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Journal of Social Policy / Volume 16 / Issue 02 / April 1987, pp 213 - 226

DOI: 10.1017/S0047279400020389, Published online: 20 January 2009

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### How to cite this article:

Robert Walker (1987). Consensual Approaches to the Definition of Poverty: Towards an Alternative Methodology. *Journal of Social Policy*, 16, pp 213-226  
doi:10.1017/S0047279400020389

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## Consensual Approaches to the Definition of Poverty: Towards an Alternative Methodology\*

ROBERT WALKER†

### ABSTRACT

'Consensual' methods, which seek to establish poverty lines by reference to the views of society as a whole, are an important recent development. Three variants are recognised: those which require the public to estimate an adequate minimum income; those which ask people to specify a list of necessary items and those which ask what level of benefits the public is prepared to fund. This paper suggests that attempts to operationalise the consensual approach have been frustrated by their reliance on survey methodology. Some thoughts are offered on a possible methodology, based on the use of qualitative techniques, which would first explore consensus on the definition of poverty and then, if appropriate, seek directly to determine a socially approved budget standard.

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The case for establishing poverty lines with reference to the views of society as a whole (the 'consensual' method) is spelled out by other contributors to this issue. John Veit-Wilson (1987) argues that democracy and citizenship are the essential values underpinning the consensual approach and challenges opponents to examine their own commitment to these values. David Piachaud (1987) relishes the fact that consensual methods seek 'to cast aside self appointed, self opinionated experts' and to 'let the people decide'. While he concludes that experts are in fact needed to operationalise the consensual approach he nevertheless accords it a central role in defining 'essential needs'. The aim of this paper is not further to elucidate the rationale for consensual methods, but rather to suggest that attempts to operationalise the approach using social survey techniques may not have done it justice. Whereas the deliberations of budget standards committees take years, the 'people' are typically

\* My thanks go to Sally Baldwin and Jonathan Bradshaw for their comments, to Lesley Warren and Jennifer Park for dusting off neglected data and to the Editor for twisting my arm. Naturally none of these can be blamed for the content.

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asked for immediate responses to tightly worded questions about complex and sensitive issues to which few of them will previously have given much thought.

The danger is that the 'people' will mouth back what they think the 'experts' want to hear, or, perhaps more correctly, what they think the experts 'ought' to hear. However, even assuming that reliable responses have in the past been obtained—reliable both in the sense of accurately reflecting respondents' opinion and being repeatable—the survey methodology used will not have tapped the interactive process through which informed consensus is forged. Consequently, one needs to ask whether much faith can be placed in either the validity or utility of the findings so far generated by adherents of the consensual approach. Do they, in fact, provide a sufficiently secure basis upon which to build policy?

In so far as space permits these reservations are developed below. So, too, are some preliminary ideas for a methodology which is better attuned to the objectives of the consensual approach. First, however, some definitions are in order.

#### DISTINCTIONS AND DEFINITIONS

Both Veit-Wilson and Piachaud make a distinction between consensual methods that ask people which of a list of items are considered to be necessary and those which ask how much income needs to be. Veit-Wilson (1987) terms the first method the 'deprivation indicator method' and the second, which he considers to be inferior, the 'income proxy method'. He sees income acting as a proxy for hard evidence about the 'realities of deprivation'. However, it may be somewhat more than this. If, as is often the case with welfare economists, household utility functions are represented in money terms (i.e. the amount of money required to attain various utility, or welfare, levels at a set of reference prices), then income can be assumed to provide a direct index of a household's utility or welfare (van Praag *et al.*, 1983; Broadway and Bruce, 1984). Alternatively, as Atkinson (1985) notes, whereas the deprivation indicator approach is concerned with standards of living, measures of poverty based on income may be seen as more concerned with the right to a minimum level of resources to which people are entitled as citizens, 'the disposal of which is a matter for them' (Atkinson, 1985, p.9). The distinction between income-based and item-based measures is retained in this article.

Piachaud (1987) also distinguishes consensual approaches which are concerned with what the public says should be provided as a minimum level from those which ask what the public is prepared to pay for.

Veit-Wilson (1987) does not consider the second approach at all. Indeed, Veit-Wilson takes the view that the establishment of a poverty line is quite different from political decisions about how much any government can afford to pay the poor. At one level this is clearly so. Research is undertaken by researchers who, even if policy literate and politically influential, do not take the final decisions about benefit levels (or about any other anti-poverty measure). In recent history decisions about benefit levels have been taken in the absence, or in deliberate ignorance, of empirical research on adequacy. However, one reason why governments have not commissioned the kind of survey advocated by Veit-Wilson is surely that Ministers fear that the results would release an unstoppable demand for action, a demand which would constrain expenditure on projects more dear to their hearts or else lead them to risk the wrath of the non-poor electorate by raising taxes to meet the increased cost of anti-poverty measures.

However, a more important objection to Veit-Wilson's stance stems from the very consensual method which he advocates since the 'people' are explicitly involved both in the definition of poverty and, through the democratic system, in the policy response. If the existence of poverty carries with it a moral imperative to do something about it, as Piachaud (1987) among others believes, then an indication of the preparedness of people to act must be incorporated in the measure of poverty. If people are not prepared to do anything about the social phenomenon which they describe, then although it may have something to do with very low living standards, it cannot be equated with poverty. Under a consensual model, elucidated in this way, poverty exists only to the extent that people are prepared to take action about it.

The conditional assumption underlying the above formulation of the consensual approach, namely that the existence of poverty predicates action, can be turned into an empirically testable proposition. Some people may insist that what they have described as poverty is indeed poverty, even though they are quite content to do nothing about it. If a lot of 'the people' take this view then this socially constructed concept of 'poverty' is very different to that held by many, like Piachaud, who have researched and written on the subject. Since it is important for poverty researchers who are committed to a consensual approach to determine whether or not this is the case—in effect to establish the meaning socially ascribed to the term 'poverty'—Piachaud's concern for what action people are prepared to take in order to combat poverty is retained in this article.

As Piachaud (1987) notes, Townsend's (1979) seminal study should

be regarded as 'behavioural' rather than 'consensual'. Townsend's respondents were not consulted on the level at which his 'deprivation standard' was set (namely, 'net disposable household income ... of less than a level below which deprivation tends to increase disproportionately as income diminishes' (1979, p.273)). Nor did they have any say in the components included in the 12-item deprivation index. The work of Mack and Lansley (1985) is somewhat of a hybrid in that, although respondents were consulted on which items were necessities, the final measure of poverty (the enforced lack of three necessities) was determined by the researchers. Nevertheless, Veit-Wilson's and Piachaud's usage is followed and Mack and Lansley's work is treated as an example of the consensual approach.

Finally, it should be emphasised that this article is concerned with methods of establishing poverty lines and not with the conceptually separate task of determining the extent of poverty once the poverty lines have been defined.

#### DEFICIENCIES AND PROBLEMS

##### *Income needs*

Veit-Wilson (1987) reviews two principal methods of setting poverty lines based on consensus values about adequacy. One asks respondents variants of the question 'what income would you find adequate to make ends meet?' (Riffault and Rabier, 1977; van Praag *et al.* 1980; Danziger *et al.* 1983), the other extends the data base by asking respondents to specify the incomes that they would associate with various verbal statements of utility, for example, 'very bad, bad, insufficient, sufficient, good, very good', (van Praag *et al.*, 1982). Other studies have asked people whether they believe existing benefit levels are adequate (Piachaud, 1974; Walker, 1981; Mack and Lansley, 1985; Jowell, Witherpoon and Brook, 1986). All face similar problems, both technical and methodological.

One difficulty is encapsulated by the question 'income for what?'. The researchers have little or no idea what 'ends' people have in mind in answering the question or how they interpret the concept of 'adequacy' (or 'good' and 'bad' incomes, different notions being contained in the single scale quoted above). It is unlikely that everybody will have the same idea in mind when they answer the question and indeed van Praag and his colleagues (van Praag *et al.*, 1982) show that perceptions of a sufficient income increase with actual income which, as O'Higgins (1980) shows, leads them into some contorted logic when trying to fix a single poverty line. In order meaningfully to interpret people's responses it is necessary to have a fuller appreciation of what concept respondents

were trying to express and their mechanics for doing so. For example, it is necessary to know whether they make a mental list of their basic needs, or think about the current demands on their budget, or simply take account of their own monthly surplus or deficit. Alternatively, they might make comparisons with other people they know, or adopt any one of an enormous set of possibilities. This is a substantive as well as a technical point for if one is to set poverty lines according to socially perceived standards, it is vital to know precisely *what* is perceived, and *how* it is perceived.

All recent studies stipulate net income in the questions asked but the definition of net income can create as many problems as it resolves (see Walker, Hedges and Massey, 1987). Moreover, it is pertinent to ask whether people really think exclusively in gross or net terms, and whether their concepts correspond with the technical terms used by researchers. A wide range of different elements might be discounted in the lay person's concept of net income, including regular bills, union dues, private health insurance deducted at source, income in kind and gifts. Some respondents, though probably not many, might even discount the notional income from welfare expenditure. Another interesting question is whether people see income as static, irregular or, perhaps, with an in-built upward trend which might lead them to feel able to 'overspend' in the expectation of higher future income. Considerations such as these are likely to affect respondents' evaluation of the adequacy of any particular level of income.

It is not evident from the published reports that much thought has been given to who answers the questionnaire. Clearly, from what is known about household budgeting and intra-household transfers (Morris and Raune, 1986; Pahl, 1980 and forthcoming), husbands and wives will probably give different answers which may, or may not, be equally correct depending on one's viewpoint. Indeed, it might be asked whether *household* income is in any sense a socially meaningful notion. For those respondents who evaluate the adequacy of income directly with what it will buy there is a further problem, namely the accuracy of the price lists that they carry in their heads. The evidence suggests that prices are typically underestimated and that people have not psychologically caught up with inflation (Cooke and Baldwin, 1984).

Another problem, if income is conceptualised (by the researcher) to be as much about choice as about expenditure, is how this notion is to be conveyed to respondents. How much freedom of choice do people perceive themselves to have and how are they to be expected to extrapolate meaningfully to other income levels?

Finally, studies of benefit adequacy in effect ask people to judge

whether a particular level of income is adequate, not for themselves, but to meet the needs of other people (see below). In practice respondents can have very little idea what the needs of other people are which raises the danger that the responses which they give will merely reflect basic underlying values. For example, Walker (1981) found that notions akin to the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor caused civil service managers to ascribe lower needs to single parents and the unemployed than they did to other supplementary benefit claimants. A similar problem arises from the fact that few people are aware of the current levels of benefit; the evidence is that the general public imagines levels to be higher than they are (Schlackman Research Organisation, 1978; Golding and Middleton, 1982), although the civil service managers mentioned above underestimated benefits by as much as 10 per cent.

#### *Deprivation indices*

Mack and Lansley's (1985) study approached the definition of poverty from the viewpoint of the public's perception of minimal needs. It asked respondents to assign 35 items—selected by the researchers after preliminary qualitative research—to one of two boxes, one for items which they considered 'all adults should be able to afford and which they should not have to do without' and one for items 'which may be desirable, but are not necessary'. The preamble to the question stressed that respondents should concern themselves with the 'living standards' that 'all adults should have in Britain today'.

The 35 items do not provide (and were not intended to provide) an exhaustive list of every item or activity which people might believe to be essential in order to escape poverty. Consequently, as Piachaud (1987) notes, there is no way of determining a money equivalent of their poverty line and therefore no mechanism for translating it into adequate social security rates. It is also quite possible that the list presented to respondents excluded items which people would generally rate as far more necessary than the items included. Mack and Lansley also chose not to sound out opinion on the quality of items included in the list (i.e. need the carpets be in adequate condition or would they do even if threadbare?) because they opined that 'these kinds of judgements were too subjective and, moreover, depended on one's own standard of living' (1985, p.51). While appreciating the methodological difficulties of including this dimension in a survey, the rationale for exclusion appears to be based on unsupported assertion and to ignore a very important reference group (that is, the respondents themselves).

Even more important, Mack and Lansley are unable to say anything about the criteria which people employ in judging whether or not items are 'necessary' nor, indeed, whether respondents felt equally strongly about each of the items assessed. Is the concept of 'necessary' really juxtaposed in people's minds with the notion 'should not have to do without' (which would seem to postulate some form of intervention) as the Mack and Lansley question implies? What reference groups do people use? How far are judgements grounded in experience or hearsay? How stable are people's responses in the light of information about living standards and on hearing the views of others? Extensive experience of discussing these issues with mature students suggests that people often are willing to modify their views even on some of the more contentious items in Mack and Lansley's list. Indeed, this is what would be predicted to happen if people's conception of needs really is determined socially.

#### *Willingness to act*

A number of studies have asked about the preparedness of people to pay increased taxes to fund higher benefit levels, or in the case of Mack and Lansley, 'to enable everyone to afford the items you have said are necessities'. The key problem encountered has been that of conveying to respondents a satisfactory appreciation of the policy domain, the options and their consequences. Piachaud (1974), for example, offered no information about existing benefit levels when asking whether people would be prepared to fund pension increases although, as Table 1 shows, a simple statement of benefit levels can trigger a marked shift in opinion. In their book, Mack and Lansley discuss how much could be raised by increases in the tax rate and what impact this could have on benefit levels but apparently they did not give this information to their respondents. Indeed, the focus on deprivation, rather than income deficiency, meant that Mack and Lansley were unable to give respondents any indication of whether a penny rise in the basic rate of tax would enable everybody to afford the basic necessities. Respondents were therefore confronted with a fairly meaningless question.

Piachaud (1974) and Walker (1981), on the other hand, equated a £x rise in benefit with a £y fall in the respondent's income due to increased taxation, but even this is just the beginning of the information exchange necessary before people can make reasoned choices. In practice, though, respondents have not generally been encouraged or enabled to think through the consequences of their decisions or asked to make choices between competing demands. When they have, some interesting findings

TABLE 1. *An example of the impact of information on expressed opinion*<sup>1</sup>

Response	Retirement pensions %	Supplementary benefit for lone parents %
<i>Before receiving information on benefit levels</i>		
Prepared to be worse off so that benefit levels could be increased (N = 147)	43	24
<i>After receiving information on benefit levels</i>		
Prepared to be worse off (N = 147)	54	56
Proportion of those originally not prepared to be worse off, changing their minds so that now prepared to be worse off (N = 84 and 112 respectively)	34	47
Proportion of those originally prepared to be worse off, changing their minds so that now <i>not</i> prepared to be worse off (N = 63 and 35 respectively)	20	16
Proportion of total sample holding to original opinion (N = 147)	72	60

<sup>1</sup> Based on a group of 147 civil service managers in 1979/80.  
Adapted from Walker (1981).

have emerged. Thus civil service managers, in previously unpublished work undertaken by the author, were asked to apportion £100 million of cuts between the principal social policy programmes: they chose on average to take least from the health and social security programmes and most from 'law and order' and social services. When asked to distribute extra resources within the social security vote, respondents on average allocated 29 per cent of the increase to retirement pensions, 26 per cent to family income supplement, 17 per cent to supplementary benefit, 16 per cent to child benefit and 13 per cent to unemployment benefit. However, it is at least arguable that these preferences would have been different had the respondents been told by how much individual benefit levels could have been increased by an extra unit of expenditure. It is also worth recording that even among this relatively homogeneous group, individual preferences differed markedly.

#### TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE

At the heart of the consensual approach to the definition of poverty is a set of simple propositions. The 'definition of what it is to be poor is something which comes out of the relations between people' (A.H. Halsey quoted in Mack and Lansley, 1985, p.49). Poverty is therefore 'a social

or cultural concept ... the enforced deprivation ... of small comforts ... which in the light of prevailing cultural standards are really “conventional necessities” (Crosland, 1964, p.89). ‘Items become “necessities” only when they are socially perceived to be so’ (Mack and Lansley, p.38). Poverty is therefore defined ‘by reference to *the views of society as a whole*’ based on ‘a widespread social consensus about what constitute the necessities of life’ (Mack and Lansley, pp.42 and 59). While the consensual approach risks ‘reflecting the dominant interests in society, interests whose advantages are built at the expense of the poor’ it ‘removes the concept of poverty from the arbitrary exercise of judgement by “experts”, politicians and governments, where up to now it has remained firmly entrenched, and opens it up to a more democratic representation of interests’ (Mack and Lansley, p.47).

But to be true to the consensual approach, people must be given scope to express their views. They need time to find their own words, to reflect on their own experience, and to grapple with the complexities of the subject. Researchers must equally be prepared to listen to their respondents and to work with their ‘real-world’ concepts. Similarly they should be willing to enter into a dialogue with their respondents. Opinions grounded in ignorance, while interesting in themselves and sometimes valuable as predictors of behaviour, have little utility as a basis for policy not least because they are likely to be very unstable. Moreover they do not do justice to the intellect of the respondents or to their presumed commitment to the research exercise. Researchers are therefore obliged to provide respondents with the information which they need in order to make reasoned choices and, as far as possible, to provide feedback on the consequences of the choices made. Since essential needs are presumed to be ‘socially perceived’, respondents should have the opportunity to listen to the views of others and to discuss with them. Likewise, the possibility of consensus is presumed—although empirical support for this is mixed (see, for example, Golding and Middleton, 1982; Cooke and Baldwin, 1984; Taylor-Gooby, 1985). Mack and Lansley have identified what might be termed ‘consensus by coincidence’ with respect to what are, by definition, non-controversial topics. At the critical margins of a practical definition of poverty to be used as a basis for policy development and evaluation, controversy is likely to be unavoidable: 50 pence, one way or the other, is going to matter; so too is money for cigarettes or a colour television. Consensus by consent or compromise will probably be the order of the day.

Quite obviously little of this can be achieved through survey methodology which is the root cause of most of the difficulties discussed above. Likewise, it is unlikely that these issues could be tackled efficiently in a

single project (or in the same stage of a project) which sought also to measure the extent of poverty. However, if the tasks of definition and measurement are separated, then recent advances in qualitative methodology would seem to facilitate a fruitful examination of consensus definitions of poverty (for example, see Cook and Reichardt, 1979; Walker, 1985, 1986). Be assured, though, that this is not to suggest qualitative work as a pre-pilot in the traditional mode adopted by Mack and Lansley (1985). Rather it is to propose a social experiment to examine the validity of the consensual approach and, depending on the results, a more effective means of operationalising a consensual approach to the definition of poverty.

What is suggested is a 'democratisation' of the budget standard approach advocated by Bradshaw and his colleagues elsewhere in this issue; or, more accurately, a method for developing a budget standard through a process of public participation. The traditional budget standard approach requires a panel of experts, informed by evidence from a range of sources including expenditure and consumer surveys but relying on normative judgements, to devise and cost a basket of goods and services which they believe equate with an adequate standard of living. *Replacing* the single panel of experts by a judicious mixture of group and depth interviews with members of the public could provide the basis for directly determining a socially approved budget standard.

Care would need to be taken to involve a wide cross section of the public in the research, or consultation, process although it would be inappropriate to strive for representativeness in the statistical sense of the term (see Glaser, 1978). Moreover, the number of respondents (better described as research participants) would out of necessity be less than in the traditional nationally representative survey, though considerably more than the number normally appointed to budget standards committees. Furthermore, failure to reach a consensus among a relatively small number of people must seriously call into question the likelihood of achieving consensus among many.

This is not the place to provide a blueprint for a programme of research designed to evolve a socially approved budget standard. Indeed, what is suggested is perhaps better viewed as a broad area of enquiry. Nevertheless, three strands of work seem important:

1. to elucidate the processes involved in budgeting and to explore the choices which people face;
2. to understand the public conception of poverty and to assess the degree of social consensus; and, if appropriate
3. to seek to establish a consensual poverty line.

### *Budgeting*

Although a lot is known about the outcome of domestic budgeting there is, with a few notable exceptions (Pahl, 1980; Pahl, forthcoming), little evidence concerning the process of budgeting or about the content of budgetary decisions. The existence of budget constraints, for instance, has to be assumed from a simple analysis of expenditure (see Walker and Bradshaw, 1985). A series of cycles of directed case studies involving different types of family groupings to focus on 'budgetary decisions and expenditure choices as people perceive them' has already been proposed in official circles (reported in Walker and Bradshaw, 1985); one aim was to identify decisions which appear salient to people but are not currently incorporated into large studies as indicators of living standards. One approach, used in Germany, is for respondents to complete an expenditure diary (similar to that used in the Family Expenditure Survey), and then to 'talk through' the decisions that preceded their expenditure in considerable detail (ISG, 1985). Respondents would be asked, for example, what alternative options were considered, the purchases that were forgone, the depletion of savings and the accumulation of debts and use of credit for purchasing. The same approach might be extended to cover low income households in order to ascertain how increments of income open up new choices.

The objectives of this area of work would be to add verbal meaning to the utility functions postulated in earlier studies and to begin to plot the 'contours' of people's real-life choices so as to explore the relationships between living standards and life style. Its particular importance in the development of a socially approved budget standard is that it enables researchers to give respondents an indication of what a particular level of income means for people in practical, everyday terms. This has two specific uses. The first is at the stage of exploring the public conception of poverty when the need is to establish whether respondents have an accurate appreciation of what it would be like to be 'poor' according to their own definitions, and whether their opinions are likely to be robust and stable in the light of conflicting evidence. The second occasion when results from this stream of enquiry assume importance is at the stage when budget standards are being set, and the participants need to know what importance to attach to the various components which might be considered for inclusion in a minimal basket of goods.

### *Social concepts of poverty and adequacy*

Work on the social conception of poverty—and the potential for consensus—is clearly the cornerstone of what is proposed. Despite much

valuable research to date, there remain large areas of ignorance about the meaning and salience of poverty; the experiential, social and psychological bases of people's views; the perceived relationship between poverty and adequacy; and, perhaps most important from the viewpoint of establishing a socially approved budget, precisely what is understood by the concept of adequacy—adequacy for what? A substantial sub-theme to be explored is the commitment of people to act to prevent poverty and the financial sacrifice that they are prepared to make.

Central to this area of enquiry would be in-depth work with individuals, and with members of households together, to explore and chart the different meanings that poverty has for people and, in particular, to gauge the extent and significance of differences in opinion. Next—and providing an important test of the consensual hypothesis—group work would be undertaken involving people of different backgrounds and persuasions to explore and detail the scope for consensus. If there proves to be a fair measure of consensus as to the nature of poverty, this would suggest that it might also be possible to derive a socially approved budget standard.

#### *Fixing the poverty line*

The suggestion is that the consensual definition of a monetary poverty line would be derived from the deliberations of a series of group discussions. Groups, perhaps in the first instance homogeneous with respect to family type and income, would be asked to agree (through a process of negotiation) acceptable minimum baskets of goods and services, and hence budgets, based on their own conception of adequacy (or preferably informed by social consensus notions of adequacy derived from earlier work). Like budget standard committees the groups would meet on several occasions. The advent of micro-computers means that groups could be fed back a range of information on the cost of the basket, both in absolute terms and in relation to average expenditure, about the nutritional value of the diets included and, perhaps also, about the public expenditure implications of setting benefits at the levels implied. Budgets derived in this way would then be referred to other groups of differing composition to be evaluated in an iterative process. If the consensual thesis holds, and this is a second empirical test, the iterative process should lead to the emergence of a final agreed budget or, in all probability, a set of budgets reflecting different family types.

## CONCLUSION

Studies of the kind outlined seem better attuned to the task of establishing a consensual poverty standard than do the survey techniques used to date. What is suggested—in some of the work—lies on the frontier of what qualitative techniques can currently deliver. It requires exacting standards of research design and project control. Much would be asked of respondents and of the relationships which researchers would need to build with them. Great ingenuity would be needed in order to devise practical methods of providing interactive feedback to respondents. The data-handling requirements are formidable and techniques for the systematic analysis of qualitative material would be tested as never before. Moreover, research of this kind is quite expensive.

Nevertheless, the possibilities are considerable. Assuming that the researches provide empirical support for the consensual thesis, the goal would be a set of socially approved poverty standards which could then be used both as the basis for determining (by quantitative means) the extent of poverty and for assessing the financial adequacy of benefits.

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