

## Ruth Lister talks about her new book *Poverty*

*Interviewer: So what would you say as the author is distinctive about this book in particular?*

*Ruth Lister:* Well, I was asked to write a book about the concept of poverty and that allowed me to think about poverty not simply as it's often thought about in terms kind of material definitions or how we measure it but what poverty means both to people who live in poverty and to people without experience of poverty. It allowed me to think about what I called the symbolic culture non-material aspects of poverty, representations of poverty. I've used the concept that's been used elsewhere but I've use it here, the concept of 'othering the poor'. I don't like the term 'the poor' because it objectifies people and lumps them altogether, as if poverty is the only thing about them that matters. But the notion of 'othering' is to get across the way the rest of society, be it through the media, be it politicians, be it service professionals, officials treat people in poverty as 'other' to us to them so they're different and it creates a distance. People in poverty themselves and that's another aspect of the book which I think is distinctive that it draws where it can on some of the voices of people in poverty themselves and what they said, particularly poverty activists both in this country and in the global South talk a lot about the importance of being treated with respect.

**So would you see that as a way of countering 'othering' if you like, are there approaches to poverty which contrive to work against that sort of 'othering' by other people?**

Yes and the chapter of the book which is devoted to that, again coming out of the some of the discourses of poverty activists, so increasingly the politics of poverty I argue in the book is the politics of recognition and respect as well as a politics of re-distribution. It has to be both and I talk about human rights, citizenship, voice and participation which are all positive banners under which, in a sense, people in poverty can organise. One of the arguments in the book which I try to make clear that people in poverty shouldn't simply be seen as passive victims but they have agency and that they exercise that agency in various ways. Exercising it politically is very difficult because people don't want to identify as poor.

**Is that part of the problem and is that part of the issue of 'voice' and what does 'voice' mean in the context?**

Voice is about enabling voices of people in poverty themselves to be heard, particularly in policy making, in the media so that it's their understanding not simply

media imposing their own understanding on people living in poverty. But it's the reluctance to identify goes back to 'othering' because poverty, and I talk about this quite a lot in book, is such a stigmatised condition in most societies, but I think in particular societies that have a history that we have of the undeserving and deserving poor.

**Do you think there are implications for service providers, for social workers, for professional practice that come out of the book?**

Well, I hope so, I mean I think there are very important implications because by looking at poverty as a social relation it says to social workers and other service providers that you have to think about how you treat people in poverty and that you don't contribute to this process of 'othering' and indeed, not coming of my book but very relevant to it is the work that ATD Forth World Human Rights Organisation for some of the poorest people, Royal Holloway and Family Rights Group have been developing social work courses where people with experience of poverty are involved in training social workers. The concept they use is that poverty-ism which is very similar in a sense to my notion of othering.

**They are trying to counter-poverty-ism by involving people in poverty, like training.**

Exactly, I think the book, I found that people like from Glasgow Poverty Alliance have found that notion of 'othering' a really helpful way to think about the way officials, professionals and so forth do treat people living in poverty and therefore it's really important, I think training is partly about how you combat that and make sure you don't contribute to it yourself.

**I suppose, lastly, some people might say that putting the emphasis on 'othering' and on respect and recognition and the non-material downgrades the importance of actually the lack of resources which is the usual emphasis in poverty books.**

Well, I hope it doesn't because I wanted to make clear that lack of resources is ultimately what poverty is about and that the definition that I use in the book is quite a tight definition i.e. what distinguishes being in poverty from not being in poverty is lack of adequate material resources. The book ends arguing that we need a politics of redistribution and recognition. But what I think is interesting is when some of the literature from some of the groups like ATD Forth World and when people are asked what is the worst things about being poor, actually what they sometimes say isn't not having enough money to get through the week which obviously is a really bad thing about being poor but being treated with contempt by other people and being treated as if you don't matter. So the book is trying to reflect back with people with experience of poverty themselves are saying.