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# Time for a revival? A historical review of the social survey in Great Britain and the United States

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# Time for a revival? A historical review of the social survey in Great Britain and the United States

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## Abstract

During the 1980s, the history of the social survey method in the UK and the US evoked significant scholarly attention; however, this has waned in recent years. Drawing on this historical literature, I review the origins and development of the social survey to its current ubiquity in serving the information needs of modern societies. Two pivotal moments set the direction for this history: first, the publication of Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People of London* in the late nineteenth century, which inspired numerous further studies to replicate his approach; second, World War II, which provided the applied research opportunity that established the social survey as an indispensable tool in public policy. Although historians acknowledge the growth of survey research in the post-war era, there has been limited discussion of the trends that shaped this expansion. I identify the processes of institutionalisation, professionalisation and economisation as setting the course for social survey methods during this period. The emergence of historical reflection on the survey method in the late twentieth century responded to a new transitional moment in its history. Commentators argued for a greater integration of theory in empirical findings to enable the survey to continue to function effectively in the production of "argumentative knowledge" (Philip Abrams, in Bulmer 1985:x), which is central to its critical social function. I argue for the value of methodological history to enable the survey method, and its practitioners, to reflectively appraise the idiosyncrasies of its development, current practices and future prospects.

## Introduction

It is difficult given the variety and profusion of social surveys in social science, government, business and civil society to imagine a functioning modern society without the survey method as a foundation for knowledge and action. The growing information needs of modernisation have to so large a degree been met by social survey work that the "genealogy" of the research technology (Osborne & Rose 1999:368) is intertwined with the stories of the societies in which it emerged to such ubiquity. The extent of this conversation between method and object of research is sufficiently significant for the history of method to shed significant light on historical and cultural change (Savage 2010).

It is curious, therefore, that the history of the social survey has diminished as an area of investigation. The commentators of the method through its twentieth century history were joined by a smattering of interested historians with a peak in the 1980s and early 1990s; however there has been little continuation of this historical perspective in the last twenty years. In this paper I will undertake a review of the social survey's history with a view to identifying how this field came to be of interest before passing into neglect, and what purpose there could be in reviving a historical approach to research methodology.

In doing so I will attempt to avoid two common pitfalls. The first is to be absorbed by the 'romance' of the early social survey pioneers, such as Booth and Rowntree in Britain, and Du Bois and the Pittsburgh survey in the United States, resulting in both an uncritical history and one which is unbalanced in its attention to the periods before Booth and after the Second World War. In particular, while existing histories of the social survey describe quantitative growth in survey research following World War II, there is little further identification of trends in this period. I therefore propose the processes of institutionalisation, professionalisation and economisation as overarching categories in an analytical approach that brings the history of the social survey up to date.

The second temptation is to accept a teleological historical narrative, which portrays history as travelling in a direction towards some culmination in a way that both drastically simplifies and retrofits a veneer of purposefulness on the messy, complex, idiosyncratic and non-inevitable events and processes that took place. In relation to the biases of my own social positioning, although I intend to consider the social survey as a methodology in the United States and Britain, as a Sociologist in a British university I lean towards these disciplinary and geographical contexts.

In order to meaningfully discuss history, it is necessary to break it down into manageable units in some significant way. Historians of the social survey tend to achieve this periodisation either through identifying developmental phases (Marsh 1982; Crowthers & Platt 2010), sometimes personified in categories of investigators (Kent 1981), or through identifying key methodological advancements or transitions, either procedural or technical (Rossi et. al. 1983; Reid 1987; Fink 2005). In order to avoid the temptation to tell a neat, linear tale, I have chosen two junctures that I consider to be watershed moments in the history of the social survey. The first is Charles Booth's publication of *Life and Labour of the People of London*, which can be considered an adoptive innovation, in the sense of its novel combination of methods (Wiles et. al. 2010; Kent 1981), and which was tremendously influential on both sides of the Atlantic (Platt 1991; Converse 1987), inspiring a boom in empirical social research. The second is World War II, which provided the context for the survey method to 'prove its worth' (Marsh 1982) within government, laying the foundation for its institutionalisation and professionalisation in the years that followed. Although significant shifts, it is important to note that these transitional moments are not definitive, in that they do not preclude repetitions of patterns found in earlier periods.

The broad historical scope of this study inevitably limits the detail with which I am able to treat particular movements or studies mentioned: my material is the historical literature itself rather than the primary sources to which it refers. I have limited the geographical scope of my study to the UK and US in part due to the historical interaction between these English-speaking contexts in relation to survey research, and in particular due to the shared significance of Booth and World War II as defining moments in this history.

## Origins: social investigation before Booth

The need to collect quantitative information for the purpose of effective governance is not new. At the most basic level, population counts were an essential process in ancient China, Egypt, Greece, Persia and Rome (Crowthers & Platt 2010), and in some cases additional information was collected about those counted. In Britain, the Domesday Book of 1086 represents an economic assessment arising from an early information gathering exercise by

William the Conqueror, as he attempted to establish the extent and value of land holdings through sending commissioners to every manor (Kent 1981). Ruling powers required this information primarily for the purpose of ascertaining fighting capacity and taxation potential, and in some cases to establish voting rights, such as in the United States, where the constitutionally-mandated census originated from the need to apportion territory into constituencies of electorates roughly equal in size (Crothers & Platt 2010; Rossi et. al. 1983). In Great Britain, a controversy emerged in the eighteenth century over the size of the population, in particular a fear of population decline. A turning point in this debate came with the publication of Malthus' *Essays on Population* in 1798, which conversely projected population over-growth, and was influential in Parliament's legislation for the first census in Britain in 1801, although an assessment of military capacity in response to the Napoleonic Wars was also a factor (Kent 1981; Tonkiss 2004; Crothers & Platt 2010).

Beyond the establishment of regular censuses, exercises in 'political arithmetic' began to take place around the turn of the nineteenth century, and were made possible by the emergence of the population as a meaningful concept. The population came to be conceived as not just a mass of people, but a set of demographic variables that can be measured, compared and investigated in terms of distribution and change over time (Tonkiss 2004). This process of quantification produced new "collective social entities", for example solidifying the category of 'the unemployed' (Crothers & Platt 2010:50). Similarly, in discussing the emergence of 'public opinion' as a phenomenon, Osborne and Rose (1999) observe a shift from an 'elite society' to a 'mass society' where it became meaningful to speak in terms of 'the people as a whole'. Although they consider this process to have happened by the 1920s, its roots reach much earlier. In relation to the social survey, the shifting place of class identities and the related information needs of democratic societies have been significant to the way it has developed both substantively and methodologically. It became during the nineteenth century not only meaningful but necessary for the purpose of governance to speak in terms of "disembodied social aggregates" (Savage 2010:x).

There is general consensus that the twofold motivation of early empirical studies was a growing awareness of the negative consequences of industrialisation and urbanisation, as well as the Enlightenment desire to study society 'scientifically'. Investigators attempted to identify 'laws' that could be quantified and predicted in a manner directly analogous to the natural sciences and, through greater understanding, aspired to enable tighter control over their rapidly changing social world (Bulmer et. al. 1991; Reid 1987; Tonkiss 2004; Crothers & Platt 2010). According to Catherine Marsh, the nineteenth century brought with it the need for a new, more deliberate approach to obtain information about what was happening in society, on account of the corruption of social relationships by capitalism. The factory system carefully 'zoned' people with similar life-styles in the new towns and cities, strengthening within-group contact among the classes but insulating the middle- and upper-classes from undesirable contact with impoverished migrant workers. Face-to-face relations between classes broke down, "effectively hiding one class from another" (1982:11).

Despite the widely-recognised Victorian ideology of laissez-faire individualism, through the nineteenth century the idea of action to address the ills of society, whether by individuals or the state, arose. Whether or not this originated from social conscience (Crothers and Platt 2010) is debatable, at least at a general level, although it is common for historians to refer uncritically to 'Victorian philanthropy'. Gordon (1973) helpfully adapts the popular language of 'ameliorative social policy' of the Victorian era to 'palliative social policy', in demonstration of the impetus to maintain the status quo of class-structured society that underlay both

charitable and governmental interventions. Irrespective of whether governmental and 'philanthropic' intervention in the maladies of industrialisation was motivated through a sense of moral duty or fear of dissent amongst the poor class, that intervention was necessary became gradually beyond dispute through the nineteenth century (Abrams 1951; Gordon 1973; Marsh 1982). The social survey therefore emerged in close relationship to public policy and social reform and in the context of a 'community of practice' including both reformers and state officials (Crothers and Platt 2010). As Mark Abrams asserted,

"Surveys ... are carried out as an indispensable first step in measuring the dimensions of a social problem, ascertaining its causes, and then deciding on remedial action ... Most surveys have been concerned with curing obviously pathological social conditions." (quoted in Bulmer 1991:3)

The empirical studies of nineteenth century Britain can be categorised in a number of ways. Michael Gordon (1973) helpfully distinguishes between administrative, epidemiological and 'moral' statistics, focusing on both the substantive content and the underlying purpose of these works. Raymond Kent (1981) uses the more methodologically-focused categories of 'social accountants' and 'social explorers', which I will adopt here.

Kent (1981) describes the 'social accountants' as the first to attempt a quantitative examination of social phenomena through both primary data collection and examination of official statistical information, resulting in inductive generalisations similar to what we now call grounded theory. Driven by a firm belief in rational governance, they considered the 'facts' to speak for themselves, and to provide a 'scientific' basis for social reform. This strand of investigation is embodied in the statistical societies, the most influential of which, the Manchester Statistical Society (which claims to be the earliest such society) and the London Statistical Society (now the Royal Statistical Society), have run continuously since the 1830s (Willcox 1934). Although driven by the purpose of improving social conditions, these societies had firm views on the place of values in social investigations. 'Facts' about social conditions were perceived as the "raw material" of a new "science of society" (Reid 1987:3; Tonkiss 2004). A sharp division was envisaged between the collection of 'facts' and the policy decisions that would be made on their basis (Marsh 1982; Bulmer et. al. 1991; Kent 1981). Despite pretensions to "exclude all opinions" (London Statistical Society, quoted in Marsh 1982:14), it must however be noted that the sponsors of these surveys held political opinions and the release of "inconvenient facts", for example relating to wages and the relationship of the factory system to poor living conditions, was restricted (Marsh 1982:15).

The critical contribution to survey methodology of the 'social accountants' was that they were the first to move beyond description to explanation, and in the attempt to test specifically formulated hypotheses, mark the "birth" of empirical sociology (Kent 1981:6; Reid 1987). The sophistication of the statistical societies' studies, such as the use of precodes, percentages, and carefully-trained interviewers following a schedule, has been noted by Marsh (1982), who suggests that their contribution is often neglected through an excessive focus on the 'philanthropic investigators' who will be the focus of the next section. Despite the presence of the societies themselves as organisations that transcended individual achievements (Willcox 1934), Marsh attributes this lack of methodological consolidation and retention to the absence of research organisations that could code, disseminate and cumulate their procedures and experience. As long as quantitative research continued to be conducted by wealthy individuals, it would be unable to institutionalise and thus provide a platform for continuous advancement.

By the mid-nineteenth century, there was a shift from the collection of rather dry facts to direct observation by middle class observers, the 'social explorers' who attempted to personally experience the lives of the urban poor. These studies originated largely through a kind of investigative journalism, and through the settlement house movement.

The plight of the poor attracted significant attention in both fiction and non-fiction from the 1840s and 1850s. Social explorers tended towards detailed and often emotive qualitative accounts, where the urban poor are seen as:

"strange 'tribes' or 'wandering hordes' who inhabit a separate 'territory' or 'dark continent' that remains to be 'penetrated' like the darkest forests of Africa and yet can be 'discovered' by the middle class and the wealthy in the very heart of Britain's industrial cities." (Kent 1981:37-8)

The poor were portrayed as an exotic other, which could be subjugated to the gaze of the affluent observer. There has been little consideration of how the fascination of the middle- and upper-classes in the nineteenth century with their new urban poor parallels the information-gathering practices of colonial administrators for the purpose of subduing and exploiting their territories, despite the strikingly orientalist language (Said 1978; see Baucom 1999 and Varma 2011, for exceptions). Further research is needed to comment on the degree and modes of transmission between paternalistic social investigations at home and abroad, and the power relations within which they are enmeshed. More generally, the history of poverty studies prior to Booth is frequently overlooked, and an awareness of this perhaps uncomfortable aspect of the field's history could productively shed critical light on contemporary studies.

Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and London Poor* (1861) is perhaps the most influential example of this kind of political radical investigative journalism (Marsh 1982). His interest was in the conditions of employment and, particularly, wage levels of the poor in London, on the implicit assumption that low wages were the cause of poverty (Kent 1981). His approach was to talk to people as a "disinterested observer", and this aspect of "detached observation" would over time become an integral part of the survey method (Bulmer et. al. 1991:14). Another noteworthy aspect of his work is the use of direct questioning, particularly on account of what it reveals about the prevailing view of the 'poor' at the time. Mayhew made the assertion that the majority of London's needlewomen and journeymen tailors subsisted on twopence-halfpenny per day; however this was rejected in *The Economist* as "entirely false and irreconcilable with known, recorded and public facts", being derived from the accounts of the poor themselves, whose "utter untrustworthiness" was well known (Thompson 1973:43, in Marsh 1982:18). As Marsh has observed, "the idea of interviewing a *respondent*, who was at the same time the subject of the inquiry and the informant, was very slow to develop" (Marsh 1982:19, italics original).

From around the 1880s the settlement house movement began in Britain, and was quickly emulated in the United States: indeed there is good evidence of interchange between leading figures in the British and American settlement house movements (Husock 1992; Platt 1991). It involved affluent, reform-minded volunteers, particularly academics and students, taking up residence in 'poor' urban neighbourhoods for the purpose of study and building relationships between the classes – to "assist the poor and to bind the classes in a common purpose" (Husock 1992:56). This activity was particularly geared towards engaging future leaders, "bringing them face to face with poverty, and giving them the opportunity to develop practical

solutions that they could take with them into national life" (Toynbee Hall 2014, para.2). In Britain, settlement houses were particularly effective in strengthening the success of the survey as a policy tool, as the British civil service encouraged elite young men to serve in settlement houses, where they undertook survey work, as part of their transition from undergraduate education in Oxford or Cambridge to political offices (Bulmer et. al. 1991). It notably also provided a context for women to engage in social investigation, for example Jane Addams and Edith Abbott of Hull House in Chicago. In fact, in the United States, settlements have by some been claimed as having been pioneers of the systematic exploration of poverty, with Jane Addams as the movement's "visionary and theoretician" (Husock 1992:56). There was, however, a greater division between academic and political circles in the United States, which prevented the settlement houses from bringing about such integration of the survey's antecedents into policy-making as was achieved in Britain (Bulmer et. al. 1991).

It is easy given the reformist orientation of the mid- to late-nineteenth century exploratory investigations to assume, as Mark Abrams does, that state action was no longer seen as an infringement on liberty but rather as being necessary to bring about the expansion of liberty:

"By 1880 the doctrine of laissez-faire had passed into history. The new orthodoxy was that society is "a partnership of all in a life of virtue", that freedom is one aspect of virtue and that State action is necessary in the creation and maintenance of those conditions which make for a virtuous and free life." (Abrams 1951:32)

This is to focus excessively on one side of the story. In fact the context of the 1880s was one of economic depression and heightened social tensions, with conflict between two groups who advocated very different solutions: on the one hand, the Charity Organisation Society of the Bosanquets continued in the more conservative Victorian philanthropic assertion that individual case work should be the response to social problems, while others, particularly Beatrice and Sydney Webb and other Fabian Society members, advocated more "collectivist solutions" (Bulmer et. al. 1991:24). For our purposes, it is important to observe at this juncture that these early precursors to the social survey were carried out by private individuals, members of particular professions (notably medical), voluntary associations and journalists. There was no conception of a 'professional' social researcher, no institutional context for such studies to be situated and consolidated, and very little interplay with academia.

The strands of empirical tradition that emerged in this 'prehistoric' period are significant not only because they anticipate the developments that followed, but because they also provide a valuable reference point which will help us to identify cyclical as well as linear patterns in the history of the social survey.

## Birth: Booth and subsequent foundational studies

Charles Booth's first investigation in the late 1880s is widely considered to be 'the start' of the social survey, in that his study amassed sufficient characteristics in common with the survey of today to be considered its earliest example (Fink 2005). The originality of the study is considered from a variety of viewpoints.

Substantively, it is important as the originator of a new style of community study from which the social survey developed (Gordon 1973), the influence of which in the United States constitutes a significant area of transmission across the Atlantic (Converse 2009; Platt 1991). At home, Booth laid the foundation for the area of poverty studies that would become so



important to British social investigation (Platt 2014) and it was of considerable significance in relation to the policy changes that it brought about (Moser & Kalton 1971; Abrams 1951). Theoretically, Booth did not simply collect facts but formed them into categories (Tonkiss 2004), and in so doing brought together empirical investigation and social theorising in a way that anticipated contemporary empirical sociology (Kent 1981).

It is for his methodological contribution that Booth is most renowned. Bulmer and colleagues draw the distinction between Mayhew and Booth on the basis of "aspirations in the direction of systematic knowledge," through "the urge to present systematic and defensible numerical statements about the problem studied based on a large-scale data collection exercise derived from questioning individuals" (Bulmer et. al. 1991:43, 42). Similarly, Mark Abrams credits Booth's "principal contribution" as "the elaboration of an adequate technique for expressing qualitative concepts and arguments about society in precise numerical terms" (Abrams 1951:41). His use of informants is sometimes emphasised, as he began with "the root idea ... that every fact I needed was known to someone, and that the information had simply to be collected and put together" (Booth, in Moser & Kalton 1971:7), as is his aim to assess an explicit assumption, or hypothesis, and therefore move beyond description into explanation (Reid 1987); however Kent (1981) identifies both of these advances in the earlier work of the social 'explorers' and 'accountants' respectively. For him, Booth is methodologically original in that he brought together the approaches of 'social accountants' and 'social explorers', systematically combining for the first time the house-to-house survey, the first hand observer's account, the use of informants and the use of statistics collected by government officials (Kent 1987).

It is difficult to make a clear assessment of Booth's role in the history of the social survey through the review of secondary literature alone as there is some disagreement as to his motivation and significance. Jean Converse astutely comments that "Booth ... has a certain mythic proportion that is pleasing in venerable forebears" (Converse 2009:12). An attempt to excavate beyond this mythology without recourse to primary sources raises the temptation to overemphasise criticisms resulting in a perhaps unfairly dismissive account. My methodology limits my ability to make such judgements, so I will offer conflicting accounts without attempting to tidy up the picture too much.

Booth was a successful businessman who owned a shipping line based in Liverpool. He was a member of the London Statistical Society, and took to exploring the East End of London, mingling with people as he went, in order to consider poverty, which he described as the "problem of problems" (Kent 1981:53). Although it is not unusual to follow Abrams' line in describing Booth as the first in a line of philanthropists - "men who were intolerably disturbed by the poverty and brutality of contemporary urban working class life" (Abrams 1951:19) - it is important not to oversimplify his influences by a focus on his altruism. Booth was highly sceptical of the accounts of Mayhew and others, which he considered to vastly exaggerate the reality of urban hardship. The trigger to his own investigation came about in response to a report published in 1885 by the Social Democrat Federation, which claimed that 25% of the workers in London's working class areas were in 'extreme poverty', which was defined as being unable to live on the wages they received (Gordon 1973). Booth set about to personally disprove this assertion.

An undertaking of this scale was made possible by three things: personal resources, including time, £30,000 and significant vision and drive; an effective team of researchers; and the use of what Beatrice Webb termed 'wholesale interviewing' through the use of informants. Booth's

team included Beatrice Potter, who would later marry Sydney Webb and go on to establish with him the London School of Economics and Political Science, home of the first chair in Sociology. She also wrote one of the earliest texts in research methods, *Methods of Social Study* (1932). Octavia Hill went on to become influential in housing, and Hubert Llewellyn Smith was responsible for a follow-up to Booth's study in the 1930s. Lucinda Platt has gone so far as to say that Booth's researchers were one of the greatest legacies of his study (2014).

In relation to the use of informants, these were middle-class professionals with 'expert' knowledge of the working class (Bulmer 1985) - in Booth's case, predominantly School Board Visitors - who had an intimate knowledge of families with school age children. Although enabling the astounding scope of his study, the reliance on School Board Visitors was a key limitation in terms of coverage. His exclusion of individuals and families without children would be considered an unacceptable degree of bias by today's standards, in a study that aspired to represent the whole population. This is also significant as an indication of distrust in objects of enquiry to "speak for themselves" (Marsh 1982:18), although it is often overlooked that Booth effectively undertook an ethnography to assist in the analysis of his 'wholesale interviewing' approach through spending extended periods as a lodger in the houses of various working people, taking notes in the evening, to ensure he could fully appreciate the interview data (Abrams 1951). In a sense he was therefore closer to the objects of his enquiry than some modern survey investigators who, despite the use of direct interviewing, may rarely come into contact with respondents through the now tightly structured intermediary role of the interviewer.

In relation to his findings, Booth developed a classification system in eight categories, with the lowest four constituting the 'poor' and 'very poor'. As he extended his study beyond the East End to the whole of London, his unit of analysis shifted from the family to the street, and enabled him to famously produce coloured poverty maps, an approach which caught the imagination of future investigators, including Hull House and Du Bois (Platt 1991). His surprising findings were that the proportion of 'poor' living in London was in fact higher than the 25% figure that he initially took issue with. Booth found that 30.7% of London's population were allocated to his lowest four categories. However, and importantly for Booth, only 0.9% fell into his lowest class of 'occasional labourers, loafers, and semi-criminals'. This enabled him to make the claim, which was counter-cultural in the mainstream of the middle- and upper-classes of his time, that a key cause of poverty was conditions of employment rather than individual responsibility. At the same time, he was able to demonstrate that the urban poor did not represent as great a threat to social stability as many imagined – the very poor were "a disgrace, but not a danger" (Kent 1981:55; Tonkiss 2004). In his conclusions we see only a slight "tempering" of his economic individualism (Gordon 1973:288), making the modest allowance that the individualist system would "stand a far better chance" with minimal state intervention:

"Thorough interference on the part of the state with the lives of a small fraction of the population would tend to make it possible, ultimately, to dispense with any Socialist interference in the lives of all the rest." (Booth 1892:167, in Marsh 1982:18)

In this we do not hear not the words of a reformist, nor an indication that in the 1880s the "doctrine of laissez-faire had passed into history" (Abrams 1951:32). However, Booth does represent a small but enormously significant shift to the *mainstream* of Victorian individualism

and concession to the necessity of state intervention, and there soon followed a body of legislation which “altered deeply the character of the British polity” (Abrams 1951:115).

As a precursor to the modern social survey, Booth’s contribution has been side-lined by some, not only for being “untheoretical” or lacking in “analytical bite” (Marsh 1982:17), but also for its limited methodological significance, showing continuity with his predecessors rather than innovation (Marsh 1982; Hoinville 1985; Platt 2014). For those that take this approach, his primary contribution is as an antecedent to the work of his immediate followers, in particular Seebohm Rowntree and Arthur Bowley, the former tending to be emphasised by those interested in conceptualising poverty and the latter by methodologists and statisticians. Indeed, the idea of replication itself can be seen as an important principle of social enquiry (Platt 2014), which Booth’s approach evidently stimulated amongst his contemporaries.

Seebohm Rowntree was the son of a famous Quaker chocolate manufacturer and philanthropist, Joseph Rowntree, and was thus “brought up in an environment in which good business was combined with concern for employee welfare and education” (Platt 2014:34). His studies concerned his own city of York: the first was conducted in 1899 (published 1901), which he then replicated twice (published in 1942 and 1951 respectively). Although he was inspired by Booth, his 1899 study of York had key methodological and theoretical differences which added the “touch of an academic approach” (Fink 2005).

Methodologically, Rowntree continued Booth’s geographically defined ‘census’ approach, that captured the whole population, but with greater “sophistication” (Marsh 1982:25). His use of ‘retail’ interviewing was the first application of direct questioning in a social enquiry of this scale (Bulmer et. al. 1991), and ensured that he captured every family, rather than solely those with school children. He also employed “professional interviewers” who he valued for both their persistence in paying “many thousands of visits” and for their interpersonal skills, as they exercised “no small amount of discernment and tact” (Rowntree 1902:14, in Platt 2014:35). His study is generally accepted to be more systematic, for example through the employment of nutritionists to provide an independent judgement as to what was required for a subsistence diet (Alcock 2006).

Theoretically, his study formed the benchmark for what would come to be known as an ‘absolute’ approach to poverty. Through identification and costing of ‘necessities’, he was able to calculate a poverty line and to distinguish between primary and secondary poverty based on a distinction between those that did not earn the minimum amount for subsistence, and those that did earn sufficient and yet did not have those ‘necessities’ in practice due to spending on ‘non-essentials’. His conclusions were of much stronger analytical value, as he identified that the majority of the ‘poor’ in York earned a regular wage but one that was insufficient to meet their basic physical needs (Tonkiss 2004). He also identified strong life-cycle effects, where families were lifted out of and pushed back into poverty as their circumstances changed over time (Marsh 1982).

It is common for the supposedly ‘absolutist’ approaches to poverty of Booth and Rowntree to be criticised for their failure to acknowledge how people’s needs may vary in different temporal, geographical and social contexts, to ignore issues of intra-household distribution, and for allowing the ‘poor’ an unacceptably low standard of living through the ‘meanness’ of subsistence levels (Alcock 2006; Marsh 1982; Platt 2014). In a later era, Peter Townsend made a comprehensive and game-changing critique of absolute approaches to poverty in response to the rather triumphalist tone of studies that considered the introduction of the

welfare state to have put an end to poverty in Britain (Townsend 1962). It is important, however, not to overlook the detail of the earlier studies, which did employ more complex, relative measures than is often recognised (Alcock 2006), and to consider these early studies within their historical context. The prevailing view of their era was that the poor only had themselves to blame through their wantonly immoral behaviour and mismanagement of funds. In defining poverty, Booth and Rowntree had to “insulate” their calculations from the accusation that the poor could help themselves if they would only use their wages properly (Platt 2014). Whether this was their intention or not, in their social-historical context, and with an eye to policy change, it was a more effective strategy to bring about a small shift in the prevailing view than to advocate a more pronounced change in perspective which few would find themselves able to swallow.

Arthur Bowley is best known for pioneering representative sampling, supporting its endorsement by the International Statistical Institute in 1903, and implementing the approach in his own 1915 study of working class economic conditions in four towns (Hoinville 1985; Dale & Kotz 2011). Although his work is methodologically distinctive through application of statistical techniques, substantively it can be seen as a further extension of the Booth-Rowntree tradition, strengthening the pattern of replication, reference and comparison amongst studies (Tonkiss 2004). He brought the social survey closer to the academy, in the sense that he was an academic researcher and applied statistical techniques to the measurement of poverty (Bulmer 1985; Fink 2005). Beyond advancement in representative sampling, he also developed methods for adjusting for non-response, paid greater attention to precise question wording, and standardised the definition of the unit under investigation (Tonkiss 2004; Marsh 1982; Fink 2005). His influence extended to the introduction of sampling into British government research, and, through his assistant, Margaret Hogg, to the application of statistics within the Russell Sage Foundation and at Federal Government level in the United States (Hoinville 1985; Platt 1991).

Despite being considered the “decisive breakthrough for the social survey as we know it today” (Marsh 1982:25), sampling did not catch on quickly, demonstrating the non-inevitability of continuous advancement in methodological history (Bulmer et. al. 1991). Rowntree, for example, only reluctantly agreed to “test” sampling in his third poverty study of 1950 (Platt 2014). Catherine Marsh has attributed this reluctance to the Enlightenment philosophy of the early social researchers, who,

“saw their job as filling in the cracks, the unknown parts of the world ... It would have been as unthinkable for these investigators to do a one in ten sample of households as it would have been for a cartographer to map only one square in ten on his grid.” (Marsh 1982:26)

Even within the Royal Statistical Society, the drawing of a biased sample was accepted as “a fact of life” in a discussion following presentation to the Society of a paper on sampling by Director of Statistics at the Ministry of Labour, J. Hilton, published in 1924 (Hoinville 1985:104). Throughout the 1930s, there continued to be a substantial gap between the theory and widespread application of probability sampling methods (Hoinville 1985).

The British tradition that began with Booth had a significant influence in the United States, as Booth “spoke to an aroused audience of activists” in “American reform circles of philanthropy, settlement house work, and Progressive politics,” in particular through his example of “thoroughness and scientific authority” which could be applied to “power social change”

(Converse 2009:22, 12). His approach to mapping became particularly important in the Chicago department of sociology in the 1920s and he in many ways inspired the prolific movement of community studies in the United States that will be discussed in the next section (Platt 1991; Converse 2009). However, in this discussion of the 'foundational studies' of the social survey, two American examples deserve explicit mention due to their continuity with the British tradition and influence over American studies that followed: namely, *The Philadelphia Negro* by William Du Bois (1899), and *The Pittsburgh Survey*, led and edited by Paul Kellogg (1910-1914).

Du Bois in particular acknowledged the influence of Booth in his study, which is visible in the style of maps that he produced (Converse 2009; Platt 1991). He stands apart from the mainstream of the American social survey movement in that he focuses on a particular subgroup rather than the community itself, and due to his stronger ties to academic sociology (Gordon 1973); he was not only an academic sociologist, but also the first African-American to obtain a PhD from Harvard, and exhibits distinctively neutral language among survey-based studies of his period (Tonkiss 2004; Bulmer et. al. 1991). Rather than poverty per se, Du Bois viewed the 'Negro problem' as the core issue of race and class in American society, and he asserted that the black population of Philadelphia (and, by implication, elsewhere) needed to be considered in terms of different and specific social characteristics and forms of behaviour (Tonkiss 2004). The Pittsburgh Survey can be seen as the most direct ancestor of the American social survey movement through the important influence of charity workers, the non-academic status of investigators (Kellogg's background was journalistic) and its support through Russell Sage Foundation funding (Gordon 1973).

The processes of industrialisation and urban growth came later in the United States than in Britain (Gordon 1973). These were characterised particularly by an "extraordinary escalation" of immigration in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century, which led to an interest in mapping the ethnic and racial geography of American cities which is lacking in early British studies (Gordon 1973:290; Tonkiss 2004). It is not altogether surprising that the British and American survey movements quickly diverged, as each was "oriented to social problems, and the perceived problems of the two countries were different" (Platt 1991). Also of significance is the differential policy impact of early surveys in Britain and the United States due to the greater distance between academic and policy circles and the strength of the "prevailing doctrine" of individual virtue in the United States (Bulmer et. al. 1991; Abrams 1951).

## Adolescence: between Booth and the Blitz

The period between Booth (and his immediate followers) and the Second World War roughly aligns with the interwar period. Although Crothers and Platt have described this as a time of "deepening methodological standards" more generally (2010:53), this does not seem to apply significantly to survey research. Despite the opportunities opened up by Booth, Rowntree and Bowley, survey research in Britain seemed to have made a "false start" (Reid 1987:6), with little evidence of methodological advancement in the twenty years leading up to World War II (Marsh 1982). Empirical sociology "floundered," as the followers of Booth "reverted to social accounting" in a way that perpetuated the divide between empirical research and social theorising (Kent 1981:6, 74). Although a Chair in Sociology was established at the London School of Economics and Political Science, its incumbents, Leonard Hobhouse (1907-1929)

and Morris Ginsbery (1930-1954) fostered a "philosophical and anti-empiricist tradition" that was reviewed by the Dean of Sociology at Chicago, Albion Small, as lacking any clear interest in sociology at all (Bulmer 1985:15). By 1943, Kent reports that one American observer described sociology in Britain as "all but dead" (1981:6).

There were two main strands to British survey work in the interwar years: the replicators of Booth, and the community self-surveys championed by Geddes.

Although the interwar years included more surveys than ever before, these were "rigorously factual" and lacking in reference to general ideas (Bulmer 1985:9). The idea that surveys should be 'factual' was not new, but in these years, fuelled by a "mood ... of institutional sobriety ... the range of the factual domain became severely curtailed" (Marsh 1982:29-30). Following Booth and the 'social accountants' before him, social surveyors tended to keep a sharp separation between their role in impartial collection of facts and the policy implications that should be drawn from them (Bulmer et. al. 1991). So census-like and limited were these enquiries that the Registrar-General of the Royal Statistical Society suggested that their main purpose was to fill gaps in knowledge between censuses, and that perhaps a better solution would be to institute a quinquennial census (Marsh 1982).

Among the replications of studies that were carried out, Bowley repeated his five towns study in 1923-4; Sir Hubert Llewellyn Smith, by now working at the London School of Economics and Political Science, replicated Booth's study of London with Bowley in 1930-35; and Rowntree replicated his York study in 1936. Similar works were undertaken by others in Bristol, Birmingham, Southampton, and other urban areas. Mark Abrams singles out the Merseyside area study completed by the University of Liverpool in 1929 as significant due to its relationship to the earlier poverty studies. It added substantively through the focus on "subnormal groups" or "problem families" (Abrams 1951:49), for example those where there is a physical or mental disability, those with persistent patterns of crime or those continuously in receipt of public assistance. This study revealed that the elimination of material poverty may not touch some forms of "social ill-health" and may even "increase the dimensions of these evils" (Abrams 1951:52).

The amateur status of the social survey was continued through the advocacy of community self-surveys by Patrick Geddes. Geddes was a biologist-turned-sociologist who was responsible for founding the Sociological Society of London in 1903, which largely promoted his idea of 'civics', later picked up by his devotee, Blandford. The community self-survey was mainly carried out by local volunteers and publicised in town halls. With the purpose of studying family and community in their "ecological setting" (Bulmer 1985:10), they resulted in a kind of "patchy anthropology" (Marsh 1982:31). The idea of applied social science that was fostered was "naïve and messianic" compared, for example, with that being developed in the field of psychology at the time (Bulmer 1985:11). Through its weak theoretical and methodological base, the community self-survey has been attributed a substantial share of the responsibility for "convincing a generation of British sociologists that surveys were not for them" (Marsh 1982:31-32).

It was in this period that the United States' hegemony in survey research was established:

"The intellectual leadership in modern sample survey research has lain in the United States, which has tended to remain in the forefront of intellectual fertility, analytical inventiveness and methodological innovation." (Bulmer et. al. 1991:39)

The three key strands of survey work I will pick up on here are the growth of opinion research, the American social survey movement, and the first steps of the "survey entrepreneurs" (Converse 2009:132).

Mark Abrams (1951) has described market research and public opinion surveys as 'borrowers' of the survey method. This distancing is not uncommon of an internalist history of social research, where survey researchers prefer to see their "ancestors in science" as being "more weighty" than those in politics and business (Converse 2009:4). However, notwithstanding the impact of Booth and other community studies, and of attitudinal surveying in psychology and sociology, these are the "most immediate ancestors of survey research" in the United States (Converse 2009:87).

Consumer market research began after World War I following a psychological laboratory model, which developed techniques of questioning people about preferences by means of carefully and consistently administered standardised questions (Rossi 1983:3). During the same period, the link between democracy and opinion flourished in the United States, as the opinion of the collectivity was reconceived from an irrational force to the aggregate of individual opinions (Osborne and Rose 1999). Newspapers took a particular interest in canvassing public opinion on political candidates and policies. Since 1904 the *New York Herald* newspaper had undertaken a poll prior to the presidential election, and this was continued until 1916. The real impetus came from George Gallup's American Institute of Public Opinion, which he initially set up in his lunch hours in 1935 (ibid.). Political polls in the 1930s made use of quota sampling, in a partially successful attempt to 'mirror' the American population in important respects (Rossi et. al. 1983). Gallup's "great coup" (Osborne & Rose 1999:377) came in 1936 when he correctly predicted the outcome of the Roosevelt-Landon presidential election based on a sample of 1500 individuals, while *Literary Digest* magazine predicted incorrectly based on a postal poll of millions of telephone subscribers. Gallup demonstrated convincingly that a small, carefully drawn sample could outperform an enormous sample drawn from an incomplete sampling frame with no effort at achieving decent response rates (Rossi et. al. 1983).

Perhaps the most prolific source of surveys in the first half of the twentieth century was the social survey movement in the United States. This had strong links to the community self-survey tradition in Britain. In 1912 the Russell Sage Foundation set up its Department of Surveys and Exhibits in order to help organise and publicise surveys and elicit community participation with the goal of "changing the community's consciousness... to become sensitized to the problems of their community and aroused to undertake a program for their solution" (Converse 2009:25). The American community study was "a more sprawling affair of community participation than their predecessors ... in England" (Converse 2009:23), with 2,775 projects completed by 1927 (Gordon 1973:293). The rapid rise and immense popularity of the movement caused it to be described by a contemporary sociologist as "a new sort of religion" (Taylor 1919:5, in Gordon 1973:293). Although these surveys brought together reformers with scientists and citizens, their fundamental aim was for "community betterment," and as a result they were closer to social reform and political action than they were to academia (Crothers and Platt 2010:52). That is not to say that academic sociology was unaware of the movement: some viewed the survey as a means of transforming sociology from a 'soft' to a 'hard' discipline (Gordon 1973:294). However, around 1930 the movement petered out through a distancing between sociology, which aspired to become a "detached and objective science", and social work, which attached itself to psychoanalytic theory (Gordon 1973:295).

It was at a similar time that the first 'survey entrepreneurs' emerged - in particular, Paul Lazarsfeld, Hadley Cantril and Rensis Likert - making important links between academic culture and the applied research of business and government, which would later be consolidated. In the 1930s, Lazarsfeld and Samuel Stouffer began using sampling theory and statistical analysis within their sociological research and later in the decade Cantril established the Office of Public Opinion Research at Newark University, while Lazarsfeld set up the Office of Radio Research that would later move to Columbia University and become the Bureau of Applied Social Research (Rossi et. al. 1983). Within government, the Bureau of the Census began developing sampling methods with a view to providing timely measures of unemployment, while the first National Health Survey was conducted in 1935 using clustered sampling (ibid.).

By 1935, there was an enormous discrepancy in the number of surveys in the United States compared to Britain. This is partly due to increased government expenditure on surveys in the 1930s and 1940s, while a similar increase did not occur in Britain until the 1960s (Hoinville 1985). According to Wells, who listed the studies in the two countries, this was due to the greater centralisation of government in Britain compared to the United States, which therefore did not require as many surveys, as well as the absence of an equivalent to the Russell Sage Foundation as a funding body in Britain (Bulmer et. al. 1991). Bulmer and colleagues add to this the greater receptivity to such social knowledge in the United States, being aimed at local audiences and appealing to a "populist tradition" (Bulmer et. al. 1991:39). It is clear that between Booth and the outbreak of World War II, the balance of social survey work both in terms of volume and quality swung heavily westwards.

## Coming of age: World War II

The experience of total war took advances in public opinion research that arose through the rise of mass markets and expansion in mass communication, and brought it into a policy setting (Osborne & Rose 1999). In both Britain and the United States, World War II gave survey research its "real impetus" (Morton-Williams 1993:1); however this worked out slightly differently in each country in ways that would have a significant impact in the post-war era.

In Britain, surveys of morale were important as the civilian population was under direct attack (Marsh 1982). At the onset of war, a new Home Intelligence Division was set up within the Ministry of Information; however it came under public attack in the media as interviewers were accused of being 'snoopers' (Marsh 1982; Whitehead 1985; Moss 1991). After a change in leadership and some restructuring in response to this crisis, the Wartime Social Survey emerged in 1941 under the leadership of Louis Moss and with a varied staff including market researchers, a former researcher on Rowntree's second York study, and two people from Mass Observation (Moss 1991).

By the end of 1944, Moss reports that over one hundred enquiries had been completed, with samples ranging from five hundred to five thousand people. In terms of substantive focus, 28% of these related to the Board of Trade interests in consumer needs and shortages; 25% were focused on food and nutrition; a further 18% related to publicity and information activities (Moss 1991). The intensity of governmental survey work was quite unprecedented in Britain. Further, there was a significant shift in public receptiveness to governmental social investigation: an article in *The Times* newspaper on 25<sup>th</sup> July 1945 asserted, "No single duty imposed on the new Government is more urgent or important than the collection and dissemination of the facts on which public policy must be based" (Moss 1991:13). Within



government, it was eventually agreed that something akin to the Wartime Social Survey had a permanent role in efficient governance (Moss 1991). The survey since Booth had been influential over governmental policy. From World War II onwards, the survey was brought *within* government, as a civil service occupation and a recognised input to the policy process.

In the United States, there was also a need for information on the 'home front' due to the enormous mobilisation of people and resources, as involvement in the war increased and required a considerable degree of "civilian understanding, cooperation and support" (Converse 2009:162). In response to this perceived need, the Federal Government called survey 'entrepreneurs' into governmental service - for example, Cantril was invited to investigate public sentiment towards pro-Allied measures (Converse 2009; Rossi et. al. 1983). Although data collection took a variety of forms, from old fashioned 'spying' to monitoring media sources, the survey was used on an unprecedented scale within the context of federal government for explicit policy purposes, which substantially increased its credibility (Rossi et. al. 1983). As Paul Lazarsfeld has observed, the demand for opinion and attitudinal research during the war offered social researchers "an unprecedented opportunity to contribute their skills and knowledge" (quoted in Converse 2009:186).

The most important product of wartime survey work in the United States was *Studies in Social Psychology in World War II*, published in four volumes in 1949-1950 through reanalysis of the wartime survey work by Stouffer, Hovland, Guttman and Lazarsfeld. Stouffer stands out for his work heading the Army's Information and Education Branch, and is credited with the first two volumes, entitled *The American Soldier*. Beyond its substantive interest, this work is significant as it demonstrates how applied survey work can provide findings of "basic" scientific interest (Converse 2009:217).

In comparing the wartime survey work in the United States and Britain, it is noteworthy that a degree of distinction between more 'factual' investigation in Britain and attitudinal research in the United States continued. There was also a much more substantial involvement of academics in the United States, due to their larger and more flourishing sociological community (Marsh 1982). This impacted on the post-war period in that while *The American Soldier* provided a significant "spur" to American sociology, in Britain wartime data was not only not offered to academics, but was covered by the Official Secrets Act (Marsh 1982:34). Nevertheless, in both contexts there emerged a new central government acceptance of survey work for policy purpose, whether conducted 'in house' or through renewed funding for academic social scientific work.

## Maturity: After the war

Following the Second World War, there was a 'routinisation' of a number of pre-war and wartime research activities, such as political polling and continuous governmental surveys, as well as a growth in information needs for both government agencies and business in response to an increasingly complex society (Osborne & Rose 1999; Rossi et. al. 1983). The post-war period has attracted less critical attention from methodological historians. However, I propose three processes that can be used to capture the changes to social survey work in the past seventy years: institutionalisation, professionalisation and economisation.

## Institutionalisation

In the aftermath of World War II, American social scientists were “demobilised”, “filtered” or “migrated” back from Government service into academia (Abrams 1951:122; Rossi et. al. 1983:7; Converse 2009:240). Although this is conceived in negative terms by Abrams, who viewed this as reinstating the division between social research and social policy, Converse has observed how a handful of key social scientists at this time brought the benefits of “on-the-job training in practical survey problems” into the academy with them (Converse 2009:241). This enabled them to establish “primary organisations” that brought together social research practice with academic social science, in the form of The Bureau of Applied Social Research (‘the Bureau’), the National Opinion Research Centre (NORC) and the Survey Research Centre (SRC), “foreign bodies” which were “grafted” on to the Universities of Columbia, Chicago and Michigan, respectively (Converse 2009:239; Bulmer 1985).

The importance of these organisations should not be underestimated, as they provided the institutional context for career academics with social research expertise to achieve “transfusion effects” in a “triangular set of relations between academic social scientists, survey practitioners and policy makers” (McKinnell et. al. 1987:260). We should not assume that these organisations were initially easily absorbed (Converse 2009:244); however, they enabled survey researchers by the 1950s to achieve “*consolidation* as legitimate research organisations in social science and ... *diffusion* of survey methods to the traditional disciplines” (Converse 2009:385, italics original). The NORC and SRC continue to dominate academic survey research in the United States today (Wright and Marsden 2010). This growth was sustained through the continued teaching of survey research “as a trade” (Converse 2009:398), to the extent that Converse (2009) has described it as a discipline in itself. These centres provided a new platform for methodological research and development through three essential ingredients: an academic approach, practical experience in survey work, and research opportunity (Hoinville 1985; Crothers & Platt 2010). Federal government support for social survey work, channelled into academic institutions through a peer review process, increased in the post-war period, particularly in the 1960s, when the federal government increased funding to “basic” social science as well as instigating surveys to provide information relating to social programmes (Crothers & Platt 2010; Converse 2009; Rossi et. al. 1983). As early as 1948 the sample survey was so established that the failure of political polls to predict the winner of the presidential election was viewed as a *scientific* problem, stimulating a strengthening of sampling procedures rather than any more general doubt over methodological validity (Osborne & Rose 1999; Rossi et. al. 1983).

Following the Second World War, survey research was ‘revitalised’ in Britain compared to the preceding years, as a tool for social and economic development (Abrams 1951). There was, however, a fragmentation in the relations between survey researchers, policy makers and social scientists: namely, few social scientists were engaged with the other actors. The legacy of the War, in Britain, was the Government Social Survey, which existed almost entirely separately to academic social science (McKinnell et. al. 1987; Bulmer 1985). Therefore, while governments in both Britain and the United States continued to fund large-scale, descriptive surveys, the engagement of social scientists facilitated a greater willingness for social scientific perspectives to be incorporated into analytic designs in the United States compared to Britain, where ‘in-house’ survey research remained rooted within the fact-finding tradition (Marsh 1982; McKinnell et. al. 1987).

The Government Social Survey – later to become the Office of Population, Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) in 1970 and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in 1996 - can be seen as the mode by which survey research was institutionalised in British government and policy-making. It evidences a “partnership between the state and the social researcher” which is still a hallmark of survey research in Britain (Marsh 1982:16). A number of continuous surveys were instigated, notably including the Family Expenditure Survey (1950s), the International Passenger Survey (1960s) and the General Household Survey (1970s), as well as numerous ad hoc surveys on a range of matters including foundation garments (1941), public knowledge of the Colonies (1951), aircraft noise and annoyance around London (1961), women and drinking (1981) and smoking among school-age children (1991) (Whitehead 1985; ONS 2011). The key figures in methodological development of large-scale surveys such as Mark Abrams, Henry Durant and Louis Moss were students at LSE in the 1930s, but had no other formal academic affiliations. There were no equivalents to Ogbury, Lazarsfeld or Stouffer, who combined “sociological imagination with considerable statistical or mathematical competence” (Bulmer 1985:28). Nevertheless, the Government Social Survey did provide a platform in Britain for substantial methodological research, particularly through working papers, albeit with limited diffusion as a result of their restricted circulation (Hoinville 1985).

Although even as early as 1950 extra-academic empirical social enquiry was reasonably healthy, academic sociology was very slow to develop (Bulmer 1985), and even slower to form connections with empirical social research. Bulmer attributes this significantly to the failure of ancient universities, particularly Cambridge, to accept sociology into the “academic Pantheon” (1985:25). Philip Abrams, who was key in that he achieved controversial approval for the first Social and Political Sciences (SPS) Tripos at Cambridge in 1969, emphasises the importance of an academic sociology separate to governmental or any other authority base. He suggested that it needs “an institutional space of its own from which its special scientific task can be pursued ... the pursuit of argumentative knowledge, the refusal of authoritative knowledge” (quoted in Bulmer 1985:x). Even at the time of writing in the mid-1980s, Bulmer contends that Cambridge was not fully “reconciled” to the inclusion of sociology (Bulmer 1985:27), and into the twenty-first century there persisted a prejudice passed down among generations of undergraduates concerning the legitimacy of SPS, which was viewed as an ‘easy way in’.

The acceptance of the social survey within sociology is significant as even in the 1980s there continued to be a reticence among sociologists to accept the social survey as a legitimate methodology, a debate that has its origins in the theoretical bent of the first Chairs in Sociology discussed above. Whether this was caused by scorn for the amateur tradition from which survey research originated (Reid 1987; Bulmer 1985) or a rejection of the excessive positivism of survey research (Reid 1987; Marsh 1982), it is clear that late into the twentieth century much of the best survey research in Britain was outside of the university: either in government, or through Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR – later to become NatGen), which was the only survey agency to resemble those of the United States (Hoinville 1985).

### Professionalisation

Another key transition for survey research focuses on the people involved, rather than the institutional contexts that they had access to. During the fifty years following World War II survey research underwent a shift from amateur to professional status (Morton-Williams 1991), although it is arguable that this transition happened earlier and more quickly in the United States, perhaps in the 1930s (Platt 2002; Platt 2014). The significance of

professionalisation is that survey research became something that could not be conducted by just 'anyone'. This process can be conceived from the viewpoint of the three main actors in the conduct of any survey: the investigator, the interviewer and the respondent. Since the professional context of the investigator is within the institutions discussed above, and so follows their development, I will focus here on the professionalisation of the interviewer and respondent.

The in-the-home interview with a sample of the general population has become the paradigmatic form for the social survey, such that it is difficult to imagine this was anything other than inevitable (Morton-Williams 1991; Bulmer et. al. 1991). Until at least the 1970s it is reasonable to suggest that survey interviewers were a non-professional group, despite research on the role of interviewers by the NORC in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and in Britain by Belson in the 1960s (Morton-Williams 1991). Nevertheless, the majority of survey interviewers were married women seeking part-time employment (Rossi et. al. 1983), lacking in professional status such that Morton-Williams can describe interviewers as "the Cinderella of the survey industry ... undertrained, undersupervised, underpaid and undervalued" (1991:3). This is despite the identification by Bowley decades earlier in his contribution to Llewellyn's *New Survey of London Life and Labour* (1930-1935) that differential non-response between geographical areas can be associated with interviewer skill (Platt 2014).

The professionalisation of interviewers advanced significantly in the 1970s under Jean Atkinson's leadership of the Government Social Survey fieldwork department. She insisted on rigorous training of interviewers, and wrote the classic guide to interviewing practice, *Handbook for Interviewers* (1971) (Marsh 1982). In the Survey Methods Centre at SCPR in the 1980s, Jean Morton-Williams undertook systematic investigation of the interchanges that take place to negotiate access to respondents' homes. These dialogues not only determine response rate but also, through their summary of the subject matter, create a mindset that will impact on respondents' answers (Morton-Williams 1991). The main thrust of this 'professionalisation' has been more rigorous training with a view to improving consistency between interviewers' approaches. Additionally, the introduction of computer technology has been seen to increase the professionalism (ibid.).

There has been some controversy over the role of the interviewer in survey research. Some emphasise standardising the interview to give a uniform stimulus to respondents, while others encourage a more active role in interpreting the research intentions (Platt 2002). There has been a decline in the role of "interviewer-as-observer" (Converse 2009:409), and there is now a greater segregation between the investigator and the interviewer, who rely on the intermediary field management role (Morton-Williams 1991). This stands in stark contrast to the team approach of Booth. The professionalisation of the interviewer has certainly transformed the role into the purview of specialists; however interviewers have been transformed into technicians. The focus of training and the introduction of technology seems to be predominantly to control the interviewer's input into formalised practices, such that the individual characteristics and interpersonal skills of the interviewer are minimised, contained or excluded, for fear of error being introduced into the data. This has served to heighten a barrier between data collection and data analysis that prevents the interviewer from having a significant substantive input and distances the investigator from the object of their research. Although in some senses the role of the interviewer is 'professional', in others it is very much diminished.

It is also meaningful to talk of the 'professionalisation' of the survey respondent, if only in metaphorical terms. The shift over time in the position of those who are researched from 'natives' to 'research subjects' to 'research participants' indicates a concern with the power relationship between the researcher and the researched (Crothers and Platt 2010:45). Not only are members of the general population trusted to speak for themselves, as we see in the transition from Booth to Rowntree, but the autonomy of respondents is acknowledged, particularly due to their capacity to refuse. With the 'routinisation' of social research (Savage 2010), or 'researchification' (Crothers & Platt 2010), of late modern society, response rates have fallen in a way that has jeopardised the hegemony of survey methods. However, 'researchified' research respondents have a clear understanding of what is expected of them. The survey interview is a well-understood social form that does not need a great deal of explanation (Savage 2010). It is a routine and formulaic interaction that involves a transfer of information about the respondent to the interview schedule with as little interference from either respondent or interviewer as possible. The majority of the population, at least in Britain and the United States, are, without formal training, well-versed in the protocols of survey participation and fulfil what is expected of them.

### Economisation

Briefly, a third process that has been influential in the history of the social survey has been economisation. It has been noted that survey research is likely to attract criticism from other areas of social science due to the high costs that are associated with it (Converse 2009). During the 1970s survey costs began to soar. A diminishing pool of people willing to take on skilled yet low-paid part-time work and more generally the professionalisation of interviewers meant a rise in wages. At the same time, fewer people were found to be available at home during daylight hours, so response rates plummeted and the number of attempts required rose (Rossi et. al. 1983). Many methodological innovations in the last forty years have been driven by the need to reduce, or at least stabilise, relentlessly rising costs, while maintaining response rates (Wright & Marsden 2010; Converse 2009).

There has been a return to interest in the potential of postal survey methods, which was largely dismissed by Beatrice Webb in the early twentieth century, as well as marginalised after the failure of the *Literary Digest* poll in the United States. The growth in household telephone connection made this a legitimate sampling option from a coverage perspective, particularly following the advent of Random Digit Dialling (RDD), which made probability sampling possible. Telephone interviewing can reduce survey costs by about 50%, although the increasing number of mobile phone only households, especially among under 30s, is jeopardising this approach, particularly as response rates are significantly lower and costs higher for mobile phones compared to landlines (Converse 2009). Computer technology made possible the introduction of Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) and Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI), which can reduce error on the part of the interviewer as well as picking up on inconsistent responses. This not only improves data quality, it also reduces the time and costs associated with data cleaning (Rossi et. al. 1983; Converse 2009).

As an industry, survey research was estimated in 1983 to be worth in the region of \$2.5 - \$5 billion (Rossi et. al. 1983). In the following twenty-five years, the number of academic/not-for-profit survey organisations in the United States almost doubled (Converse 2009), in addition to the existence of substantial private research firms and in excess of 7000 market research firms (Wright & Marsden 2010). While survey research has been forced to streamline

in order to remain a competitive option, this is not only within the context of social science methodologies: commercial interests also play a substantial role.

The economic dynamics of survey research are not of purely practical concern: there is an “enduring tension” between social scientists, wishing to seek “Truth”, and the people who pay for the work (Converse 2009:411). Survey research continues to be reliant on insecure subsidies from foundations or governments to make ‘basic’ science possible, as applied work is more marketable. The drive to economise permeates not only methodological directions of travel, but also the substantive range of options accessible to survey research.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have reviewed literature examining the history of the social survey method with a particular emphasis on its relationship to academic social science and with reference to the British and American contexts. Since this field seems to have lost its impetus in the last twenty years, I have also provided a framework for examining developments from World War II to the present, based on the processes of institutionalisation, professionalisation and economisation, in order to bring this history up to date. These analytical categories assist us to consider the two remaining critical questions that this paper seeks to address: firstly, why did the history of social surveys rise and subside as a field of interest in the 1980s and early 1990s; and secondly, what does this kind of methodological history have to offer empirical social science today?

The past commonly arouses interest at significant junctures in life: consider, for example, how important reminiscence on an individual’s history is in the context of a wedding speech or at their funeral. Historical reflection is a feature of perceived transitional moments, crises or end points in that history. An examination of the history that is recorded such as this one can be used to deduce the nature of that trigger.

Based on the evidence presented, it would be possible to argue that by the early 1980s the history of the survey method had reached a conclusion in relation to the development of the method – whether that ‘end’ is considered to be its institutionalisation in academia, the strong connections of the survey method to social policy, or in a methodological sense that defining innovations have now taken place and it has entered into a new phase of ‘routine maintenance’ (Wiles et. al. 2010), exemplified by the establishment of survey research as an independent discipline (Converse 2009). This directional narrative bears a closer relationship to the situation in the United States than in Britain. Alternatively, it could be suggested that the history arose in the early 1980s in reaction to a crisis point in continued or renewed resistance to the social survey method within academic sociology (Marsh 1982; Bulmer 1985; Reid 1987), particularly in Britain. However, I suggest that it is more productive to frame the history in terms of transitions rather than endings or crises. While it might be argued that the processes of institutionalisation and professionalisation had made substantial progress towards completion by this juncture, a new transition was emerging.

In both the United States and Britain there is evidence of a push towards more theoretically-informed survey research. In Britain, this is discussed in terms of a coming together of social theory and empirical social science in order to go beyond ‘fact-finding’ in pursuit of ‘argumentative knowledge’ (Bulmer 1985; Marsh 1982; Kent 1981), while in the United States



there is a concern around the continued necessity of 'basic' social science that underpins the more fundable applied work (Converse 2009; Rossi et. al. 1983). The survey historians of the 1980s suggest that a transition was required in order to achieve continued improvement in the quality of survey research, shifting attention from technical advancements, towards greater integration of theoretical and empirical social science. Greater 'accuracy' could no longer be the only concern – even if it was achieved by professional practitioners in the context of facilitative institutional infrastructure and at a competitive cost. Social survey research also needed to aspire to greater *meaning* if it was to continue to function as a primary means of explanation in complex societies.

This connects to the ongoing purpose of methodological history within social science. For empirical researchers who aspire to self-reflexive work, it is necessary to account for the biography of one's stand point as well as current social positioning. Just as historical approaches are capable of enlightening what is 'thinkable' or 'knowable' in theoretical terms at different points in time, methodological history can enlighten how different kinds of evidence come to be considered valid or invalid in a way that enables critical reflection on contemporary practice. Some examples from this historical review will illustrate this point.

Firstly, through considering the history of survey methodology in relation to the academic discipline of sociology in Britain in contrast to the United States, we have observed how an early separation between abstract and philosophical social theorising and empirical 'fact-finding' both delayed the consolidation of sociology as a discipline and restricted the explanatory capacity of survey research for half a century. An awareness of methodological history has the capacity to ensure that disciplinary predispositions that could morph into methodological prejudices are made visible and can be challenged.

Secondly, a historical approach has enabled us to assess claims to methodological innovation in the emergence of the social survey through identification of continuity with and divergence from patterns in previous periods or in different geographical settings. Given the proliferation of methodological innovation claims in empirical research (Wiles et. al. 2010), historical contextualisation enables us to validate these claims. It also provides the opportunity for greater methodological creativity through building on approaches that were attempted, successfully or not, in a different time and space, rather than limiting the scope of methodological imagination to approaches adopted in the recent past. It would be interesting, for example, to consider in greater depth the uses of administrative data by Booth and his predecessors to inform current expansions in the use of administrative data and opportunities for linking survey data.

Thirdly, the changing relationship between the social investigator and the object of her research has been scrutinised. For example, by contrasting the approaches of Booth and Rowntree, interesting questions are raised around the role of direct interviewing in ensuring that respondents can speak for themselves, whether this is sufficient and whether other ways of enabling populations to inform analysis may also be legitimate. The increasingly technical and regulated role of the interviewer and the division between field workers and investigators has revealed a pattern of distancing between the survey investigator and the object of research that is worthy of reflection, while the routinisation of the survey interview formula for respondents presents interesting opportunities to consider how deliberate disruption of this formula could be used as an experimental technique.

Finally, through considering how the relationships between academic social scientists, survey researchers and policy makers have changed in light of prevailing cultural norms and transformative social processes and events (such as industrialisation and World War II), empirical social scientists may approach a more comparative understanding of their own relationships within and outside of their institutional contexts. This may prove productive in helping researchers to navigate the current impact-driven institutional culture effectively.

Despite being limited by its broad scope and reliance on secondary literature, this paper begins to illustrate the productivity of methodological history for enlightening current practice and pointing to future directions for methodological exploration. This protects us from assuming that methods which have been attempted in the past can be dismissed as 'outdated' without consideration of the idiosyncrasies of the social-cultural context and purpose to which they were applied. It also enables us to make a more mature evaluation of what constitutes 'progress' methodologically. I have pointed to the need for a revival in methodological history as a lasting aspect of social scientific research, and there are a number of immediate avenues that this paper identifies. Specifically, and in addition to the four areas identified above, the question remains as to whether the need has been met for greater consistency in the integration of social theory to produce survey research of explanatory value that I propose unifies the surge of survey history on which this review draws.



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