

COMMENT

Concepts of Poverty and Deprivation.

HUGH MCLACHLAN†

Veit-Wilson has recently argued convincingly that several commentators have misrepresented Rowntree's position regarding the concept of 'poverty' (Veit-Wilson, 1986). In this paper he claims that: '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' (p.94). Ironically, this is not an accurate statement of my views.<sup>1</sup>

I do not think it is always pointless to disagree about stipulative definitions about terms, including 'poverty'. Indeed, I explicitly claim that there is often a point to such disagreement, although social scientists often exaggerate its importance and are often mistaken as to its nature. For instance, Townsend is wrong in considering that there are logical implications for social policy in adopting his particular definition of the term 'poverty' (see McLachlan, 1983, pp.103–105). Given that particular definitions have been formulated and concepts thereby generated, I am less sure that there is any point in arguing about what particular names we attach to these concepts.

My central argument is that Townsend is unjustified in claiming that the term 'poverty' can be defined only in one way; that other definitions and specifically that attributed by him to Rowntree are, somehow, illegitimate or unworkable or useless. It is pointless, if you like, to claim that only one's own stipulative definition of, for instance, 'poverty' is preferable for all purposes or solely viable.

Perhaps this point can be expressed differently. The term 'poverty' normally has two related meanings. First of all, it is simply the state of being poor. Secondly, the term implies the lack of adequate means to meet a particular end. Clearly, in neither sense, is the question of whether or not someone is in 'poverty' unambiguous. Indeed, the question is logically incomplete. It is like asking whether someone or something is, say, tall or equal. Things and people are equal to others in some respects

† Reader in Sociology, Glasgow College of Technology.

<sup>1</sup> The point of my paper was to claim that the arguments used by Townsend to discredit Townsend's account of Rowntree's concept of 'poverty' are vacuous ones, whether or not his account is accurate. (McLachlan, 1983).

and they differ in other respects. They are tall when one particular comparison is made and small on the basis of some other comparison. Similarly, people are rich or poor only in relation to some real or imaginary referent. People might be in poverty in some respects and not in poverty in other respects. A poor athlete and a rich cripple might both be unable, say, to enjoy a round of golf at Gleneagles. The particular ends for which people might have inadequate means are multi-various. There are various sorts of poverty depending on the particular comparison between ends and means that we choose to make. Nothing forces us to make any particular comparison and nothing can prevent us from making any particular comparison, however whimsical. We might say, for instance, that some people are in poverty in the sense that they lack a sufficient income to provide them with mere physical subsistence and that other people are in poverty in the sense that they lack a sufficient income to provide them with the standard of living which is customary in their own society and yet others, while enjoying such a customary standard, are in poverty when compared to members of most western societies. One might be interested in sorts of poverty in one's capacity as a social scientist or as a citizen in one's politicking. In what sorts of poverty should the social scientist be interested in studying? Can this question be answered? Is it not his or her own business? To rephrase the matter, is it reasonable to say *a priori* that particular sorts of poverty should not be studied? Is it any more reasonable to say that the term 'poverty' should be defined only in one way? Similarly, one might be interested in trying to reduce or eliminate various sorts of poverty. Presumably, not even Townsend is interested in combating only poverty of the sort he identified. After all, this could be eliminated in Britain by increasing inequality in such a way that there is no commonly experienced living style.

Veit-Wilson argues that '... discussion would be helped by using an agreed terminology in which deprivation is the condition of unmet need, which is caused by the 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' (1986, pp.94–95). This nomenclature is clearly workable. However, if an agreed common terminology is desirable in this area, then it might be worth taking his suggestion a stage further. Veit-Wilson points out that there are various sorts of deprivation, and there is no particular need to list them all nor give a name to them all and that he wants to call one particular sort of deprivation, namely monetary deprivation, 'poverty'. Now obviously we could call this sort of depri-

vation poverty; it is clearly a sort of poverty in the senses in which we have been using the term. Nonetheless, what would be lost if we simply refrained from using the term 'poverty'? Given that our *concepts* are clear, does it matter what *names* we attach to them? We could simply talk of 'deprivation'. This might be useful insofar as use of the word 'poverty' in social policy and science has led to much needless controversy. For instance, in the context of attacking Rowntree, Townsend says of me: 'The argument that Mr. McLachlan fails to confront is therefore not just that an exposition of physical needs is an insufficient basis for the recognition of what are the needs of individual members of society, but that physical needs themselves are inseparable from the obligations of individuals to the societies of which they are members' (Townsend, 1984). Now, there is no argument here to confront. People can be deprived in the sense that they have insufficient means for physical survival, they can be deprived in the sense that they have insufficient means to enjoy socially accepted life styles and they can be deprived in an infinite number of other ways. How could this be disputed? I have called these sorts of deprivation forms of 'poverty'. Townsend considers that it is legitimate to call only one particular sort of deprivation 'poverty'. Perhaps Townsend (and others) and I should agree to drop the word 'poverty' from our vocabularies and talk instead of 'deprivation'.

#### REFERENCES

- H.V. McLachlan (1983), 'Townsend and the Concept of "Poverty"', *Social Policy and Administration*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp.97–105.
- P. Townsend (1984), 'A Rejoinder on Poverty', *Social Policy and Administration* Vol. 18, No. 2, pp.165–167.
- J.H. Veit-Wilson (1986), 'Paradigms of Poverty: A Rehabilitation of B.S. Rowntree', *Journal of Social Policy*, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp.69–99.