residential hotels and non-market housing managed and/or subsidised by the city, province or non-profit organizations. Although SROs offer housing of last resort for people with low incomes, the steady decline in the numbers of SROs in the area has increased homelessness in the city (Smith, 2002). Many SROs are located in century old

buildings that require a lot of costly and timely repairs. The majority of rooms in these 'slum' hotels can cost up to 65 percent of a person's monthly social assistance money. The money pays for a room lacking basic amenities such as a refrigerator, stove, and private bathroom, as well as security (Benoit, Carroll and Chaudhry, 2003). The majority of "slumlords" allow SROs to become run down and infested with rats and bugs. Some of the homeless of the DTES choose to face the elements outside rather than be at the mercy of rats and bed bugs in a 12x9 ft room.

The first time the DTES gained international notoriety was its association with the disappearances and murders of 69 sex workers. The disappearances of the women were thought to have occurred in the late 1970s but were not reported until 1996. In 2002, police investigated the Port Coquitlam pig farm of Robert Pickton finding evidence that linked him to the disappearance of at least 50 women over the last twenty years or more (Williams, 8 February 2002). The majority of the women's bodies were fed to pigs while some body parts remained on Pickton's farm. In 2007, after hearing the evidence of 100s of witnesses, many families of the known murdered women were disappointed by the second-degree murder conviction (Culbert & Hall, 13 August 2007). Many relatives of the victims felt that conviction of Pickton for first-degree murder would have been more appropriate and that their loved ones had been treated as "second-class citizens" because they were known drug users and frequented the streets of the DTES as prostitutes (BBC News, 10 December 2007).

The spotlight on Canada's poorest postal code declined until the announcement that Vancouver would host the 2010 Olympics. With less than a year until the opening of the Olympics, the city of Vancouver is attempting to 'clean the streets' of the DTES, limiting the embarrassment that urban homelessness will have in the international arena. Those that live in the DTES have been anxious to see the city's response to the encroaching Olympics. Rumours of the city's plans to hand out one-way tickets back to home provinces have created an upheaval among the occupants of this area. The city of Vancouver authorities maintain, however, that they will be focusing on "revitalization without displacement" in preparation for the big sports fair (Ley, 2008).

### **3: LIFE HISTORIES**

Ethnographic methods usually require researchers to have direct exposure to the lives of a particular group. One method commonly used in anthropology has been the life history approach. Essentially this approach encourages an informant to talk about his or her life chronologically, so that the researcher is able to obtain informants' accounts of their life events (Agar, 1980). Narratives, based on facts, reveal how the informants position themselves with respect to their environments. While the life history method is an effective way to acquire this information, it also has some limitations. One problem with this approach is that it requires lengthy and rigorous work with individuals, and the numbers covered in any one study are likely to be restricted, making generalization difficult. It is often the case, however, that experiences are common amongst informants with similar backgrounds, allowing the researcher to form generalizations about the specific social context (Misturelli & Heffernan, 2009). The following section outlines the procedures that I followed in this research including the selection of informants, data collection, the analysis of data, and the challenges I encountered conducting poverty research. Finally, I provide a brief account of each of the life histories of my five informants-Jason, Edward, Virginia, Joseph, and Carlos.

### **3.1 Methods of Research: Selection, Collection, and Analysis**

Given the aims, resource limitations and time constraints of this research, the life history approach was the most feasible method for obtaining an understanding of localized conceptualizations of poverty in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. I collected five life histories in order to explore these conceptualizations and movements into and, in some cases, out of poverty. Contact with the participants took place over a period of two months through a volunteer position at a local organization in the DTES. This position involved establishing relationships with residents of the DTES by playing games such as crib or scrabble, painting, and distributing meals. Informants who participated in my research volunteered to tell me their life histories. Because the DTES has been well-researched, the explanation of my objectives was quite easy, but an element of trust was more difficult to establish among informants for the same reason. I also conducted interviews with officials or people employed at administrative levels in this area. In keeping with the guidelines stated in the Simon Fraser University Committee on Research Ethics, the names of participants were changed to protect their identities.

The life histories were recorded using a digital recorder. In accordance with the life history approach, informants were asked to talk about the events of their life in a chronological order. If needed they were prompted to elaborate on certain experiences or asked questions concerning their early childhood, adolescence or adulthood. They were asked specifically what factors they felt led to their experience of poverty. Additionally, informants were questioned

about what constitutes a 'state of poverty' and how they conceptualized poverty in the DTES including the deprivation of intangible and physical factors.

Following the collection and recording of these life histories, the information was analysed and transcribed at the end of each interview. In order to guard against the misrepresentation of life histories by selection only of the material that seemed to fit with my preconceived notions, every life history was transcribed. The analysis of life histories included the exploration of any trends, patterns or commonalities that emerged from the transcriptions.

The primary research posed significant ethical challenges that can apply to all research with poor people. The prime goal was not to empower or benefit the informants, but rather to transcend the gap between the poor and outsiders. For some of the poor, time is very valuable. This is especially true for addicts who spend the better part of their day trying to find money and 'score' drugs. Additionally, expectations had to be stated clearly prior to the life history sessions. Many of the poor, prior to the interview, expected compensation in exchange for their assistance – and some kind of compensation was unavoidable, even if only in the form of coffees, cigarettes, or food. Perhaps more importantly, informants may have felt a sense of inclusion and pride in their participation in this research.

### **3.2 The Representativeness and Limitations of the Life History Approach**

The complexity of the life history approach limits the sample and therefore the representativeness of the research. However, this approach allows for an in-

depth look at participants' worldviews, providing an insider's (or emic) perspective. Compared to qualitative methods such as the life history, quantitative methods often fail to provide such comprehensive and detailed understandings of informants' perspectives.

In order to maximize the representativeness of this research, many careful research decisions were made. First, key informants were selected randomly, every member of the group with whom I had contact had an equal chance of being included. Second, the information collected was checked among key informants and among others in the wider group, to increase the credibility of statements as representative of the poor. Third, narratives collected were further strengthened by work done independently by surveys. Factors such as addiction, for example, are embedded in this particular social context and reflected in data from survey research conducted by the City of Vancouver.<sup>2</sup> In 2005, the City of Vancouver found that 49% of the homeless in the DTES suffered from addictions. In this case, the small sample of life histories, along with references to comparative survey data, were sufficient to provide an account of conceptualizations of poverty that represent at least some of the poor in the DTES. Finally, variation was found in the sample of all five life histories. The

<sup>2</sup> This 'homeless count' conducted by the City of Vancouver in September 2005 was intended to provide quality information about the current size and nature of the homeless population in regions of Vancouver. Someone was considered 'homeless' in this count if they did not have a place of their own where they could expect to stay for more than 30 days. The count took place on March 15, 2005 and used survey data to acquire its percentages. Staff at emergency shelters, transition houses, and safe houses were asked to fill out brief survey forms anonymously about all the people who stayed with them on that night. Homelessness by its very nature is difficult to measure and thus, the homeless count conducted on March 15, 2005 is likely an undercount (because it does not include people in detox facilities, recovery houses, or people who are couch surfing). That being said, the information in the count provides the best available current data about homelessness in Vancouver (City of Vancouver, 2005).

informants - Joseph, Virginia, Edward, Jason, and Carlos- provided this research with a diversity of backgrounds ranging from experiences of immigration, addiction, mental illness, disconnection from families, and generational poverty. Additionally, informants represented a diversity of genders, religious and ethnic identities, and ages.

Despite these efforts to maximize the representativeness of this research, this small sample of life histories offers only a partial view of poverty in the DTES and cannot adequately characterize the views of all of the poor of the DTES. Conceptualizations of poverty presented in this paper may also be predisposed to bias because of demographics. The female viewpoint was under-represented in this research. Females often occupy shelters and facilities in the DTES that are specifically for women, many of which are off-limits to researchers looking for intensive personal data. Additionally, the views of disadvantaged youths are not represented at all. Ethics guidelines prohibited research concerning minors and thus necessarily limited the scope of this research.

The representativeness of any research is pragmatic. However, I have attempted to be as explicit as possible concerning the nature of my study, the problematic quantity of my sample, and my biases in this research. It would be difficult for any study, regardless of the measurement problems, to represent the hundreds of diverse conceptualizations that exist in the DTES, especially with this level of detail.



### **3.3 Personal Trajectories of Poverty in the DTES**

In this section I briefly describe the five life histories of my informants- Jason, Edward, Virginia, Joseph, and Carlos. The accounts of their lives illustrate their own personal struggles against poverty and, for one of the informants, his eventual movement out of poverty. The life histories that follow were very challenging to uncover but during the course of this research, I have gained the deepest appreciation for my informants and their histories.

#### **3.3.1 Jason**

Born in 1950 in Ontario, Jason was the oldest of seven children. He lived in a “modest” house with his parents who he says, were “hardworking people.” Jason’s father, a blue-collar worker and his stay-at-home mother, had no idea that Jason and his twin brother Robert were being abused by a close relative by the time of their fifth birthday. The molestation and abuse continued for years, reflecting the significant gap in Jason’s life history. The only other memory he would share from his childhood was his first experience of alcohol. When Jason was just ten years old, he opened a bottle of his father’s whiskey and drank two glasses. His parents were not home at the time, so he was never caught and although he was sick afterwards, Jason would not be turned off alcohol.

Jason’s story continues with his marriage to his high school girlfriend, Terri, when he was 21 years old. At the time of his marriage, Jason was working in nickel mines. During the course of five years, Jason and Terri had three children, two girls and a boy. It was whilst Terri was pregnant with their first child, that Jason began to drink heavily. Despite his heavy drinking habits,

Jason never drank at home. He says, "I was never a social drunk. I never went to the tavern to drink. I drank in my van before and after work." Jason was a very high functioning alcoholic. He took on several odd jobs to support his habit including a stint at a funeral home.

At 29, Jason separated from Terri. He said that this was a mutual separation but was mostly caused by his excessive drinking. Although he loved his children, Jason moved out of his family home and soon became acquainted with another woman. This woman became his girlfriend and after a few months, Jason quit his job and followed her to Vancouver, where she came from originally. Jason lived with her and a friend of hers for several months. Soon after his arrival in Vancouver, however (he cannot recall exactly how long) Jason and his girlfriend broke up. Jason was then homeless, without a job, money, or any form of support system. Jason says that he lived bouncing from shelter to shelter until he moved to Vancouver Island with a friend from Ontario. While living there, Jason worked in an old age home as a support worker and cook. He says that this job that gave him the confidence to overcome his addiction to alcohol.

In 1983, Jason moved back to the DTES. With the modest savings he had been able to build up as a support worker, Jason found an apartment in the neighbourhood. During this time Jason says that he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Also at this time, Jason reconnected with his daughters and son. Since overcoming his alcoholism, Jason has become a sponsor at a local Alcoholics Anonymous group just over two months ago. Due to a bad back and

other health-related problems, Jason has been living on government disability benefits since his time as a support worker. It has only been recently that Jason has become dissatisfied with not working. He is now working towards re-entering the labour force by way of a programme called 'Achieve'. Jason also has been selected to move into the new apartments located on East Hastings, a step up from his current apartment. Jason is working towards bettering his situation and a trip to see his children, hopefully next year.

### **3.3.2 Edward**

Of Aboriginal descent, Edward grew up on a reserve in Northern Ontario. Edward was the youngest of five children. His mother had experienced residential school systems and instilled the school's values in her children. Edward and his brothers and sisters were all made to believe that their own culture was "dirty," "sinful," and "wrong." Instead of the practices of traditional native culture, Edward was taught Christian values. He eventually felt ashamed of his native heritage. At 10, Edward experienced his first taste of alcohol.

While Edward was around 13 years old, he moved in with his cousin in Vancouver. He continued to abuse alcohol. He got a job working in retail while still continuing to drink, Edward says "I had all of the tricks, I would go to the bathroom during work and have a drink, brush my teeth, use Visine, and breath mints." Soon, Edward's cousin kicked him out of the apartment. At one point, Edward was sleeping on a 'friend's' balcony. They were his 'friends' especially when he received a paycheque.

Edward hit 'rock bottom' when he was involved in a fight, after which the police were looking for him. Afraid of the consequences if the police found him, Edward -admitted himself to a detox centre in the DTES. Since his experience at detox, Edward has been sober. After overcoming his alcoholism, Edward has been working in the DTES at an organization that helps the poor people in the neighbourhood. He is also working towards building his own organization promoting wellness and life skills. His work in the DTES has been influenced by his renewed interest in his heritage and cultural background.

### **3.3.3 Virginia**

Virginia is the only one of my informants who grew up in the DTES, living in SROs on East Hastings Street. At a very young age, Virginia's mother left her home just outside of Vancouver and eventually landed in the DTES. Her mother has had various addictions and has prostituted herself to pay for those addictions. Virginia has learned by example -she was 12 when she first drank and 16 when she started using drugs. Currently, Virginia is addicted to "rock" the lowest and cheapest form of cocaine and uses prostitution as a source of income.

Virginia was not able to describe her childhood growing up in the neighbourhood at all clearly. She did say that she spent a number of years in foster homes but eventually reconnected with her mother when she was 18. In her twenties, she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and has been off and on prescription medication since. During the course of her thirty-odd years, Virginia has had three pregnancies. All three babies were given up for adoption after

birth and she has not seen or heard from them since their adoption. She says, “I want to get clean for my babies.” However, Virginia says she has tried several day-detox treatment facilities but that none of them has helped her. After her mother’s disconnection from her own family, Virginia only has her mother to rely on. Virginia’s only ‘family’, otherwise, is other prostitutes and the drug dealers she visits daily, leaving her little support for improving her standards of living.

### **3.3.4 Joseph**

In his late forties, Joseph is originally from Halifax, Nova Scotia. Joseph, the middle of six children, said he had a relatively happy childhood. His parents were far from wealthy, his mother stayed at home while his father was a custodian at an elementary school. In his late teens, Joseph began to drink alcohol. He says, “I drank because I thought it was normal. My father was a functioning alcoholic all of my life.” Two years after he started drinking, Joseph’s parents told him he had to stop drinking, or leave. Joseph decided to leave. He has not talked to any of his family since he left almost thirty years ago, except for a single phone call from one of his sisters. Joseph says he feels “excluded” and “unwanted” by this family.

When he left home, he moved to Alberta to look for work. He worked as a cook in a camp in Alberta before heading to Vancouver, to connect with an “ol’ buddy from back home.” Since arriving in Vancouver Joseph has worked on a farm, as a custodian, and as a truck driver. Joseph’s sporadic employment history coupled with his alcoholism made the DTES the most affordable place for him to live. Currently, Joseph is still living in the DTES but has stopped drinking

due to a health scare. Throughout the years he has lived in the DTES, Joseph has made many friends, whom he calls “my family.”

### **3.3.5 Carlos**

Carlos first arrived in Vancouver in 1992 from El Salvador. He wanted to escape the political upheaval and insecurity in his own country, in order to provide more opportunities for his family. Once in Canada, with very little money, Carlos, his wife and sons, lived in the DTES because it offered affordable housing. Carlos found odd jobs cleaning but when he was offered the possibility of selling drugs by an acquaintance on the street, he became addicted to cocaine. As a participant in guerrilla warfare in his native country, Carlos suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder making drugs even more attractive. Carlos referred to the “numbness” he would feel from the drug, to “numb the pain of past memories.” Three years after first arriving in Canada, Carlos’ wife left him to live with family in Ontario. He said, “My addiction consumed my life. I didn’t think about my boys or my wife, I was not myself.”

For the past five years, Carlos has been sober. He has since played a more active role in his children’s lives, calling them weekly. Carlos continues to live in the DTES, earning well below the poverty line<sup>3</sup> but is now an activist for

<sup>3</sup> Unlike the United States, Canada has no official poverty line but researchers have used Statistics Canada’s Low-Income Cut-Offs (LICOs) as poverty thresholds. Sarlo (2001) argues that LICOs have a number of serious flaws, for example, the measure fails to provide regional differentials in costs that matter such as housing. Despite its regular use as a ‘poverty line’, LICOs identify those who are substantially worse off than the average. In recent years, Vancouver has had a persistently high after-tax low-income rate; in 2004 the rate was 17%. It is standard practice for Statistics Canada to define a low-income neighbourhood as one with a low-income rate that is greater than 40%. For Vancouver, the DTES has the highest low-income rate (Statistics Canada, 2006).

the community. Carlos is involved in various groups that congregate at the Carnegie Hall to discuss empowerment strategies for the “poorest of the poor.” For example, one of the problems he has been focusing on is that of improving the safety and security of prostitutes in the DTES. Carlos will not be leaving the DTES anytime soon, and will be there to promote the interconnectedness and acceptance of the community.

The willingness of my informants to participate in this research emphasizes both the need for ‘voices of the poor’ to be heard and the fact that they themselves want to be heard. The following section will show that the identity of the poor and the perceptions of poverty of the poor themselves diverge from ‘etic’ perspectives that may be increasingly acknowledged but quite often misconstrued.

## **4: CONCEPTUALIZING POVERTY**

The stigma of poverty is a recurring theme in the development discourse. The advancement of poverty research in the 21st century has promoted the recognition that preventive strategies should be based on the experiences and reflections of the poor, themselves (Narayan, Chambers, Shah and Petesch, 2000). Since perceptions are influenced by cultural, social, economic, and political habits that are current in an individual's society, the outside or '-etic'- perspective is also extremely important. The 'relativism' of poverty is examined in the following sections by identifying the poor in the DTES and developing countries, the etic viewpoint of the causes of poverty from mainstream literature, and the factors that determine movements into and out of poverty in developing countries and Vancouver.

### **4.1 The Identification of the Poor**

The identity of the poor is very rarely portrayed in existing poverty literature. The aim of this section is to provide the reader with a sense of the identities of the poor in the DTES and developing countries, in the hopes of overcoming any preconceived notions we may have about these people. The identification of the poor in the DTES is supported by survey data to strengthen the empirical analysis, given the limitations of my own research.



#### **4.1.1 The Identity of the Poor in the DTES**

The identification of the poor in the DTES is important for several reasons. First, it reveals the identity of those who are usually 'invisible' in our society and quite often perceived as 'dangerous'. Second, understanding and recognizing the diverse contexts in which the poor live are essential to identifying lasting solutions to poverty. The poor in the DTES come from a wide array of backgrounds, social classes, and ethnicities offering newcomers an accepting place to belong. For residents of the DTES who find themselves living in this area due to shocks such as divorce, job loss, drug dependency, and generational poverty, the DTES offers acceptance. The informants in this research including Joseph, Virginia, Edward, Jason, and Carlos provide a cross-section of the diverse backgrounds of the many people living and experiencing poverty in this area.

Carlos, from El Salvador, has lived in the DTES since arriving in Canada in 1992. As an addict and a drug dealer, Carlos was avoiding underlying feelings of post-traumatic stress disorder due to experiences of guerrilla warfare in his native country. Now sober for five years, Carlos is a member of the DTES community and actively seeks improvements for the people living within its boundaries. After years of experiencing and observing the dynamics of the DTES, Carlos has very definite ideas of the organizational structure of those who live in the area. These categories or levels of 'being poor', range from the "street vendors" to the "third party" responsible for representation of the DTES. Carlos even identifies himself in the category that describes the people who still

experience poverty but who are also involved in activist movements and volunteer positions at local shelters.

There are six categories identified by Carlos that generally describe the 'make-up' of the DTES. The first are the "dumpster divers" or the people who choose to face the elements outdoors instead of facing the rats and bed bugs that infest many of the SROs. These people rummage through garbage to find things to vend on the streets, lining up their carts and displaying their items around East Hastings and Oppenheimer Park on Powell Street. The second category is that of the mentally ill who, according to the City of Vancouver (2005) account for 25% of the population in the DTES and are easy targets for drug dealers. A staggering 70% of people suffering mental illness also have addictions (City of Vancouver, 2005). The third category, the 'addicts' or 'drug users' who frequent the 'Carnegie Pharmacy', largely choose to be poor as part of the disease that is addiction (according to Carlos). The fourth category is made up of the people who still experience poverty but are also volunteers at local organizations in the DTES. The fifth category consists of the 'working class' that live in houses on the peripheries of the DTES. Finally, the "vultures" or the "third party" perpetuate the experience of being poor. This category includes the people responsible for the representation of the poor in the DTES including those working with housing policies, social workers, and other government officials that take full advantage of poverty as a 'big business' or profiting from the continuing deepening of poverty in this area.

The accessibility of drugs in the DTES increases the number of poor addicts in the area. According to the City of Vancouver (2005), 49% of the homeless suffer from addictions. Edward , who has first-hand experience of addiction and living in the DTES, says that while many of the poor in the DTES are without full-time employment, and “Being an addict is a full-time job.” Drugs, offering alleviation from past or present abuses, take time and work to acquire. Furthermore, many of the large population suffering from mental illnesses in the area self-medicate with an assortment of drugs that are available on the streets. Three out of the five informants involved in this research have been diagnosed with mental illnesses, and during the course of their illness all three experimented with self-medication.

For others their experience of poverty in the DTES has been generational. Virginia, a thirty-something woman, has been living in the area her whole life. She lives in one of the notorious SRO hotels and one of her neighbours is her mother. At an early age, Virginia learned dangerous behaviour from her mother including prostitution and drug use. The experience of generational poverty, or what Edward refers to as “learned helplessness” is difficult to overcome. On the other hand, others experience more encouragement to take full advantage of the social provisions and resources available in the area. Jason, a native of Ontario, is edging close to 60 years old and has worked in nickel mines from a very young age. As a ‘functioning alcoholic’ working was always a priority for Jason to provide for his family. After losing his job, his family, and material possessions Jason came to the DTES where he has lived off-and-on for thirty years. Now

sober for twenty years, Jason still lives in the DTES but takes full advantage of opportunities including cooking classes that could lead to employment opportunities.

The landscape of the DTES is for the most part multi-cultural but there is a disproportionate number of Aboriginal residents. According to Robertson (2007), forty percent of the residents of the DTES are Aboriginal. Given that two thirds of Canada's urban Aboriginal population lives in Western Canada (Benoit et al., 2003, p. 822) and that this group earns far below the average income of their rural counterparts, it is no wonder that urban Aboriginal people have a comparatively high rate of homelessness. An estimated seventy percent of Vancouver's total Aboriginal population live in the DTES. Others have come to the DTES after being displaced from other areas of the province or have migrated from other areas of Canada (Benoit et al., 2003). Edward, of Aboriginal descent, has come to the DTES from a reserve in Ontario. Throughout his entire life, Edward has been affected by assimilation. Edward's mother's experiences in the residential school system influenced Edward to feel ashamed of their native culture. Currently, Edward has forged past these ill-perceived notions of culture and has been actively preserving his heritage by learning cultural traditions of his descent.

Evidently, the poor of Vancouver's DTES come from and experience extremely diverse backgrounds and daily lives. In the next section, the identification of the poor in developing countries is contrasted with those in the DTES to emphasize the necessity of localized definitions of poverty.

#### **4.1.2 The Identity of the Poor in Developing Countries**

The poor in developing countries live in rural communities and urban slums. In rural settings, the poor are involved in agriculture, fishing, and raising livestock (Flores, 2002). In contrast, the prospects in cities may be slight, forcing many of the urban poor to rely solely on charities for their survival (Kunfaa & Dogbe, 2002). Poverty touches all social groups in developing countries, yet women, the elderly, and children appear to be the most vulnerable to poverty.

Women in developing countries face a combination of widening disadvantages and low social status that contribute to their risk of poverty. In many developing countries women are unable to inherit property and own land. Additionally, their earning potential is low in comparison to their male counterparts in similar occupations (Kunfaa & Dogbe, 2002). Consequently, the absence of a male earner is often strongly related to poverty, and female-headed households are disproportionately represented among the poor. This trend is widespread and reflected in Africa, parts of Latin America, and South and East Asia (Ray, 1998).

In many developing countries, offspring are generally a substitute for missing institutions, notably the institution of 'old age security'. Institutions that ensure retirement security are rarely available to people working in the informal sector. Individuals with terribly low wages have very little left over after their consumption needs are barely met (Ray, 1998). Children, on the other hand, are assets that do not need to be bought and provide income in the form of labour power. Consequently, children are often seen as an 'investment good'; that is,

as a source of income for families, and especially for aging parents (Ray, 1998, p. 308).

In developing countries, children constitute the third most vulnerable group liable to fall into poverty. Whether responsible for providing an income for family members or orphaned, children face significant challenges in avoiding poverty. Decreased availability of land and resources in many developing countries has led to increasing cases of child labour. In some instances, children have become the main breadwinner (Kumar, 2002). In addition to children working to support their families, children who are orphans are also extremely vulnerable to poverty. Currently in Malawi, for example, there is a growing number of orphaned children. Children become orphaned when their family members die or are unable to care for them. In recent years, the rise of AIDS/HIV has been the principle cause for the orphaning of children (Kadzandira, Khaila and Mvula, 2002).

The identification of the poor is the first step in establishing the poor's perceptions of poverty. The context, in which the poor live, as we have seen, plays a large role in determining who will become poor. For example, in the DTES, the majority of the poor suffer from mental health illnesses but in developing countries, females face widening inequality that perpetuates their status as poor. The identification of the poor is particularly important for fighting against the preconceived notions of outsiders about vulnerable populations.

## **4.2 Mainstream Poverty Analysis: Causes of Poverty**

Mainstream analyses of poverty emphasize that there is no single cause of poverty or way to move out of poverty. Multiple interacting factors are responsible for propelling the majority of people into poverty. This section briefly identifies the causes of poverty and how people move out of poverty as presented in contemporary literature.

### **4.2.1 Causes of Poverty in Developing Countries**

In developing countries there is a multiplicity of factors responsible for causing poverty. Mainstream poverty research tends to converge on a number of factors that cause movements into poverty: the lack of assets; poor work opportunities; lack of education; and social discrimination. These various factors interact to produce vicious cycles of poverty or 'poverty traps' manifested in malnutrition, illiteracy, and the inability to access basic goods and services.

Ownership of assets is crucial to prevent a decline into poverty for many households in developing countries. Without adequate assets, the poor are unable to cope with shocks and stresses. Such stresses are reflected in Krishna's (2007) argument concerning the causes of poverty. First, ill-health reduces the earning potential of a household's members and the absence of affordable healthcare intensifies the burden on the household. Second, social and customary practices such as marriages and funerals can burden the household's expenditures. Third, high-interest private debts prevalent in the poorest countries are often the cause of poverty. These may result from marriage- and/or health-related costs (Krishna, 2007). The WDR 2000/2001

argues that it is necessary to think of people's assets and the returns or productivity of these assets, to determine the causes of poverty. Assets of several types including human assets, physical assets, financial assets, and social assets are utilized by the Report to gain insight into the determinants of poverty. The Report concluded that "access" to assets may be blocked or hampered by a number of variables such as the performance of state institutions, the legal structure that defines property and customary rights, and explicit discrimination, all of which can be distinguished as causes for descent into poverty (WDR, 2000/2001).

Work opportunities can be limited when economic growth is limited. Many of the poor decline into poverty as a consequence of insecure, low paid, unsafe, and exploitative work (CPR, 2008). Opportunities are particularly narrow for individuals without education. Nandy (2008) argues that most studies show lower incidences of poverty in non-manual or skilled occupations. Prospects for attaining skilled employment are dependent on education. A lack of access to human capital was emphasized as one of the causes of poverty in research conducted by Grootaert, Kunbur, and Oh (1995) in Africa. Grootaert et al. (1995) found that households with educated members were more likely to avoid the pressures of falling into poverty and it was the skills learned through education that earned access to regular waged employment.

Social discrimination defines another accepted cause of poverty in developing countries that is closely linked to the attainment of assets. According to the CPR, "[...] poor people often have social relations of power, patronage and



competition that can trap them in exploitative relationships or deny them access to public and private goods and services” (2008, p. 8). Discrimination can be based on class and caste, gender, religious and ethnic identity, or age. The majority of those who are discriminated against, lack a meaningful political voice (CPR, 2008).

Globalization is creating a world in which it is becoming increasingly difficult for the poorest populations to escape poverty. There is a broad range of factors identified as the causes of poverty: lack of assets, lack of skilled labour, lack of education, and social discrimination. The opposites of these factors are responsible for determining movements out of poverty. In addition to these factors, mainstream poverty research has also emphasized information, a diversification of labour, and strengthening institutions as additional factors that contribute to movements out of poverty. Typically the poor lack access to valuable information, for example, for new job opportunities. Through established networks of friends and family, some of the poor will be lucky enough to gain employment in either the formal or informal sector (CPR, 2008; Krishna, 2007). Income diversification or the diversification of labour is perhaps one of the most important pathways out of poverty through the pursuit of new techniques, crops, and methods of livestock (Barrett, Carter, and Little, 2006; CPR, 2008; Krishna, 2007). Finally, encouraging institutions that act effectively to promote participation and inclusion of the poor to overcome poverty can be achieved through “deeper consideration of the structural disadvantages of the poor and the constraints of their agency” (Cleaver 2005, p. 904). Institutions play an important

role in the protection of the poor against shocks and extreme vulnerability, and thus, can act to improve their livelihoods, productivity, and chances of sustainable wellbeing (CPR, 2008).

#### **4.2.2 Causes of Poverty in Developed Countries**

In contrast to developing countries, poverty in developed countries exists amidst wealth, democracy, and often, ideologies of egalitarianism.

Shaped by the country's level of development, poverty in most wealthy countries is present in segregated enclaves of disadvantage in urban slums. There are two key classifications of the causes of poverty in developed countries:

“systemic” and “personal” (Ambert, 1998). Systemic causes of poverty refer to social and economic variables, for example, overall changes in the structure of the economy. Personal or individual causes of poverty emphasize the attributes of the poor as the sources of poverty (Ambert, 1998; Morazes & Pintak, 2007; Rank, Yoon and Hirschi, 2003).

Systemic causes of poverty are tied to the processes and consequences of globalization in Western societies. Industrialization including steel, auto, and garment manufacturers predominated and contributed to the wealth of many developed countries throughout the 1970s. The globalization of the economy meant national governments lost control over the labour markets and financial sectors of their countries. Without the adequate protection of national governments and increasing use of labour-displacing technologies, blue collar workers with little education lost their jobs. The act of downsizing on behalf of large corporations due to technical advances increased unemployment rates

and thus, deepened poverty in Western societies (Ambert, 1998). Ambert states that unemployment rates reached the two-digit level, even in countries that had been models of economic growth such as Germany (1998, p. 34). Handler also emphasizes the lack of work as well as the lack of well-paid work as key causes of poverty in developed countries (1995, p. 39).

Mainstream poverty literature in developed countries largely attributes poverty to personal or individual causes. Such views assert that individuals with certain demographic characteristics, such as single mothers, are responsible for their poverty. According to Rank et al. "Researchers found that individual characteristics attributed to 'cause' poverty range from 'the lack of an industrious work ethic or virtuous morality, to low levels of education or competitive market skills'" (2003, p. 1). Esping-Andersen's (1990) research reflected personal causes of poverty, especially in market-espousing states that tended to connect poverty with individual deficiencies. "Individual deficiencies" that cause elevated poverty rates in Western societies include single-parent families, divorced families, families headed by women under 19 years of age, and a lack of education (Ambert, 1998). In addition, discriminatory practices against ethnically distinct groups are considered "individualistic" causes of poverty. In Canada, First Nations have experienced discrimination and segregation both historically and presently. Ethnicity, Aboriginal origins, gender and age have contributed to unequal access to resources such as education, income/wealth, and occupation (Morazes & Pintak, 2007).

Contemporary literature on poverty in the developed world concerns economic measures and national benefits. Several factors are emphasized for the poor's movement out of poverty including economic expansion, unemployment insurance, and shifts in family status. In the US, Blank stresses the processes of the macro economy which may help people out of poverty, "In times of high unemployment, it is disproportionately the less skilled who are unemployed, underemployed, working part time or out of the labour market, and it is these workers who benefit the most from an economic expansion" (2000, p. 7). Osberg (2000) argues that jobless individuals may be able to escape poverty if they claim unemployment benefits and if those benefits effectively replace lost incomes. Family status is also a strong indicator of potentially moving out of poverty for many in developed countries, especially Canada. In their research across Canada, Finnie & Sweetman (2003), determined that changing from lone parenthood to attached or new spouse, increases the probability of moving out of poverty (Finnie & Sweetman, 2003).

Outside perceptions of the causes of poverty greatly influence poverty analysis, policy, and intervention. The outsider views above are highly regarded but how well do they portray the people on the ground? Moreover, do these etic viewpoints include what the poor are doing themselves to overcome poverty? The answers to these questions will be addressed in the following section, which looks extensively at the causes of poverty from the view of the poor.

### **4.3 Poor People Conceptualize Poverty**

This section is dedicated to the movements into and out of poverty as these are understood by the poor themselves in developing countries and in the DTES. In Vancouver and in developing countries several dynamics combine or act independently to produce movements into and out of poverty. The five life histories collected during the course of this research were analysed to identify the principle ways that the poor conceptualize poverty in the DTES.

Conceptualizations of poverty in developing countries were determined by exploring the latest World Bank publication, "From Many Lands" in the series titled "Voices of the Poor" (2002). This reputable source includes the collaboration of various researchers who look intensively at perceptions of the poor in various countries. The perceptions of the poor were analysed in the following developing countries Ghana, Malawi, Andhra Pradesh, Indonesia and Ecuador. These countries were selected to provide a geographically wide-ranging sample, to reflect the number of life histories, and to maintain the complexity this research requires.

The factors identified as determinants of movements into and out of poverty for both Vancouver and developing countries were established after the examination of life histories and text from "Voices of the Poor." The factors in the DTES became evident because of their reoccurrence in each of the life histories. The factors that account for falling into poverty include addiction, mental health problems, and estrangement from families. On the other hand, some of the poor in the DTES are working towards betterment, finding that information and

sobriety are the most fundamental elements in movements out of poverty.

Perceptions of the poor in developing countries illustrated four trends appearing to have influenced movements into poverty including lack of access to livelihood resources, health-related costs, female-headed households, and social status.

Factors most responsible for the poor's escape from poverty include the diversification of employment, contacts through kinship-based networks, and to a lesser degree, aid from governments and/or NGOs.

#### **4.3.1 Poverty Perceptions of the Poor Living in the DTES**

The complex nature of conceptualizing poverty is illustrated in the various 'forms' of what constitutes poverty in Vancouver's DTES. The poor live in a geographic region that, whilst it is classified as a 'slum', is in close proximity to wealth and resources. The DTES, populated with shelters, charities, and other social services, provides access to basic human necessities such as food, water, shelter and clothing. In this setting, it is common to see numerous church groups distributing handouts while preaching, "Jesus is our saviour." The DTES may be seen as a 'breeding ground of sin', which attracts many religious denominations to the area. Additionally, the open space of Oppenheimer Park is used by various charities holding events and barbeques for those living in the neighbourhood.

The conceptualizations of poverty developed by the poor in the DTES conjure a different image than mainstream explanations of poverty as merely a lack of employment. Poverty in many contexts implies 'deprivation' of capabilities as well as needs. In the DTES, where poor people have their most basic needs

met, this research has shown that the poor perceive poverty as “a lack of something either physical or intangible.” All of informants who participated in this research identified feelings of ‘guilt,’ ‘marginalization,’ ‘learned helplessness,’ and ‘rejection’ as closely associated with poverty. Virginia says “When you are livin’ in the streets, people don’t see you, they don’t talk to you.” For these informants, poverty is a lack of ‘happiness’ or ‘acceptance’ by society.

My informants were also quick to acknowledge varying ‘levels’ or ‘stages’ of poverty occurring in the DTES. The stages of poverty determined by participants were characterized by the condition of housing and belongings. At the lowest levels-are the people who lack shelter, whether it is by choice or not, these are the individuals who are literally ‘homeless’. The second level of poverty consists of those people who occupy the slum hotel rooms on East Hastings. This level of poverty involves the poor who have some belongings and occupy a dwelling that lacks cleanliness, a private bathroom, and a fridge. The third level of poverty in the DTES includes those people who have their own rooms in low-income housing apartments. The people in this group have more belongings; some even may own a television and a DVD player, and have a small kitchenette and private bathroom. The following section will examine the factors that are responsible for these varying levels or degrees of poverty in the DTES, influenced by the ideas of the poor themselves.

#### **4.3.1.1 Falling into Poverty**

Addiction in the DTES has acted both as a factor in people’s decline into poverty and in the reproduction of their impoverished circumstances. Many have

fallen into poverty when their addictions caused the loss of possessions, marriage, and home. The DTES offers individuals suffering from addiction easy access to any drug from the lowest form of cocaine known as 'rock', to heroin. Police traditionally have ignored the sale and exchange of drugs in the streets of this region. In addition, Vancouver was the first city in North America to initiate a safer injecting facility, called Insite. This facility began operation in 2003 when the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority wanted to reduce the risk of health problems related to the use of injection drugs such as the spread of HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C (Kerr, Wood, Small, Palepu, and Tyndall, 2003).

Estrangement from immediate family members is also a principle factor in the movement into poverty for a majority of people. Robertson (2007) argues that people have lost their 'emotional anchors' to their birthplaces, to where they grew up, or where they had some sense of belonging, and are more apt to come to the DTES and feel a sense of belonging. The disconnection of people from their families increases the likelihood of falling into poverty. An estimated 16% of the homeless population (sheltered and street homeless) has described the breakdown of family or loss of contact with family members as the main reason for their having fallen into poverty (City of Vancouver, 2005). Information from the life histories or general discussions with the poor in the DTES revealed that several of the poor had lost contact with their families due to disagreements. One in particular, Joseph from Halifax, Nova Scotia travelled all the way to Alberta to work and lost his job before finding himself in "Canada's poorest postal code." When I asked why he left his home Joseph responded, "I am the black



sheep of the family and they don't want me there so I left." The diverse population of the DTES creates a tolerance among its residents so that once there, a person comes to feel a sense of belonging.

The most context-specific factor influencing the decline into poverty in Vancouver is mental health. Mental illnesses from bipolar disorder to schizophrenia are major determinants of movements into poverty. An undetermined but large number of mentally ill who are poor in the DTES are ex-patients of the Riverview facility located outside of the city. The closure of Riverview services has left many with the challenge of establishing networks of support and living an 'un-institutionalized' existence. The poor who suffer from mental health illnesses also face additional disadvantages when applying for jobs that could improve their circumstances. Jason says, "Employers discriminate against you when they see your address and find out that you have mental disabilities." The poor belonging to the 'mental health' social group are able to obtain a monthly disability benefit from the government. This meagre income acts in two ways: it supplies the poor with necessities such as shelter and food and it contributes to the persistence of poverty for those who have come to accept this income as their only achievable means of survival.

The three principle factors illustrated above are perhaps the most apparent and primary sources of decline but informants alluded to other causes of movements into poverty. Many of the poor in the DTES perceive themselves

as victims of “the system”<sup>4</sup> and allude to two experiences to justify these feelings. First, four out of the five participants noted that forced displacement during EXPO '86 was a reason for many falling below the poverty line. Of these four, two informants were actually living in the DTES at the time. This case shows how events driven from the outside of this community can influence movements into poverty and the memories of EXPO '86 show just how significant an event like this was. After the disastrous legacy of EXPO '86, poor individuals in the DTES are concerned about the outcome of the upcoming Olympics. Joseph comments, “The police are handing out tickets for ‘jay-walking’ only to the people in this area.” Joseph is not alone in his expression of doubt in the system or government about the rumoured ‘clean-up’ before the opening ceremonies and feelings of anxiety over future developments. Despite general feelings of angst toward the system or government, the poor in the DTES were able to express some actions for movement out of poverty.

#### **4.3.1.2 Escaping Poverty**

“Escaping poverty” is understood by the poor in the DTES to have several dimensions including acceptable living quarters with a private bathroom, employment (part- or full-time), and enough money to buy groceries.

“Acceptable” living quarters refers to the contrast between the dire conditions of SROs and the more suitable state of housing with private bathrooms and kitchenettes, owned by the province or private owners. In this case, you are in the process of escaping poverty when you have achieved this standard of living.

<sup>4</sup> The “system,” according to informants refers to the government and/or national or provincial policies that led to hosting of EXPO '86.

The majority of the poor in the DTES rely on disability benefits from the government, yet this cheque barely covers the cost of rent. Those who are able to maintain steady employment, either full-time or part-time, are considered to be escaping poverty. Finally, the people who are able to afford their own groceries without relying on meals by shelters and organizations in the area are seen to be moving out of poverty.

Residents of the DTES have difficulties in escaping the clutches of poverty in this area. Services such as mental health facilities, free clinics, and organizations providing shelter, food, and clothing are concentrated in the DTES, making the poor in this neighbourhood content. In addition to having their basic needs met, the majority of residents are also engaged in the thriving community of the DTES. Although streets such as East Hastings in the DTES appear as a nightmare to outsiders, it is a place of refuge for many. According to Carlos, the DTES is “Heaven but with a little bit of hell in heaven.” Hell is the exploitation by loan sharks, the corruption by ‘landlords’, and the continual pushing of drugs by dealers. Heaven is the acceptance of anyone by members of the community. The strength of the community and the provision of services may obstruct the path to surpassing the poverty line in this area. On the other hand, people have succeeded in escaping poverty by utilizing the close ties in the community. Informants alluded to information from contacts and sobriety as the main factors that contribute to the alleviation of poverty.

Edward was the only informant who fully succeeded in escaping poverty in the DTES. The first step in Edward’s movement out of poverty involved reaching

a sober state. Once he has accomplished sobriety with the help of detox, he was able to move forward. Edward recalls feeling like a mist was lifted once he became sober. He got involved in a community groups and organizations, in which he established contacts and networks of support. Through these contacts and support systems, Edward gradually worked towards employment and moved out of poverty.

Information has proven to be a key factor for improving the circumstances of many in the DTES. The poor utilize information from contacts concerning opportunities for employment and skills (re)-training to move out of poverty. Information is obtained from close friends, relatives or contacts in the social services. Progress towards poverty alleviation takes place in small steps. Initially, the poor find themselves employed in irregular and part-time jobs that are often unsafe and unsanitary. If fortunate enough, information can lead to opportunities that move beyond sporadic employment. Jason through information received from an employee in the social services has the opportunity to complete a programme called 'Achieve'. This programme targets people with mental health disabilities and its goal is to improve and maintain employability. Jason is taking the steps necessary to arrive at stable employment to improve his standard of living. The first steps require Jason to meet with a counsellor who will be responsible for providing information about Achieve including the various sectors of employment that clients are trained in. Once, -an occupation is chosen, the client begins training classes to move towards the end goal of employability. Cooking is a hobby for Jason and, he has chosen to be trained in

this area. Jason is now looking forward to beginning and completing this training in order to move out of poverty.

Addiction is one of the main factors influencing movements into poverty; sobriety inevitably is one of the main criteria for escaping poverty. Addiction can affect anyone regardless of age, gender, education or socio-economic status. Addiction is an illness that can be treated at several treatment centres in Vancouver. Supported by Vancouver Coastal Health, there is easy access to treatment facilities by calling “Access Detox” for referral to facilities including Cordova Detox and Vancouver Detox. In 2005, 49% of the poor in the DTES reported they had an addiction problem (City of Vancouver, 2005). With many of the addiction treatment programmes promoting hope and welfare, more people are empowered, once accomplishing sobriety, to search for opportunities to ‘get off the streets’. An improved level of self-confidence and self-worth can enable many individuals to move beyond the experience of extreme poverty.

#### **4.3.2 Poverty Perceptions of the Poor in Developing Countries**

Contextual differences are evident in what the poor in developing countries perceive to be ‘lacking’ in contrast to physical items in developed countries. The lack of bedding, fishing nets, and adequate housing are ideas of the poor themselves about what defines poverty in Malawi (Kadzandira, 2002). In Andhra Pradesh, the poor feel the ‘well-to-do’ can eat a variety of food every day and own large plots of land (Kumar, 2002). Differences exist between the objects that determine a person’s level of poverty among varying developing countries but similarities persist to reveal what constitutes poverty.

Regarding all five of the developing countries, authors argue that ideas of 'wellbeing' and 'illbeing' are defined by poor people themselves. Both concepts are used to describe the multidimensional nature of the experience of poverty. Across various contexts, wellbeing is often expressed as 'having enough' whether this entails material possessions or intangible elements of peace and freedom of choice. Illbeing describes the 'lack or want' of housing, food, and shelter. Ideas of illbeing are often associated with experiences of poverty that include rejection, exclusion, isolation, and powerlessness. Wellbeing and illbeing are states of mind that conceptualize the experience of poverty for the poor in developing countries (Narayan et al., 2000).

The poor people within the five countries analyzed alluded to four principle factors as accounting for movements into poverty and two principle factors for movements out of poverty. The lack of access to livelihood resources, health-related costs, being female-headed households, and social status were represented the most by the poor as reasons for their decline into poverty. Contacts established most often through kinship-based networks and the diversification of employment were key factors in helping the poor lift themselves out of poverty.

#### **4.3.2.1 Falling into Poverty**

Agriculture provides the single most important livelihood for the majority of the poor in developing countries. In Indonesia, sixty percent of the poor work in the agriculture sector (Mukherjee, 2002). In four out of the five countries studied, poor people argue their greatest source of vulnerability and thus, one of the

principle causes of poverty, are unstable and inadequate livelihoods. Major obstacles to successful livelihoods are infrastructural elements such as bad roads and environmental stresses such as lower rainfall and soil depletion. Changes in the environment can have severe consequences for livelihoods. In Ecuador, farmers of all ages reported that since soils are exhausted, there is an increased need for fertilizers and pesticides, the access to which is blocked by the cost of such resources. Those who are better off usually possess the resources needed for successful livelihoods including tools, livestock, and land (Flores, 2002). In Renggarasi, Indonesia the poor claim that 'sterile land' is the main cause of poverty (Mukherjee, 2002). Prospects of wellbeing are next to impossible with no money and insufficient food.

Health-related costs, triggers the spiral into poverty by negatively affecting livelihoods and savings for the future. In Andhra Pradesh, for example, one woman Lakshmi had to sell what little land she owned to cover the cost of debt and interest she owed to a loan after husband broke his leg (Kumar, 2002). Health is the main priority for men and women who depend on labour-intensive jobs as the main source of income (Flores, 2002). Meagre incomes may be forced to be spread too thinly in large family units, where the possibilities of health-related costs increase. The poor scattered across many villages in Indonesia say they worry immensely about illness striking their families and in turn, lacking the ability to make a living (Mukherjee, 2002).

Cultural and/or social factors perpetuate the low status of women in many developing countries and threaten the stability of female-headed households.

Despite current trends of women supplementing their husband's income, women continue to face widening disadvantages. For instance, in Indonesia, women earn on average twenty-five percent less than men who do the same work (Mukherjee, 2002). The status of women is often reflected in the treatment of females in a society including the subjection of women to rape and domestic violence. Their lack of rights often extends and worsens after a husband's death. Wives and daughters are unable to inherit the property or possessions of a late husband or father. As a result, many female-headed households plummet into extreme poverty. An example from Ghana illustrates how one widow, Abena Mansah Sarpong, worked tirelessly smoking fish after her husband's death but still could not improve her circumstances of extreme poverty. Abena's efforts to move out of poverty fail because her earnings do not succeed in generating saving and at the same time, cover the costs of living for her family (Kunfaa & Dogbe, 2002). With gender relations so far from being equitable in developing countries, this remains a key factor in determining why some fall into poverty.

One of the most evident determinants for movements into poverty in developing countries has been social status. For many, their placement in society is determined at birth, continues through their lives, and is passed on to subsequent generations. Black Ecuadorians for example, are not only persecuted because of the color of their skin but also experience discrimination on the basis of their social class. One woman from a poor community called Nuevas Brisas lost her job washing clothes when her employer learned where she lived (Flores, 2002). In some societies, the differences of social class are



very pronounced. In Andhra Pradesh, the social stratification of the caste system permeates the community. The institution of castes in India continues to determine an individual's place in the social hierarchy that will be carried on by future generations. Lower caste members with little land, tattered clothing, and deep debts experience discrimination at the hands of the higher castes (Kumar, 2002). Movements out of poverty for the poor in these societies are infrequent but the poor alluded to two factors that could help them escape poverty. These factors are described in the following section.

#### **4.3.2.2 Escaping Poverty**

In developing countries a combination of two principle factors interacting, produce desired results for movements out of poverty. These factors are contacts established through kinship-based networks and the diversification of employment because of these contacts. Familial ties are strong in developing countries and act as a safety net for those living in extreme poverty. The family unit becomes even more significant when networks are created leading to opportunities for employment. The diversification of employment remains the most successful avenue of escape for the poor in developing countries. Diversification for many means the expansion of skills outside the usual domain of work, usually agriculture. Depending on the context, jobs may include anything from vendors, plumbers, painters, and tea stall assistants (Krishna, 2004). For Neneng, a young father in Indonesia, coping with poverty has led him to diversify his sources of income. Neneng, a landless farmer, spends some part of the year working in construction and other parts collecting and scavenging for

brushwood. A large number of the poor in developing countries will never be truly successful in escaping poverty, if “success” is understood to mean complete movement out of poverty. Instead, many of the poor learn successful coping strategies of poverty through familial ties and diversification of incomes (Mukherjee, 2002).

To a lesser degree, assistance from national governments and NGOs play a role in the movement out of poverty. In Indonesia, Mukherjee (2002) conducted a study that required poor people to rank and evaluate institutions according to effectiveness, trust, and control. The results of the study illustrated the low scores of outside parties, in particular government associated programmes. On the other hand, NGOs and religious prayer groups scored higher among the poor. Informal groups were trusted more by individuals because they operated according to criteria such as transparency and honesty. Formal sector groups, mostly operated by officials, lacked any possibility for the poor to influence decisions concerning problems in the village (Mukherjee, 2002). This study demonstrates the views of the poor towards formal and informal attempts at poverty alleviation.

The section above has shown the invaluable nature of emic perspectives for widening our understandings of poverty. In each case, the DTES and developing countries, the poor were willing to express their interpretation of poverty. Despite their willingness to contribute, the poor are powerless and lack a voice in institutions. It is imperative for development actors to give a voice to the poor through participatory, ethnographic research methods. The narratives

of the poor become a powerful tool for deepening the understanding of poverty and initiating more effective strategies of reduction.

## **5: CONCLUSION**

Despite widespread research, exploration of the 'relativism' of poverty is rare. Yet there are an estimated 2.8 billion poverty experts worldwide, the poor themselves (Narayan et al., 2000). The location of disparities within and between the conceptualizations exemplifies the necessity for the development discourse to take account of context-specificity more frequently in poverty alleviation strategies.

### **5.1.1 Factors that Determine Movements into and out of Poverty in the DTES and Developing Countries**

In each stage of conceptualization- the identification of the poor, mainstream analysis of poverty, and localized determinants for movements into and out of poverty- differences persist from context to context or from Vancouver to developing countries. Mainstream analyses of poverty in developing countries illustrate strong similarities with the conceptualizations of the local poor in those countries. In the DTES, local perceptions of poverty differ from mainstream analyses that tend to focus on grand historical narratives. Between the two cases presented, Vancouver and developing countries, some factors were comparable such as the 'powerlessness' felt by the poor in the DTES and developing countries but otherwise conceptualizations were vastly different. The differences in conceptualizations reiterate that poverty alleviation programmes

should be based on context rather than on ideas about the universal determinants of poverty.

The differences between the perceptions of poverty of the poor themselves in the DTES and in developing countries occur largely in two ways including environmental pressures and health-related issues. In Vancouver, the conceptualizations of factors determining movements into poverty are influenced by the poor's proximity to wealth. Rich in resources, the members of the DTES have easy access to basic amenities such as food, water, shelter, and clothing. In contrast, the poor in developing countries conceptualize their ideas of poverty in a context that has a low quality of life. 'Access' to basic amenities for the poor in developing countries may be blocked by social status or gender. The disparity in the contexts also places specific pressures on the poor in both the DTES and developing countries. For example, the introduction of injectable drugs in the 1980s to the DTES, has slowly made addiction the number one factor for decline into poverty established by the poor themselves. While in developing countries, the greatest source of vulnerability is unstable and inadequate livelihoods leading the poor to conceptualize this as the number one factor for determining movements into poverty. The poor have identified the de-institutionalization of the mentally ill in Vancouver as a factor that moved many into poverty. In developing countries, health-related costs create significant burdens on families including large sums of debt. However, unlike developing countries, the health factor in the DTES does not concern 'cost' but rather is a consequence of an isolated event, such as the closure of mental health facilities.

The determinants of poverty established by the ideas of the poor in developing countries and Vancouver emphasize the value of emic perspectives and contextual difference in poverty research. The experience of poverty is very personal and should be treated as such. Universal or absolute meanings of poverty fail to provide contextual elements that are necessary for appropriate representation of the poor.

### **5.1.2 The Value of Localized Strategies: The Expertise of the Poor**

This research shows that by expanding our understanding of the poor's perceptions of poverty, the identification of contextual elements can positively affect the development discourse. Previously, poverty strategies were entirely influenced by the perspectives and expertise of the non-poor including professionals, politicians, and agency officials in which economic growth was the goal of development agendas targeting poverty (Carr, 2008). Frameworks for poverty reduction that narrowly emphasize household income or consumption through economic growth are unlikely to lead to poverty alleviation strategies that effectively target the underlying causes of poverty (Green & Hulme, 2005). Overtime, discussions concerning the alleviation of poverty have brought a number of different factors to the attention of international organizations. These factors include affirmative action, community organization, credit and insurance, information, property rights, social capital, and technological improvements. Yet it is uncertain as to what factor or combination of factors might work best to reduce experiences of poverty worldwide (Krishna, 2004).

Poverty alleviation programmes are ill designed when they are devised without first knowing what poor people are doing themselves to overcome or cope with poverty. In such circumstances, it is often the case that programme initiatives “displace” and “replace” the local effort without providing many benefits to the poor (Krishna, 2004, p. 131). Smith (2006) argues that while the World Bank, bilateral agencies, and NGOs all have roles to play in poverty alleviation, strategies must be ‘locally owned’ and carried out in local terms. Carr (2008) argues that contemporary efforts to alleviate poverty share a universal conception of poverty that influences current approaches to poverty reduction in two ways. First, current approaches to poverty alleviation are derived from pre-conceived notions of what constitutes problems to be addressed in particular contexts. Second, universal applications of poverty reduction approaches overlook local processes through which people are already attempting to overcome poverty (Carr, 2008).

The identification of factors that determine upward and downward mobility by the poor in my research lends itself to past research that also valued perceptions of the poor (Carr, 2008; Chambers, 1983). The work of Chambers (1983) was perhaps the first attempt to motivate mainstream development practice to replace ‘top-down’ outsider views with those of the rural poor. Chambers (1983) focused on proposing a new approach to development by concentrating on the knowledge of the rural poor. Carr (2008), also against universal approaches to poverty reduction, suggests that development actors should address the various issues under the heading ‘poverty’ to move beyond a

singular conceptualization towards an approach that covers “poverties.”

According to Carr, “poverties” refer to “the various, complex barriers to human well-being that emerge in particular places” (2008, p. 726).

The significance of my research beyond reiterating the value of emic perspectives, is not to suggest abandoning ‘development’ but rather to lend insight to a more context-specific approach to poverty alleviation that values the conceptualizations of the poor. Exploring localized understandings for upward and downward mobility in particular contexts can help guide more effective action. The consideration of a particularistic approach requires re-thinking development goals and ways of achieving them. Customizing approaches to poverty alleviation, largely impacted by local conceptualizations, combined with lessons learned from past strategies, will help to improve future interventions.



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