

# A Psychosocial and Human Rights Investigation into Poverty and Social Exclusion in the United Kingdom

Nicola Warren

University of Essex

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## Abstract

This essay will examine the issue of poverty in the United Kingdom (UK), drawing on its definition as a lack of adequate resources to provide the necessities of life. It will also address the issue of social exclusion, examining the experience as one that is made up of multiple deprivations, including poverty, exclusion from the labour market, services and social relations (Gordon, et al., 2000). It will use a psychosocial approach to investigate poverty and social exclusion in the UK, showing how they affect individuals on multiple levels, as well as negatively impacting society at large. It will demonstrate how poverty and social exclusion are human rights issues. Moreover, it will refute the prevalent discourse levelled at social security benefit recipients, that is to say, the claim that they are lazy or inherently lacking in some trait or quality (Froggett, 2002; Baillie, 2011; Van der Bom *et al.*, 2017). My key argument is that it is social structures and political and economic institutions which create and maintain socio-economic inequalities, perpetuating the status quo.

**Keywords:** Poverty, United Kingdom, Social Exclusion, Human Rights, Society, Social Security

**Essay**

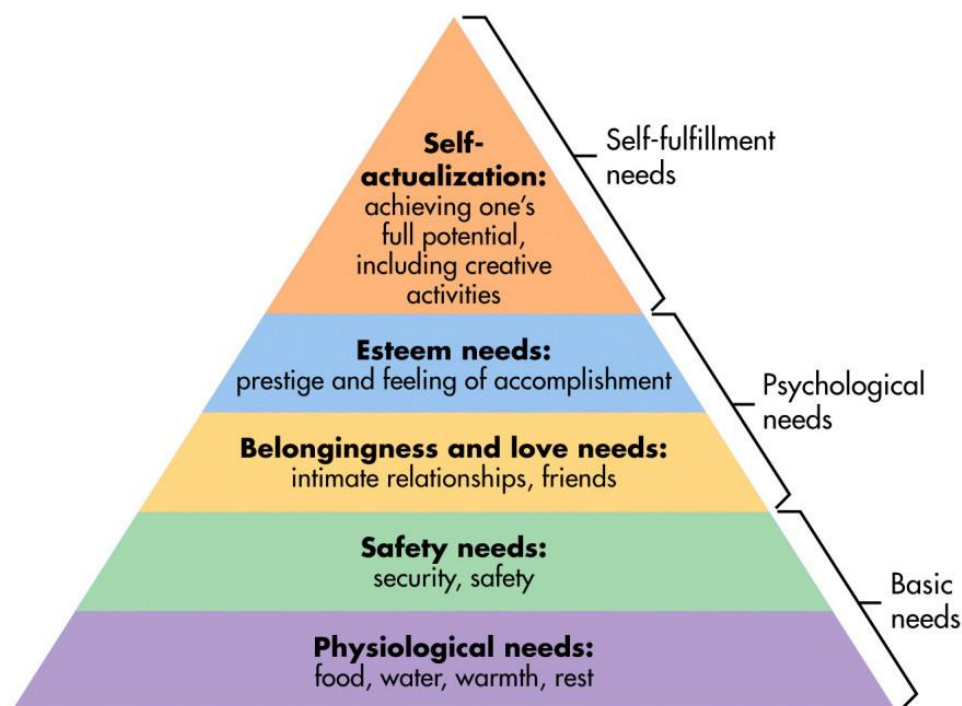
My interdisciplinary approach brings together epistemologies and methodologies used in human rights and psychosocial discourses. Although the two disciplines can be regarded as possessing very different perspectives, I will show how they can be used to complement each other. The first half of the essay will examine how some politicians and some strands of the UK's media have led to misconceptions about those claiming social security benefits contributing to the negative stereotypes of people living in poverty, particularly in relation to ill health, mental health, and the forging of the identity of the benefit claimant as a victim of their own choices or defective character (Baillie, 2011). My argument centres on the idea that poverty is a result of political and economic choices such as 'austerity' a decision to cut public spending across the board, including reductions to social services budgets, the National Health Service (NHS) and social security benefits, which plunged the most disadvantaged and marginalised members of society further into poverty and destitution, a conclusion drawn by Professor Philip Alston, the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, when he visited the UK last year (Alston, 2018). Moreover, reducing poverty is in the interests of the whole country, in addition to a human rights obligation. The second half of my essay will examine at the issue of social exclusion by looking at homelessness as a direct violation of human rights. I will demonstrate that far from making bad choices, people who are homeless are often victims of a series of unfortunate circumstances (MacDonald *et al.*, 2005).

The psychosocial approach bridges the disciplines of psychology and sociology. It takes a holistic approach to understanding the individual, made up of three levels. The first is the intrapsychic level, which includes unconscious and conscious internal states, hopes, feelings, and fears. The second is the interpersonal level, which recognises the significance of a person's relationships and interactions with others. The third is the socio-political level, spanning the wider context, such as social organisation, economic and political systems, discourses and ideologies. The psychosocial approach highlights the complex interaction between all three levels rather than using a reductionist approach (Froggett, 2002).

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I will now discuss human rights to show how they can be used to compliment the psychosocial approach and vice versa, strengthening both approaches and showing how they can be used to reduce the harm caused by poverty. Human rights are basic normative standards, codified in the United Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), known collectively as the Human Rights Bill. The UDHR sets out the *'minimum conditions for a dignified life, a life worth of a human being'* (Donnelly, 2013, p. 16) The UDHR also sets an ethical standard by which Governments must treat their citizens (Freeman, 2011, p. 156), with dignity, liberty and equality (Donnelly, 2013, p. 100) and suggests how citizens should treat each other *'in a spirit of brotherhood'* as stated in Article 1 of the UDHR (1948).

Human rights are not only a tool to relieve the suffering of individuals, they are also a benchmark to prevent suffering, a standard assessed by the extent to which an individual has everything they need to attain the minimally good life (Buchanan, 2010, pp. 706-7). Psychologist, Abraham Maslow's (1943, 1954) "hierarchy of needs" illustrates the basic requirements a person needs to flourish. It is a hierarchy formed of five-levels, outlining the fundamental basic needs that must be met for a person to reach their full potential (McLeod, 2018) By mapping human rights onto the "hierarchy of needs," it is possible to determine the means of meeting the basic needs of the individual, at least to a minimal standard. Human rights codify human needs as inherent rights that belong to everyone without distinction; the State is the duty bearer with the requirement to do everything within its power to ensure every individual's basic needs are met (Freeman, 2011).



*Figure 1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (McLeod, 2018)*

The first level of the hierarchy of needs consists of basic “physiological needs”, such as food, water, warmth and rest. The second level consists of “safety needs”, including personal security, achieved through employment, and the provision of adequate resources and health care (McLeod, 2018). Several of the articles of the UDHR refer to these fundamental needs, for example, Article 25 of the UDHR (1948) states:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

Many of the Articles in the ICSECR also refer to these basic needs.

The third level of the hierarchy of needs is “love and belongingness,” which includes intimate relationships and family (McLeod, 2018), codified in Article 16 of UDHR (1948) as “the right to marry and to found a family” and Article 10 of the ICESCR (1966) which recognises the family as “the natural and fundamental group unit of society...entitled to protection by society and State”. The fourth level of the hierarchy of needs refers to “esteem needs,” such as respect, prestige, and feelings of accomplishment (McLeod, 2018). Similarly, human rights are premised on the idea that

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all humans are equal in dignity, and rights protect the individual from “attacks on his honour and reputation,” as stated in Article 12 of UDHR (1948). The final level is “self-actualisation”, the idea that each person should be able to reach their full potential, something they can only achieve when all other needs are sufficiently met (McLeod, 2018). Human rights also value the person’s right to self-actualisation, guaranteeing autonomy to become author of one’s own life, and the liberty to become who one wishes to be. It is a concept enshrined in Article 29 of UDHR (1948)

‘Everyone has the duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible’

The UDHR (1948) claims that human rights are universal, interdependent and inalienable, but with global political tensions arising out of conflicts such as the Cold War (mid-20<sup>th</sup> century) and the advancement of Western capitalism. Priority was placed on advancing the civil and political rights contained in the ICCPR (1966) associated with freedom and democracy, rather than the economic, social and cultural rights of the ICESCR (1966) which were championed by the Eastern bloc (Jankowski, 2015, pp. 10-11). Thus, human rights are strongly influenced by the concept of liberal individualism. This encourages the view that an individual’s behaviour is cause of problems such as poverty, social exclusion and homelessness, rather than recognising that the way society and its systems are structured also creates and perpetuates the problems (Howard-Hassmann, 2018).

In the UK, this is also true of the State-provided NHS that uses a medical model which treats illness and disorder as manifesting from the patient, ignoring social and economic factors that cause or at least contribute to mental and physical illnesses as well as creating stigma, as demonstrated in studies in America (Goldberg, 2012, pp. 111-2). Similarly, the British justice system views the individual as the problem, rather than looking at other factors which might motivate criminal activity, such as poverty. Social services and government officials also identify ‘troubled families’ and blame the parents for social problems (Crossley, 2016, pp. 1-2). Thus, the conditions of poverty and social exclusion are seen by the State as resulting from people being either mad, bad or defective, and people living in poverty, including those who are homeless, are treated accordingly (Sadd, 2014). In other words, for those living in poverty in the UK, the experience is deeply stigmatising, particularly if they are also claiming social security benefits (Baumberg, 2016, p. 1).

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As Robert Pinker (Pinker, 1971, p. 175) famously said .. ‘The imposition of stigma is the commonest form of violence used in democratic societies ... [It] can best be compared to those forms of psychological torture in which the victim is broken psychically and physically but left to all outward appearances unmarked.’

The benefits system as we recognise it today was introduced in the UK in 1945 in response to the Beveridge report, as a safety net for those who were unable to do paid work for reasons of ill-health, retirement, death in the family, or disability (Diamond, 2017, pp. 25-6). However, the recipients of benefits have since been cast as scroungers and deviants, as opposed to wage earning, tax payers. They have become targets for both material aid (via social security benefits) and public hostility (Fraser, 2003, p. 9) The perception that benefits claimants are unintelligent, lazy and drug-addled (Cozzarelli *et al.*, 2001; Van der Bom *et al.*, 2017), dishonest, dodgy and workshy (Garthwaite, 2011, pp. 369-370) finds expression in media outlets, including the tabloid press and on mainstream television channels which imply that dependency on benefits is a lifestyle choice for many who choose not to work, and instead live a life of leisure on tax payers’ money.

Contra to the stereotype of the typical benefits recipient highlighted above, the statistics show that the majority of those in receipt of benefits are pensioners, with only a small percentage of claimants living in households where nobody is employed. The latest figures from the Department of Work and Pensions show that of the twenty million people claiming benefits in the UK, two-thirds are pensioners, who make up the biggest number of claimants (Stirling, 2018). Only 1.45 million adults of working-age, who are considered fit for work, are not in employment (‘Quarterly benefits summary,’ 2018) which is just over two percent of the UK’s entire population. In addition, many working families have to claim benefits to cover the high cost of private rent. Other claimants have disabilities, or mental health problems preventing them from working; or are doing reproductive work such as caring for young children (‘Quarterly benefits summary,’ 2018). The statistics would appear to speak for themselves, but it is also the case that social security is identified as a human right, encompassed in Article 25 of the UHDR (1948):

Everyone has... the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or any other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

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The government actively discourages people from becoming dependent on benefits in order to keep costs down. To achieve this, people are paid just enough to survive but not to participate in their culture, leading to social exclusion (D Gordon *et al.*, 2000). This is a fact underlined by evidence that the four key activities in the UK are consumption, production, politics and socialising (Burchardt *et al.*, 2002). The stigmatising of those on benefits by the media and politicians succeeds in disseminating the image of the welfare “scrounger,” a ploy that enables some politicians to forward their own political agendas (Romano, 2015, p. 67). In the media, the rise of “poverty porn” programmes, such as *The Jeremy Kyle Show* (now cancelled) and *Benefits Street*, feed into the stereotype, parading benefits claimants and their lifestyles before the camera for entertainment (David Gordon, 2018), not dissimilar to the Victorian practice of slumming in which the rich members of society would visit the slums to mock and jeer the poor people living in them, for entertainment. These programmes enable some people to justify the view that those in poverty are poor, either because of the bad choices they make, or because of a defective character (Raz, 2013, p. 9), blaming them for their own misfortune, rather than recognising such misfortune might be attributable to wider social and political forces. It is also evident in popular sayings, such as “people get their just desserts” and “what goes around comes around”, which reinforce the attitude that the individual is to blame, and the idea that we live in a “just world” where people deserve their lot (Furnham and Gunter, 1984).

If a particular social group is persistently demeaned over time, it can lead to the creation of damaging stereotypes, a denial of recognition for that group and for its contribution to wider society. Additionally, it has been demonstrated in eye-tracking experiments that people of low social status are given less eye-contact and thus less validation by other people than those of a higher social status (Foulsham *et al.*, 2010, p. 330). This further undermines their sense of self-esteem. In other words, it brings about a denial of the satisfaction of the fourth level of the “hierarchy of needs”, the need for “esteem.” When stereotyping becomes habitual, it results in wide-scale discrimination, a violation of a basic tenet of human rights, the right to equality. Furthermore, people belonging to low-status groups tend to internalise negative stereotypes that justify their own low status (Jost *et al.*, 2004). In turn, this means they behave in ways that

reinforce the stereotypes imposed on them (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999) and the cycle of discrimination continues.

Returning to the psychosocial model discussed earlier, it is evident that poverty does affect people on an intrapsychic level, that is to say, it severely affects the way they perceive themselves as well as their subjective well-being (McBride, 2001). Poverty adversely affects both mental and physical health; for example, it can lead to poor diet and malnutrition, as well as to stress, which, in turn affects the immune system (Ziol-Guest *et al.*, 2012). The demonisation and dehumanisation of the poor has an even more profound effect on psyche and psychological health; it leads to feelings of worthlessness, shame, and guilt, feelings which are manifested in conditions such as depression, anxiety and addiction, sometimes leading to suicide (Mills, 2017). Some scholars argue the risk of mental disorders is significantly higher among people who are poor, unemployed, homeless or poorly educated (Kuruvilla and Jacob, 2007).

Poverty is not a random phenomenon; those who experience it once, especially those raised in poverty, are far more likely to experience it again, a cycle which can make them feel further alienated from society (Burgess and Propper, 2002, p. 119) and mired in the “poverty trap” (Bowles *et al.*, 2011). The system does not help dispel such attitudes. In order to apply for social security benefits, people are expected to take on the role of victim by proving that their circumstances are dire enough for the government to assist them. The system requires yearly reviews of all who make a claim, a process which causes further stress because of fears that there might be a withdrawal of benefits. If benefits are withdrawn, claimants will be unable to pay their rent or buy food, arguably violations of the right to an adequate standard of living codified in the UDHR (1948). Being refused benefits will prevent the individual from attaining the higher levels of Maslow's “hierarchy of needs” discussed earlier or maintain the lower levels, basic needs. Further, this exclusion will leave the individual less secure, at further risk of losing their self-esteem, and with little chance of realising their life’s ambitions or, to use Maslow’s term, achieving “self-actualisation” (McLeod, 2018).



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In being forced into playing the role of victim, there is the very real risk that people living in poverty will give up their autonomy and get stuck in a cycle of dependency on the State. It is not a situation that will help alleviate poverty, particularly with a government that advances policies which reinforce economic inequality through privileging the wealthier members of society. Such policies allow claimants to survive, but not fully participate in their culture. It is also important to consider the cost of such policies on, for example, the NHS, with increased demand for appointments, prescriptions, therapies and hospital stays, on top of the cost of benefits paid to those medically unfit for work. If large numbers of people are unable to work due to ill health, the cost to society is high.

My belief is that poverty in the UK can be only addressed by the State fully adhering to the Human Rights Bill, specifically the ICECSR (1966) which has been neglected relative to the ICCPR (1966) and is paramount in the fight to eradicate poverty. Such an approach would contribute to forming a society where people are able to achieve a decent standard of living so they are able to escape the poverty trap through developing a sense of autonomy, as well as achieving social mobility through education, a key tenet of human rights and a widely evidenced route out of poverty (Janjua and Kamal, 2011, p. 164).

This section of the essay will look at homelessness as the ultimate form of social exclusion. It will suggest that homelessness is a result of wider structural problems such as lack affordable housing rather than stemming from problems simply located within the individual such as alcoholism and drug addiction, as often suggested by some media outlets and politicians as well as circulating in common discourse (Van der Bom *et al.*, 2017). People in the UK with the lowest social status are those without a home, whether living on the street, in temporary accommodation, or 'sofa surfing'. Homelessness is a direct human rights violation by the State, as the provision of a home is the minimal requirement for an adequate standard of living as stated in Article 11 of ICESCR (1966, p. 4)

'The State Parties to the present Covenant recognise the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions'

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In addition, a home is a basic need for survival according to Maslow's "hierarchy of needs." However, over 4,000 people sleep on the streets of England on any given night. In addition, over 100,000 families per year are assessed as being homeless across the UK ('Ending Homelessness,' 2018). Many are placed in temporary accommodation, such as a hostel or bed-sit, some of which lack the facilities to cook or store food, and fail to provide private bathroom facilities ('Statutory homelessness,' 2016-2017). Defined by their lack of property rather than any other factor, people who find themselves homeless are often also lacking a family or a support network which makes them more likely to experience social exclusion. For example, a study carried in in Wales found that one third of care leavers become homeless within two years of leaving care and twenty-five percent of homeless people have at some point in their lives been in the care of social services (Stirling, 2018, p. 12). Crisis, the national charity for homeless people, describes homelessness as "devastating, dangerous and isolating" ('Ending Homelessness,' 2018).

The human right to housing covered by Article 11 of the ICESCR (1966) applies to all equally, however homelessness affects some groups more adversely than others. For example, local councils prioritise families with children, and occasionally single women, when allocating emergency accommodation. This leaves many men with no other alternative than to sleep rough. The average life expectancy of somebody who sleeps rough is 47 for men and 43 for women (Fuller, 2016). Rough sleepers are nearly ten times more likely to take their own life and seventeen times more likely to be the victims of unprovoked physical violence ('Ending Homelessness,' 2018).

Human beings are fundamentally social creatures, who depend on other people for their survival. That is why the third level of the "hierarchy of needs" discussed earlier recognises the importance of relationships for humans to thrive. Social exclusion has been shown not only to cause psychological stress but also physical pain. In addition, rough sleepers often struggle to claim benefits or access adequate health care because they do not have a fixed address. This lack of access to benefits and basic services are violations of Article 25 of UDHR (1948). Moreover, homeless people cannot participate politically which is a violation of Article 2 of the ICCPR (1966). The State also deploys formal measures to criminalise homeless people for loitering, begging and sleeping rough (Sanders and Albanese, 2017).

Social housing is an option for only a limited number of people and is dependent on what properties might be available in a given area. In addition, the circumstances of the individual are taken into consideration and they must be deemed suitably deserving when assessed against the situation of the many other applicants on the housing list (Forrest and Murie, 2014). Living in social housing is also considered the best measure of social exclusion, because it correlates with other adverse factors, such as a lack of education, family breakdown, and unemployment (Hobcraft, 2002, pp. 65-8). For those renting in the private sector, the situation is also problematic. Private rents are often unaffordable, even for working families, while high rents can keep families trapped in poverty. They are also unable to afford to enter the housing market. Housing benefit is claimed by 3.9 million people of working-age, the highest number of claimants of any benefit offered by the State, whilst the private rental market has doubled in the past fifteen years (Ronald and Kadi, 2017).

For those claiming benefits, homelessness is often just one step away, as there is little money available to cover the cost of a serious illness or accident, or even a bereavement that results in the loss of earnings. The insecurity generated by these factors has been further exacerbated by the introduction of Universal Credit in 2013. Universal Credit caps benefits at a weekly amount and pays a lower amount for rental costs than the previous system. It is also paid in arrears, causing problems for those who must pay their rent in advance. When the new system was introduced, many were left with no money for six weeks, leading to further financial hardship (Brewer *et al.*, 2017, p. 20) and, inevitably, a rise in homelessness for those who fall into rent arrears and were evicted (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2018, pp. 42-3).

In conclusion, this essay has sought to dispell the individualistic view that benefits claimants and homeless people are responsible for their own predicament by highlighting the socio-economic structures and political choices that exacerbate and perpetuate poverty and social exclusion, by creating and maintaining class inequalities. I have used the social security system in the UK to show how inequalities are entrenched through stigmatising benefits claimants - and the homeless - as lazy, or lacking in some necessary trait or quality, that they are either mad, bad or defective. I

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have illustrated instead that political choices such as 'austerity' exacerbate poverty and social exclusion by creating and maintaining class inequalities while media outlets and politicians reinforce the stereotype of people in poverty as work-shy scroungers. It is an argument strengthened by adopting an interdisciplinary methodology which foregrounds the transactional relationship between psychosocial theory and human rights.

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