

Review Article

Researching Poverty and the Poor

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J. Bradshaw and R. Sainsbury (eds.) (2000), *Researching Poverty*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

B. S. Rowntree (2000), *Poverty. A Study of Town Life*. New edition with an introduction by Jonathan Bradshaw, Bristol: The Policy Press.

K. Van den Bosch [2001], *Identifying the Poor Using Subjective and Consensual Measures*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

JSP, 31, 2002, DOI: 10.1017/S0047279402006724

Is there any hope of ever achieving clarity in the argument about what poverty is and what to do about it? Imagine arguing about how to diagnose and treat 'illness' if there were as little agreement in the worlds of public health and private medicine, each with their preventative and curative aspects, as there is about poverty. Is there one illness or are there many? Is it malaise, indisposition, infection, injury, impairment, handicap or disability? Does it need medicines or surgery – or the alteration of patients' minds or their environments? This simplistic analogy closely reflects the 'poverty' situation. Common usage talks of poverty but creates many poverties and differing ways of researching them, quite apart from the often unexamined question of focusing on the nature of poverty or the characteristics of the poor, by no means identical. Further, while many contentiously disparate methods are each appropriate for different varied purposes and in varying circumstances (as is obvious in the medical analogy), few poverty authors acknowledge the need to circumscribe their projects – if they have only scalpels, all problems need surgery. Few distinguish between concepts and methods appropriate for social analysis and the different needs of policy prescription, often leading to criticism of the former for not suiting the latter.

These problems exemplify deep-seated and fundamental conflicts and unexplored misunderstandings even between research methodologists about discourses and paradigms, means and ends, descriptions and prescriptions, values and strategies. In some circles it is deliberately fashionable at present to obscure the differences between a commonplace meaning of poverty (as a measurable lack of material resources, chiefly cash, sufficient for conventionally defined but measurable decent minimal social participation) and deprivations and inequalities in general, as well as the many diffuse weak and strong notions of social exclusion (covering everything from lack of fungible personal or social resources to the consequences of the combinations of deficits and even to power-holders' negatively discriminating activities which are often hard to specify precisely and mostly impossible to measure exactly). No wonder the UK's Blair government

has so casually dismissed as fatuous the enterprise of trying to set clear and unambiguous minimum cash income standards for its grand promises of abolishing child poverty (e.g. Baroness Hollis, House of Lords Hansard, 11 October 1999, col. 165], because its members cannot make sense of this confusion and see the underlying social science basis as so riven by disagreement and imprecision.

How far do these books clarify these problems and their solutions, so that governments prepared to act (many are not) can make better social policy?¹ All three report on surveys, but of many kinds. *Researching Poverty* is a collection of thirteen disparate papers by 26 authors, some only peripherally concerned with poverty research as such. Rowntree's book tells us how and why he did it the first time, hardly a model for a century later. Van der Bosch's book (an expansion of his doctoral thesis) is devoted to the econometricians' attitudinal survey approach (the Flemish or income proxy school) but concludes that it is not enough for a full picture of poverty. Only Rowntree and Van den Bosch discuss the limitations of method, and many other chapters aim only to show specific methods in use, but taken together they allow some judgements about the state of poverty research at the end of the twentieth century, and parts therefore deserve detailed consideration as examples and guides. Too many other interests are addressed for discussion in this review, which focuses on the poverty research methodology issues, not on findings about poor or deprived people and places.

The first question is, are the methods appropriate for their poverty research objective? For example, Rowntree wanted to count the poor within the working class, and for that he had first to *identify* or describe them. For identification he used the observable 'squalid lifestyle' description of poverty which was conventional then. But he also wanted to *explain* the appearances, and for this he devised his primary poverty (P1) measure – if some had too little money even for physical subsistence (essential to the contemporary 'efficiency' discourse), they certainly did not have enough to avoid a squalid lifestyle.² Each of these objectives – identification, counting, explanation – was focused on 'the poor', not on 'what is poverty?' as such. Van den Bosch also wants to identify and count the poor, but by using measures which report what the population reports on average as the minimal acceptable income, or which *discover* an unacceptable lifestyle suffering an aggregation of conventionally defined deprivations. Here we already have five distinct purposes for poverty research. Other purposes are to *compare* the numbers of the poor over time and between places, and to *prescribe* income maintenance systems to combat poverty. Perhaps there are more than these seven purposes, but simply distinguishing them helps to emphasise the problem of appropriate methodological choices. Some of the authors in the Bradshaw/Sainsbury collection illustrate these purposes, but some are concerned with data sources or places, which introduces different problems.

Rowntree's first book has attracted a century of debate. In the first half, it was taken as a model for poverty research, but in the second half the development of sociological methods of enquiry into the meaning of poverty which Peter Townsend pioneered led to a widespread re-examination of Rowntree's aims and methods. To celebrate the centenary, Jonathan Bradshaw has produced a facsimile of the first, 1901, edition of *Poverty*, complete with original maps and photographs, but inserting his own new, 64 page, preface printed in the same con-

temporary style. Bradshaw claims that the study's importance was threefold – it affected public opinion; it impacted on government policy; and it 'established the British tradition of empirical social science research ... designed to inform policy ...' (p. xx). Further, for the first time a *structural* explanation of poverty was offered based on empirical findings and implying policy conclusions, including (as Rowntree wrote) 'the relative duties and powers of the State ... affecting the ... distribution of wealth.' (p. 145). Bradshaw also reminds us that the chapters reporting on working-class housing conditions and the relationship between poverty and health fleshed out the lived realities and 'efficiency' policy aspects of what otherwise remain statistics abstracted from context. As a result, the structural discourse of poverty gained credibility in the UK (apart from some ideological digressions). The policy impact was reflected in the Liberal government's social reforms through to the Beveridge Report and subsequent social security policy – though regrettably only at the conceptual level of minimum subsistence. While some critics argue that Rowntree's expedient support of P1 for minimum wage and social assistance policy implies that he believed it to be adequate, Bradshaw reminds us they overlook his acknowledgement of the arbitrariness of distinguishing primary from secondary poverty and soon dropped it. Rowntree later asserted that poverty meant resources inadequate for social participation, not just 'physical efficiency' (Rowntree quoted in Veit-Wilson 1992: 286-7). Bradshaw's assessment of Rowntree is wholly positive, but one may doubt if the heuristically justifiable expedient of P1 should be celebrated, because it had bad consequences. The public plausibility as adequate of a heuristic tool devised to be inadequate has subsequently caused mystification and suffering to countless millions of poor households.³ But historians continue to argue over its significance, exemplifying the problems of unacknowledged incompatible understandings of 'poverty'.⁴ In the absence of prior clarity, such arguments are fatuous.

Researching Poverty, one of three books which Bradshaw and Sainsbury edited following the Rowntree centenary conference in 1998, opens with Peter Townsend's autobiographical and historically valuable review of poverty research during the half century in which he has been the leading figure in driving the international structural debate. He offers a salutary clarification of the field – one must always distinguish concepts from operational definitions (including measures), and from explanation and from policy prescriptions, let alone what governments actually do. At the same time, he stresses that 'none ... can be regarded as analytically distinct from the others': they are all connected. His development of the sociological empirical approach to mapping what the population as a whole defines as necessities which nobody should be without, and what resources are needed not to be forced to be deprived of them and thus poor, has regrettably been misunderstood by those who dismiss the findings as subjective, and those, not sharing his egalitarian ideology, who therefore also reject the integrity of the research methods, their findings and their implications for policy. Rightly making his value position clear, his writings have not always distinguished between the other elements of the package deal (Fox 1979), facts and strategies; indeed, he calls the distinction between the scientific and the political a false dichotomy. This is tactically dangerous. If his strategic goal is abolition, he should want to persuade even convinced inegalitarians to accept the majoritarian approach to identifying social necessities and its statistically derived poverty boundary even if they do not share his aim of making society

less unequal. The consequent policies would seem residualist rather than structuralist but at much more generous benefit levels. For Townsend to emphasise that scientists often tacitly reflect the power holders' ideology and agenda (thus endangering the scientific integrity of their poverty research) is arguable but fails to allow them the equal right to have their world view treated as phenomenologically authentic as poor people should also have. Of course Townsend is right to say that policy is at the heart of the poverty problems social scientists study – after all, it causes them – but the intellectual ecology of the problems has to be debated, not dismissed.

Townsend's essay is nevertheless an indispensable review of pertinent issues, with sharp criticisms of the dismissive asociality of many econometric measures, so beloved of both social scientists and politicians (especially in the World Bank), as well as of the 'all poverty measures are arbitrary or subjective' delusions. He answers the methodological claim that poverty thresholds cannot be found, as well as the political resistance of governments to applying scientific measures to locate them, by pointing out that governments unhesitatingly prescribe normative thresholds on similar problematic empirical continuums such as radiation, pollution or nutrition.⁵ The essay also addresses the operationalisation of the UN's global measures of absolute and overall poverty, terms which Townsend might not have chosen but which he expediently adopts. Here again he elides the distinction between illuminating analysis and improbable global political action. It would be a shame if his powerfully far-seeing analysis of global inequalities (of which poverties are a subset) were rejected by those who would not accept his prescriptions. The main thrust is clear: every conception of poverty, from local to global, is inherently caused by political (in)action and implies its counterfactual, unachievable without political action. No one in the poverty industry can evade taking a political position on how to deal with it.

The subsequent chapters are less olympian. David Gordon addresses the scientific status of poverty research and distinguishes poverty as too low a level of living, which is a normative judgement, from poverty as low income, a matter of empirical observation. To have a high level of living with a low income is socially acceptable, as is the converse if based on choice. An empirical threshold, a poverty line, is that which maximises the difference between the poor and the non-poor and minimises the difference within each group, but it is a pity that his figure to illustrate this shows two distinct distributions of low income and high deprivation scores and the converse, when in principle (and other countries, as he admits) the distribution might equally show such an intermingling that no threshold can be seen. The earlier Mack and Lansley (1985) finding that a line can be reliably drawn between low income correlated with high deprivation scores and rising income decreasingly correlating with low deprivation scores seems to me to be more persuasive.⁶

In a model chapter on how to carry out truly consensual poverty research, Sue Middleton discusses her work with intensive focus groups to define poverty and find its budgetary income limits, showing that the method is properly scientific and overcomes the objections to majoritarian imposition, attitudinal randomness and budgetary prescription. Her focus groups emphasised children's categorical rights to human respect and participation, demanding adequate *family* income resources. Previous 'expert' budgets were substantially lower because

the true cash costs of children's social participation are so undervalued. But income maintenance systems remain inadequate, and the failure to allow enough for participation – in practice, people meet social before material needs⁷ – leads finally to social ills including crime.

A series of technical chapters follows. Some examine the viability of poverty research resources such as administrative data, the Family Resources Survey, and historical geographical data. Others report surveys of the problematic relationships between UK indicators of urban deprivation and government expenditure, and between local deprivations and residents' attitudes, as well as a depressed rural overspill town, and problems of electronic exclusion.

Two final chapters return to what poverty is researched and by whom. John Washington and colleagues review the history of the European Commission's poverty programmes, their inherent assumptions and limitations and the evolution of the concept of social exclusion. They illustrate the shift from a structural, lack of resources, perspective to one which emphasises the individual's deficits and marginality, a lack of integration where income maintenance is insufficient, based on a French concern with a Durkheimian conception of solidarity and integration in social space. This shift to a discourse of social exclusion is given a rosier gloss here than the cynical political evasion of poverty terminology reported to me by EC officials in 1994 (Veit-Wilson 1998: 97). The policy implications thus evasively focus on marginal(ity) symptoms rather than structural causes. The EC's analysis of poverty is unsociological but political and has to be addressed by the antipoverty lobby in those terms. Then the real problem for poverty research and policy is not multifaceted poverties and social exclusion (the consequences) but societies and governments which exclude (the cause). Even here, policies ostensibly aimed at participative integration ends are still vitiated by governments refusing the adequate income means.⁸

Lastly, Ruth Lister and Peter Beresford argue for currently poor people to be involved in the agenda setting and management of poverty research on experiential grounds (who knows best what poverty is?). If one ignores the problems of patronisation, selection and tokenism, their case for the co-operative involvement of subjects in research into them is strong. But their polemic is weaker applied to the epistemologically and methodologically complex aspects of research into poverty and policy. The deprivation indicator approach, attitudinal surveys and focus group methods all depend upon the representative responses of the *whole* population including (but not just) the currently poor. What matters is rightly the subject's experience of what is inadequate for decent life, but that is the whole population.⁹ Relative deprivation studies as long ago as Runciman's (1972), as well as the welfare rights movement, showed that most people did not want to define themselves or be identified as poor, and the poor ask for too little. This problematises the question of who are these currently poor people who are to hold power over research into the whole population, especially in the light of dynamic poverty research which shows that far more people have experienced poverty than are poor at any one time (Leisering and Leibfried 1999; Walker and Ashworth 1994). We might prefer minimum income policy to be based not on what some currently poor people would accept but on what currently non-poor people will accept when it applies to them – for instance in minimum pensions.

A serious question also arises about the implications of this chapter for consequent political changes in the distribution of power and resources. The authors commend organisations such as ATD which work intensively to enable multiply deprived people to articulate their views to politicians. Respect is admirable, but ATD comes from France, the source of the social exclusion approach to poverty which has socially integrative but not necessarily egalitarian aims. Applied to poverty research, the whole approach seems to reflect a curiously static hierarchical (them and us) view of society.¹⁰ Poor people's involvement in poverty research cannot substitute for solidaristic political action; the arguments are different.

Van den Bosch's book is about distinguishing the poor from the non-poor, that is, finding the income threshold and not the low level of living which it reflects, the indirect measure which is a proxy for the direct deprivations. For an econometrician he has some refreshing views on what poverty is and what it is not – not income inequality (such as HBAI); not low welfare, since poverty is not a measure of happiness but of economic resources for socially defined functioning; not low status or other aspects of class to which economic resource transfers are irrelevant. His account of the deprivation indicator approach is incomplete, omitting that it too offers an objective way of finding a poverty line (see the discussion of Gordon above). He gives a full critical account of the varied uses and limitations of public attitude surveys to report the income levels which people believe are barely sufficient for their households, in which he has been involved for many years, and emphasises both the objectivity of the reliable collection and manipulation of many subjective opinions, and the problems in finding comprehensible and comparably replicable forms of question ('avoiding poverty' or 'making ends meet' or 'getting by' in different languages, times and countries). He criticises the confusion between what is desirable (incomes above the poverty line) and what is politically feasible, and deals neatly with the Deleeck fallacy from the same Flemish stable (that if the responses to the 'making ends meet' question exceed the prevailing social assistance scales, the survey responses cannot be treated as a 'real' poverty line (Deleeck et al.1992: 37–8)) by pointing out that if poverty involves the inability to meet social expectations, the survey response is valid. Nor, he admits, can econometric techniques resolve what are the essentially sociological problems of what adequate levels of living are.

Van den Bosch's conclusions from the many whole population sample surveys he has been involved with are especially pertinent to this review – that the only thing distinguishing the currently poor from the rest of society is that 'they have a material standard of living that is socially regarded as unacceptable; they do not share any other characteristic or combination of characteristics that distinguishes them from the non-poor. ... They cannot be identified on the basis of behaviour, or any other observable characteristic only' (p. 412). This undermines the Lister/Beresford static behavioural case for involving 'the poor' in all kinds of poverty research, resembling instead the dynamic view that it is the unacceptability of material conditions to the whole population which needs to be studied. The conclusion is that if you want to study these behaviours and characteristics then use the appropriate tools (and research collaborators), but don't confuse what you find with lack of resources and call it all 'poverty'.

If the aim of poverty research is to identify the causes of deprivations and

exclusions so that political action can remove them, then precision about which causes and what action is indispensable. As with the need for both preventative and therapeutic medicine, this may be a matter of both/ands and not either/ors. However, the persisting reluctance to treat poverty as, first, a lack of simple purchasing power hinders (deliberately, in the case of many politicians) the hard work of planning and politically implementing adequate income maintenance systems. Yet until the whole population (of any country) has enough disposable income to buy what *in that context* is demonstrably needed for participation, it is impossible to take the next research step, to discover who nevertheless remains excluded and what *further* resources (if any, whether tangible or intangible, personal or collective, structural or behavioural) they need to achieve minimal participation. In modern states, adequate income is the clean water of poverty policy. While Middleton concludes, 'Until we can agree some definition of what poverty is, we cannot sensibly debate its nature, extent or, indeed, how best to improve the living standards of those experiencing it' (p. 75), I doubt that a single definition is sufficient any more than it is for 'illness'. Might it not be better to triangulate the evidence from many different empirical sources and methods (e.g. deprivation indicators, public attitudes, budget studies, nutritional and health correlates) to see how far their findings robustly overlap on the types and levels of resources essential to avoid socially defined deprivations and exclusions in given contexts? The scientific findings on the necessary income levels and other resources would then be the essential guide to, and monitor of, the political judgement of governments where to set minimum income standards, how to implement them, and thereafter what other anti-exclusionary policies to pursue – if they really have the political wit or will.

- 1 Whatever the many motives for doing poverty research, I assume hopefully that poverty researchers aim to further prospects for abolition and not only academic careers.
- 2 Those who believe that Rowntree saw *poverty* simply in behavioural terms, concentrating on the characteristics of people in his 'secondary poverty', should remember that unemployment, drink and gambling were also rife among the rich Victorians without resulting in their visual identification as poor. As that acute participant observer of the contemporary social scene, W C Fields, put it, 'a rich man is nothing more than a poor man with money'.
- 3 Rowntree rightly distinguished immediate policy prescription from broader social analysis, and since P1 was higher than many manual wage levels he expediently recommended it as a provisional target for minimum wages at that time. But less sophisticated people have promoted the mistaken idea that 'merely physical subsistence' actually was an adequate basis for participatory life (and that Rowntree thought so), and have used it to justify inadequate income maintenance levels.
- 4 Harris considered that my 1986 papers undervalued the importance of Rowntree's creation of P1 and undermined the force of his political message, which was not simply to make a relativistic comparison but to emphasise the economic inefficiencies of poverty (Veit-Wilson 1986a; 1986b; Harris 2000: 67). But I was making a point about scientific paradigms not political objectives. By contrast, Gillie rejected the originality of P1 which he considered was appropriated from Rowntree *père* and Sherwood's previous work (Rowntree and Sherwood 1899; Gillie 2000: 86–95), and also my interpretation of Rowntree *filis's* intentions, for reasons concerned more with my expressions (where he may be right) than to any understanding of the broader conceptual argument about the significance of a relativistic rather than merely subsistence approach for identifying the poor (Gillie 2000: 100–2). Space prevents proper response to the detailed and somewhat contradictory criticisms made by Harris and Gillie. While it is diverting to explore disparate interpretations of Rowntree's writings, intentions and

significance, it would have no effect on abuse of Rowntree's work. The fact that a century later the United Nations Development Programme's authoritative briefings incorrectly discuss 'primary poverty' measures as meaningful (UNDP 1999) suggests that the damage from misunderstanding Rowntree's work is too deep-seated for scholastic cure.

- 5 In the income case, this would be a politically normative governmental minimum income standard (see Veit-Wilson 1998). It would help the policy debate if the methodologists would accept that their findings may at best act as contributions towards and criteria of this political construct rather than be substitutes for it.
- 6 Or rather than a hard line, a band of income within which the correlation is increasingly weak. One can then choose as one's threshold line the minimal situation at the bottom of the band where the correlation becomes strong enough, or the optimal situation at the top where it becomes indistinguishable. Gordon emphasises that whether and where income thresholds may be found remains contextually contingent; this must also be true of the judgement on how much correlation is to be taken as reliable.
- 7 Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs (1943) is a theoretical model unsupported by empirical evidence, except sometimes in concentration camps.
- 8 Not many people seem aware of the difference between Townsend's robust use of 'exclusion' in his celebrated definition of poverty, where it is the *consequence* of lack of material resources, to the current political weak usage where it is an *alternative* to addressing their lack.
- 9 There is also an argument to be furthered that the demand effectively denies the possibility of Weberian *verstehen*. Neither sociology nor anthropology would be possible if the assertion that researchers cannot 'understand' their research subjects were dogmatically accepted as universally valid. It can however be argued and tested case by case pragmatically in context.
- 10 Some twenty years ago I took part in two meetings of ATD's Scientific Advisory Committee in Paris. At that time these traditional religious but conservative values were very apparent: humane, but their political solidarity was hierarchical not egalitarian.

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