

POVERTY, PARTICIPATION AND CHOICE

Peter Townsend, the famous British sociologist who died in 2009, demonstrated that poverty prevents people being full members of society. This analysis of a large new dataset, Understanding Society, explores the relevance of Townsend's ideas in the 21st century.

Key points

- Participation in society can be measured in terms of social relationships, membership of organisations, trust in other people, ownership of possessions and purchase of services. All are lower among people with low incomes.
- However, while participation generally drops as income declines, participation stops falling among the 30 per cent or so of people with the lowest incomes creating a participation 'floor'; among this group, those with higher incomes do not have measurably increased living standards, greater social participation or higher levels of trust.
- The 30 per cent of people with the lowest incomes are also forced to choose between the basic necessities of modern life; they must decide which needs to neglect.
- For people affected by the floor, additional income may well be spent on upgrading the quality of necessary goods and services rather than adding to them.
- Averages mask important variation. The participation floor for benefit recipients is lower than for other groups on the same income.
- Most minority ethnic groups experience greater material deprivation than the white majority but social participation is, on average, higher.
- Children's engagement in school life and friends is not directly affected by household income.
- However, parents on low incomes, on average, play less often with their children and spend less on activities. This is associated with poorer educational outcomes as judged by teachers.
- Low income parents frequently spend more time than affluent ones assisting children with their school work because they have fallen behind their classmates.

The research

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BACKGROUND

The British sociologist Peter Townsend died in 2009, but left a rich legacy of ideas and evidence to help us better understand poverty. He recognised that poverty was relative not absolute; someone is poor if they cannot afford to participate fully in the society of which they are part. Townsend's key research was undertaken before Britain became the diverse multicultural society it is today. Nevertheless, this new research demonstrates that Townsend's ideas remain profoundly relevant in 21st century Britain.

What is participation?

Participation is about belonging. Society imposes expectations on people in terms of what they should possess and what they should do. Many of society's expectations require individuals and families to spend money. Like it or not, modern Britain is a consumer society in which people are assessed according to the income that they have, how they spend it and what they do with their time. Participation can be meaningfully and consistently defined with respect to three dimensions: freedom from deprivation; social relationships; and trust in people.

Each dimension of participation can be measured by a combination of variables.

- **Deprivation** has four components:
 - material situation (the possession of consumer goods);
 - housing circumstances;
 - financial situation (whether people can pay the bills); and
 - access to recreation (whether people can afford a holiday or to meet with friends).
- **Social participation** is measured through the nature of people's relationships with neighbours and their engagement in formal organisations, notably religious and political institutions.
- **Trust** is the glue that holds society together and an essential prerequisite for people to engage with other people; it is measured by asking about trust in people generally and strangers in particular.

Income and low participation

Analysis demonstrates that all three dimensions of participation rise and fall according to a person's income: the higher the household income, the greater a person's participation in society (which means less deprivation, more social participation and higher levels of trust).

Townsend thought that participation might decrease rapidly below the level of income at which people found it 'particularly difficult to share in the customs, activities and diets' typical of the society in which they lived. What, in fact, happens is that participation declines with reduced income until it reaches a level below which it generally does not continue to fall. There seems to be a minimum level of participation, a 'floor', that most people succeed in preserving, however low their income.

The participation floor applies to about the 30 per cent or so of people with the lowest household incomes. (Incomes are adjusted in the analysis to take account of variations in household size and differences in needs.) Incomes vary markedly among the people affected by the participation floor, so the fact that participation remains constant is not because incomes are similar. Rather, within this group, rises or falls in income do not translate into measurable differences in participation. People may need to spend additional income on upgrading necessary goods and services rather than on adding to

them. Approximately 40 per cent of the people affected are reliant on social security benefits for part of their incomes and the floor for this group is noticeably lower than for others on the same incomes.

The participation floor does not seem to apply to the five per cent of people who report the lowest incomes of all. This group is very diverse, including many students, disproportionate numbers of self-employed workers and fewer than expected numbers of social security claimants. Other researchers, employing different surveys, have cautioned against drawing firm conclusions about this group; there may, for example, be under-reporting of income.

Participation and choice

Townsend's work was originally criticised for not taking adequate account of people's tastes and the exercise of choice in determining the type and level of participation in society. The new analysis addresses this issue by examining the different kinds of participation observed at different income levels. (This entails, to use statistical terminology, simultaneously investigating mean levels of participation and the variation.)

The analysis demonstrates that the 30 per cent or so of people with the lowest incomes find it difficult to afford all the basic necessities and are forced to make hard choices between them. This is indicated by the greater variation in the things that people own and do among people with the lowest incomes than those who are better off. This appears to be because people with higher incomes can afford to own or do all the things asked about in the survey; those towards the bottom cannot, and make different choices about what things they can afford, which results in greater variation.

Other factors influencing participation

While participation is strongly associated with income, it varies for other reasons too. Participation varies by education, age, gender and ethnicity, even after accounting for differences due to income. Participation is generally highest for those with good educational qualifications, among older people and among the self-employed. Indeed, trust and social participation are both more strongly related to educational attainment than they are to level of household income. Women experience more material deprivation and are less trusting than men. However, men and women with similar incomes do not differ in the extent to which they are likely to belong to associations and to be socially integrated into their neighbourhoods.

Deprivation is higher than average among all the largest ethnic minority groups except those of Indian descent. Trust is lower than among white respondents for Indian and Caribbean groups only. In contrast, social participation is generally higher for minority ethnic groups than for their white counterparts. In the case of African, Indian and Bangladeshi respondents, high levels of material deprivation are more than offset by greater social participation, with overall levels of participation higher for these groups than for white respondents. The logic underpinning this last finding is that one component of participation substitutes or compensates for another. This indicates that respondents belonging to certain ethnic minorities rely, from choice or necessity, on social resources to offset limited material ones. There is evidence from other studies to support this statistical finding, but it is circumstantial and specially-designed research is required to further substantiate it.

Children's participation

Townsend did not explicitly consider the impact of income on the lives and social participation of children. New analysis of 8 year-olds suggests that children are not generally consciously affected by low family income in terms of their own friendships, participation in physical activities or in their engagement with school. Parents with low incomes play less often with their children and engage with them less in activities that cost money. This in turn is reflected in children's relative lack of educational success as assessed by their teachers.

Irrespective of household income, mothers who work tend to play with their children marginally more frequently than those who do not, spend an equal amount of time helping their children with their

education and actually spend a little more time attending paid for activities. Somehow, therefore, working mothers appear to be able to juggle their time in such a way that their children do not miss out.

Parents on low incomes appear to protect their children from an awareness of the direct effects of poverty and spend extra time helping them with schoolwork to compensate for poor achievement. Even so, children from low income households still perform worse at school than their more affluent peers.

Conclusion: Understanding difference

As Townsend demonstrated 30 or more years ago, people in poverty are unable to engage fully in society; they experience material deprivation, socialise less and are less trusting than people with greater resources. However, while participation declines as income falls, there appears to be a point in the income distribution at which participation stops falling, creating a participation 'floor'. The participation floor affects the 30 per cent of people with the lowest incomes, but varies in its level: it is lower for people who are reliant on social security benefits than for others on the same income. For the people affected by the floor, higher income is not reflected in measureable improvements in living standards or increased social participation, but seems instead to be used to sustain material and social existence. People confront circumstances in which nothing appears to be gained from additional income; a 'nothing for something' rather than a 'something for nothing' society.

About the study

The research is mainly based on analysis of the first wave of the ESRC Understanding Society household panel survey. The data relate to almost 100,000 individuals in nearly 40,000 households that are representative of the UK population. The interviews were conducted in 2009 and 2010. The analysis of children's participation utilises the separate Millennium Cohort Study; interviews were conducted with children and their parents or carers when the 19,000 sampled children were aged 8 in 2008. The findings are based on analysis using modern statistical tools.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

This summary is part of JRF's research and development programme. The views are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the JRF.

This is a summary of a larger report **Poverty, Participation and Choice: The Legacy of Peter Townsend** by Emanuele Ferragina, Mark Tomlinson and Robert Walker published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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ISSN 0958-3084

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