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J.H. Veit-Wilson

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Consensual Approaches to Poverty Lines and Social Security*

J.H. VEIT-WILSON†

ABSTRACT

The principal problematic issue in all poverty measures is the source and status of the standards of needs and deprivation. Rejection of minimum subsistence or quasi-absolute approaches to defining poverty, and acceptance of the social relativism of poverty, logically demand that the indicators of deprivation equally be derived from the society in question and not be prescribed for it by 'experts'. The paper reviews the policy implications of the distinction between deprivation and poverty, and discusses two principal approaches to empirical methods of establishing 'consensual' measures of poverty: the income proxy method and the deprivation indicator method. The paper also distinguishes sociologically-based poverty lines from politically-based social security scales, outlining some important aspects of the theoretical and methodological relations between them.

Arguments about the adequacy of social security scales continually and necessarily refer back to the concept of poverty lines. The public discussion of these matters in Britain has been bedevilled for decades by the inability to distinguish between the scientific establishment of a poverty line and the quite different activity of taking political decisions on how much money the government can afford to pay the poor. In Britain there is still no officially recognised poverty line other than that which is tautologically implied by the supplementary benefit (SB) scale rates. The arguments are further confused by the variety of participants

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† Head of the School of Applied Social Science, Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic.

— politicians, pressure groups, economists, sociologists, social policy people and so on — all of whom arrogate to themselves, if they have not already been conventionally ascribed with it, the expertise to qualify them to say what poverty means and where the poverty line should be set. Few of these experts (and I am among them) are themselves poor. The status of their expertise about poverty, whether technical or intuitive, is thus quite widely questioned, not only by poor people but also by other experts who hold different views and values.

This paper is about the ways in which a poverty line can be clearly established by dynamic and empirically valid research methods which avoid the futilities of the clash of personal opinions of experts. It discusses the problem of the status of the expertise, experiential or technical, of the various parties to the argument, including 'public opinion'. Deriving standards for defining necessities from empirically-based public opinion surveys leads Mack and Lansley to call these methods 'consensual' (1985, p.45). This paper outlines the implications of such consensual poverty research methods for democratic governments that wish to design social policies and update social security scales in relation to incontrovertible findings about deprivation and poverty in their nations. It does not, however, prescribe any scales as such. This is because governments base such scales on political and economic considerations which are quite different and separate from the social and psychological aspects of deprivation on which poverty lines are based.

SEMANTICS AND THE SOCIAL DIVISION OF WELFARE

Writers on poverty often use the words 'poverty' and 'deprivation' ambiguously, sometimes synonymously, but differently at other times. In addition Titmuss (1958) and other analysts of social policy have shown how social welfare needs in modern society are met by the flows of resources through a variety of distinct and different institutionalised channels to individuals and groups, of which the cash flows of personal earnings or social security benefits are only one among many. Prescriptions for poverty are often vitiated by disagreements between commentators about which of a range of concepts (from social exclusion to deficient purchasing power) is most valid in the analysis, and which method of change (from comprehensive social and economic reform to adjustments to social security scales) is most efficacious. I suggest that, even if universally agreed meanings are chimerical, a discussion of these issues would be more constructive if a firm distinction were made between the terms to give them back their current ordinary meanings and to allow not only greater precision in analysis and prescription but also unambiguous discourse.

'Deprivation' means not having tangible or intangible resources or experiences which are conventionally desired, expected or prescribed in the society or social context in question. The list of resources and experiences may be lengthy and would include all those things which may satisfy human needs in their manifold expressions. These expressions draw on concepts in four domains:

Physiological: nutrition and environment;

Psychological: identity and community.

These abstractions are, in practice, inevitably and invariably expressed in social terms. The idiom used may vary by time, place and social actor, and by context. The expression of needs may conceal the hierarchical or contextual nature of their felt experience. Further variation may be introduced by the distinction between the immediacy or postponability of the satisfaction of needs. And much depends on whether needs in these domains are personally experienced by a social actor commenting on them, or are being experienced by someone else to whom needs are or are not being ascribed by observers, including the experts mentioned before.

'Nutrition' refers not only to diet, but also to air and water. 'Environment' refers to all aspects from geography and climate at one extreme, through mobility in physical space, to housing conditions, heating and the personal portable environment of clothing at the other extreme. The two psychological domains of need are central to considerations of individual mental health and social behaviour, and of collective social integration. The domains are not exclusive categories: the language in which needs are expressed usually draws on ideas from more than one domain, because in practice such things as dietary, clothing and housing needs have to be expressed in terms of their social and psychological meanings and experience. For example, Charles and Kerr note:

Within Britain the dominant food ideology defines a socially and nutritionally acceptable diet as one that centres around the regular consumption of proper meals. Within this diet meat, particularly fresh meat, occupies a central place; it is the food accorded the highest value. The social and ideological values attached to food are therefore crucial in defining what is meant by proper eating. Because of this, the adequacy of families' diets needs to be assessed not only in nutritional but also in social terms (1986, p.413).

Attempts from Rowntree onwards to define precisely what resources are required to satisfy human needs in these domains, and to what levels (minimum or optimum), have been vitiated by methodological problems in establishing agreed standards and measurements, and by the concep-

tual problems arising from the failure to take account of the two psychological domains of need in arriving at socially acceptable standards. For example, the workhouse diet may have been nutritionally satisfactory, but it was psychologically depriving because it undermined the individual's sense of a competent identity and underlined that he or she was not a member of the respectable community of non-paupers. The equal importance of the psychological with the physiological domains is evident when one considers the pathology of unmet psychological needs: mental disintegration and community breakdown, including the exclusion of individuals and groups.

As against this wide range of practical meanings associated with deprivation, 'poverty' is conventionally a much narrower concept. It has been used to describe the *condition* of severe deprivation (whether relative or subsistence) as well as the *cause* (lack of control over resources required). To the extent that money is the principal resource lacking, the common meaning of poverty is simply not having enough money with which to buy the resources required to meet needs.

This distinction usefully emphasises that deprivation may be caused by factors other than poverty, and money can meet only those needs which can be satisfied in markets. If there is no market in the resources necessary to meet these needs and prevent deprivation (or to provide for the 'capabilities' as Sen (1983) has called them) which is accessible to people at risk of deprivation, then money by itself is useless. The distinction also focuses attention on the range of methods available to governments for meeting recognised needs, so that political discussions do not remain at the level of income maintenance alone (important though that is in a society where many needs are conventionally met through individual purchasing power). All British governments have subscribed to the belief that some deprivations at least should be dealt with outside the market place; for example, some have withdrawn services such as health and education from market distribution, and others emphasise the mutual obligations of support deriving from kinship or co-residence.

To use the term poverty solely for lack of money may seem to leave no word for the causes of deprivation where the resources required are not available in markets. But this is an issue in the politics of the distribution of all kinds of tangible or intangible resources, and the common phrase for being without these is being powerless. And since the individual's control over resources is itself a sequential process, power as a psychological as well as a political concept is constantly required beside poverty as an economic one. They may be linked, but they are not the same.

In this paper, therefore, the terms deprivation and poverty will be given the following distinct meanings: the condition of deprivation means unmet need, which is caused by lack of resources of all kinds (tangible, intangible, interpersonal, intrapersonal). The condition of poverty means lack of money resources, and the lack of resources, including money resources, is caused by the condition of powerlessness in the social, economic or political systems. While governments may choose to deal with deprivations by mobilising a range of formal or informal flows of resources, the cure for poverty is more money—earnings or social security benefits.

In saying this, we must re-emphasise the distinction between deprivation and poverty on the one hand and social security scales on the other. In the stipulative approach adopted in this paper, poverty lines are the empirically derived and demonstrable minimum levels of cash income at which people do not suffer from a set level of deprivations. Whatever the arguments about what constitutes these deprivations, all poverty lines are based on the notion of the least amount of money required to combat them. By contrast, government social security scales are based on the contrary notion of the maximum amount of money which the government is prepared to pay people in recognised and demonstrable need. Again, while the question of what those recognised needs are may be argued, such provisions are always framed in terms of maxima. It is, of course, conceivable that a government might pay social security benefits at levels higher than those necessary to combat recognised poverty, but the empirical evidence in this country from such studies as those of Rowntree (see Atkinson *et al.*, 1981), Piachaud (1979) and Bradshaw (1987) suggest that this has not been the case since the Beveridge Report and subsequent legislation brought in the current social security system. Definitions of poverty lines in terms of social security scales, or in terms of what the taxpayer is willing to pay, are statements about the maximum which those who have power over resources are willing to pay the poor, and both are flawed as statements about the nature of poverty as such.

THE PROBLEM OF EXPERTISE

All operational definitions of deprivations or of poverty are in some sense relativistic, in that they inevitably express minimum needs or the experiences of deprivation in terms of the diets, clothing, housing, patterns of behaviour and expectation which are appropriate to the society in question. The use of terms such as absolute, minimum, subsistence, or relative, is often confusing and unproductive when there is no previous agreement on the precise meanings of the terms in context (see, for example, the exchange between Sen (1983) and Townsend

(1985a)). What distinguishes different approaches is the question of *who* decides what necessities are.

In the *prescriptive class* of definitions, whatever they may be called, experts lay down what are to be the minimum standards of food, clothing, housing, income and so on. These experts may have sophisticated arguments in support of their prescriptions, but the force of the prescription is either their own beliefs about how poor people in society ought to be able to live (for example, Beveridge 1942), or the purported demonstration that poor people need more money than they are getting (for example, Rowntree, 1901; Piachaud, 1979 and 1981a; Bradshaw, 1987). Such prescriptive approaches may include budget studies based on empirical materials. Surveys of household management styles among the poor, like food surveys, demonstrate the inadequacies and problems but do not themselves aim to prescribe standards (for example, Bradshaw, 1987). That is left to other experts who use such studies, applying their own values to interpreting the findings and incorporating them into their prescriptions for poverty lines. Rowntree's primary poverty line in 1899 was based on studies of the cost of working-class housing, and his primary poverty line allowance for clothing was based on working-class respondents' views of minimum standards which were then costed (1901, p.108). Primary poverty, however, remained an explicitly expert construction even though—as Rowntree himself pointed out—it was not intended to be a prescription for a minimum income on which anyone could actually live a social life (Rowntree and Kendall, 1913, p.30–31). There have been many forms of prescriptive deprivation indicators and poverty lines, and motives for their construction, and as they have been widely reviewed before (in, for example, Townsend, 1979) there is no further need to do so here.

The other approach to deprivation is based on deriving the standards, the definitions of necessities and thus the indicators of deprivation, from the whole of the society in question by the use of social survey methods, including using empirical methods to discover the income level(s) at which such standards are generally achieved. These approaches are explicitly relativistic, in that they claim that the concepts of deprivation and poverty are social constructs which can only be expressed and understood in the context of a specific society at a particular historical position. They take this relativism to its logical conclusion by recognising that, as the measures of deprivation and poverty are peculiar to that social context in time, and as even the experts are in a sense a part of that society as well as observers of it, the standards can only properly be derived and understood by studying their social source—that is, the masses in society

whose experience and expectations give rise to them. In this sense, a sociologist might study the expert civil servants and other elites who design social security scales and implement them, or the expert economists who claim that scales are above *their* poverty line, or the expert masses of society who themselves decide what the necessities of decent social life are, albeit in an unconscious manner. In choosing the latter, the sociologist does not ignore the role of elite experts and does not necessarily embrace a democratic ideology, but does acknowledge the indisputable location and source of social values. After all, who can possibly know better than ordinary people themselves what their perceptions of social necessities are? They may not have the expertise to know the nutritional content of their diets, but they know what they want to eat, and how often and where and with whom they want to eat it. In this empirical approach to determining satisfaction and deprivation, the role of the expertise of the nutritionist is to determine the nutritional content of the diets eaten by people in their own unselfconscious ways in different cultural contexts and at different income levels. The role of the expertise of the social researcher, sociologist and economist is to use reliable technical methods to expose and articulate both a society's own definitions of necessities and the empirically verifiable facts about the income levels at which groups in that society fail to acquire them and are forced into deprivation.

This way of defining deprivation and poverty has been described by Mack and Lansley as 'in essence a *consensual* approach' because 'it aims to identify a minimum acceptable way of life not by reference to the views of "experts", nor by reference to observed patterns of expenditure or observed living standards, but by reference to *the views of society as a whole*' (1985, p.42, emphasis in original). Although this class of consensual approaches is younger than the prescriptive class, there are divisions within it as well. One may distinguish the consensual studies made so far into (a) those which concentrate on the popular view of the *income levels* required to avoid deprivation (but which do not unpack the contents of that deprivation), and (b) those which study the popular view of the *necessities* required to avoid deprivation (and which then seek to establish the income levels correlating with a prescribed level of deprivation).

Strictly speaking, the term 'consensual' should be applied only to these two approaches because they are based on testable degrees of consensus about the standards used. It is arguable that Townsend's approach is a hybrid because, although it is based on social surveys, it relies in its choice of standards on his explicit view that consensual methods may

misrepresent the 'reality out there' of true needs and deprivation (Townsend, 1985a, p.661). The following sections briefly outline aspects of these two types of approach and consider some of the problems associated with each of them, including the differences between the Townsend and the Mack and Lansley approaches.

THE INCOME PROXY METHOD

During the 1970s a team of economists and statisticians at the University of Leyden in the Netherlands developed a new approach to the generation of poverty lines, based on the assumption 'that the individuals themselves are the best judge of their own situation' (van Praag *et al.*, 1980). This approach has become known as the Leyden method, and because it has been described in detail and its epistemological and methodological strengths and weaknesses analysed previously (O'Higgins, 1980) I confine myself to commenting on only those aspects relevant to the argument about the basis, implications and consequences of consensual methods.

The Leyden method involves surveying a sample of the whole population to give answers to two questions: (a) what the respondents believe are the levels of net income they would need to 'live without problems', to 'make ends meet' and to 'consider themselves really poor'; and (b) what cash values of net income the respondents would attach to a series of descriptive statements ranging from superfluity of income, through sufficiency to insufficiency and extreme paucity, arranged on a scale. (The number of points on the scale has varied from one version of the study to another. The language has varied, not only from country to country but also—and more contentiously—in terms of the extremes of the continuum.) The aim is to convert semantic differentials into quantifiable and manipulable scores, so that statistical methods will allow comparisons to be made between what the Leyden authors call the 'welfare function' of particular levels of income derived from these scales, and the perceptions of poverty, marginality and adequacy derived from the first question. Whatever the epistemological and methodological implications of this approach, the principle is clear—to try to discover if a consensus can be achieved within a country on the level of net cash income required 'to make ends meet'.

The Leyden team admit that 'making ends meet' is a question which does not give unproblematic answers, but they seem to consider that the range of responses which it evokes are justified because they are expressed purely in terms of the respondents' own views about a minimum income without the researchers having prompted them with

any prespecified bundle of commodities (Kapteyn *et al.*, 1984, p.6). Further, respondents are not asked to make any comparisons of the utility of income levels for *other people*, which is so often the basis of criticisms of attempts to derive poverty lines from public opinion surveys. After much statistical discussion, the authors of the reports on the Leyden method come to the conclusion that the best approximation of a consensual poverty line achievable using this survey method is the level of income at which respondents on average claim that they are only just able to make ends meet. The authors arrive at this conclusion after a discussion of the range of responses which might arise if incomes change and with them the sense of relative deprivation, but O'Higgins has questioned the assumptions on which this conclusion is based (Goedhart *et al.*, 1977, p.514; Kapteyn *et al.*, 1984, p.6; O'Higgins, 1980a, p.6).

In various papers the Leyden authors refer to both of these methods as producing 'poverty lines'. One might have assumed that the minimum income question would lead to the more obvious poverty line, and it is the one which Goedhart *et al.*, (1977) themselves used. But when this 'making ends meet' poverty line is compared with the welfare evaluation score derived from the semantic differential scale, it can turn out to be less than what is considered acceptable on the welfare scale. British readers might be surprised by the comment that 'politicians may find the corresponding welfare evaluations ... unacceptable. For example, they may feel that a welfare evaluation of 0.35 is too low and that it should be at least 0.40, or 0.45' (Goedhart *et al.*, 1977, p.516). This must, however, be seen in the context of the fact that the statutory minimum income in the Netherlands at the time of the survey in the mid 1970s was more than the estimated level of the poverty line in these consensual minimum terms. This reference to the decisions by politicians is raised in other papers: Colasanto *et al.*, (1984) write about a 'politically determined poverty line. Under this definition, the poverty line is an income level corresponding to a specific point on a continuous welfare scale. The choice of a specific point—that is, the welfare level attached to the poverty line—is made through the political process' (1984, p.128). In another paper from the Leyden team (Kapteyn *et al.*, 1984) the authors write 'since, in the end, the adoption of any poverty line involves political decisions, the term "politically determined" is unfortunate' (1984, p.10).

Whether or not the Leyden welfare function of income approach gives us a usable poverty line, the use of the other method has certainly led to some thought-provoking conclusions. In 1977, the Commission of the European Community published the report of the survey by Riffault and

Rabier of *The Perception of Poverty in Europe*. Most of the publicity given to this report at the time in Britain focused on its findings about the judgemental attitudes of the British towards the poor. But another part of the survey covered the public opinion issues mentioned by Goedhart *et al.*, what the public thought was the income required to live satisfactorily and the real minimum income necessary to make ends meet (Riffault and Rabier, 1977, pp.13 and 18). The difference between these two income measures was found to be under 10 per cent in all nine countries surveyed (7 per cent in the U.K.) (Riffault and Rabier, 1977, p.19). But there was a greater range among countries in the proportion of the population considering their *own* incomes to be below the necessary minimum (the EEC and UK averages were both 28 per cent) (Riffault and Rabier, 1977, p.20).

That approximately one quarter of the population claimed to be financially deprived is interestingly similar to the many findings of other research studies in this country on the scale of poverty, based either on the augmented SB scale approach (from Abel-Smith and Townsend (1965) onwards) or the deprivation standard approach (Townsend, 1979; Mack and Lansley, 1985). But I did not say that these European Community respondents called themselves poor, though that would be my use of the term. Only 7.6 per cent of the EEC respondents rated themselves as 'poor' (points 1 and 2 on a 7 point scale from poor to rich) and 9.3 per cent in the UK (Riffault and Rabier, 1977, p.22). It seems that describing yourself as poor is not the same as saying that you have less than the minimum necessary income to make ends meet. This interpretation is consistent with Runciman's survey findings on the sense of relative deprivation (1966) and with the British antagonism to the poor. Asking the public what income is necessary to avoid poverty, or to evaluate the supplementary benefit scale (if the respondent has not lived on it) is thus likely to evoke different responses from asking about the respondents' *own* needs. Some of the resistance to the use of public opinion as a guide to the poverty line must derive from this finding, but is in my view misplaced if the focus is shifted from the needs of other people to one's own needs. There is widespread popular agreement, particularly on the political right, that individuals are indeed the best judges of their own needs and interests, and no meaningful disagreement that the collection by reliable survey and statistical method of a mass of subjective individual opinion creates a 'social fact' which neither sociologists nor politicians can ignore. (Sociologists from Durkheim to Townsend have argued that there are also social facts which do not form

part of public opinion or consciousness, even if about deprivation, and I shall return to this point later.) Thus there must be near universal agreement that the findings of public opinion on the income levels at which populations can only just 'make ends meet' is a deprivation indicator of the highest significance.

I have called this approach to defining poverty lines the INCOME PROXY METHOD, because it seems to me that both of the Leyden methods use income as a proxy for other considerations. In the case of the minimum income question, income stands directly as a proxy for a more detailed consideration of what each respondent's conception of necessity is. We have to assume that the respondents are answering in terms of those necessities which they expect to acquire by spending their incomes. It is clear from comments in the Leyden reports that this is the correct explanation: for example, several of the studies have shown that the equivalent scale values which can be derived from studies of answers to the minimum income question for families of different size are more dispersed in some countries than in others. The reason appears to be that the additional marginal cost of children is lower in countries which have higher levels of public services provided for families with children such as 'inexpensive day-care facilities, low or zero school tuition, and heavily subsidised housing' (Colasanto *et al.*, 1984, pp.133–4). One would assume that there might similarly be differences between countries where respondents have to pay for health services, expensive private transportation, and many other aspects of the 'social wage', by comparison with countries in which they do not have to pay as much or anything. In other words, while this approach does give us a cash poverty line, it does not tell us as much about social deprivations and the need for government intervention (if any) as more direct methods might do.

The same judgement would seem appropriate about the Leyden welfare function approach, which van Praag *et al.* (1982) call the 'Leyden poverty line'. This Leyden poverty line seems to be the politicians' choice of the welfare function of income to be applied in their country; that is, at what average cash level attached to the semantic differential scale derived from the social surveys is the national social security minimum scale to be set. Under this approach, the politicians are expected to respond to the semantics of the verbal categories about inadequate income, and this is a long way from having hard evidence about the realities of deprivation and is in that sense a proxy for those realities. The point re-emphasises the distinction between the political setting of social security scales and the quite different activity of discovering the income

levels at which people are objectively deprived in relative terms; politicians' responses to consensual views expressed in evaluative categories about certain income levels may be politically important but they are meaningless as a guide to the sociological phenomenon of poverty.

Thus while the income proxy approach may seem worth exploring because it goes directly to income levels which could be related to social security scales, it does so in a context which holds the rest of social policy constant. Changes in the cost of (among other things) housing, transportation, health, education and personal social services, must all tend to complicate and make obscure the answers to the question of the welfare function of any particular level of income in any one country, place, class, gender and time. Sociologists concerned with attempts to understand the whole of the conception of needs and deprivation, and the part which financial poverty plays within it in a particular complex of social policy and the social division of welfare, will find the income proxy approach finally unsatisfactory and must give more serious attention to the deprivation indicator approach which is outlined next.

THE DEPRIVATION INDICATOR APPROACH

The methods used by both Townsend (1979) and Mack and Lansley (1985) to generate poverty lines from social surveys involved the use of indicators of deprivation. While there are considerable similarities between the two methods, there are also important differences in the way in which these researchers have generated the deprivation indicators; that is, items of personal possession, consumption, achievement or experience which have been pre-defined as necessities which all citizens should have access to if they wish it and whose lack is therefore defined as deprivation. These researchers disagree with each other on the question of the source of expertise which validates the social definition of an item as a necessity.

Townsend's celebrated definition of relative poverty is set out as the first paragraph of the first chapter of *Poverty in the United Kingdom*:

Poverty can be defined objectively and applied consistently only in terms of the concept of relative deprivation. That is the theme of this book. The term is understood objectively rather than subjectively. Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong. 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 (1979, p.31).

I have suggested elsewhere (1986) that, in itself, this definition of poverty is not radically different from that adopted by both Booth and Rowntree at the beginning of the century when they identified the poor visually as those who were, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities. Indeed, it is worth remembering that less than half of the working class in 1899 were poor in Rowntree's survey, and only one seventh of the working class had incomes below the primary poverty line (Rowntree, 1901, p.117). What distinguishes Townsend's approach from Rowntree's is the degree of commitment to prescriptive or empirical approaches in the derivation of deprivation indicators. Rowntree used a prescriptive method for the dietary component of his poverty line, and empirical methods for the housing and clothing elements, though drawing these only from working-class budgets. This was probably because cultural stratification in living patterns was so much more clearly exhibited and expected in 1899 than in the present era which Townsend surveys. Townsend's approach is, in principle, to generate deprivation indicators from empirical studies of groups in the whole population known to be at risk of deprivation (large families, single parent families, the unemployed and the long-term sick and disabled). Townsend explicitly rejects the kind of expertise adopted by Rowntree for dietary purposes which prescribes the minimum diet to be eaten by the poor and its cost. Of course he does not reject the competence of nutritional experts, but he has argued elsewhere (1962, p.220) that the poverty line which should be based upon their recommendations is the actual levels of income at which people manage *in practice* to satisfy the prescriptions of the nutritional experts.

While Townsend is often quoted as the arch-exponent of the relative deprivation approach to defining poverty, he nevertheless makes important qualifications to this approach which in my view make him a hybrid between traditional prescriptive approaches and the wholehearted consensuality of Mack and Lansley. Townsend does not use the term 'relative deprivation' in the same sense as Runciman (1966) used it. Runciman used the term to mean an individual sense of deprivation by *subjective* comparison with a reference group, but Townsend—as quoted above—uses it *objectively*. The objective comparison is made by a detached external observer, the sociologist, observing the positions of individuals and groups in society. Townsend writes:

Relative deprivation—by which I mean the absence or inadequacy of those diets, amenities, standards, services and activities which are common or customary in society. People are deprived of the conditions of life which ordinarily define membership of society. If they lack or are denied resources to obtain access to

these conditions of life and so fulfil membership of society, they are in poverty (1979, p.915).

But at the same time, Townsend concedes that

There is no unitary and clear-cut national 'style of living'. Rather, there are series of overlapping and merging community, ethnic, organisational and regional styles. By style of living I do not mean *particular* things and actions in themselves, but *types* of consumption and *customs* which are expressive of social form (1979, p.249, emphasis in original).

Townsend derived the broad definition of necessities (and consequently deprivation indicators) from many previous studies of lifestyles and amenities and the pilot studies for the national survey of poverty, but he added his own interpretation of some of them. This approach has been much disputed (by, among others, Piachaud, 1981b and Sen, 1983, as well as Mack and Lansley, 1985) because Townsend seemed to be setting himself up as the expert on what *ought* to be deprivation indicators even when his empirical material might not support the idea that a majority of society would agree (the famous case being 'has not had a cooked breakfast most days of the week' (1979, p.250)).

Townsend gives two reasons for adopting this position of privileged sociological commentator. First, "'false consciousness" is not an important sociological concept for nothing' (1985b, p.44). The social institutions of capitalism, the state and the family enslave individuals by shaping their lives and hence their needs. People do not recognise the forces which drive them, and these facts:

oblige us to look for criteria of need other than in social perceptions—whatever might be said about the valuable legitimating functions of mass endorsement of particular standards in a political democracy. Otherwise social scientists will be missing something quite fundamental in the human condition (1985b, p.44).

Second, the public perception of poverty, that which is known to the public, is not the same as the actuality of deprivation, that which may not be known to the public. Since the role of the social scientist is to collect the facts about these situations, and Townsend has done so, he feels he is in a position to draw attention to aspects of social exclusion and deprivation which may not arise from empirically derived consensual deprivation indicators. In 'A Rejoinder to Professor Amartya Sen' (1985a) Townsend writes:

It seems to me quite crucial to try to separate subjective (in both the individual and collective senses of that term) from objective aspects of deprivation in identifying and measuring poverty. People may be in poverty when they believe

they are not, and vice versa. Or people may be in poverty when interested others—such as governments, or the public at large or even the economic and sociological professions—believe they are not, and vice versa. Perceptions which are filtered through, or fostered by, the value or belief systems of sectional groups, the state or whole communities can never be regarded as sufficiently representative of 'reality out there'. There have to be forms of 'objective' social observation, investigation and comparison against which they may be checked (even if those standards remain necessarily incomplete as well as necessarily creatures of socially produced modes of scientific thought) (1985a, p.660–1).

The question remains here as always: what philosophical position, what sets of facts and values, gives Townsend or any observer the privileged status of expert to identify other people's false consciousness or reinterpret the authentic needs of a society? It is an ancient but lively question, extensively and well discussed by Springborg in her scholarly review *The Problem of Human Needs and the Critique of Civilisation*, (1981).

Before turning to the approach adopted by Mack and Lansley, I should briefly review the remainder of Townsend's method, one with which they broadly agree. The population is surveyed to discover who lacks the necessities implied by the deprivation indicators. The number of indicators lacking is then compared with personal incomes to see if there is any correlation, and at what income levels. Writing in this *Journal* about this approach Townsend states:

People can experience one or more forms of deprivation without necessarily being in poverty. People with the same resources may display a different relationship to forms of deprivation. And people with fewer resources than others may be much more likely to experience forms of deprivation even when their resources remain considerably above the 'poverty line'. However, it is assumed in this conceptualisation that at a certain point in descending the scale of income or resources deprivation is likely to grow disproportionate to further loss of resources and that this 'threshold' properly marks the beginning of a state of objective poverty. Thus, while people experiencing some forms of deprivation may not all have low income, people experiencing multiple or single but very severe forms of deprivation are in almost every instance likely to have very little income and little or no other resources (1987, p.130–31).

In this passage, Townsend shows that he has clarified the use of terminology left somewhat imprecise in 1979 and has accepted the argument that the objective lack of a socially prescribed necessity may be a matter of taste if one has the resources to acquire the necessity but chooses not to. Nonetheless, objectors to the consensual approach cannot fall back on the 'taste' argument when confronted with the objective facts of multiple deprivation and low levels of resources. As Mack and Lansley put it: 'The rich do not choose lifestyles associated with the lack

of necessities' (1985, p.96). The statistical work carried out by Desai (1986) has shown that such an empirically derived poverty line can be derived from Townsend's data, just as it was for the *Poor Britain* study.

As opposed to Townsend's, the other method based on the deprivation indicator approach is that adopted by Mack and Lansley in their study *Poor Britain*, (1985). Like the Leyden studies, Mack and Lansley choose only deprivation indicators which relate to *personal* spending: that is, they exclude important areas of life experience such as health and education where the chief factor affecting supply and personal experience is *public* expenditure. This is because they are directly concerned with poverty and not with the whole of deprivation or social exclusion, important though these areas are.

In a lengthy (and in my view the best) discussion of the issues of expertise, choice and deprivation, Mack and Lansley suggest that the problem which Townsend has is a confusion between the application of his own values in choosing the significant social phenomena which he uses to define real deprivation, and the application of other people's values in defining socially perceived deprivation. They believe that Townsend has muddled lifestyle up with deprivation, and that there can be no moral imperative (which many authors identify as an essential value lying behind the interest in deprivation) to homogenise the national lifestyle. Mack and Lansley themselves put it:

...the fact that society's perceptions can be questioned and analysed does not, in our view, undermine an approach to poverty based on these perceptions. For, to reiterate, these perceptions determine the importance and significance that can be attached to the various aspects of our living standards (1985, p.38).

They prefer to adopt an approach which avoids arguments about whether exclusion from norms is pathological or where inequalities become unacceptable, and which concentrates its moral and political force by focusing on two fundamental values widely held in British society: that poverty is about *minima*, and that it is about an *enforced* situation and not deprivation by choice. Hence they define poverty '*in terms of an enforced lack of socially perceived necessities*' (1985, p.39, emphasis in original). However, the authors admit that exclusion from the norm may become poverty in their sense when the aggregated deprivations affect the way of life of the individual against his or her wishes.

Mack and Lansley do not evade Townsend's criticism of consensual approaches which he has expressed in terms of 'the indoctrinated quality of our social perceptions' (1981, p.477), the notion that the dominant

interests in society have been built at the expense of the poor, and the question of false consciousness. To this, Mack and Lansley reply:

... although it is, of course, true that a collective view of what constitutes necessities is socially conditioned, this is in fact a key advantage of this approach. For the concept of poverty is trying to tap exactly the question of what it is that we as a society have come to accept as necessities—the aspects of our way of life that are so important that when people are forced to go without they are regarded as deprived and feel deprived. The very fact that people are culturally conditioned makes them the best judge of what it is that people have been culturally conditioned to expect as a minimum entitlement (1985, p.47).

They admit that there is a risk that commitment to consensual approaches may obscure other indicators of other real deprivations, but insist that at least this approach removes the concept of poverty from the power of the experts, the politicians and the governments who attempt to manipulate it for their own ends, and returns it to the open forum of democratic argument and the representation of group and collective interests in an open manner. Their definition of poverty is 'based in the reality of the commonplace and as such has meaning for both the poor and others ... In establishing a minimum standard of living on the basis of what is to most people unacceptable, it establishes a politically credible level' (1985, p.48). Such open argument has, in the last analysis, been the highest court of appeal for free people concerned with discovering the truth about society since the time of Socrates if not earlier.

It is arguable, and could be a matter for empirical verification, that ordinary people in society are capable of seeing behind the superficialities of consumerism and identifying for themselves the authentic 'capabilities' (to use Sen's term) which those consumerist elements make possible in our technological and complex society. For example, the abstract capability of communication between individuals requires *in our society* the highly complex tangible infrastructure of postal services, telecommunications services and transportation services including those of air, sea, road and rail. For individuals to communicate requires that this infrastructure be there and that they have the personal resources required to use the communication network: disposable income sufficient for telephones, stamps and public transport fares; or where there is inadequate transport, perhaps even a personal car. It is noteworthy that Rowntree (1901, p.133–4) included enough money to pay for postage stamps to communicate with an absent member of the family as a social necessity which he was forced to omit from his primary poverty line for merely physical efficiency; similarly, Mack and Lansley's respondents in 1983 put public transport as a high ranking necessity (88 per cent

specifying it) while ownership of a car was only included as a necessity by 22 per cent of respondents (1985, p.54). The latter respondents need not all have been rich: a car may be a necessity for all citizens, however poor, where there is inadequate public transport. People respond in terms of what they are conscious of in concrete and not abstract terms in the social context and geographical space they occupy. It is implausible that people specifying a car as a necessity were thinking of it as a fetish; it is much more likely that they had in mind a notion of enough money to both possess and run one's own means of transport for socially defined communication purposes where other means were not available. The same argument may be applied, *pari passu*, to other commodities objected to by critics of consumer fetishism. Such critics should also take care that their views are not subject to Orwell's reproach:

Behind all the ballyhoo that is talked about ...the 'materialism' of the working class lies the simple intention of those with money or privileges to cling to them ... The damned impertinence of these politicians, priests, literary men and what-not who lecture the working-class socialist for his 'materialism'! (1975, p.244).

Mack and Lansley use the term 'consensual' in a fairly loose manner. For them it is the 'collective' view of 'public opinion' and is therefore 'socially-approved'. Halsey is quoted as saying that their findings represent 'some kind of social consensus' (1985, p.48). Purists might claim that their approach is majoritarian and not consensual, since a consensus implies there are no objectors, while they base their findings on degrees of majority support for the deprivation indicators. Townsend finds the consensual judgement of society at large 'no more of an adequate basis for defining and measuring poverty as consensual politics provides the basis for constructing a welfare state' (1985, p.44) but Mack and Lansley's response seems to be that their approach does in fact have the advantage of being politically credible because it represents a majority public view. Of course, public opinion is not the sole factor to take into account, and 'in particular, absolute and relative changes in the distribution of income and living standards are an important backdrop for any measure of poverty' (1985, p.47).

There are inevitably still many methodological details in the method used by Mack and Lansley which need further clarification if it is to achieve more widespread acceptance as the current rational form of the operationalisation of the relative approach to poverty. Some of these points are raised by Walker in a paper elsewhere in this *Journal*. They include questions of the validity of responses given under differing

interview conditions (individual or group); questions of the degree of individualism or collective experience to be adopted in measuring access to resources; questions relating to the stock of resources possessed as well as to their flow; and questions relating to time span as a dimension of potential deprivation—an item may or may not be defined as a necessity depending on the duration of expected deprivations. Statistical questions relating to the establishment of income thresholds also need clarification. But the question of the place of expenditure on items which have not been consensually defined as necessities is not simply a technical matter. Meeting one's social and psychological needs involves expenditure on a large number of items which may not have been defined as necessities, such as tea and tobacco. To draw a poverty line at the income level at which expenditure on tea can be satisfied but tobacco excluded is to fall into the minimum subsistence prescriptive trap. A more sociological approach would be to accept that ordinary living patterns include this collection of non-necessitous expenditure, and poverty is the income level at which people following their own normal expenditure patterns still have insufficient to acquire necessities. Mack and Lansley, in pursuit of their goal of political credibility, make allowances for tobacco expenditure which they would not have had to do if they had adopted a wholeheartedly sociological approach.¹

Mack and Lansley deal at length with the arguments about defining poverty which had been published up to 1984, thus including the exchanges between Townsend, Piachaud and Desai (1981). They deal with many of the conventional objections to consensual methods which have been raised by these authors and others. They provide support for their assertion that, when it comes to defining necessities, there are 'nationally sanctioned standards that override class differences' (1985, p.65), and that there is a remarkable homogeneity in the views shown. Further, they do not fall into the trap of believing that what is possessed or done by the majority, or even the average in society, somehow gives rise by this mere statistical fact to a conscious conception of these goods or experiences as necessities; on the contrary, their research method evinces from respondents the concept of what is a necessity and what is not, irrespective of the ownership or experience of it. Thus one can conceive of a society which defines as necessities things which the majority do not have, and of a society with a considerable degree of inequality but in which nobody lacks socially defined necessities and in which there was therefore no poverty. The political implications hardly need further comment, but I think it worth noting again that this approach depends wholly on the definition by a high degree of consensus

of necessities applying to everybody in society and not being stratified by culture or class. Democracy and citizenship are the essential values underpinning the consensual approach; those who do not find it persuasive might consider whether their objections are based on a lack of sympathy with these values or are merely technical objections which may be overcome.

IMPLEMENTING CONSENSUAL APPROACHES

Poverty lines are social phenomena (the income levels empirically found to correlate with severe enforced deprivation measured by society's standards); they are not social security scales (which are no more than an administrative arrangement constructed in the light of a government's political and economic considerations). Nor is the reverse true, even if in Britain official estimates of poverty are expressed in terms of social security scales in the absence of government acceptance of better sociological evidence about poverty lines. It is illogical and perverse to embrace the values implicit in consensual approaches, those of democracy and citizenship, and then apply them only to the empirical discovery of poverty lines but not to the design, implementation and administration of social security scales. But the belief that poverty lines should be based on what public opinion is prepared to pay in taxation, a belief sometimes confused with consensual approaches, is a misconception based on a category confusion between poverty lines and social security scales. They may have a calculable relationship but they are distinct in both concept and practice.

In the various distinct stages in moving from the definition of needs and the generation of deprivation indicators at one end to social security scales to combat poverty at the other, survey methods form a technical sandwich between the ideological commitment to a democratic approach and the political choices about the use of the findings. Any British government wanting to design a defensible social security system must therefore in the first place carry out or commission the social surveys necessary to establish what the poverty line is at present and what changes take place in it over time. The facilities for carrying out such research already exist in the form of the General Household Survey, Family Expenditure Survey and the National Food Survey. British governments have recognised for over 30 years that what must be taken into account in estimating the cost of living is not just the prices of the goods and services bought but changes in their composition, and the same is no less true of the definition of necessities. Whatever other difficulties may be found, there are no insuperable technical obstacles to extending

the existing programme of official research surveys to cover the following questions:

1. The generation of deprivation indicators. This can range over a wider field than simply those items available in markets, thus allowing governments to decide what distributive methods to adopt (I return to this point in considering the political implications).
2. The ranking of deprivation indicators. This includes evidence on the degree to which there is consensus on the validity of the individual indicators, the priority ranking of necessities, short term and longer term, the question of how many deprivations are considered intolerable, and differences between expressed public opinion and actual consumption behaviours (to provide evidence on the expenditures on 'non-essentials' where there is also enforced deprivation).
3. The correlation of deprivations with incomes. To establish at what levels of income and other controls over the flow and stock of resources individuals and groups in the population manage to acquire the defined necessities in rank order. The range of resources to be taken into account is wide and includes welfare, occupational and fiscal benefits. The statistical methods would also test how far the deprivations cluster and whether there are key indicators of multiple deprivations, group risk and intensity.
4. The restriction of free choice. To gather empirical evidence on the levels of control over resources at which the lack of necessities because of freely exercised taste and choice changes into enforced deprivations. It is essential that valid research examines this question, partly because of its political salience but chiefly because existing survey evidence suggests that at low levels of income people can satisfy one need only by neglecting others: they do not have enough money to choose whether or not to satisfy them all. This lack of free choice is in itself an important aspect of unmet psychological need and deserves more attention from individualists than it often receives.

Before such surveys are carried out, it is not possible to predict where on the scale of income or control over other resources deprivation becomes poverty. Mack and Lansley freely concede that this is a problematic issue and deserves more attention. They explain at some length how, for the purposes of their survey, they exercised their judgement on the data available to them to arrive at this decision: that lack of one or two necessities was a matter of taste in about a quarter of instances and enforced in about three quarters (1985, p.176).

Nevertheless, their considered judgement was that : ‘we will take all those who cannot afford three or more necessities as an indication of the numbers in poverty’ (1985, p.178. Italics in original). This was because they found that a lack of three or more necessities was overwhelmingly enforced on those thus deprived—people who in any case had low incomes and reported having to cut down on all their expenditures. Furthermore, Mack and Lansley deal with the problem of deciding on the degree of consensus to adopt in defining deprivations by deciding to take as necessities those items which 51 per cent of the population identify as such. In practice, they found that 95 per cent of the people who lacked three or four necessities (at the 51 per cent level) lacked at least one necessity defined by 66 per cent of the population, and over two-thirds of the deprived lacked at least one necessity defined at the 75 per cent level. This suggests that severely deprived people lack necessities which a large majority of the population defined as such. By contrast, about half the population lacked one or two necessities at the 51 per cent level and lacked one at the 66 per cent level, and about one-third of the population lacked one necessity at the 75 per cent level. Mack and Lansley conclude that if they had taken the 66 per cent rather than the 51 per cent level for defining necessities, then this would hardly have changed the numbers in poverty (1985, p.118). To quote these findings is not to propose that they should be taken *a priori* but to show that these issues should be treated as matters for empirical research and statistical verification on each of the regular occasions on which such surveys should be carried out by the government.

The findings of these augmented social surveys will keep the government informed both about the cost of living of the whole population and about what people think about their standard of living. The expected standards may be found to rise as the average level of living of the whole population rises, but in principle standards could fall if adverse circumstances affected the whole population (as happened during the Second World War). Such surveys cannot of course give a complete or exhaustive list of every item and activity people see as essential or desirable to avoid deprivation. Nor is it necessary for the surveys to do so, since their point is to find out the income levels at which ordinary people, following their own choices, have enough money not to be forced to be seriously deprived according to the standards set by their own society and exposed by the surveys. If people are not deprived on the major items, the survey findings on their own priorities of expenditure should show if they were ever too poor to afford the minor ones if they wanted them. Just as the cost of living index is regularly revised according

to both changes in prices and also the weightings of different items bought, so the deprivation surveys would reveal changes in the composition of deprivations over time, as well as changes in the income levels at which they occur. Governments concerned with the effectiveness of their income maintenance programmes should also monitor the consequences of them for people on low incomes. Existing evidence shows that the cost of living is higher for the poor than for average households, chiefly because of lack of access to credit, bulk buying and cheaper shops. A concerned government would monitor changes in the cost of living of the population with the lowest incomes: for example, at the lowest quintile level, because the evidence of all surveys of poverty in Britain this century suggests that roughly one quarter of the population have had incomes insufficient to prevent deprivation, and the lowest fifth is thus well within the ranks of the poor.

CONSENSUAL ASPECTS OF THE DESIGN OF SOCIAL SECURITY SYSTEMS

Political choices

The separation of the discovery of the poverty line from that of the setting of social security scales is not merely a logical necessity—it would, from a democratic point of view, be of political benefit. Indeed, opposition to the distinction deserves careful enquiry, to see if it is based on mere incomprehension or on a reluctance to confront the political implications in our rich society of the research findings about the scale and intensity of poverty as measured by consensual deprivation indicators. The widespread belief that, as an editorial in *New Society* put it (14 November 1986), ‘every time benefits go up so do the numbers of the poor’, can be based only on ignorance or cynicism, and it would be politically advantageous for a democratic government to sponsor the research which gave us ‘fixed goal posts’ instead of a moving line based on social security scales.

A government committed to a consensual approach must nevertheless also confront the question of designing a consensually acceptable social security scheme. The principles of consensuality based on 51 per cent majorities embodied in Mack and Lansley’s approach lean more towards Rawlsian than Utilitarian values. The final section of this paper therefore considers some aspects of the political choices about social security schemes to which the consensual approach could make a constructive contribution.

It is unrealistic to suppose that in the short run any government would redistribute resources sufficiently to meet all consensually defined needs

and thus abolish poverty. The real questions the planners of social security have to consider concern such issues as the following:

1. How far should a government take into account the popular consensus about which of the attitudinally significant indicators of deprivation, and how many of them, constitute an intolerable situation—that is, what kinds and amounts of deprivation are to be treated as not merely personal troubles but as political issues.

2. How far should a government take account of the popular consensus on which groups at risk of poverty should be prioritised in gaining improvements in social security. A government might adopt conflicting approaches: a consensual line on deprivations but a rejection of populist prejudices (such as sexism or racism) against helping certain groups at high risk of deprivation. Governments must, of course, also decide on the other aspects of political and economic expediency of expenditure on different deprived groups to varying degrees. For example, this could involve distinguishing the deprivation of the dependant and disabled of all ages from that of the able-bodied adult without dependants: a government could direct policies to combat all the enforced deprivations of the dependant and disabled, leaving the able-bodied to carry the burden of up to three enforced deprivations (following Mack and Lansley, 1985, p.176). Or the pursuit of a crude functionalism might run counter to these popular values. All governments inevitably take decisions of this kind, but a commitment to consensual approaches would give them guidance on the acceptability of their priorities.

3. How far should a government deal with different deprivations by using differing channels in the social division of welfare. Deprivation is not necessarily best combated by raising personal incomes unless private markets can provide all the resources required to meet need, and governments may decide to meet defined need directly or through social markets (with prioritised access or modified prices). But if the psychological need for the full experience of citizenship is to be met, and if non-deprived citizens acquire resources privately and exercise their freedom of consumer choice, government failure to help the deprived to do so by increasing their personal purchasing power may enhance psycho-social deprivation even if the benefit (for example, free school meals) may combat the physiological deprivation.

4. How far should a government take account of public opinion in the setting of the levels of social security scales by category and equivalence, and in the decisions on the standardisation or complexity of such benefits in allowing for additional needs and special

conditions. It is by no means unimaginable that consensual methods might produce paradoxical results, but it is worth remembering that the rhetoricians of taxpayers' or ratepayers' revolts generally assume their constituency is not the poor. The belief that potential beneficiaries should not vote on their own benefits has never prevented the richer ones from doing so in Parliament and elsewhere. A genuinely consensual response made in the full knowledge of the extent and incidence of deprivation might well be less partial. Budget studies such as those of Bradshaw and Piachaud (described elsewhere in this *Journal*) would also make an important contribution to the public and political debate on this topic.

Some of the public views on these matters may be expressed in overtly political forms at the time of general elections, for example, views about the distribution of health services, housing or education. But because general elections (whatever their advantages for democracy) are a poor guide to public consensus on specific issues, it remains proper to suggest that the consensual approach using reliable and valid research methods be adopted to give guidance to governments on such questions as the form and level of social security, the distribution of health services or the standardisation or stratification of the modes of payment for housing.

Social Security Administration

The consensual approach to the definition of necessities and the generation of deprivation indicators can shed an important light on an aspect of the design and administration of social security schemes which is often overlooked. The way in which government income maintenance schemes of any kind are designed and administered is as important in meeting the psycho-social needs of citizens for status recognition (without which they may be discriminated against and deprived) as is the level of benefits provided by such schemes in enabling them to meet other needs themselves. This issue of the public acceptability of administrative methods, which is empirically testable like surveys of deprivation, needs equal attention to that which is commonly given to the level of tangible benefits. In order to emphasise this point in the discussion of policy-making, I have suggested (1981) that it be given a distinct name, TONE. Naming the concept allows us to measure the tone as well as the levels of social security in considerations of the adequacy of a scheme. Tone is a component of the social division of welfare (exemplified in Titmuss's distinction between the appearance of, and treatment of clients in, banks and social security offices) and must be given the same attention as the levels of fiscal or occupational benefits or of social welfare schemes.

The concept of tone thus provides a tool for evaluating different

methods of selective distribution of benefits when limited resources compel targeting on deprived groups. Although the terms 'universal' and 'selective' are often abused, they do refer to important differences in the tone of benefit administration. It is easily demonstrable that all so-called universal benefits are selective in terms of various characteristics (for example, being ill or having dependant children), and it can easily be shown that the common usage of selectivity is in terms of the characteristic of money income, where this is tested by means tests at or before the point of benefit receipt. Yet this method has been criticised by observers and recipients for decades (if not centuries) as demeaning because of the implication of financial incompetence, diminished social status and so on. Thus it can be argued that, as a generalisation, what are commonly called selective benefits are likely to carry bad tone, and what are commonly called universal benefits are made selectively available by criteria which are consensually acceptable to the whole population: that is, they possess good tone. It can be empirically verified that income maintenance systems which are publicly perceived as having worthwhile benefits and being characterised by good tone do not have uptake problems.

Uprating

The use of regular sample surveys and the creation of data series (similar to the Family Expenditure Survey and the Retail Price Index) would tell government and public about changes in what the population sees as needs and the levels of income at which they are satisfied. This is essential information every time social security scales must be raised. But while the survey methods proposed here would give a firm empirical foundation to determine the income levels at which households manage not to be deprived and the relativities between individuals, they are a cumbersome way of giving guidance to governments who wish to uprate the social security scales. To act as a buffer here, the use of a 'base index' would help, such as has been used in Sweden since 1960. There, the base index is changed in line with changes in the cost of living, and various pensions and benefits for single people, couples and children are expressed as percentages of the base, allowing changes in the relativities to be shown and discussed openly. Thus the consensual survey methods could be used to monitor if changes in the deprivation indicators and relativities need to be made, and the base index would then be used to keep the benefit scales in line with the factors the government deems politically desirable and economically feasible. Such factors may include both changes in the cost of living for households of varying income levels and changes in

indices of average earnings. Either factor might be used to uprate the base index, which could not easily be done if social security scales were directly dependent on the social surveys. The point is clearly arguable, but cannot be avoided by any government aiming to design a rational and consensually based social security system.

CONCLUSION

Those who accept that poverty is inevitably expressed in terms relative to a particular society and time, and that it cannot be seen as in any sense absolute or expressed in terms of minimum subsistence, must logically accept that the standards by which poverty is defined and measured are themselves socially derived. However, it is inconsistent to reject the views of experts on minimum subsistence but demand the right for experts to tell people in society what relativistic parameters of poverty they are to accept as relevant. Consensual approaches provide the indisputable and incontrovertible evidence of what that very society sees as the necessities, and the subsequent technical activities provide the evidence of the real poverty line in British society. Governments, exercising their political and economic judgement, may well decide to set social security scales at some other level, but they must not pretend that such scales themselves in any way represent the minimum income needed to avoid deprivation in British society—at any rate, not until the social security scales demonstrably equal or exceed the empirically derived poverty line. What no government must ever do again is to decide on the amount of money it will spend on the poor and then define poverty as the income level which that sum provides.

NOTE

1 The surveys of public opinion may reveal one set of rankings: the behavioural data a different set. This is what leads some authors to wonder how people who have objectively low incomes and rank as deprived on several indicators nevertheless spend money on non-essentials. Perhaps smoking and suchlike are more of a necessity in public practice than in opinion. There is no paradox here if commentators would only remember that normal people do their best to avoid undesirable and abnormal situations and therefore try to avoid acting in their living and spending patterns as if they were poor in every respect of their lives as long as they can. As Rowntree put it in 1923:

Do we want the workers always to spend only what is needed for purely physical efficiency? Are amusement and all luxuries to be taboo? Surely not! Those who, often thoughtlessly, speak of the inordinate thriftlessness of the working class, would not like to see their own households condemned to such an iron regime as the thrift they recommend would involve. (Quoted in Briggs, 1961, p.204).

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