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Paradigms of Poverty: A Rehabilitation of B.S. Rowntree*

J.H. VEIT-WILSON†

ABSTRACT

Rowntree is widely regarded as having originated in 1901 the 'scientific' definition of poverty as the minimum income level required for physical subsistence. He is quoted as defining 'secondary poverty' above this income level as mismanagement. Critics of this approach confuse Rowntree's use of concepts with his discussion of causes, and they overlook Rowntree's own explanation that his concept of poverty was relativistic life-style, and that his distinction between primary and secondary poverty was a heuristic device to convince individualists that the life-style of the poor was at least in part caused by low income and not by improvidence. Townsend's major life work in defining and measuring poverty as relative deprivation is usually presented as overthrowing Rowntree's paradigm. The paper shows that Rowntree's early views and methods have been widely misunderstood by later authors, and it argues that the evidence necessitates a reconsideration of Rowntree's position, which would show Townsend's achievement as a paradigmatic shift not from absolutist to relativistic models of poverty but from relativistic models based on standards prescribed by expert observers to relativistic models based on standards derived from the whole population by social surveys.

Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree (1871-1954) was a pioneer of social research into poverty. His first social survey of York in 1899 (the findings were published in 1901) not only counted the poor but described their

* I want to acknowledge gratefully the constructive criticism and suggestions which several previous versions of this paper have received since it was first given at the British Sociological Association's annual conference in 1981. I owe a great personal debt to Peter Townsend and my criticism of some of his views must not be taken as detracting from my respect and gratitude to him. The paper has also benefited from the advice of A.B. Atkinson, J. Higgins, K. Judge, H.V. McLachlan, R.A. Sinfield, A.J.C. Wilson, H.C. Wilson, the participants in seminars at the BSA conference and at Newcastle-upon-Tyne Polytechnic, and the anonymous referees of this journal.

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conditions of life. It showed that at least one-third of the poor had too little money to buy enough even for physical existence, let alone for social participation. In the years since his death, many of the reports of his early work and findings have concentrated on Rowntree's development of the instrument by which he showed this (the primary poverty measure). By doing this, some authors have misrepresented Rowntree's work in two important respects. First, they have suggested that the primary poverty measure was Rowntree's sole conception of what poverty was. They wrongly suggest that he held only an absolute, minimum subsistence view of poverty, and they unjustly criticize him for doing so. Second, they overlook his actual relativistic definition of poverty which he used in 1899 and in his second survey of poverty in York in 1936 (published in 1941). The critical authors also misquote the statistics which these surveys produced, often mentioning only the very poorest and not all those whom Rowntree identified as being poor, or saying that all the poor had incomes below the primary poverty line. Not all authors seem to have misunderstood and misrepresented Rowntree in this way, but some of the best known and most widely published have done so and perpetuated the errors.

There are two reasons why this misrepresentation matters. First, the truth should be told, and error which has been widely spread should be corrected, particularly when personal reputations are at stake. Second, British state income maintenance programmes have been justified for the past forty years in terms of Rowntree's early work on minimum subsistence. Such methods have often been promoted on the assumption that Rowntree's work provided a neutral scientific basis for minimum subsistence and showed relative approaches to be no more than matters of individual opinion. On the other hand, academic careers have been devoted to attacking this assumption and Rowntree's work, and to promoting a relativistic paradigm for poverty studies. But a reconsideration of Rowntree's early work shows both the assumption and the attack to be misguided. Rowntree's paradigm of poverty was relativist and not absolutist. His development of the primary poverty measure in 1899 was explicitly a heuristic device and not a policy prescription, and his views on policy to combat deprivation were far more progressive and redistributive than his critics seem to realize. In short, a reconsideration would restore Rowntree's reputation as the pioneer of policy-orientated poverty research which later workers have not overturned but only advanced.

These are bold assertions, and this paper aims to substantiate them. The first section briefly sets out some examples of the erroneous assertions which are conventionally presented about Rowntree. The

second section — which reviews what Rowntree actually wrote about his early measures of poverty and his reasons for using them — leads on to the final section, which considers the implications of this review for the arguments about poverty. Rowntree's minimum subsistence definition of poverty was itself relativistic, as he himself asserted (1901, p.141), and the paradigmatic shift which has unconsciously taken place is from relativistic definitions based on standards produced by experts such as Rowntree (1901, 1937), to relativistic definitions based on standards derived from the population itself through social surveys such as those carried out by Peter Townsend and his colleagues (Townsend, 1979). Awareness of this distinction shifts the focus in theoretical discussions from the sterilities of argument between experts to the realities of democratic politics, and the new paradigm thus has profound and far-reaching consequences for social policy.

CONVENTIONAL MISREPORTING OF ROWNTREE'S EARLY WORK

The mistaken assertions which have been made about the methods and findings of Rowntree's early surveys in York (1899 and 1936) range from minor points of methodological detail to major errors about the concepts of poverty with which he was working. One may classify the mistakes roughly into those concerning his survey method, errors in the statistics quoted, confusions between Rowntree's concepts of 'poverty' and 'primary poverty', and confusions between Rowntree's definitions of 'secondary poverty' and his comments on some of its apparent causes. Some of the mistakes are so elementary and obvious that one is forced to assume that the authors had not checked Rowntree's published work (they rarely give references) but had perhaps copied the error inadvertently from some previous mistaken author whom they had trusted. To substantiate this criticism, some examples of these common errors follow.

Many authors seem unclear about Rowntree's research methods. Some say that he or his investigators visited every household in York in 1899 (e.g. Thane, 1982, p.6), whereas Rowntree pointed out that only working-class households (those not keeping servants) were studied (1901, p.14). As a result, some authors give the wrong percentage for the poor (e.g. '28 per cent of his survey', Evans, 1978, p.12), where the reported figure was 43.4 per cent (Rowntree, 1901, p.117). Some authors give lower percentages for the poor in 1936 than Rowntree does (e.g. Townsend, 1979, p.160; Thane, 1982, p.168; see Rowntree, 1941, pp.108, 126), and some compare statistics of one of Rowntree's three kinds of poverty in 1899 with a dissimilar one in 1936, and draw erroneous conclusions (e.g. Brown and Madge, 1982, p.53).

Sometimes two or more of these types of error are compounded in one reference, as in the following example:

A physiological definition of poverty is one which permits relatively easy translation into cash terms. This makes it possible to carry out the measurement of poverty on a large scale. A poverty line is drawn, being the minimal amount of money needed to keep a person out of poverty, and the numbers of people who fall below this line can then be counted. This technique of measuring poverty was first used effectively in Britain around the turn of the century in the pioneering surveys conducted by Booth and Rowntree. At that time the information they collected indicated that, by their rather stringent standards, over one quarter of the population was living in poverty (Brown, 1982, p.23).

In fact neither Booth nor Rowntree used anything like the technique described here, and by confusing the measurement of primary poverty with the identification of the poor, this author makes it seem that all the poor were living below the primary poverty income level, whereas only one-third of them were in fact doing so (Rowntree, 1901, pp.111, 117). It is a succinct complex of inaccuracy.

It is a common error among authors to assume that in 1899 Rowntree used an income measure to identify and count the poor. Such authors suggest that they are unclear about Rowntree's important distinction between the identifying criteria of poverty and the heuristic device of the primary poverty measure. This confusion is found in the well-known works of such authors as Berthoud and Brown (1981, p.15), Coates and Silburn (1970, p.22), Evans (1978, pp.12-13), Field (1982, p.116), George (1973, p.42), Holman (1978, p.5), Jackson (1972, p.23), Rein (1970, p.50) and Townsend (1954, p.131; 1962, pp.211, 215; 1979, p.33), to name but a few. Many authors also have difficulty in reporting Rowntree's own views about secondary poverty. Their common errors are confusions between the definition of secondary poverty (which describes *who* those poor are) and its causes (which explain *why* they are poor), and the unfounded notion that Rowntree believed that all secondary poverty was caused by improvidence. Among the authors whose work suggests confusion about secondary poverty are Berthoud and Brown (1981, p.8), Hagenbuch (1958, p.167), Holman (1978, pp.4-5), Kincaid (1973, p.53), Meade (1972, p.289), Rein (1970, p.49), Rodgers (1969, p.52), Rose (1972, p.29) and Townsend (1979, p.239).

Rowntree must himself bear some of the responsibility for the mistakes. He was sometimes obscure, confused, inconsistent and mistaken. The introduction to his first survey report (1901) gives a summary of his method of distinguishing poverty which is quite misleading when one compares it with the detail in later chapters of the book. It seems that

some later authors may have based their criticisms simply on their reading of the introduction; its ambiguities about the concepts of 'merely physical efficiency' and secondary poverty may well have seemed good reason for their comments. Sometimes Rowntree changes the meaning of words and ideas from one part of a book to another; for example, 'the minimum standard' means a particular income level on p.34 of the 1941 report, a different real level of living on p.126, and is called 'poverty' on p.460. Quite apart from questionable research assumptions and methods, there are arithmetical errors: not merely what may be misprints (such as the discrepancy between the numbers of working class people in institutions given on pp.12 and 32 of the 1941 volume) but downright howlers such as adding together disparate percentages to produce a chimerical total (Rowntree, 1941, p.461: quoted without reference or apparent awareness of the statistical error by Walker and Church, 1978, p.8). However, we must remember that Rowntree, unlike the authors referred to, was not an academic scholar, but was a socially concerned businessman who could afford to test his ideas.

Thus, in substantiating a serious charge of error, I do not want to suggest there has been deliberate impropriety. Many of the references given are passages in which the authors' attempts at brevity may have compressed disparate elements or only partially reflected Rowntree's ideas, together producing false impressions. But some of them occur in lengthy attacks on Rowntree's minimum subsistence measures in 1899 or 1936 in the erroneous belief that they were Rowntree's sole or even preferred significant concept of poverty, or his ideal prescription for income maintenance. As this seems to have become conventional or at least unexamined wisdom about him, I hope the authors mentioned will excuse my having used their works as merely a few among many examples, particularly because other previous writers have not all misquoted Rowntree. For example, as long ago as 1959, in a paper read to the British Association on 'Seebom Rowntree's contribution to the study of poverty', Drinkwater quoted Rowntree to refute Townsend's criticisms (Townsend, 1954) and added: 'One does not need to disagree with the sentiments which underlie these criticisms to feel that, whatever application they may have to others, they do considerably less than justice to Rowntree himself' (Drinkwater, 1960, p.193).

Similarly, Aronson's critique (1984) of the arguments between proponents of minimum subsistence and relativistic approaches to the operational definition of poverty lines in the USA politely criticizes some misrepresentations of Rowntree's concept of secondary poverty, and concludes: 'a historically informed reading of Rowntree suggests that his

use of subsistence-based criteria was a rhetorical device that reflected a political strategy' (Aronson, 1984, p.26). Her paper is not designed to give the evidence for this assertion and, because Rowntree continues to be widely misrepresented, it is timely to counteract what seems almost a derogatory mythology about him by a review of the facts. The next section returns, therefore, to Rowntree's original works and quotes him to show what he set out to do in defining and measuring poverty, how he did it and why. This review of his early published work is confined to those parts of it which concern the first of his two aims 'to ascertain not only the proportion of the population living in poverty, but the nature of that poverty' (1901, pp.vii–viii). The review is thus not concerned, except where relevant, with the second aim, the report on the social conditions of the working class as a whole, which takes up seven of the ten chapters in Rowntree's first book (less than half of the working class were poor, and only one-seventh of the working class had incomes below the primary poverty line — Rowntree, 1901, p.117 and see Field, 1981, p.119). Nor is the paper intended to be an encyclopaedic review of the validity of different concepts or explanations of poverty, except as appropriate to illuminating the discussion of the content and current status of Rowntree's early work and indicating the significance of the real change of paradigm which Townsend's research methods facilitate.

ROWNTREE'S OWN ACCOUNTS OF HIS METHODS AND THEIR RATIONALE

The 1899 survey

Seebohm Rowntree's first survey of York was carried out in 1899 and the report was first published in 1901. In its introduction, Rowntree set out the aims mentioned above. It was in pursuit of the aim of ascertaining 'the nature of that poverty', Rowntree writes here, that he decided to divide the families in poverty into two groups:

- (a) Families whose total earnings are insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency. Poverty falling under this head I have described as 'primary' poverty.
- (b) Families whose total earnings would be sufficient for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency were it not that some portion of it is absorbed by other expenditure, either useful or wasteful. Poverty falling under this head is described as 'secondary' poverty (1901, p.viii)

To find the division between the two kinds of poverty, Rowntree had to discover 'the minimum sum necessary to maintain families of various sizes in a state of physical efficiency' (1901, p.viii). From this it might seem as if Rowntree was equating poverty with an inability to attain

merely physical efficiency, and that it was therefore identifiable by income level, in which case families in secondary poverty were not 'genuinely' poor. But only later in the book did Rowntree show that these were not his beliefs or practices: too late for some readers, who seem to believe that Rowntree was critical of anyone not managing to live a decent life on the primary poverty line. To try to dispel this confusion, we must look first at Rowntree's research method.

The bulk of the survey was carried out by an investigator visiting households, and information was also given by voluntary workers, clergymen and others (1901, p.14). The 11,560 households visited were those of almost all the wage-earners in York. Households employing servants were excluded (as were their servants' households on the same premises); to be working class was taken as synonymous with earning wages and not keeping servants (1901, p.14). The number of people about whom information was obtained was 46,754 'or almost exactly two-thirds of the entire population' (1901, p.26 and elsewhere — but note the error on p.85 where the number given is 47,754). The 1901 Census had not been published, and Rowntree calculated the number in the servant-keeping class by deducting the wage-earning population, an estimate for the number of domestic servants, and the inhabitants of public institutions, from the total population of the city. He included 'a few families who ... do not keep servants, but who live in the same style as many of those who do' (1901, p.28).

Although Rowntree was able to find out the exact wages of some of the workers (he employed some of them in the Cocoa Works), he estimated the earnings of many of them: 'In the case of skilled workers, the earnings were assumed to be the average wage which obtains in the district for the particular trade' (1901, p.26). Any precise statements about numbers, percentages and income levels ought therefore to be carefully qualified; it is doubtful if Rowntree's frequent use of two decimal places in percentages can be justified by the reliability and precision of his crude data.

In a pamphlet defending his survey method against criticism, Rowntree described the way in which he established how many people were living in poverty as follows:

In order to arrive at the total number of those who are living in poverty, my investigator in the course of his house-to-house visitation noted down as being in poverty those families who were living in obvious want and squalor. From this total number I subtracted those who were living in 'primary' poverty; the remainder represented those who were living in 'secondary' poverty. Now, in order to ascertain the number who were living in 'primary' poverty, reference

to the definition of the term will show that it was necessary first to ascertain what were the minimum sums upon which families of different sizes could be maintained in a state of physical efficiency. Having settled these sums, it was only necessary to compare the income of each family with the standard in order to see whether that family was above or below the 'primary' poverty line. It is clear, therefore, that the fixing of my 'primary' poverty line depends absolutely upon a money basis, while the fixing of my 'secondary' poverty line depends upon observations regarding the conditions under which the families were living (1903, pp.19–20).

The distinction between primary and secondary poverty was not designed to identify the poor but was intended to illuminate 'the nature of that poverty' — 'that poverty' being conceptually distinct from either primary or secondary poverty, and consisting of the characteristics of families identified by the investigators as being poor. It is essential to note that the precise criteria used by Rowntree's investigators to determine which members of York's working class were or were not poor *did not include income*. As Rowntree noted above, the precise criteria used by his investigators to identify poverty were not financial; they were *behavioural* and *visible*. In the body of the 1901 volume, Rowntree elaborated the method summarized above, to give greater depth to the meaning of 'obvious want and squalor':

Direct information was often obtained from neighbours, or from a member of the household concerned, to the effect that the father or mother was a heavy drinker; in other cases the pinched faces of the ragged children told their own tale of poverty and privation. Judging in this way, partly by appearance, and partly from information given, I have been able to arrive at a fair estimate of the total persons living in poverty in York (1901, pp.115–16).

Rowntree stated clearly that these identifications of who was poor did not thereby define any particular income level as the poverty line. A family might maintain the outward appearance of not being poor while having an income less than that of families which did not maintain this appearance:

The investigator, judging by appearances, would place such families above the poverty line, whilst he would no doubt place below it some families living in the slums who should not have been so counted (1901, p.117).

Furthermore, comparisons between the table classifying the population of York by income level (1901, p.31), and the bar chart showing the number and proportion of the population in and out of each kind of poverty (1901, p.117), show that Rowntree was quite clear that classification by the visible signs of poverty did not correspond with particular income categories.

That it was appearance and behaviour, *not income*, which were foremost in Rowntree's mind in identifying the poor and thus implying the criteria comprising the definition of poverty is unambiguously clear throughout this section. Continuing the passage quoted above (1901, pp.115–16) Rowntree writes: 'From this total number I subtracted the number of those ascertained to be living in "primary" poverty; the difference represents those living in "secondary" poverty' (1901, p.116), and to make sure it was clear he repeats it later (1901, p.140). Lest anyone suspect that this interpretation is a mere matter of emphasis, Rowntree returns to it yet again in his concluding chapter:

The number of those in 'secondary' poverty was arrived at by ascertaining the *total* (italics in original) number living in poverty, and subtracting those living in 'primary' poverty. The investigators, in the course of their house-to-house visitation, noted those families who were obviously living in a state of poverty, i.e. in obvious want and squalor ... sometimes the external evidence of poverty in the home was so clear as to make verbal evidence superfluous (1901, p.297–8).

We can summarize Rowntree's method of identifying the poor diagrammatically thus:

Rowntree's Concepts of Poverty, 1899

THE WHOLE POPULATION

consisting of

THE NON-POOR

distinguished *by life style* from

THE POOR (ΣP)

who consist of those people

IN SECONDARY POVERTY (P2)

who are distinguished *by income level* from those people

IN PRIMARY POVERTY (P1)

His procedure can be shown as: ΣP minus P1 leaves P2. As demonstrated, his procedure was *not* P1 plus P2 totals ΣP , as it is often misquoted (e.g. by Jackson, 1972, p.23).

The difference between primary and secondary poverty was by no means inconsiderable in quantitative terms. Of the whole domestic population of York, 27.84 per cent were living in poverty (1901, p.117) but only 9.91 per cent were living in 'primary' poverty (1901, p.111). Thus a large majority of all the poor people in York were living in 'secondary' poverty, 17.93 per cent of the whole population (1901, p.117). From many other commentators' later accounts of Rowntree's findings, some of which were referred to above, one might assume that

TABLE 1. *Population statistics and percentages in poverty, York 1899*

<i>Rowntree's method of calculating numbers in each category</i>	<i>Numbers in total population</i>	<i>% of total population</i>	<i>% of domestic population</i>	<i>% of wage-earning class*</i>
1. Whole population (estimated)	75,812	100.0	—	—
2. less inmates of institutions	2,932	3.9	—	—
3. leaves domestic population (line 1 minus line 2)	72,880	—	(100.0)	—
4. less domestic servants (estimated)	4,296	5.7	—	—
5. less members of wage-earning households	46,754	(61.7)	(64.2)	100.0
6. leaves members of servant-keeping class (line 3 minus lines 4 and 5)	21,830	28.8	—	—
7. PEOPLE VISIBLY IN POVERTY (ΣP)	20,302	(26.8)	27.84	43.4
8. less people in primary poverty (P1)	7,230	(9.5)	9.91	15.46
9. leaves people in secondary poverty (P2)	13,072	(17.2)	17.93	(28.0)

Source: Numbers and percentages given by Rowntree (1901, pp. 1, 28, 31, 111, 117) with the author's calculations given in brackets. Rowntree describes the statistics of the poor as percentages of the whole population (1901, pp. 111, 117), but the calculations show that they are in fact percentages of the domestic population only.

* Rowntree's wage-earning class base excludes the inmates of institutions and domestic servants, almost all of whom were, however, members of the working class (1901, p. 26).

primary poverty was the principal (or only) form of poverty, while secondary poverty was a mere wasteful fringe on the massive volume of primary poverty. In fact, most of the York poor were in secondary and not primary poverty — but they were all in poverty, by Rowntree's definition. Table 1 summarizes the essential statistics.

It should now be clear that Rowntree and his investigators were working with a relative definition of poverty which compared the living conditions of the people they surveyed with the living conditions which were conventionally recognized and approved. Apart from differences in measuring 'convention', they used a definition essentially comparable with Townsend's celebrated definition of relative poverty in the first paragraph of chapter one of *Poverty in the United Kingdom*:

Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the type 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).

Charles Booth used a similar relative definition of poverty in his surveys in London to that used by Rowntree:

I made an estimate of the total proportion of people visibly living in poverty, and from amongst these separated the cases in which the poverty seemed to be extreme and amounted to destitution, but I did not enter into the questions of economical or wasteful expenditure. You too have enumerated the cases of visible poverty; but you enumerate separately those whose income is such that they cannot by any means afford the expenditure which your argument sets forth as an absolutely necessary minimum (letter from Booth to Rowntree, quoted by Rowntree, 1901, p.300).

'As a result', writes Rowntree (1901, p.299), 'I feel no hesitation in regarding my estimation of the total poverty in York as comparable with Mr Booth's estimate of the total poverty in London, and in this Mr Booth agrees'.

The problematic issue for Rowntree and his contemporaries was not the identification of poverty as life-style but the question of cause. Hence most of Rowntree's efforts did not go into defining poverty (ΣP), but into the line separating those whose income was too low however they spent their money. The difference between Booth's and Rowntree's surveys in this respect were not conceptual but methodological. Rowntree explained: 'As soon as I came to deal with the question, "What proportion of the population of York is living in poverty?"' (i.e. ΣP) 'I saw that in a town so comparatively small as York, it would be possible to distinguish between the two kinds of poverty' (i.e. P1 and P2) (1903, p.19). Booth could not do this because, as he wrote to Rowntree in 1901, 'The methods adopted by you are more complete than those I found available for the large area of London' (quoted in Rowntree, 1901, p.300). In a glowing contemporary review of Rowntree's book, Nash wrote:

The subject of poverty ... never comes up for discussion without bringing forth a disagreement as to what are the immediate causes of poverty ... Mr Rowntree's book will do much to clear up this question, which is a very important one ... Mr Rowntree's conclusions, too, are confirmed in a remarkable way by their coincidence with Mr Charles Booth's estimate of London poverty (1902, p.3).

Like Rowntree, Booth was conscious that his definition was conventional and relative. In their biography of *Charles Booth, Social Scientist*, T. and M. Simey wrote:

In sum, Booth's poverty line must be regarded as being so drawn as to coincide with popular opinion, and all depended, in the last analysis, on the judgement of his interviewers. The key phrase is in the Second Paper; those families are 'very poor' whose means are insufficient '*according to the usual standards of life in this country*' (authors' italics); it was not his fault if his endeavour to translate this into shillings and pence for illustrative purposes was regarded by others as

the main factor in his evaluation ... Many misunderstandings, and many false comparisons have arisen, however, from Booth's use of estimates of family income (1960, p.279).

Not only Booth's 'very poor' but also his 'poor' were defined in terms of conventional standards: their means were insufficient 'for decent independent life' (1892, p.33). As Marshall puts it:

Though Booth may be said to have invented this concept (i.e. 'the line of poverty') he used it rather carelessly and inconsistently. This was, perhaps, because poverty for him, as for his predecessors, was not a matter of income only, but of the conditions obtaining in the home and of the nature and regularity of employment. He was interested in the qualitative differences between the classes (1981a, p.37).

This clearly conscious distinction between poverty (which is a relative condition defined by visible life-style) and the primary poverty income level runs through Rowntree's first book, from the introduction onwards. The very ordering of the chapters indicates it. Chapter Three on 'The Standard of Life' shows that poverty is not treated as life on a given income level, but in terms of the style or state of life which is experienced at an imprecise or varying cash income level. Only in the next chapter does Rowntree elaborate the distinction and consider the basis of the primary poverty line. Even here the distinction is unequivocal. The chapter concludes with a reiteration of the emphasis on the poor as visually identifiable, not on the primary poverty line. Its penultimate paragraph gives Rowntree's own priorities: 'That nearly 30 per cent of the population are found to be living in poverty is a fact of the gravest significance' (1901, p.118). Yet it was his attempts at late-Victorian scientific precision which have been seized upon by later commentators (and misrepresented) as Rowntree's sole significant measure of poverty. Their later misapprehensions may have been encouraged by the emphasis which Rowntree's own contemporaries gave to his development of a cash primary poverty line as a precise survey tool (for example Bowley and Burnett-Hurst, 1915) and as a focus for argument. In responding to these two forces, Rowntree's own interest in all the poor may arguably have later shifted towards an interest in an income level on which the poorest could live.

Nevertheless, it is very important that readers comprehend just how clearly Rowntree himself realized that even the primary poverty line was relative and not in any sense 'scientifically absolute'. Rowntree's critics seem to overlook his remark: 'It is thus seen that the point at which "primary" passes into "secondary" poverty is largely a matter of opinion, depending on the standard of well-being which is considered

necessary' (1901, p.141). To show this, he gave calculations for the proportions of the poor in each category if he had taken weekly family incomes two shillings (10p) and six shillings (30p) higher for the primary poverty line: at the lower level, for example, nearly half of the poor would have been in primary poverty instead of one-third; at the higher level the proportion would have been over three-quarters of all the poor (1901, p.112).

One of the most prolific of his statistical contemporaries, A.L. Bowley, carried out a number of studies in British towns using a form of the primary poverty line as the measuring instrument. But Bowley did not suffer from misconceptions about the status of that instrument any more than Rowntree did. Bowley wrote: 'Though this calculation appears to have a scientific basis, and so far as knowledge of nutriment goes is accurate, it is in fact conventional rather than absolute' (Bowley and Hogg, 1925, p.13). Bowley seems quite aware that the primary poverty line was not an income on which anyone could live: 'We are far from arguing that larger incomes are not to be desired ... We are only concerned here to establish a standard below which a family is *prima facie* in want' (1925, p.14) — *prima facie* meaning that there was no need at that low income level to argue about *other causes* of poverty.

So far I have only discussed Rowntree's method of counting the poor in 1901. I turn now to the reasons he gave for adopting this method. The problem of poverty at the end of the nineteenth century was not how to define it (since there seems to have been general agreement that poverty was a visible condition, 'obvious want and squalor', in which some people lived), but to find out what the scale and causes were. The obvious effects of poverty were poor health and physique among the working class (as Rowntree also showed: 1901, Chapter 8) which — to the middle classes who were asking the question — reduced their value as workers and soldiers. A conventional explanation of poverty, held by many among the middle classes and exemplified by the work of the Charity Organisation Society, was that people who looked and acted poor did so because they wasted their money, not because they had too little of it. To test this assumption one does not have to believe in the validity of a minimum subsistence approach oneself: it is enough if the proponents of the individualistic assumption are prepared to believe in it, as they generally were because it had the stamp of approval of nutritional science on it. As a research chemist by training and practice, Rowntree wanted to use these respected and persuasive methods and language to find out which explanation was the more plausible. To do this he had to see if there was any level of income at which the individualistic hypothesis

would no longer hold true; that is, could there be an income level at which people could not maintain a non-poor life-style however hard they tried? Assuming for the sake of the experiment alone that all forms of social expenditure are disputable, but that scientifically-proven minimum subsistence expenditures are irreducible, Rowntree was able to show that one-third of the poor had incomes too low even to keep physically fit, and that nearly three-quarters of these inadequate family incomes came from full-time regular earnings (1901, Chapter 5).

In spite of this, Rowntree was criticized by those (like the Charity Organisation Society) who rejected the implications of his findings, that state action was required to raise incomes. One such critic was Mrs Bosanquet: the only frankly hostile one, according to Rowntree (1903, p.3). Both Rowntree and Mrs Bosanquet agreed that poverty *might* be caused by individual improvidence; the question at issue was whether some of it was caused by too little income. Mrs Bosanquet considered that the standard of living on which the primary poverty line was based was extravagant, and that the nutritional standards were too generous. Rowntree answered her:

Had Mrs Bosanquet devoted some years of her life to the study of chemistry, as it has been my lot to do, she would have observed that, in every instance where ... the analyses may be inaccurate, the possibility of error ... may be *overstated*, but ... the inaccuracies are never on the side of *understatement* (1903, p.21, original emphasis).

His pamphlet replying to Mrs Bosanquet goes into detail on his survey and nutritional methods, and he concludes that:

Her criticism suggests a lack of acquaintance with the science of dietetics, and of the relative status now accorded to those who have written upon it. She surely cannot imagine that I made so important a decision as to that of the standard to be adopted without the most careful enquiry (1903, p.22); ... probably sufficient has been said to show that my facts are capable of surviving criticism, and may, therefore, to quote her own words 'take their place in the body of approved knowledge by which men are willing to guide their actions' (1903, p.25).

As I have shown, primary poverty was defined in money terms, and so its causes were expressed as reasons for low incomes. But secondary poverty was the residual category: in it were all those who were poor but whose incomes were more than the primary poverty level. What were the causes? Unfortunately, Rowntree confused the answer. In the 1901 Introduction he wrote about 'other expenditure, either useful or wasteful', and glosses this comment: 'It need hardly be said that an expenditure may be in the truest sense "useful" which is not necessary for the

maintenance of *merely physical efficiency*' (1901, p.87n). These comments are both essentially correct in terms of his definition of what secondary poverty *is*. But in considering *why* some people 'act poor', he returned to contemporary middle-class convention, and answered in terms of individual improvident behaviour (1901, pp.142–3). Few of the readers who criticize him for this seem to have turned over the page to see that Rowntree then locates these individual behaviours firmly in social context:

Though we speak of the above causes as those mainly accounting for most of the 'secondary' poverty, it must not be forgotten that they are themselves often the outcome of the adverse conditions under which too many of the working class live (1901, p.144).

He then expands this structural explanation to include:

questions dealing with land tenure, with the relative duties and powers of the State and of the individual, and with legislation affecting the aggregation or the distribution of wealth (1901, p.145).

The common criticisms of Rowntree are that he prescribed the primary poverty income level as enough to live on and, following from this, that in concentrating on human physical efficiency alone he disregarded all human social and psychological needs. Both of these criticisms can be shown to be unfounded if one examines what Rowntree actually wrote.

As do so many of today's campaigners, Rowntree felt the need to counter any charge that his findings might exaggerate the extent of poverty; hence his constant emphasis on a minimum subsistence approach (Field, 1982, p.116).

Field is wrong to refer to 'the extent of poverty', since that was not in dispute; what Rowntree himself was perfectly clear about was that he was using these natural science methods not to define or measure poverty (ΣP) but to distinguish primary from secondary poverty. 'The work done towards determining the relative proportions of the two classes has been valued by many experts as marking an advance in social information and in statistical exactness' (Rowntree, 1903, p.19). In this way, he contributed to the later misunderstandings about his views and methods. Remembering that he was concerned with the causes of poverty (ΣP), we can better understand the emphasis he gave to the use of a measure which distinguished causes in currently conventional terms, at a minimal level:

My primary poverty line represented the minimum sum on which physical efficiency could be maintained. It was a standard of bare *subsistence* rather than *living* (italics in original). The dietary I selected was more economical and less attractive than was given to paupers in work houses. I purposely selected such a dietary so that no one could possibly accuse me of placing my subsistence level too high (1941, p.102).

This extract shows Rowntree choosing his method of comparison to persuade his audience, not because he believed anyone could live a social life on the primary poverty line, but because they believed it to be possible. To accept an opponent's premises for the sake of argument as a basis for one's criticism is a normal debating practice, but it has been turned against Rowntree.

Rowntree repeatedly returned to this point. His view that his minimum subsistence primary poverty line was not a realistic prescription for even a minimum income to live on, but was no more than a heuristic device, is evident throughout his writings. It is implicit in his famous and much-quoted description of what minimum subsistence would mean in real life (1901, pp.133–4). He wrote in his study of *How the Labourer Lives*: 'We ... state our own strong conviction that such a minimum' (i.e. one equivalent to the primary poverty line) 'does not by any means constitute a reasonable living wage', and further on: 'we have assumed a poverty line so low as to be open to the criticism of serious inadequacy' (1913, pp.30–1). In 1937 he was still making the same point in his revised edition of *The Human Needs of Labour*: 'No! my standard cannot be successfully attacked because it is too liberal. Rather it is open to the criticism as being too low, and yet millions of our fellow citizens belong to families whose breadwinners earn less than my minimum figure' (1937, p.125).

'I chose this criterion', Rowntree wrote in 1952 about 'merely physical efficiency', 'because I didn't want people to say that Rowntree's "crying for the moon"' (quoted in Briggs, 1961, p.46). But why should they have done so? The comment makes sense only if one remembers that Rowntree was using his methods to show that even opponents of social reform could not resist the conclusions about the causes of poverty. As he wrote in 1941 about his *Human Needs of Labour* poverty standard used in 1936:

I purposely adopted a standard which the most hard-boiled critic could not say was extravagant. Had I given any justification for such a criticism, those who wanted to excuse the present state of things would have fastened on any items which might be regarded as extravagant and thus sought to neutralize the effect of my book (quoted in Briggs, 1961, p.296).

It was a matter of political judgement, and was, in Briggs's own view, correct:

As in 1901, however, the austerity of Rowntree's standards was more telling, at least to better-off people, than a more generous analysis, tinged with what in the conditions of the 1930s might still have been dismissed as 'sentimentality' (Briggs, 1961, p.297).

As we have seen, Rowntree defended his standards against critics of their generosity and justified them in terms of their political realism, but not

as an income level on which real people should have to live. Similarly, when the common confusion between primary poverty and Rowntree's actual views about poverty is dispelled, it is clear that he was probably a good deal more aware of the social and psychological dimensions of poverty than his critics seem to realize. Writing about expenditure on 'non-essentials' in 1941 (p.126), he refers to the resources needed for the satisfaction of postponable psychological human needs as opposed to immediate non-postponable physiological human needs; he treated the satisfaction of the latter needs to a level of merely physical efficiency as 'essential'. But this does not mean that Rowntree thought that psychological needs should not be met before physiological ones, as he is commonly misinterpreted as suggesting; it means only that he was aware that both sets of needs could not be met simultaneously from an inadequate income. In answering the question: 'why do poor people spend their inadequate incomes on social recreational activities instead of food?', he wrote:

The explanation is that working people are just as human as those with more money. They cannot live just on a 'fodder basis'. They crave for relaxation and recreation just as the rest of us do. But ... they can only get these things by going short of something which is essential to physical fitness, and so they go short, and the national standard of health is correspondingly lowered (1937, pp.126-7).

In other words, he is once again addressing a debate, in this case about the national standard of health, and he is demonstrating not that health could be maintained on so low an income by ordinary humans, but that it could be maintained only by an inhuman disregard of the satisfaction of conventional psychological needs.

People such as Mrs Bosanquet may have felt justified in criticizing the primary poverty line as generous because they may have been using a narrower version of the life-style criterion of poverty than Rowntree worked with. When Rowntree defended himself against them, he pointed also to the wider aspects of deprivation, collectively suffered and visible but not always manifest in any one poor individual (and, as the following extract shows, he was well aware of the sexual division of diswelfare in poor families). Briggs, who as Rowntree's biographer was very conscious of his genuine concern that poor people should be provided with the resources and opportunities needed for complete and fulfilled lives in their own contemporary society, repeatedly shows Rowntree trying to get people to understand what poverty really meant:

Rowntree warned his readers not to pit their uninformed feelings about poverty against his facts. If they saw people who by his standards were in primary

poverty appearing to live well (in terms of smoking, drinking, dress or recreation), let them not confuse 'things that are seen' with consequences of poverty which are not seen: 'We see that many a labourer, who has a wife and three or four children, is healthy and a good worker, although he only earns a pound a week. What we do *not see* is that in order to give him enough food, mother and children habitually go short, for the mother knows that all depends upon the wages of her husband. ... These unseen consequences of poverty have, however, to be reckoned with — the high death rate among the poor, the terribly high infant mortality, the stunted stature and the dulled intelligence' (Briggs, 1961, pp.36–7, quoting Rowntree, 1901, p.135n).

Writing in 1923 about the inadequacy of benefits for the unemployed, Rowntree again shows what he really felt about the primary poverty line:

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 (from an unpublished paper on unemployment insurance, quoted in Briggs, 1961, p.204).

Briggs bluntly states that Rowntree 'condemned people who had misinterpreted his own writings about minimum subsistence' (1961, p.204). Although Rowntree was addressing mainly critics of his profligacy, his words are as relevant to those who, after his death, criticize what they believe was his parsimony.

The 1936 survey

In his second survey of social conditions in York, Rowntree used a new tool in his attempt to show scientifically that some poverty was caused by incomes too low even for good managers to live decently on. The second survey was started in 1935 and work continued for some years; the results were published in 1941, but it is generally referred to as 'the 1936 survey' (1941, p.vii). The new tool was based on the estimates which Rowntree had made for minimum wage purposes. During the First World War, Lloyd George had commissioned Rowntree to oversee the welfare of the workers employed by government in the munitions industry. In trying to improve their conditions and pay, and having argued that the primary poverty line was a criticism of, and not a prescription for, minimum wage levels, Rowntree worked on what he thought could represent a defensible minimum wage for a family: 'defensible' meaning that Rowntree's use of the heuristic device of the minimum subsistence approach would show the need to *raise wages*. The calculations were published as *The Human Needs of Labour* in 1918 and extensively revised and republished in 1937. He used them as the basis

for his cash poverty line in the 1936 survey. Both versions were based on surveys of the actual budgets of working-class households, augmented by a 'minimum but conventional' diet, somewhat more generous than that of the primary poverty line in 1899. In particular, the sums included allowances for rents to pay for decent housing, thus at a much higher standard than most working-class people occupied, and they allowed for a limited range of conventional social expenditures of the sort which had been explicitly excluded from the primary poverty line in 1899. The total represented a recommendation for a minimum living wage large enough to cover Rowntree's estimate of the basic needs of a family with three dependent children: the family would thus live at a higher level while there were fewer children, and Rowntree called for children's allowances if there were more. Ignoring housing costs, this sum (43s 6d, £2.18) was nearly half as much again in real terms as the primary poverty line for the same household (30s 7d, £1.53) (1941, pp.102, 104).

Rowntree's survey method in 1936 was not the same as in 1899. The basis of the survey was in principle a census of all households whose chief wage-earner was earning not more than £250 a year. Rowntree's method of finding these households was, however, simply to interview all households 'in all the streets where such people are likely to be living' (1941, p.11). He admitted this would omit manual workers earning more than £250 per annum, and households earning less who did not live in the streets covered by the survey. He also pointed out that some low-paid middle-class households were included. We must therefore note that the survey was based neither on class, occupation or income level, but on households living in what were assumed to be 'low-income household' addresses — and these are what Rowntree refers to for simplicity as the working classes (1941, p.11).

The house-to-house visitations covered 16,362 families, including 55,206 people, comprising about 57 per cent of the city's total population. Income data were *not* obtained during these visits; as in 1899, Rowntree obtained them from employers for about 60 per cent of the households. For the remaining 40 per cent of households, Rowntree estimated their incomes from 'information gathered regarding the normal earnings of people engaged in the occupations concerned' (1941, p.25). Again, the amount of well-informed guesswork, which Rowntree openly admits to, probably would not support finely distinguished decimal points of percentages.

As in 1899, Rowntree used various arguable estimates about the size of the total population of York (within changing boundaries) and of the population employed as domestic servants or living in institutions, and

he included some inconsistencies and misprints (1941, pp.12, 32). Comparisons with 1899 must therefore be made only with care and qualification; Rowntree himself commented: 'The only figures that are absolutely comparable are those for primary poverty' (1941, p.461). Table 2 shows the chief categories relevant to this discussion, in 1936 and in 1899.

Rowntree's aims in the 1936 survey were to find out how many people were in poverty and what changes had taken place since 1899. The way in which he defined poverty (ΣP) had not changed in principle, although naturally its relativistic components were not the same. However, he did not feel he could operationalize this definition in the same way as in 1899; he could not identify the poor

by direct observation, partly because the methods of doing this adopted in 1899 appear to me now as being too rough to give reliable results, and also because even had I done so the results would not have rendered possible a comparison with 1899, for ideas of what constitutes 'obvious want and squalor' have changed profoundly since then. There is no doubt that in 1899 investigators would not have regarded as 'obvious want and squalor' conditions which would have been so regarded in 1936, and on the other hand a large proportion of the families living below the 1936 poverty line would not in 1899 have been regarded as 'showing signs of poverty' (1941, p.461).

Therefore, instead of using the 1899 method, Rowntree used his estimates of actual wage rates to estimate how many people lived below the minimum wage level (31 per cent), and augmented the result of this *cash* measure by more than a quarter (7–10 per cent) to reach his 'guestimate' of those people who lived in poverty defined as *life-style* even though their incomes were higher than the cash measure. Rowntree summarized the position thus:

We shall not, I imagine, be very far wrong if we assume that *about* 40 per cent of the working class population of York are living below the minimum standard, 31 per cent through lack of means, and 9 per cent because of expenditure on non-essentials (1941, p.126).

This point seems to have been overlooked by later commentators.

Rowntree's 1941 report shows that his concept of an adequate level of living included many factors other than income: the conditions of housing, health, education and a variety of recreational and leisure activities and facilities. Although this level of living was composed of social and not physical factors, and was relative and not absolute, Rowntree gave openings to his critics by measuring aspects of it in cash terms and calling it a 'minimum'. Thus many of them (e.g. Townsend, 1979, p.160) quote only the statistics of the poor who also have low

TABLE 2. *Population statistics and percentages in poverty, York 1936, and comparisons with 1899*

Rowntree's categories of the population	1936		1899			
	Number	% whole population	low-income residents	Number	% domestic population	% wage-earning class
1. Whole population (estimated)	96,980	100.0	—	75,812	—	—
2. People living in lower income streets in 1936	55,206	56.9	100.0	—	—	—
3. People in working-class households in 1899	—	—	—	46,754	(64.2)	100.0
4. People living below 'minimum standard' (P)	—	(about 23.0)	'about 40' 38-41	20,302	27.84	43.4
5. People living below 'Human Needs of Labour' level	17,185	17.8	31.1	—	—	—
6. People living in 'primary poverty' (P1)	3,767	3.9	6.8	7,230	9.91	15.46

Sources: Numbers and percentages given by Rowntree (1941, pp. 11, 13, 28, 34, 96, 108, 108, 126 and sources for 1899 as in Table 1) with the author's calculations given in brackets.

Rowntree's Note:

'The only figures that are absolutely comparable are those for primary poverty' (1941, p. 461).

incomes instead of giving correctly the statistics of *all* the poor. If we take the correct estimate, we find that the proportion of the population which was poor in York in 1936, about 23 per cent, is surprisingly the same percentage as Townsend found was poor in the United Kingdom in 1969 using his deprivation standard (1979, p.302).

Rowntree was very concerned that historical comparisons should be facilitated for their social value: 'it is *most* important to be able to measure accurately the success which has attended the efforts made by the community since 1899 to improve the condition of those living in abject poverty' (1941, p.101). To do this precisely he needed an unvarying measure of poverty apart from the relativistic and thus changing measures by which he defined poverty (ΣP). For the purpose, therefore, he took the 1899 primary poverty line and adjusted it for 1936 prices. The resulting comparison is shown in Table 2: a fall from roughly one in ten of the population of York to around one in twenty-five. It is in the course of this discussion of comparisons that Rowntree made a serious statistical error. In quoting the 1899 figures, he added together the 15.46 per cent of the *working-class* population in primary poverty (1941, p.461) and the 17.93 per cent of the *whole* (domestic) population in secondary poverty (1941, p.460), and then wrote:

The fact that in 1899 only 33.39 per cent of the working class was regarded as living in poverty, either primary or secondary, whereas in 1936 31.1 per cent are living below the minimum through lack of income, and a further unknown proportion, possibly 7 or 10 per cent, are living in 'secondary' poverty, have no relation to each other (1941, p.461).

The correct figure should of course have been 43.4 per cent (1901, p.117), and Rowntree seems to mean that we cannot compare it with the estimate of about 40 per cent in poverty in 1936 because the standards were not constant. But if we focus on the changing standards according to which people were defined as poor, then such a comparison becomes as valid as is the one based on unvarying standards. Between 1899 and 1936 in York, unvarying poverty (P_1) diminished significantly but relative poverty (ΣP) remained relatively constant. Rowntree showed that he was using both of these standards of comparison in the subsequent passage where he expresses the conviction that there has been immense (possibly 30 per cent) improvement in the economic condition of the workers but

the satisfaction which we may rightly feel at this great improvement must be qualified by a serious sense of concern that so large a proportion of the workers are living below a poverty line which few, if any, will regard as having been fixed at too high a level (1941, p.462).

Rowntree's own writings quoted here demonstrate irrefutably what he really said. In view of their antiquity and accessibility, it is puzzling to find recent commentators still writing passages such as these:

In 1934–35 Rowntree repeated his study of York using a slightly more generous poverty line than in 1902. ... He found 18 per cent of the York population to be in poverty, half of these in 'primary' poverty (Thane, 1982, p.168).

It was found that the extent of poverty, measured in this dynamic sense, far from falling had actually risen from 10 to 18 per cent between 1899 and 1936. This meant that there had been a considerable increase in the proportion of the population unable to attain currently minimally acceptable standards despite an overall improvement in social conditions (Brown and Madge, 1982, p.53).

Perhaps later editions of these and other popular books could correct such errors and help to restore Rowntree's reputation for intellectual integrity and social responsibility.

THE THEORETICAL STATUS OF ROWNTREE'S CONCEPT OF POVERTY

This final section considers the theoretical status of Rowntree's early work on poverty in relation to the claims of the relativists such as Townsend, and the implications of a changed perspective on the relation between theories of poverty and political action. As Mencher writes:

the trite observation should be made that differences in the definition of concepts in studies of income are not abstract issues, but can only be resolved in view of their practical consequences in clarifying the problem of poverty (1967, p.2).

Townsend's massive work on *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (1979) not only presents the findings of the most searching survey of the levels of living of the British population a decade earlier, but a large part of the book is also devoted to detailed discussions of differing concepts and measures of poverty and deprivation and their implicit or explicit relationships to policy prescriptions. On the second page of his first chapter, Townsend opens a discussion of 'Previous Definitions of Poverty' (1979, p.32). He acknowledges that his new relativistic approach 'is new only in the sense that the implications and applications do not appear to have been spelled out systematically and in detail', and quotes Adam Smith's famous definition of 'necessaries' which include 'whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without'. But Townsend refers to Rowntree's work in such a way as to exclude Rowntree from consciousness of this relativism:

Previous operational definitions of poverty have not been expressed in thoroughgoing relativist terms, nor founded comprehensively on the key concepts of

resources and styles of living. The concern has been with narrower concepts of income and the maintenance of physical efficiency. Among the early studies of poverty, the work of Seebom Rowntree is most important

– and then follows solely a description of *primary* poverty, concluding: ‘A family was therefore regarded in poverty if its income minus rent fell short of the poverty line’ (i.e. the primary poverty line) (1979, p.33). No mention here of secondary poverty or of any other kind.

Of course the critical point is what Townsend means by the word ‘operational’. Was Rowntree’s survey operational? Townsend says Booth’s survey was ‘on a larger scale but employed a cruder measure of poverty’ than Rowntree’s (1979, p.33). He thus seems to compare Booth’s ‘cruder’ poverty line with Rowntree’s *primary* poverty line. But, as we have seen, this is not to compare like with like, as both Booth and Rowntree realized (1901, p.300). Both of their surveys operated a similar definition of poverty, but it was a visual one which measured the quantity and quality of housing and its contents (including inhabitants) against prevailing conventional assumptions about what non-poverty was.

Townsend’s own method (1979) of operationalizing relative poverty standards may be stated briefly as follows. First, exploratory studies are carried out (such as those of Land, Marsden, Sinfield and Veit-Wilson: for details see Townsend, 1970, 1979) to generate indicators of deprivation — items of goods, services and experiences which people consider necessities, the lack of which constitutes deprivation. These provisional indicators are then tested in national surveys to see how far they are valid as deprivation indicators across the whole population, and at what income levels people lack necessities they want because they have too little money and not because they choose to do without them. In this approach, both the list of necessities and the income level at which they are achieved are derived from the population itself through surveys, and not from expert prescription or calculation.

But at the time of Booth’s and Rowntree’s first surveys, the concept of conventional life-style and the visual identification of the poor were not in themselves problematic. I have outlined Rowntree’s reasons for concentrating his attempts at precision in 1899 on primary poverty rather than poverty as a whole. Thus, to count the poor, Booth and Rowntree were entirely dependent on an operational definition based on ‘styles of living, and to show ‘the nature of that poverty’ Rowntree was crucially concerned with conventional resources, as can be read in Chapter 3, ‘The Standard of Life’, in his first book (1901) and extensively later (1937, 1941).

Townsend is perfectly right that even the primary poverty line is

narrowly relativistic in conception (1979, pp.38–9), but he nowhere seems to admit that Rowntree's definition of poverty (ΣP) was as relativistic, though not as precisely delineated or empirically derived, as his own. It seems that he too may have misunderstood Rowntree's definitions of poverty, and this impression is strengthened by his consistent misquotation of Rowntree. As long ago as 1962 Townsend wrote in his seminal essay on 'The Meaning of Poverty': 'In 1901 Seebohm Rowntree stated that families living in poverty were those "whose total earnings are insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency"' (1962, p.215), and in the latest work he writes: 'Poverty as mismanagement (or Rowntree's "secondary" poverty)' (1979, p.239).

Asa Briggs suggested (1961) that many influential people at the end of the nineteenth century (let alone many social scientists and politicians since) approvingly or disapprovingly believed that Rowntree had overturned the widely-held view of poverty as a life-style caused by misuse of sufficient resources, and had substituted a new perspective of poverty as too little money for minimum subsistence, and a new and scientifically reliable method for discovering what resources were necessary for subsistence. As explained and acted upon, this might be said to be paradigmatic: the theory that human needs can be met at an income level corresponding to this minimum level of living; the creation of a new scientific instrument to determine this minimum level and its price; a set of rules concerning the question of the goods and services to be put in the minimum 'shopping basket' and priced; and a body of practitioners applying the theory and methods to conduct surveys and devise minimum income maintenance programmes for the state.

Townsend's entire academic career has been marked by his desire to overturn this paradigm of minimum subsistence poverty which he implies Rowntree established, and to substitute an explicitly relativistic one, where the theory is that human needs can only be conceived and expressed in terms relative to the social norms peculiar to social context, time and place; measured by standards of relative deprivation; with rules to determine the resources to be considered. The approach in itself has precedents, since the concept of potential relative deprivation has long been accepted in Britain as the basis of, for example, the design of earnings-related pensions and insurance schemes, but it has not previously been systematized and applied, as Townsend has now done, to examine the issue of poverty.

Contrary to the paradigmatic view ascribed to him, in 1899 Rowntree seems to have held a simple and unarticulated version of the relative

deprivation view, although it can be argued that in later life Rowntree was seduced by the support his work received into accepting the viability of the minimum approach. But his own words show that he had not started from those premises: he had no intention of changing the definition of poverty as a deprived life-style, but only of discovering its extent and nature, and of convincing his readers that the reasons for a part of it were not within the control of the poor themselves. Those who read Rowntree's works may at times be surprised that he could arrange his ideas in such unsystematic or taken-for-granted ways, and one may note that his references to the concepts and measures of forms of poverty changed in his books as he grew older. Briggs calls Rowntree's sociology 'unacademic and unsystematic' (1961, p.3) but Drinkwater considers that in the application of scientific method it is Rowntree's critics and not Rowntree himself who are to blame for the confusion (1960, p.192).

Townsend's criticisms are validly addressed to Beveridge and others who maintain the defensibility of a minimum subsistence measure of cash need to be embodied in the state's social policies, but one may ask if they rightly apply to the early Rowntree. As shown above, he started from the premise that poverty was to be expressed in terms of conventions about life-style, as does Townsend. Rowntree's concern about poverty — as Townsend's — did not exist in a moral vacuum but arose from a dissatisfaction with the condition of the poor and the intolerable disparity in control over resources which caused those conditions. When Rowntree wanted to convince his readers of the quality of poverty, he showed them — in a scientific language they respected — that some of the poor had too little money to satisfy their physiological needs, let alone the conventions of life-style. Instead of using a different word for the income measure he devised to emphasise this point, he unwisely also called it poverty, though with the qualifying adjective 'primary'. Townsend distinguishes between deprivation (equivalent to Rowntree's ΣP) and a notion of poverty whose role is to convince Townsend's readers that the quality of deprivation is caused by lack of money (as opposed, that is, to the idea that the deprivations are caused by other lacks or are voluntary choices of behaviour).

The problem here is not merely semantic. McLachlan has argued at length (1983) that it is pointless to disagree about differing stipulative definitions of poverty: 'poverty' is what people use it to mean, and to be considered in the context of action. I have suggested elsewhere that discussion would be helped by using an agreed terminology in which deprivation is the condition of unmet need, which is caused by lack of control over resources of all kinds (tangible, intangible, interpersonal,

intrapersonal) over time; and where the term poverty is used in its conventional sense as the condition of lacking *money* resources. In this usage, deprivation may be caused by other factors besides poverty, and money can only meet those needs which can be satisfied in markets (Veit-Wilson, 1981, p.76). Titmuss (1958) was amongst the first to demonstrate the importance of channels other than markets through which resources flow to meet the needs of individuals. Rowntree considered the question of how far there were other sources of real income available to households, such as the products of allotments, or presents, beyond the cash earnings of the family, and wrote: 'I have come to the conclusion that the extent to which incomes are augmented by such irregular means is very small, and would not materially affect the figures we have been considering' (1901, p.112). The occupational, fiscal and social welfare channels which Titmuss identified were, in 1899, either undeveloped or unavailable to the poor. The concepts of deprivation and poverty could thus be treated at that time as largely coterminous, and a comparison between Rowntree's and Townsend's use of the terms is feasible. In these terms, Rowntree's concept of poverty (ΣP) could be described as deprivation identified by observers, while Townsend's method is based on social actors' perceptions of deprivation.

The belief that popular perceptions of deprivation are a valid basis for defining necessities has a long and respectable provenance. Aronson (1984) quotes no less than Alfred Marshall's *Principles of Economics* (1890) to show that his views of economic efficiency embraced the idea that class-bound cultural habit created conventional necessities, to be given no less weight than, say, the hypotheses of nutritional science in deciding what necessities were. Aronson's study of the setting of poverty lines in USA in the period 1885–1920 shows how proponents of equality promoted the use of workers' own consumption preferences in defining necessities, while those who supported national efficiency preferred to prescribe how workers should spend their money. She suggests that the idiom of natural science as a means of expressing subsistence minima achieved greater public attention in situations in which there was a low level of agreement on the principles of distributional justice to be applied to anti-poverty policies, and that Rowntree used it only as a rhetorical device to persuade people (1984, p.26).

Rowntree's critics often overlook that he used 'natural science' methods to establish solely the nutritional component of the necessities included in primary poverty: the components of clothing, lighting, fuel and rent were in fact based — as many critics suggest they should be — on empirical budget studies of working-class households in York. Not

TABLE 3. Rowntree's 1950 poverty line and Townsend's 1969 deprivation standard compared with national assistance or supplementary benefit scales

Type of household	1950: Rowntree's poverty line as % of NA scale rates	1969: Townsend's deprivation standard as % of SB scale rates
Man under 60	138	131
Woman under 60	119	132
Man and woman both under 60	131	116
Man and woman plus 1 child	134	116-119
Man and woman plus 2 children	136	119-125
Man and woman plus 3 children	136	124-131

Sources: For 1950: Atkinson *et al.* (1981, p. 67).
For 1969: Townsend (1979, p. 269).

many people know that Rowntree actually discussed with his respondents what *they* considered to be the minimum conventional necessities and their cost, and he then used these responses for his primary poverty minima (1901, p.108). Nor was this an isolated instance of attempts to operationalize convention in poverty lines. In Harris's biography of William Beveridge, she described how he was advised that Assistance Board experience showed that 'any practical definition of "subsistence" was largely dependent not merely on what was necessary but also on what was customary' (Harris, 1977, p.397). Beveridge rejected this advice, just as he rejected Rowntree's view that minimum income levels should not be based on a primary poverty approach: Beveridge's recommended income scales were substantially lower than Rowntree's recommendations for minima in *The Human Needs of Labour* (see, for example, Veit-Wilson, 1984, p.82). The widespread misrepresentation of Rowntree as the effective originator of the minimum subsistence levels embodied in the income scales of the Beveridge Report *National Assistance and Supplementary Benefit* is particularly ironic in the light of the calculations by Atkinson and his colleagues which show that the poverty line used by Rowntree in his 1950 survey of York was higher than the prevailing National Assistance scale rates by a factor of between 30 and 40 per cent (Atkinson *et al.*, 1981, p.67). When one examines the relationship between Townsend's empirically-derived 1969 Deprivation Standard and the contemporary supplementary benefit scale rates, one finds that (even allowing for all the methodological reservations which both Atkinson *et al.* and Townsend express) Rowntree's poverty incomes for households of varying compositions are relatively higher than Townsend's (see Table 3).

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the evidence from Rowntree's life's work does not suggest that he promoted an absolutist or minimum subsistence conception of poverty, and it does suggest that his measure of overall poverty was relativist and quite comparable with that promoted on empirical grounds by Townsend.

What distinguishes the work of Rowntree and Townsend is not the clash of absolutist versus relativistic paradigms; it is the shift from relativist standards for defining deprivation as *prescribed by observers* to relativist standards *derived from surveys*. The effect is shattering. Decades of futile argument between middle-class experts, administrators and politicians about what goods and services should or should not be included in the list of necessities for the poor are swept away, and the value of sociological expertise is revealed as the power to enable whole populations to speak for themselves systematically and incontrovertibly about what deprivation means.

In Rowntree's class society at the end of the nineteenth century, convention expected clear cultural stratification and the issue of middle-class identification of the key criteria of deprivation was scarcely seen as problematic. What was problematic for the power classes was the question of whether to give the poor money and, if so, how much. In Townsend's latter part of the twentieth century the idiom of rigid cultural stratification is widely unacceptable, and the politically contested issue has become more sharply whether the state's social security levels are sufficient to combat deprivation.

This process of change, via Beveridge's adoption of sub-Rowntree poverty lines, has produced a further confusion in Britain. We have to be clear that the scientific establishment of a poverty line is a separate and technical activity which must be firmly distinguished from the quite different activity of taking political decisions as to how much money any government chooses to pay the poor. The public discussion of this issue has been bedevilled for decades in Britain by the inability to distinguish these two activities, and in 1985 Britain still has no official poverty line other than that implied by social security scales. I have discussed elsewhere (1985) how this relationship might be clarified and adjusted: that is, how governments may both apply the Townsend paradigm to establishing valid poverty lines, and also consider those factors (such as the intensity of deprivation or other characteristics of deprived categories) they should take into account in setting income maintenance levels for a social security programme. The distinction has been blurred or even obscured by those governments and others who have thought to benefit

by deciding first how much money to spend on all the poor and then defining poverty as the income levels which that sum provides.

Like Townsend, Rowntree was not only an investigator but was also politically active and advised the major progressive political party of his day on social policy issues. But as we have seen, the mixture of roles and goals led to confusion and misunderstanding. Similarly, T.H. Marshall, reviewing Townsend's survey, draws attention to the problems Townsend encounters in 'trying to straddle two horses, one a sociological horse concerned with the scientific analysis of social structure, the other a social policy horse, concerned to expose an evil and to seek a remedy' (1981b, p.82). Facts do not speak for themselves: the exposure of inequalities, deprivations and poverty is not thereby a motive force for political action or a prescription for the form it should take. The uses made of Rowntree's primary poverty measure should act as a warning to us all to preserve clarity about the pursuit of each set of distinct goals: elucidation, persuasion or policy-making.

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