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Measuring Poverty in late 1960s Britain: Peter Townsend, Relative Deprivation,
and the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust

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Abstract

1960s Britain saw the start of a transformation in poverty research that, 30 years later, would lead to the resurgence of interest in inequality that we are still experiencing. The sociologist Peter Townsend (1928-2009) played a leading role in those events, pioneering a variety of approaches to poverty, including the concept of relative deprivation. An attempt to express poverty in relation to individuals' access to a range of resources that enable social participation, relative deprivation was described by Townsend fully for the first time in *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (1979). Yet, as this paper shows, he first worked out a version of the concept 15 years earlier, during the troubled national survey of poverty that provided data for that book, which was initially co-directed by Brian Abel-Smith and funded by the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust. Drawing on archival sources that reveal the difficult early history of relative deprivation, this paper contributes to our understanding of the origins of an idea that has become central to discussions of poverty and inequality and, in so doing, explores the challenges associated with pioneering new approaches to poverty knowledge in postwar Britain.

Introduction

On 13th October 1967 the trustees of the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust, one of the biggest funders of social research in Britain during the period, met at the Royal Station Hotel in York. On their agenda was a project that had been the recipient of the largest single research grant they had ever awarded: a new national survey of poverty, led by Peter Townsend at the University of Essex and Brian Abel-Smith at the London School of Economics. The project had experienced some successes since its launch three years earlier but Townsend and Abel-Smith had come to believe that they needed much more than £32,000 that the JRMT had originally agreed to provide.¹ The JRMT trustees had concerns about increasing their grant, though. Some of their worries were about Townsend, Abel-Smith, and their research officers and assistants – John Veit-Wilson, Dennis Marsden, and Hilary Land – campaigning for the recently-founded Child Poverty Action Group. But others were specifically about Townsend, whom they thought might be ‘so committed to certain views of social policy’ that it permeated every aspect of the project. ‘This danger was particularly evident’, the trustees believed, ‘when concepts such as “relative deprivation” were introduced because they seemed to be capable of interpretation in a variety of ways’.²

As Felix Römer has recently shown, the 1960s were the beginning of a transformation in approaches to poverty that came to fruition in the 1990s, when there was a resurgence of work on inequality that would lead to the widespread interest in the topic associated most closely with Thomas Piketty.³ But the fact the language of inequality, including ideas like relative deprivation, have become commonplace can obscure the fact it was contested for

¹ £32,000 is the equivalent of £783,400 in 2024, judged by real prices, or £1,396,000, using labour value as the point of reference. Figures are taken from <https://measuringworth.com/ukcompare>.

² Meeting of the Trustees held at the Royal Station Hotel, York, on 13th October 1967, Minute Book, 1957-68, Papers of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Borthwick Institute for Archives, JRF/2/1/1/5, p. 3.

³ Römer, ‘Evolving Knowledge Regimes’; Römer, ‘Poverty, Inequality Statistics and Knowledge Politics Under Thatcher’; Römer, *Inequality Knowledge*; Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.

several decades before that point, hindering the few scholars who focused on such topics, including Townsend's friend and, for a short period, colleague, Anthony Atkinson.⁴ A central reason poverty and inequality research was stymied in Britain, as Römer has demonstrated, was that successive governments did little to develop, and in some cases actively hindered efforts to improve, data that would have helped researchers who were working in the field.⁵ As Römer has argued, the consequence was that agreed ways of defining and measuring inequality only emerged relatively recently, with significant implications for our understanding of both the ways Britain has changed since the Second World War and discussion about its future.

Peter Townsend (1928-2009) was a leading figure in these developments, pioneering a variety of approaches to poverty and relentlessly campaigning for changes to the way governments treated it.⁶ In the most general sense, Townsend helped transform poverty research by making relative poverty an accepted measurement. But his ambition was always to enlarge people's understanding of poverty, rather than simply changing aspects of the way it was quantified. The concept of relative deprivation, an attempt to express poverty in terms of individuals' access to a broad range of resources that enable them to participate in wider society, was his effort to do just that. Explored fully for the first time in *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (1979), a book revered by subsequent generations of researchers, who helped turn relative deprivation into a tool that was used to measure poverty in both Britain and internationally, the concept represented Townsend's ambition to stop social scientists from being what he described as the 'unwitting servant of contemporary social values'.⁷ He believed relative deprivation did this by shifting poverty from the economic sphere, where it

⁴ See, for example, Atkinson, *Unequal Share: Wealth in Britain*; Atkinson, *The Economics of Inequality*; Atkinson, *Inequality: What Can Be Done?*

⁵ Römer, 'Poverty, Inequality Statistics and Knowledge Politics Under Thatcher'; Savage, *The Return of Inequality*.

⁶ Römer, *Inequality Knowledge*, 166–74, 256–60; Glennerster, 'Peter Brereton Townsend, 1928–2009'.

⁷ Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, 46.

had been situated for most of the postwar period, towards the realm of sociology.

Yet while Townsend's writings have been a continuous source of discussion and inspiration for historians and sociologists alike since their publication, little has been known about their formation and production. Scholars have long been interested in these dimensions of Townsend's work; he was a participant, for instance, in two separate Witness seminars, convened to gather insights from key actors in events from recent British political history, and the subject of the longest interview in Paul Thompson's "Life Stories" project.⁸ But restrictions on access to archival evidence made it difficult to dig below the published record and oral testimony. Recently, however, historians have made use of a wide range of resources, such as the records of his surveys of old age during the 1950s and early 1960s, as well as his correspondence with civil servants, to gain insights into not only Townsend's research methods and relentless efforts to influence the British state but also issues such as class and gender in post-war Britain.⁹

This paper adds to this growing literature by showing how Townsend's earliest efforts to enlarge the definition of poverty were beset with problems, with even actors who were broadly sympathetic to his aims questioning some of his innovations. The paper illustrates this point by utilising archival sources to explore the troubled late-1960s national poverty survey on which the analysis in *Poverty in the United Kingdom* was based, with a focus on discussions between Townsend and Abel-Smith, who initially co-directed the survey, and their funders, the JRMT, now known as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which has received surprisingly little attention from historians, despite its important role in a range of developments at the intersection of social research and politics during the late twentieth

⁸ Thane and Davidson, *The Child Poverty Action Group in the 1970s and 1980s*; Berridge, 'The Black Report and The Health Divide'. My thanks must go to one of my referees for drawing out the significance of these resources as indicators of interest in Townsend and their relationship with the work on Townsend that has subsequently been possible.

⁹ Greenhalgh, *Aging in Twentieth-Century Britain*, chs 2–3; Renwick, 'The Family Life of Peter and Ruth Townsend'; Römer, *Inequality Knowledge*.

century.¹⁰ As we will see, although the JRMT, welcomed the ambition of going beyond then-conventional ways of measuring poverty, they were unsure about the work associated with Townsend's concept of relative deprivation, asking questions about the objectivity of the whole approach, and eventually deciding not to support its extension.¹¹ The question of whether Townsend's effort to develop the concept of relative deprivation was objective or not, which is open to interpretation and has been addressed by scholars elsewhere, is not a concern here; but the fact that the project's funders raised the issue at all is seen as having an important bearing on our understanding of the difficulties that confronted efforts to break free from existing approaches to poverty and provides insights into the politics of social research during the post-war decades.¹²

Returning to the 1960s origins of Townsend's concept of relative deprivation locates the discussion in a set of themes from the literature on social science and poverty research during the post-war era. On the one hand, as a project utilising sampling and in-depth face-to-face interviews and based, if only in theory at first, in one of Britain's new universities, the national survey on which *Poverty in the United Kingdom* was based was typical of the movement to build a modern, rational, post-war nation through a new kind of social science, which has been described by Mike Savage.¹³ On the other, the responses to Townsend's work

¹⁰ There are few sustained studies of the JRMT/Rowntree Foundation, with the main sources of information being Flower, *Trusting in Change*; Waddilove, *Private Philanthropy and Public Welfare*. Other branches of the Rowntree operation have received some attention, though mostly for earlier periods, notably Freeman, *The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust*. Rowntree organisations played crucial roles in the development of things like 'Short Money', which provides funds for research assistance for opposition parties in parliament, as well as NGO politics, by providing the likes the Low Pay Unit and Friends of the Earth with office space in central London, during the late twentieth century. For a recent example of an acknowledgement of Rowntree organisations' role in British politics during the late twentieth century see: Murphy, *Futures of Socialism*, 25.

¹¹ For a different account, focused on Abel-Smith's involvement, see Sheard, *The Passionate Economist*, 198–200, 208–9.

¹² For a recent philosophical discussion of objectivity and Townsend's concept of relative deprivation see Maia, 'A New Look into Peter Townsend's Holy Grail'. For a broader analysis of the issues associated with measuring poverty and their implications for policy see Ravallion, *The Economics of Poverty: History, Measurement, and Policy*. For the history of social research in Britain during the post-war decades, see Savage, *Identities and Social Change*; Halsey, *A History of Sociology in Britain: Science, Literature, and Society*.

¹³ Savage, *Identities and Social Change*. They also resonate with questions about the use of statistics in the government of postwar Britain explored in the essays in O'Hara, *Governing Post-War Britain*.

on the concept of relative deprivation provide an important case study that supports Römer's arguments about the relationship between the "knowledge regime", a set of practices, norms, and hierarchies of authority in a field of knowledge, in postwar Britain, and its "knowledge politics", the political efforts that stabilise, govern, and transform a knowledge regime.¹⁴

Postwar researchers like Townsend had to operate in a context where the British state had a stranglehold on the production of poverty knowledge, Römer has demonstrated, which put significant restrictions on the way poverty could be studied, conceptualised, and discussed in the public sphere. As this paper shows, those restrictions extended to the outlook of those who funded poverty research during the period, providing further obstacles on the challenging landscape Townsend and his colleagues had to travel through during what they understood as a quest to wrestle the idea of poverty away from political and bureaucratic elites. In so doing, the paper contributes to not only our understanding of the origins of relative deprivation, an idea that has become central to discussions of poverty and inequality in both social science and the media, but also a broader international scholarship on the history of poverty and inequality research.¹⁵

Poverty and Social Research in Early Twentieth-Century Britain

Poverty had been the focus for large-scale surveys in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain, when it emerged as a problem that seemed to threaten the political and social order. The main aim of these surveys, the most famous of which were conducted by Charles Booth in London and Seebohm Rowntree in York, was initially to establish an accurate figure

¹⁴ Römer, 'Evolving Knowledge Regimes', 328; Römer, *Inequality Knowledge*, ch. 1.

¹⁵ Bach and Morgan, 'Measuring Difference?'; Tomlinson, 'Social Democracy and the Problem of Equality'. See also the other essays in the special issue of *History of Political Economy* of which these essays are a part, as well as O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*; Davie, *Poverty Knowledge in South Africa*.

for the number of poor people in Britain – an issue that was widely contested when there were few reliable sources of information, beyond Poor Law claimant counts. But the individuals who conducted the work, most of whom were operating outside universities, either as private individuals or within contexts such as the settlement movement, were often motivated by interests in social reform, in particular challenging the idea that the help available for those in need was adequate. Their surveys generated new knowledge about poverty, which was produced by different mixtures of impressionistic observation, novel definitions, and innovative approaches to measurement. The results would inform the development of policies that constituted the origins of the mid-twentieth-century welfare state.¹⁶

In addition to greatly extending many people's perception of how widespread poverty was – by the interwar years, it was widely believed that around 30% of the population were living in poverty of some kind – this survey work saw the emergence of a whole new methodological and conceptual framework. Drawing on ideas about household budgets and basic diets, Booth, Rowntree, and others brought new precision to the old idea of the 'poverty line', tying it to beliefs about what people required to sustain the most basic of lives, and developed concepts such as the 'poverty cycle', which associated poverty with the interruption of earnings and specific life events, such as the birth of a child and old age. The appeal of this emerging tradition of poverty research, including to social investigators who were preoccupied with working-class individuals whose behaviour and lifestyles did not match their middle-class expectations, was that it seemed to offer not only unambiguous measurement criteria but also a clear account of the circumstances in which state intervention was required.¹⁷

¹⁶ Bulmer et al., *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective, 1880-1940*; Englander and O'Day, *Retrieved Riches*; Thane, *Divided Kingdom*, ch. 1; Thane, *Foundations of the Welfare State*; Renwick, *Bread for All*, ch. 2.

¹⁷ Welshman, *Underclass: A History of the Excluded since 1880*, chs 1–4. For a broader discussion of these

Yet there were always doubts about exactly how comprehensive or realistic such approaches to poverty were. As some commentators pointed out, political economists, including Adam Smith, had long accepted that economic development created new standards, meaning poverty was sometimes closely related to the conventions of the society in which individuals found themselves. Even Rowntree, who took a deliberately spartan approach to defining basic needs and categorised poverty as either 'primary' or 'secondary', with the latter a consequence of lifestyle and choices, incorporated elements of this kind into his work.¹⁸ Moreover, there was a strong interest on the left of the political spectrum in inequality.¹⁹ R. H. Tawney, for example, wrote extensively during the interwar years about his belief that life would only improve for the poorest when they had a greater share of not only economic resources but also power.²⁰

Nevertheless, relativistic ideas about poverty were nowhere near as influential as absolute ones in social research and politics, not least because, as Jim Tomlinson has argued, Tawney was resistant to the emerging discipline of economics and the quantitative approaches that were coming to dominate it.²¹ General attitudes towards poverty, as well as policy thinking about it, were therefore tied to ideas such as subsistence, culminating with William Beveridge's proposals for the reform of Britain's social services, which drew on Rowntree's ideas about human needs, enabling the post-war Attlee administration to build a somewhat austere welfare state.²² Aided by data from Rowntree's flawed third survey of

points, see: Hennock, 'Concepts of Poverty in the British Social Surveys'.

¹⁸ Veit-Wilson, 'Paradigms of Poverty: A Rehabilitation of B.S. Rowntree'. Townsend disagreed with Veit-Wilson, his friend and former Research Officer, about this issue. See: Townsend, 'Paradigms of Poverty: A Comment'. For criticism of efforts to rehabilitate Rowntree, see Freeman, 'Seebom Rowntree and Secondary Poverty, 1899–1954'.

¹⁹ Jackson, *Equality and the British Left*.

²⁰ Tawney, *Equality*.

²¹ Tomlinson, 'Social Democracy and the Problem of Equality', 521–22.

²² Sloman, *Transfer State*, 32–39; Harris, 'Enterprise and Welfare States: A Comparative Perspective'; Harris, *William Beveridge*, 386–88; Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920–1970*; Tomlinson, 'Why so Austere?' Harris, 'Enterprise and Welfare States: A Comparative Perspective'.

York, and despite an ongoing interest in the subject among social researchers who strived to understand working class life on its own terms, politicians and commentators found it easy to argue throughout the 1950s that poverty was a thing of the past.²³

By the mid-1960s, however, the postwar consensus was under pressure from a small but relentless group of academics and campaigners. The intellectual centre of gravity for the group was the Department of Social Administration at the London School of Economics, home to Richard Titmuss (1907-73), who developed a hugely influential approach to studying the new welfare state, set out in revered works including *Essays on the Welfare State* (1958), *Income Distribution and Social Change* (1962), and, later, *The Gift Relationship* (1970). Titmuss wanted people to understand Britain's social services holistically and in the context of the country's wider fiscal framework, such as the tax reliefs available to the middle-class. Doing so led to a very different account of who the post-war settlement worked for.²⁴

Along with the likes of David Donnison and Tony Lynes, Abel-Smith and Townsend, who secured positions in Titmuss' department before the end of the 1950s, helped develop a research programme that simultaneously defended the value of the social services and criticised the way they were organised and administered – a role that led to them being referred to as the 'Titmice'.²⁵ The group, who offered expertise on a wide range of topics, from tax and pensions to housing, health, and social care, found an audience among a new

²³ Rowntree and Lavers, *Poverty and the Welfare State*; Lowe, 'The Second World War, Consensus, and the Foundation of the Welfare State'; Skidelsky and Bogdanor, *The Age of Affluence*; Black and Pemberton, *An Affluent Society?* On social research that aimed to understand working class life, including poverty, on its own terms during the period see Todd, 'Affluence, Class and Crown Street: Reinvestigating the Post-War Working Class'; Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?: The Search for Community in Post-War England*; McCarthy, 'Pearl Jephcott and the Politics of Gender, Class and Race in Post-War Britain'; Butler, *Michael Young, Social Science, and the British Left, 1945-1970*; Savage, *Identities and Social Change*.

²⁴ Stewart, *Richard Titmuss*; Oakley, *Father and Daughter*; Fontaine, 'Blood, Politics, and Social Science: Richard Titmuss and the Institute of Economic Affairs, 1957-1973'; Jackson, 'Richard Titmuss versus the IEA'.

²⁵ The origins and original meaning of this term are unclear. It is a term Titmuss used to refer to his own family, as well as one applied to the group as often pejoratively as endearingly in the public sphere. See: Stewart, *Richard Titmuss*, 2-3; Oakley, *Man and Wife*, 202. On Abel-Smith and Townsend more generally see: Sheard, *The Passionate Economist*; Glennerster, 'Peter Brereton Townsend, 1928-2009'.

and much-celebrated generation of Labour Party intellectuals, who brought them into the party's policy-making process in opposition and employed many as special advisors when Labour formed a government.²⁶ A belief in the continued existence of poverty was a thread that ran through work on these different topics and Townsend, who had argued since the early 1950s that welfare state provision was pegged to elite expectations about working-class behaviour, was the member of the group with the strongest interest in developing research on this specific issue.²⁷ As Townsend told the then shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, Harold Wilson, in a heated exchange in the *New Statesman* in 1959, he believed 'the evidence suggests both that a substantial minority of the population live in destitution or near destitution and that they have few prospects of improvement at a time when the wealth of some sections of the population is increasing rapidly'.²⁸ The challenge was finding a means of demonstrating the empirical reality of this conviction.

Relative Poverty and the 'Rediscovery of Poverty'

Townsend did not see a contradiction between his conviction that poverty was a continuing and significant concern and the wider belief that Britain was a country where many people, in the words of Conservative Prime Minister, Harold MacMillan, 'had never had it so good'.²⁹ On the contrary, Townsend was an early enthusiast for the US-Canadian economist J. K. Galbraith's book *The Affluent Society* (1958), which had depicted the USA as a country with two radically different but seemingly inseparable sides: growing private wealth, with luxury

²⁶ Sheard, *The Passionate Economist*, chs 5–8; Stewart, *Richard Titmuss*, 12, 13, 20, and 25; Thornton, *Richard Crossman and the Welfare State*, chs 2–4; Pemberton, 'The Failure of "Nationalization by Attraction"'; Blick, *People Who Live in the Dark*, chs 3, 4, and 6; Smith, 'Networks of Influence'.

²⁷ Townsend, 'Poverty: Ten Years After Beveridge'; Townsend, 'Social Security and Unemployment in Lancashire'; Townsend, 'Measuring Poverty'.

²⁸ Townsend, 'Truce On Inequality'. For Wilson's response, see: Wilson, 'The War on Poverty'.

²⁹ {Citation} Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, ch. 7.

goods available on a scale never known before, and increasing public squalor, produced by concentrations of poverty, absent infrastructure, or low-quality public services. As he explained in a letter to Titmuss in 1959, Townsend thought Galbraith helped advance his developing critique of Britain by drawing attention to how ‘there has been a political truce about inequality’. This truth was exemplified, Townsend explained, by the ‘lack of sufficient enquiry into the “revolution” brought by the Welfare State’.³⁰

However, Townsend’s ideas about poverty had little impact beyond his immediate circle of academic associates until the publication of *The Poor and the Poorest* (1965), co-written with Abel-Smith, a year after Labour’s return to government. The pamphlet was the product of a project they had started in 1961 with a small amount of internal research funding from the LSE, which they used to explore data generated by surveys conducted for the Ministry of Labour: the Enquiry into Household Expenditure, a random sample survey that collected returns from more than 12,000 households in 1953/54 and was used to update the Cost of Living Index, and the more recently inaugurated Family Expenditure Survey, which had begun in 1957.³¹ Convinced that official statistics used for the measurement of poverty provided an incredibly limited basis for understanding the problem, Abel-Smith and Townsend sent a research assistant to do hours of painstaking work on the original EHE and FES questionnaires and punch cards, which were held at Ministry of Labour offices on the fringes of North West London, in the belief the data could be used to measure the number of people experiencing what they described as ‘low standards of living’.³²

Abel-Smith and Townsend’s project was significant for a number of reasons. One was

³⁰ Townsend to Titmuss, 5th February 1959, Townsend Papers, Box 21, File 10. For Galbraith’s account of the ‘truce on inequality’ see Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, ch. 7. On Galbraith in Britain see Thompson, ‘Socialist Political Economy in an Age of Affluence’. On the left and affluence during the period see Davis, ‘Arguing Affluence: New Left Contributions to the Socialist Debate 1957–63’; Middleton, “‘Affluence’ and the Left in Britain, c.1958–1974’.

³¹ On the history of the Enquiry into Household Expenditure and the Family Expenditure Survey, see: Moss, *The Government Social Survey*, chs 3–4; Gazeley et al., ‘The Poor and the Poorest, 50 Years On’, 457–58.

³² Abel-Smith and Townsend, *The Poor and the Poorest*, 16–17.

that it was a very early – most likely the first – example in British social research of ‘secondary analysis’: taking data collected for one purpose and using it for an investigation of a different kind. Although this approach was innovative, statisticians had significant criticisms. Abel-Smith and Townsend used different aggregate household measures on the two surveys – expenditure on the 1953/54 EHE and income on the FES of 1960. Some commentators, including W. F. F. Kemsley, the research officer responsible for the FES, who read their draft manuscript, did not believe Abel-Smith and Townsend could infer from the data the things about living standards that they claimed. Moreover, Kemsley, like subsequent commentators, thought comparing the two surveys using different measures was more problematic than Abel-Smith and Townsend were prepared to admit.³³

Another reason *The Poor and the Poorest* was significant was that Abel-Smith and Townsend’s poverty line was not based on existing definitions of subsistence or a new one they had devised. Instead, they had looked to the National Assistance Board, which handled cases that did not fall under the remit of National Insurance. The NAB was, in many ways, a remnant of pre-war social security — a locally-administered system that provided means-tested benefits to people who did not fit the model of the full-time, able-bodied, male, industrial worker, to whom much of the postwar settlement was tailored.³⁴ Beveridge had believed something like national assistance, a safety net for everyone who fell through the cracks of the National Insurance system, was necessary but also that it would gradually wither away. By the early 1960s, however, the numbers claiming national assistance benefits were continuing to increase, with the old, whose benefits had been set at below-subsistence

³³ W. F. F. Kemsley, ‘Households with Low Expenditure or Income. Comments on Report by Professor Townsend. 2nd February 1965’, Townsend Papers, Box 47, File 15. For an overview of *The Poor and the Poorest*, see Gazeley et al., ‘The Poor and the Poorest, 50 Years On’; Gazeley, *Poverty in Britain, 1900-1965*, ch. 6.

³⁴ On the history of the means test see: Deacon and Bradshaw, *Reserved for the Poor*. On often-excluded groups see Hampton, *Disability and the Welfare State in Britain*; Jones, ‘The State and Social Policy’.

rates after the war, the biggest group of claimants.³⁵ The NAB was not at the fringes of the welfare state but a core part of its activity, meaning Abel-Smith and Townsend believed it was legitimate to treat it as an unofficial but government-endorsed poverty line.

National assistance payments were calculated using scales but NAB officers also had the discretion to disregard household resources and award a range of extra allowances. Based on a study of NAB records, Abel-Smith and Townsend argued that 140% of basic NAB rates was a more accurate reflection of what claimants actually received.³⁶ They therefore applied this metric, a relative measure, given poverty was defined in relation to benefit rates and applied to the whole population, to their EHE and FES data. Civil servants who had been involved in granting Abel-Smith and Townsend access to the survey data disputed this application, arguing that the final figures were unmoored from a meaningful definition of poverty.³⁷ But Abel-Smith and Townsend disagreed, believing that the ideas about social convention that NAB officers weighed when making their decisions on individual cases showed poverty had to be defined much more broadly. On this basis, their data showed 18% of households, containing about 14.2% of the population, less than half of whom were retired and including almost as many, 2.25m, children, were poor.³⁸ In fact, those figures had almost doubled over the course of the period they had examined.

On its own, Abel-Smith and Townsend's 78-page pamphlet, published in the LSE's highly influential but niche 'Occasional Papers in Social Administration' series, would probably not have had an audience outside of circles predisposed to accept their arguments. After all, Townsend had presented short but relatively complete versions of their rationale,

³⁵ On National Assistance see Deacon and Bradshaw, *Reserved for the Poor*, ch. 6. On old age and national assistance, see: Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 364–80.

³⁶ For a discussion of these points see Veit-Wilson, 'The National Assistance Board and the "Rediscovery" of Poverty'.

³⁷ Römer, *Inequality Knowledge*, 170.

³⁸ Abel-Smith and Townsend, *The Poor and the Poorest*, 39–40. For more on the place of *The Poor and the Poorest* in relation to previous approaches to the measurement of poverty in Britain see Gazeley, *Poverty in Britain, 1900-1965*, ch. 6.

findings, and arguments more than three years earlier in both well-publicised presentations to the British Sociological Association and articles in widely-read sections of the press, eliciting little broader response.³⁹ As Keith Banting argued some time ago, the reason was that the project lacked the elements usually considered essential to overturning established views about poverty or inequality. The poor and their representatives in the public sphere — the Labour Party and trade unions, for example — did not feature. Instead, ‘poverty was essentially a statistical concept’ and the poor ‘were discovered at the bottom of income tables’.⁴⁰

What made things different when *The Poor and the Poorest* was published was the decision to synchronise its appearance with the launch of the Child Poverty Action Group, which campaigned for an immediate increase to Family Allowances, the universal payments that were available for the second and subsequent child in every family. CPAG, of which Abel-Smith and Townsend were early members, was one of a raft of new single-issue organisations that would become a fixture in British politics from the mid-1960s.⁴¹ CPAG made significant use of figures from *The Poor and the Poorest* in its meticulously-planned and media savvy launch at Christmas 1965, a time chosen deliberately because there would be little competing news. Emotionally-charged depictions of stricken families, where children went without Christmas presents and dinner, items few people would include in any definition of ‘subsistence’, conveyed the ideas that had motivated *The Poor and the Poorest* in a way that dry statistics and arguments about the significance of the discretion exercised by NAB officials could not. Indeed, so successful was the strategy that Harold Wilson felt under enough pressure to have to meet a CPAG delegation, including Abel-Smith and Townsend,

³⁹ Townsend, ‘The Meaning of Poverty’, 1962; Townsend, ‘The Meaning of Poverty’, 20 April 1962; Townsend, ‘The Shadow of Poverty in the Age of Plenty’.

⁴⁰ Banting, *Poverty, Politics, and Policy*, 68.

⁴¹ Evans, ‘Stopping the Poor Getting Poorer’; Hilton et al., *The Politics of Expertise*; Whiteley and Winyard, *Pressure for the Poor*.

after they had delivered a letter demanding action to Downing Street in the full glare of photographers and journalists.⁴²

The Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust and the National Poverty Survey

The Poor and the Poorest had been started using funding from the LSE but it was finished with a small portion of a grant from the York-based Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust, originally known as the Joseph Rowntree Village Trust and one of three separate bodies founded in 1904 to manage the Rowntree family's philanthropic interests and funding work.⁴³ The JRMT had broadened its remit beyond housing in the late 1950s to include an array of social research, increasing the range and number of projects it supported. Moreover, it had decided that the country's expanding higher education sector was the best home for much of the money it was looking to distribute – a move that was welcomed by institutions that did not have a state-supported social research council to call on before 1965 and had previously contended with the changing priorities of US foundations, which had taken an interest in British social research during the early and mid-twentieth century.⁴⁴ In the 20 years after 1959, the JRMT made 240 grants of varying sizes, funding work at universities including

⁴² For more on CPAG's early history, see: Thane and Davidson, *The Child Poverty Action Group, 1965-2015*; McCarthy, *Campaigning for the Poor*.

⁴³ Flower, *Trusting in Change; The Joseph Rowntree Inheritance, 1904-2004*; Waddilove, *Private Philanthropy and Public Welfare*.

⁴⁴ Savage, *Identities and Social Change*, ch. 5. On the involvement of US foundations in UK social research earlier in the century, see: Ahmad, 'Institutions and the Growth of Knowledge'; Bulmer, 'Support for Sociology in the 1920s'; Bulmer and Bulmer, 'Philanthropy and Social Science in the 1920s'; Butler, *Michael Young, Social Science, and the British Left, 1945-1970*; Fisher, 'The Role of Philanthropic Foundations in the Reproduction and Production of Hegemony'; Renwick, 'Completing the Circle of the Social Sciences?'; Tiratsoo and Clapson, 'The Ford Foundation and Social Planning in Britain'. On the creation of the Social Science Research Council, later the Economic and Social Research Council, see King, 'Creating a Funding Regime for Social Research in Britain'; Gaber and Gaber, *SSRC/ESRC: The First Forty Years*. There was, however, a funding body for social research in the empire some time before one was established for domestic research - a fact that reflects the priorities of the British state during the mid-twentieth century. See: Steinmetz, 'A Child of the Empire'. On commemorative philanthropy in UK universities more generally, see Pellew and Goldman, *Dethroning Historical Reputations*.

Durham, Bristol, Leeds, Newcastle, and Birmingham, supporting individual research projects and the creation of entire units and centres.

It made perfect sense for Townsend to approach the JRMT in 1964, not long after he had left the LSE for the University of Essex, drawn by the vision of the modernist campus just outside Colchester becoming something like the UK's answer to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which was put to him by the university's founding Vice-Chancellor, Albert Sloman.⁴⁵ The JRMT supported research across the country but they were known to be particularly interested in the country's new universities, notably York, with which the trust had a special relationship.⁴⁶ Townsend wrote to the JRMT to suggest they discuss ideas for 'a major inquiry in Britain into the subject [of poverty] over the period of five years'. Aware of the relationship between what he was proposing and the history of the organisation he was in dialogue with, he pitched his idea in particular way: he would reenergise a surveying tradition that had been dormant for almost 30 years, he told the JRMT, and ensure 'the important interest of pioneers like Charles Booth, Seebohm Rowntree, Bowley and others might be kept alive and drawn to the attention of the public'.⁴⁷

The JRMT did not make any firm commitments but they indicated they were interested in hearing more. Townsend and Abel-Smith therefore drew up a brief, three-page outline of a potential new survey, including some very rough cost estimates, and forwarded it the following Spring. Their four-year plan was divided into three stages. The first included four pilot studies of groups — large families, fatherless families, the chronically ill and disabled, and industrial injury and war pensioners — they had identified as being particularly at risk of experiencing poverty. Stage two would see a major national survey of living

⁴⁵ Hoefflerle, 'Great Expectations: Sloman's Essex and Student Protest in the Long Sixties'; Sloman, *A University in the Making*.

⁴⁶ For figures on grants awarded, see Waddilove, *Private Philanthropy and Public Welfare*, 109–10.

⁴⁷ Townsend to Lewis Waddilove, 18th September 1963, Townsend Papers, University of Essex, Box 1, File 2. For an early articulation of this view about the tradition of British poverty surveying see Townsend, 'Measuring Poverty', 130.

standards, based on a sample of at least 5,000 families. The final stage would be focused on yet-to-be-determined sub-groups from the main sample.⁴⁸

Although Townsend had told the JRMT the plan was to revive the tradition of Booth and Rowntree, he and Abel-Smith did not intend to replicate those earlier studies; on the contrary, they intended to deploy new concepts and ideas, which would bring poverty surveying within what scholars would later refer to as ‘the Titmuss paradigm’.⁴⁹ As Abel-Smith and Townsend explained in their brief outline, they wanted to conduct a survey that corrected what they saw as the problem of previous ‘studies of the distribution of income... [being] narrowly based and... not... related to wealth, fringe benefits and the resources of other members of the family’.⁵⁰ They proposed mapping the distribution of wealth in the UK, uncovering how many people, overall and in different categories, lived in poverty and, most significantly, though this would not be immediately obvious, in ‘relative deprivation’.

An emerging concept, with roots in social psychology and work on status by theorists including Max Weber, relative deprivation had been developed since the Second World War as a means of understanding how individuals perceived themselves with respect to an immediate or wider reference group.⁵¹ As his earlier publications on the research for what would become *The Poor and the Poorest* made clear, Townsend was developing a different version of the concept that involved using it to express the material and emotional resources that were available to individuals at any given time.⁵² Like much else relating to the advanced stages of the project, though, Abel-Smith and Townsend provided few details about the ways they were planning to depart from convention, even of an emerging sort.

⁴⁸ Abel-Smith and Townsend, ‘Survey of Poverty’, Townsend Papers, Box 47, File 9, p. 2.

⁴⁹ Stewart, *Richard Titmuss*, 4–8.

⁵⁰ Brian Abel-Smith and Townsend, ‘Survey of Poverty’, Covering Letter, 24th March 1964, Townsend Papers, Box 47, File 9, p. 1.

⁵¹ Stouffer, *The American Soldier*; Merton and Rossi, ‘Contributions to the Theory of Reference Group Behaviour’; Hyman, ‘The Relation of the Reference Group to Judgements of Status’; Runciman, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice: A Study of Attitudes to Social Inequality in Twentieth-Century England*.

⁵² Townsend, ‘The Meaning of Poverty’, 1962, 210, 225; Townsend, ‘The Meaning of Poverty’, 20 April 1962.

Abel-Smith and Townsend estimated a project of this kind would cost in the region of £32,000 and, to their great surprise, the JRMT agreed to fund the project immediately.

Although the decision attracted a significant attention from the national press, it was also the cause of a serious headache for Townsend.⁵³ The University of Essex, to which the JRMT were adamant they were awarding the grant, was not even a building site yet, with no research facilities to speak of, meaning Abel-Smith had to convince the LSE to provide office space and support, despite their misgivings about how much thought had gone into the practical details.⁵⁴ Abel-Smith and Townsend then had to rapidly advertise for staff, hiring Dennis Marsden, co-author of *Education and the Working Class* (1962), and John Veit-Wilson, who had spent the previous four years in what Abel-Smith described as “civil servant-ish jobs” in the management consultancy world, as research officers and Hillary Land, a mathematics graduate from Bristol University who had taken the LSE’s Diploma in Social Administration, as a research assistant.⁵⁵ Each would conduct a pilot, with an ongoing study of the long-term unemployed in the North East by Adrian Sinfield brought under the project’s umbrella as a substitute for the proposed pilot on the industrial injury and war pensioners.

Planning for Abel-Smith and Townsend’s national survey started in mid-1966, when the fieldwork for the pilot studies was almost done. By this point, however, important things had changed. *The Poor and the Poorest*, which Land had spent her first few months on the project helping to finish off, had made an impact beyond what they had originally envisaged; so much so that the Ministry of Social Security had launched its own follow-up investigation,

⁵³ Daily Telegraph Education Reporter, ‘Grant of £32,000 for Poverty Survey’; *The Guardian*, ‘£32,000 Grant for Study of Poverty’; *The Times*, ‘Poverty Survey By Essex’.

⁵⁴ Abel-Smith to Richard Titmuss 4th May 1964, and Sidney Caine to Abel-Smith, 19th May 1964, Brian Abel-Smith Papers, London School of Economics, ABELSMITH/4/1/A.

⁵⁵ Abel-Smith to Townsend, 10th September 1964, Abel-Smith Papers, London School of Economics, BAS/4/1/A.

employing Abel-Smith as an adviser.⁵⁶ The Labour government had also announced plans to abolish the NAB and replace it with the Supplementary Benefits Commission, which was to oversee a new system of rules and, supposedly more generous, benefits.⁵⁷ Moreover, Abel-Smith and Townsend had acquired even more substantial public profiles, coming to be identified, alongside Titmuss, as key figures in what was being called the ‘poverty lobby’ in British politics.⁵⁸ Townsend had become particularly well known in newsrooms and TV production companies for his willingness to make himself available for interviews and provide input into scripts that dealt with social security. Indeed, his direct, uncompromising, and sometimes combative style, quite different from Abel-Smith’s more measured tone, meant he could be relied on to criticise Labour politicians as fiercely as Conservatives, despite his long-term and continuing association with the party.⁵⁹

Driven by Townsend’s conviction that these developments made new ways of measuring poverty even more important, he and Abel-Smith drafted what Abel-Smith later described as ‘what must have been the most complex questionnaire so far used in social research’.⁶⁰ 39 pages long and containing nine sections — housing; employment; occupational facilities and fringe benefits; cash income; assets and savings; health and disability; social services; private income in kind; and styles of living — the questionnaire aimed to gather comprehensive information on respondents’ resources and lifestyles using experimental approaches. With respect to income, for example, they aimed to capture households’ income over a period of 12 months, rather than at the moment the survey took

⁵⁶ Ministry of Social Security, *Circumstances of Families*.

⁵⁷ On the Supplementary Benefits Commission, see: Deacon and Bradshaw, *Reserved for the Poor*, 105–12; Sloman, *Transfer State*, chap. 4; Stewart, *Richard Titmuss*, chap. 25.

⁵⁸ Moorhouse, ‘The Poverty Lobby’.

⁵⁹ For an occasion, other than the launch of CPAG, when Townsend, Abel-Smith, and Titmuss clashed with the Labour government, in their own distinct ways, see their debate with Richard Crossman in Fabian Society, *Socialism and Affluence*. Perhaps more notable, and divisive, was Townsend’s prominent role in CPAG’s later ‘Poor Get Poorer Under Labour’ campaign. Sheard, *The Passionate Economist*, 255–60; Meyer-Kelly and Kandiah, *The Poor Get Poorer Under Labour: The Validity and Effects of CPAG’s Campaign in the 1970s*.

⁶⁰ Abel-Smith, ‘Poverty in Context - New Thoughts on Old Themes’, 124.

place or via interviewees' estimates of what they would 'normally' earn. They attached most significance, however, to the section on 'styles of living' — a series of questions about how often families ate fresh meat and cooked breakfasts, the frequency with which they socialised in and out of their house, and whether children had parties on their last birthday, among many other things. Asking about these subjects was motivated by their belief, as they put in a report to the project's advisory committee in September 1966, that 'the needs induced by the society in which the individual lived were every bit as real and as pressing as nutritional needs'.⁶¹

Yet following the completion of the four pilots Townsend and Abel-Smith concluded that the sample size they had settled on, 4,500 households, would not enable them to capture minority groups — both variants on the groups that had been the subject of the pilots but also households with children with learning difficulties, those with individuals who had spent time in prison, those that had experienced homelessness, non-white immigrants, and poor rural workers — in a way that was nationally representative.⁶² Townsend suggested it would be necessary to increase the sample size to 10,000.⁶³ But, via informal and discreet channels, he and Abel-Smith made it known that, in an ideal world, they would actually like to increase the sample to twice that.⁶⁴ 'It would, of course, be possible to undertake the study on the scale originally contemplated', Abel-Smith and Townsend wrote to the JRMT. However, significant expansion 'would be of more than proportionate value. Instead of discussing the poor in six main categories—elderly, sick, disabled, unemployed, fatherless and large families with head in full-time work — it would be possible to handle at a tolerable level of

⁶¹ Abel-Smith and Townsend, 'The Strategy of a National Survey: Progress and Prospect', 20th September 1966", Townsend Papers, Box 47, File 9. The questionnaire and interviewer instructions, explaining the rationale for fieldwork, were reproduced in the final report: Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, apps 9–10. For a discussion of the questionnaire and its aims see Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, 94–98. Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, pp. 94–8

⁶² See also Abel-Smith and Townsend, 'The Strategy of a National Survey'; 'Advisory Group on the Survey of Poverty', 27th September 1966, Townsend Papers, Box 47, File 9.

⁶³ 'Advisory Group on the Survey of Poverty', p. 4.

⁶⁴ Abel-Smith and Townsend to Ford Longman, 24th November 1966, Townsend Papers, Box 47, File 9, p. 2.

significance twenty to thirty categories of vulnerable households'.⁶⁵ Developments of this kind would enable genuine strides forward in the understanding of who the poor were, away from the largely homogenous category that had dominated discussion up until that point and towards something that recognised what scholars would later come to describe as its intersectional elements.⁶⁶ Townsend was not confident the JRMT would say yes to potentially doubling their existing budget but he did think they seemed open to a discussion.⁶⁷

Anxieties about Objectivity

The JRMT trustees first discussed Abel-Smith and Townsend's request for further funding in February 1967. Jean Rowntree (1905-2003), who had recently retired as head of the BBC's adult education unit and taken over as the trustee with special responsibility for the project, told her colleagues that she found the suggestion disconcerting. Coming to things with a fresh pair of eyes, she argued that approaches for more money had to be scrutinised closely, given the substantial sums they had already agreed to part with. Yet her concerns were less to do with the total budget Abel-Smith and Townsend might end up acquiring or the merits of different sample sizes and more about 'the degree of objectivity with which [the poverty survey] is being conducted'. Indeed, she claimed that there 'have been rather similar anxieties for some little time in the [JRMT] office'.⁶⁸

One of Rowntree's major worries was that the poverty project was mixing politics and research in a way that should make the JRMT deeply uncomfortable. For Rowntree, the

⁶⁵ Abel-Smith and Townsend to Ford Longman, 24th November 1966, p. 2.

⁶⁶ For more on this point see Römer, *Inequality Knowledge*, 146–55.

⁶⁷ 'Poverty Project Group, Meeting, 4th November 1966', Townsend Papers, Box 47, File 9, p. 1.

⁶⁸ Meeting of the Trustees at Mary Ward House, London, on Saturday, 25th February at 2.00pm, Agenda Notes, 1967, Papers of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Borthwick Institute for Archives, University of York, JRF/2/1/2/7, p. 2.

problem was caused ‘principally because Professor Peter Townsend has emerged as the principal advocate of certain controversial proposals to meet the needs of families in “poverty”, and the form of the research which he has undertaken seems to be very closely related to the political programme which he is advocating’. The reason Rowntree – a former BBC producer – singled Townsend out was telling: she had encountered his ideas about alleviating poverty via his appearances on television. Although she did not want to discuss the merits of his proposals, declaring the issue irrelevant, she did report that she found them ‘less well considered’ than what she had heard from CPAG — a seemingly strange conclusion, given Townsend’s leading role in the organisation, but one that reflected his separate and very public status as an expert on the general topic of poverty.⁶⁹ Given the trust had turned down an application for support from CPAG, believing that funding the campaign group could compromise the trust’s charitable status, Rowntree argued they should interrogate Abel-Smith and Townsend about their intentions.⁷⁰

Yet Rowntree and others at the JRMT were also concerned about the *way* Abel-Smith and Townsend planned to investigate poverty, believing that the new tools and concepts they attached so much importance to were being developed in directions that showed the influence of their egalitarian politics. The JRMT had been sold on the idea they would be paying for a study that would stand as a successor to Booth and Rowntree’s turn-of-the-century surveys. To be sure, the JRMT understood that the new project involved innovations that would see poverty surveying evolve beyond what had been done half a century earlier. But they saw a marked difference between using NAB rates as a new poverty line and what seemed to be required to put flesh on the bone of an idea like relative deprivation. As Jean Rowntree put it

⁶⁹ Meeting of the Trustees held at Mary Ward House, London, on Saturday, 25th February, 1967, p. 2.

⁷⁰ Meeting of the Trustees held at Mary Ward House, London, on Saturday, 25th February, 1967, p. 12. CPAG would receive funding from the Joseph Rowntree Social Service Trust, which had a different remit and was run as a limited company, later in the decade.

to Townsend at a meeting of the project advisory committee in late May, the worry was that ‘the impression could be created that the team had decided what solutions were required before the research was completed – indeed, before the main survey was launched’.⁷¹

Abel-Smith and Townsend conceded it was difficult ‘keeping apart the various roles they played’ and ‘not easy to control the way in which these roles were described by the press and by radio and television’ but made a number of promises about trying to ensure they did not associate the JRMT with their campaigning work.⁷² The trustees, however, wanted a more comprehensive account of the methods and approaches that were planned for the rest of the project, especially when Sir Donald Sargent, who had been Secretary of the NAB from 1959 to 1966 and taken the same role with the new SBC, complained about Dennis Marsden’s use of data originally supplied by the NAB in a recent article.⁷³ Abel-Smith and Townsend were instructed to prepare a report that addressed Jean Rowntree’s concerns directly and could be used as the basis for a more general discussion about the trustees’ future financial commitments to the project.⁷⁴

Submitted in early October, the report gave a stirring account of what had been achieved during the previous three years: three new pilots; technical preparations for drawing a national sample of 4,500; the recruitment of interviewers; and the drafting of a questionnaire.⁷⁵ Success in these areas had allowed them to fill in the numerous gaps in their provisional account of the later stages of the project. The pilots had stressed not only ‘the importance of looking at poverty over a period of time’, Abel-Smith and Townsend

⁷¹ Advisory Committee on Poverty Survey, Minutes, Friday 26th May 1967, Townsend Papers, Box 47, File 9, p. 1.

⁷² Advisory Committee on Poverty Survey, Minutes, Friday 26th May 1967, p. 2.

⁷³ Advisory Committee on Poverty Survey, Minutes, Friday 26th May 1967, p. 2; the article in question was Marsden, ‘Poverty - The Fate of One Child in Six’.

⁷⁴ Meeting of the Trustees to be held at the Royal Station Hotel, York, on 28th July 1967, at 9:30am, Agenda Notes, 1967, Papers of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, JRF/2/1/2/7, p. 8.

⁷⁵ Report for the Advisory Committee Meeting on 2nd October 1967, Townsend Papers, Box 47, File 10. Two of the pilots would be published in full: Land, *Large Families in London*; Marsden, *Mothers Alone*.

explained, but also that ‘poverty can be measured in a number of different ways, for instance, by level of possessions, by income, by housing standards, so that families lacking in one of these respects can be described as in partial poverty’. Overall, it was now clear, they wrote, that families’ ‘sense of well-being was related to the rising standard of living in the community so that erstwhile luxuries were coming to be regarded as necessities’ and only more, not to mention longer and more intensive, interviews than they had originally envisaged would allow them to investigate the phenomenon properly.⁷⁶

Townsend also produced a memo on the way they proposed to measure poverty. ‘Following previous work’, he wrote,

we start by re-defining poverty in terms of relative deprivation. Individuals and families are in poverty if they lack the resources to have the types of diets, participate in the activities, and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary in society. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities.⁷⁷

Operationalising this definition was challenging, though. ‘Resources’, which included less obviously-quantifiable cultural and social activities, had to be measured. A poverty line that represented the idea of ‘below average’ – something they knew would be dismissed as arbitrary if it simply referred to a group such as the bottom 40% of the income scale – had to be determined. They also had to find a way of distinguishing between temporary and permanent poverty and overcoming technical challenges such as equivalence between

⁷⁶ Report for the Advisory Committee Meeting on 2nd October 1967, p. 3.

⁷⁷ Townsend, “Defining and Measuring Poverty in the National Poverty Survey”, 1st September 1967, Townsend Papers, Box 47, File 12, p. 1.

household units of different sizes and composition. Indeed, Townsend wrote,

the most worrying aspect of this very provisional sketch of a method of measuring poverty is the concept I have been developing of income-related cultural participation. 'The' culture is made up of a series of overlapping sub-cultures. If the national culture is defined statistically to include majority activities, customs and amenities then in trying to measure the numbers of those who are excluded from it we run the risk of lumping rich elites and religious and ethnic minorities with the poor... We must therefore use as our criterion not just majority activities and amenities but activities and amenities which usually require the expenditure of resources or which can be shown by empirical means to involve a 'threshold' level of the expenditure resources.⁷⁸

As he and Abel-Smith explained in a memo on their questionnaire, written around the same time as Townsend's poverty memo, they 'suspect[ed] that participation in [cultural pursuits] which are common tends, statistically, to diminish rapidly below a certain level of income, or of resources, for each type of household'.⁷⁹

Having read and digested this material, Jean Rowntree pressed Abel-Smith and Townsend further at a meeting in early October. Abel-Smith and Townsend assured the trustees they would still be using measures such as Supplementary Benefit scales but stressed that they would do so primarily for the purpose of comparison with relative deprivation, which they believed was the only means of capturing the contours of poverty hidden by most attempts to express it as an income:

⁷⁸ Townsend, "Defining and Measuring Poverty in the National Poverty Survey", 1st September 1967, Townsend Papers, Box 47, File 12, pp. 6-7.

⁷⁹ "Household Resources and Social Problems in the United Kingdom. Commentary on Project and Questionnaire, October 1967", Townsend Papers, Box 47, File 12, p. 9.

the extent to which a housewife deprived herself for the sake of her children, the inability of a family to own a washing machine, refrigerator and other durable goods, the lack of even mediocre housing, the failure to purchase an overcoat in the previous years and the dependence on second-hand clothing, and the inability to share in ordinary leisure-time pursuits such as an evening out and summer holidays.⁸⁰

The project's advisory committee, which had a majority of practicing social researchers, including Titmuss, and had been asked to advise the trustees on the merits of Abel-Smith and Townsend's case, were convinced a bigger sample was justified. The trustees were unmoved, though. One reason was their feeling that saying yes would encourage further requests for even more resources at some point in the future. Another reason, however, was that they were unconvinced that Abel-Smith and Townsend's politics would not influence the direction of the analysis. 'Although the assurances about objectivity could be accepted', the trustees concluded, they had a strong feeling that Abel-Smith, Townsend, and their assistants were so 'deeply committed to certain views on social policy that they would find it difficult not to direct the study in a way which would, if possible, lend support to the policies they advocated'. This seemed most obvious to the trustees in the case of relative deprivation because it was 'capable of interpretation in a variety of ways'.⁸¹ The boundaries of the project that had originally been pitched to them therefore seemed satisfactory.

After much deliberation about potentially applying to a different funder, Abel-Smith and Townsend concluded they would have to proceed with the original plan, which was

⁸⁰ Minutes of the Meeting of the Advisory Committee held on October 2nd 1967 at the London School of Economics, Townsend Papers, Box 47, File 10, pp. 2-3.

⁸¹ Meeting of the Trustees held at the Royal Station Hotel, York, on 13th October 1967, Minute Book, 1957-68, Papers of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, JRF/2/1/1/5, p. 3. On the JRMT's decision see Meeting of the Trustees held at the Royal Station Hotel, York, on 13th October 1967, p. 4; Longman to Townsend and Abel-Smith, 23rd October 1967, Townsend Papers, Box 47, File 10.

executed over the course of 12 months from early 1968. The survey was not without its challenges. Bad weather and foot and mouth disease caused significant delays in rural areas. There was also a high level of churn on the interviewing team, thanks in no small part to the complexity of the questionnaire, which took on average more than two hours to complete and required highly skilled and motivated interviewers, leading many to quit or be asked to leave. However, the biggest problem came in the summer of 1968, when Abel-Smith went to work part time as an advisor to Richard Crossman, Labour's new Minister of Social Security, leaving Townsend to steer the project through to completion — something that would eventually take more than 10 years.⁸²

Aware that the project was going to run out of money before the analysis had been completed, Townsend made one further attempt to secure more funding. He approached the sociologist T. H. Marshall, chair of the recently-created SSRC's committee for sociology and social policy, about the possibility of not only tiding the project over but also extending the survey.⁸³ The SSRC committee were also unconvinced, though, with the timing of the approach perhaps not helped by Essex having recently received sustained national attention during the student protests of May 1968.⁸⁴ Marshall reported that, on first viewing, 'it was not clear to [the committee] how some of the key concepts used in the study, such as "average", "normal", "style of life", "deprivation" etc., would be handled operationally', especially on the kind of scale Townsend had described.⁸⁵ Even a longer report was not enough to persuade them otherwise.⁸⁶

⁸² Sheard, *The Passionate Economist*, 254–55.

⁸³ Townsend to T. H. Marshall, 10th June 1968; Townsend and Abel-Smith to T. H. Marshall, 10th June 1968, Townsend Papers, Box 47, File 10.

⁸⁴ Hoefflerle, 'Great Expectations: Sloman's Essex and Student Protest in the Long Sixties'.

⁸⁵ Marshall to Townsend, 16th May 1968, Townsend Papers, Box 47, File 10, p. 1.

⁸⁶ Marshall to Townsend, 10th July 1968, Townsend Papers, Box 47, File 10.

Conclusion

Poverty in the United Kingdom was finally published in October 1979 – a delay caused by computing difficulties, funding shortages, and Townsend’s commitment to producing the fullest report possible, which led to the inclusion of such a wide array of tables and graphs that the manuscript spent two years in production. Townsend had used the survey data to define a shared style of living, based on a provisional index of 12 characteristics, drawn from a much longer list of 60, including whether individuals had been on holiday in the past year, possessed a refrigerator, and had left the house for entertainment during the previous two weeks. He had then mapped those characteristics’ distribution across society and related them to income. Townsend believed there was not only a clear relationship between income and deprivation, as indicated by a score of 6 or more on his index, but also that his initial hypothesis was correct: there was a definite threshold, around 150% of the supplementary benefit standard, where deprivation increased disproportionately to the decrease in income.⁸⁷ If the supplementary benefit standard, a benchmark produced by the state, was used as the poverty line then 7% of households were poor; but if his relative deprivation standard, which he believed reflected what would be widely acknowledged, encouraged, or approved as features of a conventional life in modern society, was deployed then the result was 25% — approximately 12.4million people.⁸⁸ The difference was important because, as he told readers on the first page of the introduction, ‘poverty can be defined objectively and applied consistently only in terms of the concept of relative deprivation’; other approaches reflected elite views of the poor.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Questions were posed in the negative — for example, “has not had an afternoon or evening out for entertainment in the last two weeks” — so scores indicating deprivation were numerically high, rather low. See Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, p. 250.

⁸⁸ Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, p. 1, ch. 7.

⁸⁹ Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, 31.

From Townsend's perspective, the ten-year gap between finishing the survey and the final report's publication was unfortunate. Although he was able to put some of his ideas about relative deprivation into circulation, whether in academic forums, where he reported some of the earliest findings of his analysis, or in the public sphere, such as during his clashes with the Conservative Minister of Social Security, Keith Joseph, over what Townsend believed to be the victim-blaming theory of the 'cycle of deprivation', an opportunity was undoubtedly missed.⁹⁰ In part, this was because critics who were predisposed to reject his arguments were able to dismiss his data as being more than 10 years out of date. But it was mostly because, as Felix Römer has argued, the mid-1970s were a period when Labour, elected on a more radical manifesto than its predecessors of the 1960s, and building on the area-based programmes that had been set up during the final years of those administrations, put inequality at the heart of central government, opening up new possibilities, albeit only briefly, for the way the state measured, thought about, and tackled poverty.⁹¹ Townsend had a role to play in those developments, submitting a draft copy of *Poverty in the United Kingdom* and giving oral evidence to the lower incomes reference of the Royal Commission on the Distribution of Income and Wealth in 1977, and serving on the government committee, chaired by Douglas Black, that was asked to investigate health inequalities the same year.⁹² But by the time *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, not to mention the Black report, appeared, Labour had been replaced by Margaret Thatcher's Tory administration, which had no time for Townsend's calls for 'distributional justice for all' via policies such as maximum wages and the abolition of excessive wealth.⁹³

⁹⁰ Townsend, 'Poverty as Relative Deprivation: Resources and Style of Living'; Townsend, 'The Cycle of Deprivation'; Welshman, 'Ideology, Social Science, and Public Policy'.

⁹¹ Römer, *Inequality Knowledge*, ch. 4. For a discussion of the concept of deprivation in those area-based programmes see Andrews, 'Multiple Deprivation, the Inner City, and the Fracturing of the Welfare State'.

⁹² Townsend, 'Note of an Oral Evidence Session Held on Tuesday, 17 May 1977'.

⁹³ Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, ch. 27; Römer, 'Poverty, Inequality Statistics and Knowledge Politics Under Thatcher'.

Yet the concept of relative deprivation, in the terms Townsend understood it, would not disappear because the Conservatives governed Britain from 1979 to 1997. On the contrary, relative deprivation would become a key part of the wider approach to and discussion of poverty across politics and the public sphere during the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, beginning with the ‘Breadline Britain’ project, which was accompanied by a Channel 4 television series.⁹⁴ To be sure, not everyone, even on Townsend’s part of the political spectrum, was convinced by the concept, which continued to be contested both in the broadest terms and with respect to the way he had rendered it. David Piachaud, who had worked for Crossman, alongside Abel-Smith, in the late 1960s and in a variety of roles for Labour in the 1970s, thought the index of deprivation ‘offers no solution to the intractable problem of disentangling the effects of differences in tastes from those of differences in income’ and, despite welcoming the goal of moving poverty out of the economic realm, that Townsend’s arguments about the presence of a threshold was an artefact of his long-held beliefs.⁹⁵ The economist Amartya Sen also disagreed that poverty could be understood universally as a relative concept, arguing, in a somewhat ill-tempered dispute with Townsend, that the lesson from the study of poverty beyond industrialised nations was that it had an irreducible absolute core.⁹⁶

Such conceptual concerns were the subject of work by Townsend and others over the course of the decade that followed. But by the 1990s, as Römer has shown, the state no longer exercised an effective monopoly over the statistical foundations for claims about poverty and inequality, with NGOs able to interrogate government claims much more effectively and produce different data sets that could be used to explore aspects of the

⁹⁴ The most comprehensive source of information about these surveys is www.poverty.ac.uk

⁹⁵ Piachaud, ‘Peter Townsend and the Holy Grail’, 420. For Townsend’s response see Townsend, ‘Peter Townsend Replies’.

⁹⁶ Sen, ‘Poor, Relatively Speaking’; Townsend, ‘A Sociological Approach to the Measurement of Poverty--A Rejoinder to Professor Amartya Sen’; Sen, ‘A Sociological Approach to the Measurement of Poverty: A Reply to Professor Peter Townsend’.

problem overlooked, often deliberately, in older approaches.⁹⁷ In this context, with a broader array of information, produced over a sustained period, and important developments in the precision with which complex ideas could be measured, relative deprivation gained a much firmer foothold within both the academy and the public sphere, where it increasingly featured in analysis of the changes wrought by economic and social policy since the early 1980s.

⁹⁷ Römer, *Inequality Knowledge*, ch. 5.

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