Identities

Identity, Poverty Situations and the Epistemology of the Known Subject

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ABSTRACT

The article proposes a relational definition of poor people and poverty situations grounded in the Epistemology of the Known Subject and drawn from qualitative research data. I first examine the basic assumptions of such epistemology, which has arisen from the limitations of prior ways of knowing; that is, of what I call the epistemological paradigms of the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject. Then I discuss the features of an empirical study on extreme poverty in Buenos Aires city, as well as the data analysis and concept creation processes involved. This enables me to consider the characteristics of the relational definition of poor people and poverty situations. Finally, I explore the societal model and the type of social process underlying the usual notions of poverty, and the influence of both on social policy design.

KEY WORDS

deprivation processes / epistemology of the knowing subject / identity / meta-epistemology / poor people / poverty / resistance processes / theory creation

Epistemological Assumptions: From an Epistemology of the Knowing Subject to an Epistemology of the Known Subject

This article presents some of the findings of my empirical research on extreme poverty in Buenos Aires city, based on which I suggest a relational definition of poverty and poverty situations. For reasons of space, I focus

on the theory creation process, leaving out significant aspects of the study that are not directly linked to it.

The relational definition of poor people and poverty situations proposed has been approached from a meta-epistemological perspective, which brings together the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject and the Epistemology of the Known Subject.

The former focuses on the spatially and temporally located subjects that know, their theoretical background and methodological tools. From this per-spective, it approaches the subjects that are known. Their characteristics may be seen as similar to those of the external, objective and objectifiable world or not, depending on the proximity between the knower's perspective and the positivist paradigm. According to this paradigm, the knowing subjects are the main actors in the knowing process, keeping their distance to ensure the objectivity of their knowledge. The assumed difference that separates them from the known subjects renders them immune to change as far as the know-ing process is concerned (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2003: 22).

As I have shown in previous studies (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 1992a: 11), the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject seeks to elucidate the epistemological paradigms underlying social science research, starting from its theoretical framework and practice. These paradigms constitute *the theoretico-method-ological framework used by the researcher to interpret social phenomena in the context of a given society*. Epistemological reflection has identified three cur-rently prevailing social science paradigms: two of which have become estab-lished, the historical materialist and the positivist one; the third paradigm – called interpretive – going through a consolidation phase. Each paradigm prompts a different kind of epistemological reflection, and the different inter-pretive models used by speakers to describe reality may be grounded in all of them.[1]

Since the interpretive paradigm has not been consolidated yet, I list what I consider its four basic assumptions, particularly in the light of the contributions made by Weber (1944, 1971), Schütz (1972, 1974), Giddens (1987a, 1987b) and Habermas (1987, 1990). They are linked to a view of language as a resource and creation, as a way of producing and reproducing the social world (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 1992b: 153).

Thus the interpretive paradigm: 1) resists the naturalization of the social world; 2) maintains the relevance of the life-world concept; 3) proceeds from observation to understanding and from the external to the internal point of view; 4) is based on double hermeneutics. These basic assumptions require, in my view, a new reading in the light of those of the Epistemology of the Known Subject.

This has arisen as a consequence of the limitations of the established theories and paradigms I have included in the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject. In my research experience, these paradigms fail to account for the aspi-rations of the known subjects, in this case poor people living on the streets, their personal journeys and the deprivation they suffer. I have observed, especially in

conducting fieldwork, how these people resisted categorization, stereotyping and definition. As they were allowed to reveal themselves, the shortcomings of such paradigms and theories became clear to me.

Current social science theories and methods are, therefore, in my view, insufficient to grasp the complexity of resistance and identity creation processes, both individual and collective. I have been led to this conclusion by the content and range of extremely poor people's discursive representations of their own identity and situation, as compared with representations of these same people and situations by individuals and groups differing from them in their material and symbolic power (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 1999a, 1999b, 2003). Consequently, I have not set out to verify any theories or used them as a source of data analysis categories.

Thus, the Epistemology of the Known Subject speaks where the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject remains silent for lack of words to account for people's situations, actions, perceptions or meanings. It endeavours to make the known subjects' voices heard, taking care that they are not distorted through translation into the codes of scientific text (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2003).

According to the Epistemology of the Known Subject, identity is made up of an essential and an existential component. The former is *common* to all human beings and constitutes what makes them equal. The latter constitutes the *differential* aspect distinguishing each human being from the others and making each individual unique.

The assumptions of this epistemology, as revealed by the study I have referred to, may be summed up as follows:

Capacity to know. The principle of essential equality of all human beings and the common identity of the knowing and known subjects lead to considering knowledge as a cooperative construction.

Ways of knowing. Other epistemological paradigms are incompatible with this epistemology to the extent that they prevent the full manifestation of the known subjects' identity.

Scope of knowledge. The need for these subjects' integral manifestation leads to the rejection of any conceptualizations, categorizations and typologies stemming from prior partial ideas about their identity.

Knowledge validity. The centrality of social actors' 'privileged' representations is recognized, whereas scientific knowledge is seen as no more than a socially legitimated way of representing reality.

Knowledge development. New ways of knowing are suggested to account both for human beings' essential equality and their existential differences, in order to avoid considering the latter as essential.

Thus, the Epistemology of the Known Subject entails a rupture regarding the ontological features of people's identity. This rupture has significant epistemological consequences, among them the recognition of the cooperative nature of

knowledge construction, to which essentially equal subjects make different contributions (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 1999a, 2003).

The Epistemology of the Known Subject does not reject the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject: both are currently applied by social science and complement each other at what I call the meta-epistemological level. Thus, having previously suggested paradigm coexistence (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 1992a), I now propose epistemology coexistence in order to broaden the observational horizons and combine different methods and ways of knowing.

The assumptions underpinning some significant contributions to the study of poverty and the social policy field coincide, in my view, with the epistemology I propose in two extremely important respects:

1   In considering poor people as equals: Lister (2004), sees them as subjects of their own lives, who possess the expertise borne of experience, rather than as objects of professional judgment, research and policy. They are social actors in their own right, with their issues and concerns (Ridge, 2002a), and not objects of pity, passive victims lacking agency (Bennett and Roberts, 2004; Lister, 2004).
2   In recognizing: a) the validity of the knowledge provided by poor people (Bennett and Roberts, 2004; Beresford et al., 1999); and b) the existence of an interactive knowledge production process combining different ways of knowing that have the same value (Bennett and Roberts, 2004).

'Participatory' approaches to research and inquiry into poverty (Bennett and Roberts, 2004) and 'child-centred research methods' (Ridge, 2002b) are among the methodological strategies that best reflect the above epistemological assumptions.

Grounded theory, which I have applied to the data gathering and analysis process, is likewise consistent with my epistemological assumptions. In the present research I have used theoretical coding in order to develop a theory (Glaser, 1978; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1994) from the data gathered.

Empirical Research, Context, Methodology and Data Analysis

The Study

The relational definition of poverty and poverty situations suggested in this article has been partly prompted by my ongoing research on extreme poverty in Buenos Aires city.[2] This inquiry attempts to provide input for preventive and assistance social policy-making aimed at helping individuals and families either living in extreme poverty or at risk. It seeks to determine the characteristics of extreme poverty situations in this city and to generate both theory

and knowledge about the identity of the people considered as poor, who they are and what they aspire to. I also intend to analyse the meaning they ascribe to their action, the different kinds of social conditioning affecting it and the strategies they use to endure and overcome their situation. In order to achieve these goals I have analysed and compared two groups: people living on the streets; and families living in hotels or makeshift houses, or occupying either houses they do not own or state-owned plots. The latter run the risk of losing their precarious accommodation and face serious difficulties in trying to satisfy their material, symbolic, spiritual and transcendent needs. In this article I focus on the former group.

The situations people living on the streets are in and the processes they go through, have been studied in different countries. Although there is no agreement about the features of these situations and processes, concept and category creation is often used to characterize both. Thus, in France, some suggest a typology encompassing three stages in people's adaptation to public spaces: 'fragilization', 'habit' and 'sedentarization' (Damon and Firdion, 1996: 383). The consideration of these stages as successive is criticized by others, who propose the coexistence of three marginal worlds: 'hell', 'zone', and 'bell'. From this synchronic perspective it is claimed that, while some individuals move from one world to another, others may remain in the same one forever, since each constitutes a different universe, governed by its own organizing principles, where life goes on at a different pace (Bresson, 1998: 117–18).

Studies carried out in England have concluded that people living on the streets are in a 'liminal' state or constant transition between social positions or life stages (Wardhaugh, 1996: 708). This 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1969) state describes the experience of movement involved in having left one place, one conventional state of being and not yet having arrived at another. I have found that this characterization applies, in general, to the situation of those who have lost a stable job and have not yet found another.

In the United States, research on people living on the streets points to the complexity of their situations and life journeys and the difficulties they encounter in trying to modify them and leave the streets permanently (Burt, 1998: 15).

The Context

I now put the concepts emerging from my own research in the social, political and economic context in which it took place. The application of neo-liberal policies in Argentina during the 1990s, including deregulation and the abrupt opening of the country's economy, resulted in widespread job loss. Rising unemployment brought about a feeling of uncertainty in those still employed and an increase in the number of precarious jobs (Beccaria and López, 1997: 10–11). Precariousness in labour relations increases the number of persons having difficulty in satisfying their basic needs, and the unpredictability of their participation in the productive process affects their capacity to consume. Therefore one

can conclude that there is a relationship between precariousness in employment and exclusion (Lindenboim, 2004).

In 1994, 12.2 percent of Argentina's economically active population were unemployed, and 16.1 percent of the inhabitants of the Great Buenos Aires area[3] were below the poverty line. In 1999 the latter percentage climbed to 27.1 percent, reaching 29.7 percent in 2000. The country's unemployment rate was 15.4 percent in May 2000, and 16.4 percent a year later. In October 2000, 3,466,000 people or 738,000 households were below the poverty line in the Great Buenos Aires area. In the same month and year, 11,980,667 people or 2,445,289 households[4] were below the poverty line in Argentina; its total population being 37 million.

As a consequence of this impoverishment process, sectors of the middle class have been incorporated into the universe of poverty, which has become more complex and heterogeneous. A rise in extreme richness constitutes the other side of the coin, encouraged by privatization, financial market liberalization and economic concentration (Minujin, 1998: 229). The gap between rich and poor has widened: the income of the richest amounting to 15 times that of the poorest in 1991, and to 26 times in 2000, which shows the inequitable distribution of economic growth.

Methodology

The project I have undertaken involves the use of qualitative methods to approach 'real life' situations. Therefore I have tried to gain access to the meaning structures of these situations *from within* (Habermas, 1990: 87) through participation. I have attempted to grasp the meaning of social action in the context of the pre-interpreted life-world that constitutes the actors' non-problematic horizon, to which they resort in their communicative social interaction.

The use of qualitative methods entails forsaking any construction or normative definition of poverty aimed at measuring the real world, verifying hypotheses, or making predictions or generalizations (Maxwell, 1996: 60) beyond the cases studied.

The following are among the qualitative strategies used:

Dialogic interviews, in particular, and **open interviews,** in general. The latter are aimed at creating situations as similar as possible to those in which natural language occurs (Bourdieu, 1993; Holstein and Gubrium, 1998).

Participant observation, through which I have approached the nature of relations and processes in different contexts, interpreting the meaning and function of social action (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994; Coulon, 1995).

Life stories, which lend sociological value to subjective experience (Atkinson, 1998; Bertaux, 1997).

Family stories, through which families are considered as social subjects (Bertaux, 1996; Miller, 2000).

Case study as a technique to deepen and optimize the researcher's understanding of a given situation, phenomenon or personal journey (Hamel et al., 1993; Stake, 1995).

It should be pointed out that a **dialogic interview** is a data-gathering strategy grounded in the Epistemology of the Known Subject. In it the researcher, assuming the interacting subjects' essential equality, recognizes: a) the active and reflective participation of the known subjects in the cognitive interaction; b) the original nature of their knowledge; c) the validity of their ways of knowing; and d) the cooperative knowledge construction process that takes place, therefore, during such interaction (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2003: 51).

Between November 1995 and November 2001 I conducted 100 interviews with people living on the streets selected through theoretical sampling. These interviews, most of which formed part of life and family stories, constituted the chief source of data and took place in parish church soup-kitchens. Different researchers carried out participant observation in these soup-kitchens at different times, in order to: a) provide further knowledge of field details; b) avoid data inconsistencies; and c) detect the possible influence of the researchers' social identity on the knowing process (Buford May and Patillo-McCoy, 2000: 83).

The use of all the strategies discussed has enabled me to:

1   Gain access to the meaning structures of the contexts studied – soup-kitchens, squares, parks, people's homes, hotels – by participating in them, observing actors in their own milieu and interacting with them on their terms (Cresswell, 1998; Marshall and Rossman, 1999).
2   Approach the collected data critically, test them, spot their weaknesses and determine the need for additional testing (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 1992a).

Validity requires that even the hypotheses that conflict with those suggested by the data be analysed (Maxwell, 1996: 88). In order to fulfil this demand at every stage of the research and deepen my understanding of the phenomena studied, I have used triangulation (Seale, 1999; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998).

The Proposed Definition of Poor People and Poverty Situations

The Relational Definition

In analysing the data provided by the interviews, life stories and family stories with a view to creating theory, I became aware of the predominance of a concept in poor people's definition of their situation. This referred to the different kinds of social relation in which they were involved and to their features. At times these relations constituted a source of protection, care and attention but, most of the time, were marked by contempt, rejection and even aggression. It is

the consideration of these social relations that has led me to develop the proposal I discuss next, through a series of steps that I have accounted for elsewhere (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2003).[5]

The definition of poor people and poverty situations proposed in this article has been constructed as part of a grounded theory. While suggesting a possible relation between concepts or groups of concepts (Strauss and Corbin, 1994: 278), grounded theory is being constantly developed and may be improved through further research. Therefore it may be seen as a process, as an unfinished product (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 32).

I first quote some interview utterances through which people living on the streets discursively represent their relations with other people. These examples enable me to account for the different theory construction stages. The implicit and explicit concepts used by the speakers to refer to other people's actions affecting them are printed in **bold type**. Concepts related to the way in which people living on the streets define themselves and feel they are perceived and valued by those with whom they interact are underscored. Both the characteristics of other people's behaviour towards them and the assumptions about their identity underlying such behaviour are linked to the higher-order concept of social relation.

> 1–2.59[6] … society should be made aware that we should not be **marginalized** so much … [1–2.63] People who have [things], who have never gone through anything, have never been in need … look on us as blacks,[7] as shanty town [people]. (Alberto, 26 years old, dog trainer. He sleeps in a square.)

> 7.8 … we are worse than animals, just because they see us carrying a shoulder-bag[8] they **prevent** us from going into a café to urinate … we are marginalized people. (Juan, 56, assembly-line worker. He sleeps in an underground station.)

> 19.41 … society … When are we not? The more penniless we are[9] the more we are **marginalized**, it's always been like that. (Adolfo, 30, restaurant worker. He sleeps in a square.)

> 95.113 … there should be more understanding, in the sense that we shouldn't be **ignored** … 95.192 … not for me, but simply for old people, see? … 95.194 I don't know, it's as if … as if they **reject** them, see? Though they give them a coin, old people feel marginalized, see? (Argentino, 21, flower grower. He sleeps in a square.)

In these utterances, the speakers ascribe their marginalization to society as a whole. They see it as a consequence of: a) the opposition between 'haves and have-nots', the former attributing them certain racial and social features that make them different from those who are not poor (1–2.63); b) the stigma attached to certain things, like the shoulder-bag they carry, by which their plight is recognized (7.8); c) their being on the streets (19.41); or d) their being old (95.194). Thus, the actions they attribute to others, such as 'marginalizing' them, 'depriving'[10] them of certain things, 'ignoring' them, or 'rejecting' them, are linked to the way they feel ('worse than animals', 'marginalized'). They are also related to the way in which they are regarded by others (as 'penniless', 'as blacks, as shanty town [people]').

The speakers use the concepts 'discrimination' and 'marginalization' to describe most of the relations in which they engage. These constitute, therefore, 'live concepts', i.e. words and phrases used by the social actors themselves (Glaser, 1978: 70; Strauss, 1987: 33), reflecting their deep concerns. In order to incorporate the interviewees' relevant contributions and multiple perspectives into the emerging theory, I have drawn on these concepts to construct the two most general categories into which I sorted the data. The live concept 'deprivation' was also used in data coding, with a view to creating theory.

In accordance with the data gathered I have defined discrimination and marginalization. The former is the action by which some of those involved in social relations disregard the essential component of the others' identity – common to all human beings – or deny, reject or do not tolerate their existential differences. The latter is the action by which some of those involved in social relations separate, segregate or exclude the others from a certain milieu or context, preventing them from interacting freely and autonomously with them or with others (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2003: 76).

The interpretation of those data has finally led me to propose a relational definition of poverty situations. From this perspective, *poor people are those involved in a web of relations entailing multiple deprivation of material, symbolic, spiritual and transcendent goods indispensable for the autonomous development of the essential and existential components of their identity*.

According to this definition, deprivation of goods translates into deprivation of identity when it either involves the denial of one of its components – essential or existential – or prevents the autonomous development of one or both of them. A gesture, a look of indifference or rejection, constitutes a depriving action to the extent that it involves the simultaneous denial of the existence and development of poor people's essential component, which stems from failure to see them as equals that are suffering, have been deserted, feel unhappy. Depriving actions of this kind disregard the principle of essential equality and are therefore violent and unjust, as is any hierarchical social order based on the purported existence of essential differences between people.

Based both on research data and on the Epistemology of the Known Subject, the relational definition of poverty situations I suggest:

1   provides a historical, dynamic and interactive interpretation of society, which differs from the ones constructed by means of the various methods used to measure poverty up to now;
2   accounts for the multiple relations that are woven, unwoven and interwoven around poor people, which often produce, prolong or fail to prevent poverty situations;
3   enables the determination of the meaning and origin of the processes that give rise to and consolidate poverty situations and of those responsible for them, with a view to taking preventive action;
4   considers the possibility that those who define, describe, explain and interpret 'poverty' may be engaged in deprivation relations;

5   places the social relations poor people engage in, those involved in them
     and, therefore, poor people themselves, within society, thus avoiding the
     metaphorical representation of the poor as people situated outside or on
     the periphery of society or below its other members;
6   shows the simultaneous existence of different social orders based on dif-
     ferent scales, within which, therefore, certain values and social goods take
     precedence over others;
7   points to the possibility of societal models other than the capitalist one,
     with forms of social organization that differ from those on which contem-
     porary western societies are based.

Since a distinction needs to be drawn between concept, definition and
measurement (Lister, 2004), as well as between description, definition and mea-
surement (Veit-Wilson, 2004), I should point out that I do not define 'poverty'
but 'poverty situations' as poor people describe them. Therefore, my definition
is conditioned by the context in which the enquiry took place and by the char-
acteristics of those situations.

In the view of the speakers, their poverty situations have arisen from their
relationships with those who discriminate against and marginalize them.
Among them they include society as a whole, the police, those who fired them
and those who deny them a job, the government, the law courts, social aid
agencies, certain churches and hospitals. These relationships also determine the
permanence of such situations. The following example illustrates the point:

> 5.51 I never get an answer from the current government, then this means that the
> social condition of <u>middle class people</u> no longer exists in this country; they are
> more and more **attacked, unnoticed**, or better: **we are being persecuted**, mainly; I
> have seen injustice in our present-day society. (Humberto, 38 years old, builder. He
> lives on the streets.)

According to the Epistemology of the Known Subject, poverty situations
cannot be represented by means of abstract categories. 'Poverty' as a concep-
tual abstraction is a social construction, usually the work of those who consider
themselves to be at the 'centre', not on the 'periphery' of society. However, it is
because they have been deprived of different kinds of 'goods' that the people
currently called 'poor' are regarded as such. Those goods, in turn are consid-
ered as such in the context of the dominance of the capitalist societal model.
Thus, poor people should not be statically considered as merely sharing the fea-
tures of a certain situation. Research should focus, rather, on how they have
been brought into that situation by the action and omission of different people
and groups.

The Societal Model underlying Poverty Definitions

Metaphorical definitions of poverty – based on the inside/outside,
centre/periphery or up/down dichotomy (Fassin, 1996) – may be useful to

quantify the phenomenon. However, in my view, a relational definition is necessary to determine those responsible for it: that is, those that have caused, encouraged and maintained poverty situations as well as those who profit from them.

Poor people have a highly developed reflective capacity, as I have found out throughout the interviews by listening to their life and family stories and in conducting fieldwork. They can accurately characterize the poverty situation they are in and, therefore, are in the best position to define their needs and determine those who prevent or hinder them from satisfying them. Those who study poverty, for their part, should reflect on whether their research will contribute to the maintenance of those situations or to their transformation. They should be aware that their exercise of the defining, categorizing, explaining and interpreting power may involve depriving actions. In fact, the relation between the observer and the observed is often mediated by representations that presuppose an insurmountable difference between both (Howarth, 2002), thus helping reproduce inequality and reinforcing deprivation.

Concepts frequently used in social science, such as 'marginalization' and 'exclusion' involve a metaphor that compares society to a space occupied by different groups. This fiction has important representational and cognitive consequences for our understanding of social phenomena and processes.

It should be borne in mind that most of the available definitions of poverty have been developed from the standpoint of the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject. These notions tend to stress either the differences – economic, educational, family-related, occupational, cultural – between individuals or the similarities between those who are in the same situation. However, they fail to show the essential component of poor people's identity (which is common to all human beings), the respects in which they resemble the researcher and the positive features that distinguish them from other people and groups.

These definitions have been constructed in terms of the values socially recognized in most contemporary western societies. These values are related to certain ways of knowing, considering, and even accepting, justifying and reproducing the differences existing in these societies. Failure to notice the limitations of such definitions may lead to the naturalization of a societal model based on the capitalist mode of production and distribution. This model entails: a) a capitalist cosmogony; b) the recognition of differences stemming from what people possess; c) the equation of identity with its existential component. All this points to the primacy of material and symbolic goods over spiritual and transcendent ones.

Many of those considered rich in material or symbolic goods might be deemed poor in relation to spiritual and transcendent goods within a societal model based on the pre-eminence of the essential component of people's identity. It is in this component that human dignity is grounded, which is protected by the recognition of fundamental human rights.

Often those lacking in transcendent goods are not poor, however, as a result of deprivation relations, but as a consequence of personal choice, of

self-deprivation, of their denying or downgrading the essential component of their own identity. This choice has led them to privilege certain goods, the accumulation of which entails, in most cases, disregard for the essential equality of all human beings.

Deprivation and Resistance Processes

From the standpoint of the Epistemology of the Known Subject, poor people cannot be viewed as a class, category or group, but rather as people involved in relations through which they are deprived of different kinds of good. In this respect, theoretical constructions based on the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject do not consider deprivation of spiritual and transcendent goods as such. Thus, for example, defining poor people's needs and the ways of satisfying them regardless of their own election does not constitute, from that point of view, a depriving action. This is due to the fact that the different paradigms I have included in this epistemology fail to take account of the ontological nature of the human being's identity, tending to focus on its existential component.

According to the Epistemology of the Known Subject, researchers should seek what makes them equal to the subjects observed, trying to be *with* and *in* the latter without ceasing to be who they are. This starting from the others' understanding of their situation has led me to suggest a relational definition of poverty situations that does not originate in categories alien to poor people's perception. The meaning and content of the definition I propose have, therefore, been determined by the centrality of their own resistance processes, their relations with those who deprive them of different kinds of goods, their refusing to define themselves as poor, and their feeling discriminated against, marginalized, forgotten.

Albeit grounded in the Epistemology of the Known Subject, this definition does not exclude but rather complements the definitions provided by the paradigms and theories pertaining to the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject. The difference between this and other definitions lies in its purpose, which is not simply to know or measure poverty situations in order to overcome, alleviate or avoid them, but to reveal how poor people live, perceive their situation, and think it should be modified. It aims to show the way in which they see themselves and those they interact with, how they define the actions of the latter and interpret the world around them. It also seeks to show how their ways of knowing set limits to the notions and concepts with which the observer approaches them, which usually prevent them from freely displaying their identity.

By combining the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject with that of the Known Subject through what I call meta-epistemology, I have observed the coexistence of *deprivation* and *resistance* processes. Scholars within what I call the Epistemology of the Knowing Subject tradition, drawing on theories that understand society largely as a system, have pointed to the *deprivation processes*[11] that poor people and workers, among others, undergo (Castel, 1995;

Castel and Haroche, 2001; Paugam, 1996, 1997). It is in this context that the opposition between, among others, socialization and desocialization, structuration and destructuration, integration and disintegration, makes sense. These processes stem from the deprivation relations in which poor people are involved, in a spatially and temporally circumscribed social context. When such processes are analysed, according to the Epistemology of the Known Subject, from the standpoint of those undergoing them, the simultaneous emergence of what I call *resistance processes*[12] can be detected. These constitute a different type of process, which includes vindicating oneself and one's claims, rediscovering one's skills, re-establishing social bonds and redefining one's own identity in the face of other people's representations, as linguistic analysis of the interviews I conducted has revealed.

I have used this analysis as a strategy for interpreting qualitative data (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 1992b, 1997, 2003) from an interdisciplinary perspective. This approach shows how the text the known subjects construct throughout the interview becomes a site of resistance (Denzin, 2003: 257): that is, how, through it, they put up a strong discursive resistance (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2003: 221) to, for example, social representations of poor people associating them with crime, alcohol abuse and unwillingness to work. This leads them to define their identity oppositionally and to distinguish its existential aspects from the essential ones by using different verbs – for example 'being in the street' and 'belonging to the street'.[13] The former, unlike the latter, is perceived as a temporary situation that starts with the loss of one's job and then one's house, as can be seen in the following utterances, in which identity is thus defined:

> 16.21 I never try to interact with anybody because to me this is not the type of, let's say of, <u>no, I am not a street guy</u>, I feel as if I were a … <u>monkey in a circus</u>. See? Because <u>I am not</u> … (Raúl, 33 years old, tile layer. He lives on the streets.)

> 6.139 Yes. Why not? Yes, because they (the police) believe that if you are <u>a person that is on the streets</u> you are <u>socially, mentally and bodily diminished</u>. No, not at all, <u>I am quite smart, I know my rights</u> and up to where you may come and up to where I go; then: **the move is uncalled for** … (Alejandro, 31 years old, systems analyst. He lives on the streets.)

The interviewees also stress that they want a better future, especially for their children, their innermost transcendent desire regarding them being linked to the pursuit of formal education as a means to overcome the family situation.

Defining poverty situations and characterizing poor people in terms of *deprivation processes* entail applying the negative argumentative paradigm, which results in the discursive production of negative images of these people. When *resistance processes* are left out, poor people's identity is restricted, distorted, detracted from and poor people themselves are discriminated against through identity deprivation actions. These actions, in turn, strengthen the web of deprivation relations in which they are involved.

Although analysis of poverty situations is often based on the *deprivation processes* poor people undergo (disaffiliation, disqualification, deprofessionalization,

etc.), some aspects of these processes are paid little attention. Among such aspects are:

1 the web of deprivation relations from which such processes stem and the identity of those who define the terms and conditions of those relations;
2 the extent to which deprivation processes are encouraged by: a) social aid agencies; b) those who develop, administer, apply and evaluate social policies; c) those who interrogate poor people in order to know their situation, carrying out endless inquiries purportedly aimed at the modification of that situation, which is seldom achieved; d) those who write social and environmental reports on poor people and their situation; e) those who decide whether they fulfil social aid, subsidy or employment conditions or the requirements for a hotel room or a place in a day-care centre for their children. Poor people's dignity and identity are daily disregarded, as they point out, by the action and omission of the individuals and organizations that have the power to provide or deny social aid, the scope for legitimate self-determination being limited as a result.

Conclusion: The Relational Definition of Poverty Situations and Social Policy

Defining poverty situations as the outcome of a web of relations entailing multiple deprivation of material, symbolic, spiritual and transcendent goods has important consequences for social policy.

An important aspect of such policy is the determination of essential needs. This depends on our assumptions about the human being and, therefore, about the immanent or transcendent nature of human fulfilment. According to the Epistemology of the Known Subject, these needs relate not only to people's existence but also to the development of their essence: that is, of their own humanity, to social respect for their dignity, and to the realization of their common innate transcendent calling. The so-called essential needs are actually existential in nature, since they are not linked to the integral development of both the essential and existential component of human identity, but only to some aspects of the latter. Such a conception of essential needs constitutes a depriving action, since it privileges one of these components over the other, thus denying people's identity as a whole.

In Argentina, social policy-making often focuses on poverty situations rather than on the processes responsible for them, being therefore aimed at mitigating some effects of inequality and oppression but not at eradicating them. Respect for the essential equality of all human beings, enhanced freedom and autonomy for all are not usually stated as goals. Nor is the equitable distribution of goods.

The injustice of all inequality and discrimination follows from the principle of essential equality of all individuals. Compliance with this principle also

entails breaking with any kind of knowledge involving violence against others, the superiority of some over others or the imposition of certain courses of action on people whose knowledge is denied. Such imposition prevents them from reflecting and deciding for themselves and pursuing their own goals in life according to their identity.

Social policies and programmes fail whenever their application puts people's dignity at risk, whenever poor people are not seen as essentially human but as existentially poor for want of necessaries, whenever the contingent takes precedence over the transcendent, the different over the identical.

Acknowledgement

Notes

1 I put forward a paradigm coexistence proposal at the 1987 Extraordinary International Philosophy Conference held in Cordoba, Argentina. This differs from Guba and Lincoln's (1994) competing paradigms, especially with respect to the notion, number and types of paradigm. Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) reformulate Guba and Lincoln's contribution, substituting the pragmatic paradigm for the critical one.

2 The project 'Extreme poverty in Buenos Aires city' has been largely funded by the Agencia Nacional de Promoción Científica y Tecnológica (National Agency for the Promotion of Science and Technology) of Argentina.

3 This area comprises the City of Buenos Aires, where the present inquiry is being carried out, and its outskirts, which belong to Buenos Aires Province.

4 These data have been drawn from the October 2000 Continuous Household Survey results, provided by the National Institute for Statistics and Censuses (INDEC) of Argentina

5 Theoretical coding has also enabled me to develop a database to quantify part of the qualitative data emerging from the 100 interviews conducted. According to these data, 21 percent of these people, of whom there are no census records, are women and 79 percent are men, 28.1 percent being younger than 22 and 53.9 percent younger than 32 years old. Interview data also show that 39.2 percent have completed their primary, 12.2 percent their secondary, 2.7 percent their university and 1.4 percent their non-university tertiary education; 5.4 percent having not received any formal education at all. Whereas 30.3 percent lost their job during the six months prior to the interview, 33.3 percent became unemployed in the previous two years; 70 percent eat at parish church soup-kitchens and 5.3 percent scavenge for food. Five per cent have lived on the streets since their childhood.

6 The number on the left is that of the database file, and the number on the right indicates the utterance. Both interviewer and interviewee utterances have been sequentially numbered. Two numbers on the left, separated by a hyphen, indicate the presence of two interviewees, usually a couple.

7   Negros in Spanish, a derogatory term originally used to refer to people coming
to Greater Buenos Aires from the provinces. (Translator's note.)

8   The shoulder-bag reveals that the speaker carries with him all his belongings,
since he has no place to leave them, and, therefore, that he lives on the streets.

9   'Siempre andamo más tirado …' in Spanish, tirado meaning 'penniless' in River
Plate slang, and 'más tirado' 'more penniless'. (Translator's note.)

10 Deprivation is mentioned in utterance 7.8, which has been rendered as '… they
prevent us from going into a café to urinate …' The Spanish text reads '… nos
privan de entrar a un bar a orinar …', which would be literally translated as '…
they deprive us of going into a café to urinate …' (Translator's note.)

11 In the Spanish text, these processes are called procesos 'des-'. The Spanish pre-
fix des- corresponds to the English prefixes 'de-', 'dis-', 'un-' and may denote
negation, deprivation, removal, rejection, degradation or reduction, as can be
seen in the examples provided in the next sentence. Further examples of these
processes are supplied in the next section: disaffiliation, disqualification, depro-
fessionalization. (Translator's note.)

12 These are called procesos 're-' in the Spanish original. Some examples of these
processes are provided in the next sentence, the English word 'vindicating' cor-
responding to the Spanish word reivindicar. They include the survival, self-
assertion, reconstruction and opposition processes through which those
undergoing deprivation resist or fight back. (Translator's note.)

13 'Estar en la calle' and 'ser de la calle' in Spanish, literally 'being in the street'
and 'being of the street'. (Translator's note.)

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