

**DD206\_1**

**Social science and participation**

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## Introduction

This course explores how social science helps to inform and shape public debates and policy-making processes. It introduces the idea that the descriptions (measurements, dates and representations) and understandings (concepts, explanations, theories and interpretations) developed by social scientists contribute to actually making the social worlds we live in. In other words, social science helps to make visible (or describe) social phenomena, and make sense of (or understand) social processes. In doing so, it makes a difference to the social worlds it investigates (it helps to enact them).

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 2 study in [Social sciences](http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/find/social-sciences)

## Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

* identify the ways in which social scientific descriptions and understandings are related to the enactment of social worlds
* understand the enactment of social science in terms of informing public debates and shaping the social worlds it investigates
* identify the ways in which social science investigates participation as a topic and the uses to which social science research on participation is put
* understand how social scientific ideas about participation in social worlds have impacted on public debates and policies about poverty
* provide examples of how ordinary people are themselves involved in participating in social science.

## What is participation?

Start of Figure



Figure 1

End of Figure

To explore how social science helps to make a difference to social life – how it helps to enact social worlds – this course focuses on participation. Participation refers to all the ways that people engage in social worlds with others including taking part in social life, sharing in a common culture and being involved in civic activities. Social scientific investigations of all sorts of topics – such as poverty, social exclusion, political representation and everyday life – often revolve around the value ascribed to participation by experts and ordinary people alike.

Participation as a topic attracts a great deal of attention from social scientists. The political scientist Patrick Chabal (2009) uses the word ‘partaking’ to capture the dual sense in which participation is important in social science:

* the idea of taking part in activities with others
* the idea of making use of shared resources.

You will see that both of these dimensions of participation are important in social scientific accounts of participation.

Some participation involves deliberate decisions to act together with others, such as when people march in a demonstration, vote in an election or join a group formed to pursue a shared purpose, such as protecting the environment.

Other activities, such as using public transport or visiting a museum, might at first seem less obviously social but they are still forms of participation. Many people engage in them together, but even when these activities are done individually we all share in their overall costs and benefits, for example by making contributions to keep museums open or paying taxes to subsidise public transport systems.

## Differences in participation

Social scientific research on participation is often concerned with differential patterns of participation – with describing who does and who doesn’t participate, and why, and suggesting appropriate measures to enhance participation in general, or among particular groups.

These differential patterns of participation can be divided into two broad areas:

* differences in the levels and types of participation undertaken by people who are from different backgrounds, who live in different areas or who have different levels of income
* changing patterns of involvement of people in different sorts of participation over time.

In this course you will learn how social scientists seek to describe and understand these related areas of participation. The focus will be on introducing the idea that social scientific investigation helps to enact social worlds. You will see that investigations of participation are always concerned with informing debates about the future of participation and shaping opportunities and initiatives to transform who participates and how.

## Poverty and participation

The following film, ‘Social science, poverty and participation’ looks in some detail at the history of social scientific definitions of poverty. It addresses how social scientific ideas about participation in social worlds have impacted on public debates and policies about poverty, inequality and social exclusion.

You should now watch the film. You will need to spend some time engaging with its themes and issues, and we recommend that you watch it at least twice.

As you watch, consider the questions below:

* How have definitions of poverty, and of how to measure poverty, changed over time?
* According to the film, what have been the key contributions of social scientists to the redefinition of poverty?
* Has social science made any difference to how poverty is understood?

Start of Media Content

Video content is not available in this format.

Social science, poverty and participation

[View transcript - Social science, poverty and participation](" \l "Session1_Transcript1)

End of Media Content

As you continue through this course, you should keep in mind the issues addressed in this film, and in particular the questions it raises about what shapes different people’s participation in social activities.

## Who participates?

In the film ‘Social science, poverty and participation’, you saw that not everyone in society is able to participate equally in all social activities. This is the key insight of social scientists who have worked on defining and measuring poverty. You also saw that social scientists contribute to the process of defining which activities people should be participating in, in order to play a full part in wider social worlds. This is a simple way in which social science enacts participation.

In the following short film, ‘What counts as participation?’, the sociologist Ruth Levitas indicates the role of social scientists in defining what counts as participation. As you watch, listen out for the way she describes political participation.

Start of Media Content

Video content is not available in this format.

What counts as participation?

[View transcript - What counts as participation?](" \l "Session2_Transcript1)

End of Media Content

Levitas defines participation quite broadly. It includes economic, cultural and social activities, as well as political ones. She also defines political participation broadly, not confining it to voting, but suggesting it should be understood as ‘being able to influence the circumstances of one’s own life’.

## Measuring participation

In 2008, a team of social scientists began a five-year research programme called ‘Understanding Society’. This was financed by the main funder of social science in the UK, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The programme of research involves over 100,000 participants from 40,000 households from across the UK. The researchers are collecting information on many aspects of social life through a longitudinal social survey. This involves repeated collections of data from the same people over a long period of time about their preferences, attitudes and values, and about the wider environments of both individuals and the households in which they live.

The goals of the research include:

* measuring and explaining stability and change in people’s living conditions, health and well-being
* understanding changes in individual outcomes and behaviour.

(Understanding Society, 2008)

Start of Figure



Figure 2   Understanding Society website logo

End of Figure

Start of Extract

An important dimension of the Understanding Society project is the description of levels of participation in the UK. The project defines participation as a basic feature of social worlds:

Start of Quote

Society is bound together through the participation of its members, who in turn, share the benefits that flow from participation: social, material and political resources; a sense of identity and belonging; and the reciprocity that makes for citizenship.

(Understanding Society, 2011)

End of Quote

End of Extract

In this definition, participation is central to making social worlds what they are. You might notice an interesting double sense: on the one hand, taking part is what binds social worlds together; on the other hand, participation is also about sharing benefits, about making use of the resources, identities, and reciprocities that flow from participation.

The Understanding Society project is therefore an example of social science that takes participation as an object of investigation. It is also an example of a social science method that depends on the participation of ordinary people.

## Understanding participation

Start of Figure



Figure 3

End of Figure

The Understanding Society project illustrates how social science description, in this case measuring participation, depends on social science understanding – on how participation is defined. The project identifies two broad dimensions:

* activities primarily defined as forms of taking part in, or what the project calls ‘social participation’, including involvement or interest in politics, involvement in local civic activities or volunteering
* activities related to making use of, based on consumption including material consumption and consumption of social and environmental resources.

These different dimensions of participation relate to the ability of people to participate in social worlds, but in different ways. Recalling Levitas’s comments about participation, you might notice that these two dimensions also involve people making a difference to social worlds by joining in shared social activities; these are ways in which people enact their social worlds in new ways.

People can engage in varied forms of informal civic activity and associational life (the project calls this 'neighbouring'), and in formal political processes such as voting or membership of a political party. A person’s material consumption will depend on them having the economic resources to pay for goods and services that are necessary in everyday life, whereas social consumption also depends on the different resources through which people sustain ordinary relationships.

The idea of defining and measuring participation as a ‘multidimensional concept’, combining both social participation and consumption, follows the work of Peter Townsend (1979) and other social scientists whom you saw in the film, ‘Social science, poverty and participation’. They argued that being able to afford a certain level of consumption is a basic condition of being able to participate fully as a member of society.

Watch the following film clip, ‘Poverty and social exclusion’, in which social scientist David Gordon, an expert in poverty research, discusses the concept of social exclusion. Try to focus on how much emphasis he places on consumption-based criteria in describing and evaluating the quality of people’s participation.

Start of Media Content

Video content is not available in this format.

Poverty and social exclusion

[View transcript - Poverty and social exclusion](" \l "Session2_Transcript2)

End of Media Content

Gordon defines participation even more broadly than Levitas. Social exclusion is an important issue for him because it prevents people ‘doing the things they want to do’.

In his definition of social exclusion, Gordon is getting at the idea that what’s at stake in defining poverty is not only that some people have fewer material resources than others, but also that this affects their ability to take part in activities in which they should be able to participate.

## Evaluating participation

Defining participation as including consumption activities, ‘neighbouring’ and measures of more formal participation means that the Understanding Society research is able to capture relationships between participation (in the broad sense used by Levitas) and levels of material deprivation and poverty (of the sort that Gordon touches on). Since both material and social consumption require financial resources, there is likely to be a difference in the levels of overall participation depending on how much income people have available. However, ‘neighbouring’ does not necessarily vary quite so predictably according to measures of socio-economic advantage.

Start of Activity

**Activity 1   Evaluating types of participation**

Allow 5 minutes for this activity

Start of Question

Take a look at the examples of participation listed below. Think about which of these six examples are most important in shaping the overall level or quality of someone’s participation in society. Use the text box to rank each of the examples from 1 to 6, with '1' being the most important in shaping the overall level or quality of someone’s participation in society.

1. Having access to material resources to buy goods and services
2. Being able to afford occasional treats for yourself and your family and friends
3. Living in a clean and healthy environment
4. Being involved in local community groups
5. Trusting government organisations
6. Taking part in politics, e.g. voting in elections

End of Question

*a.  
b.  
c.  
d.  
e.  
f.*

[View discussion - Activity 1   Evaluating types of participation](" \l "Session2_Discussion1)

End of Activity

## Participation in the UK

The Understanding Society project seeks to generate large-scale, representative descriptions of how the different activities that people engage in relate to their well-being, status and position. These can be simple relationships. For example, the researchers might look at whether the activity of families eating meals together is related to higher levels of health and happiness among teenagers. There might also be much broader descriptions of patterns of participation in different parts of the UK, and between different groups of people depending on factors such as age, religion or income.

The findings of the Understanding Society project’s first survey of participation in the UK were published in 2011. Extract 1 provides a summary of some of those findings.

You will notice that each of the findings links a form of participation or consumption (e.g. neighbourhood participation) to a particular group or category of people who responded to the survey questions (e.g. pensioners or Welsh people).

Start of Box

**Extract 1   Who participates most in UK society?**

* People with degree-level education are more likely to score highly on the measures of trust, social expenditure and political interest and they are also more ready to invest in energy-saving measures in support of the environment.
* Social consumption is highest among pensioners.
* Neighbourhood participation is more closely related to age, increasing noticeably among people aged 50 and above.
* Differences in participation relating to ethnicity are small.
* English respondents tend to have the lowest neighbouring scores.
* Welsh respondents average the highest neighbouring scores.
* Respondents from Northern Ireland have the highest scores on trust and the least interest in politics.
* The presence of school-aged children increases the incentive for people to be more involved in their own neighbourhood.

(Source: Understanding Society, 2011, p. 8)

End of Box

You can see that the Understanding Society project produces broad descriptions of different patterns of participation. These findings might prompt all sorts of questions. Why, for example, should people be more inclined to participate in their own neighbourhood if they have school-aged children? Why is social consumption highest among pensioners? Answers to these questions would require further elaboration of the simple ‘facts’ presented in the findings.

Nonetheless, some of these findings do suggest problems that require attention and action. You may have a sense, for example, that the low level of neighbouring in England should be addressed to improve the level of this sort of activity, or that efforts should be made to enhance the capacity of people who do not have degree-level education so that they will participate more in energy-saving measures in support of the environment.

In making differences in participation visible, social science projects such as Understanding Society reveal certain sorts of problems that can become issues of public debate and, in some cases, objects of concerted policy action.

## Taking part and ‘having a voice’

Participation is about taking part in something that either directly or indirectly involves you in wider social networks. Participation is widely considered a good thing in so far as it enables people to exert influence over the processes that shape their worlds. Having a ‘voice’ in processes that matter to you is also important. Not all forms of participation are considered equally significant in this respect. People disagree about the value of different forms of participation and not everyone is equally able to participate in all of the activities that help them express their opinions and exert influence.

Activity 2 looks at what sorts of activities might be considered to count as participation in the sense of giving people a voice, and also at how these activities might be understood to be differentiated in the ways already discussed.

Start of Activity

**Activity 2   Do you do any of these things?**

Allow 10 minutes for this activity

Start of Question

Have a look at the list of activities below. Think about which, if any, you have undertaken in the past year.

Do you think these activities are similar or would you divide them into different groups or categories? Think about whether they might be classified as ‘political’ or ‘civic’ activities.

Note down some of your thoughts in the text box below.

Start of Table

|  |
| --- |
| Written a letter of complaint about public services in your area |
| Helped to run a club |
| Volunteered to help people in need |
| Joined in a campaign to improve your local area |
| Attended a public meeting |
| Signed an online petition |
| Joined a book club |
| Played sport in a team |
| Voted in an election |
| Attended a religious service |
| Signed up to a social media platform, such as Twitter or Facebook |
| Joined a trade union |
| Taken part in a protest or a march |
| Voted in a reality television show |
| Stood for election to a political body, a civic organisation, or a club |
| Served on a committee of an organisation locally or at work |

End of Table

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Activity 2   Do you do any of these things?](" \l "Session3_Discussion1)

End of Activity

The distinction between political and civic participation is not necessarily clear cut. Levels of civic participation might be related to the capacity of people to express a voice in political arenas. Some social scientists have argued that a society in which there is a wide range of non-political social activities is likely to also have a high level of participation in political activities. This idea was most famously proposed by the US political scientist Robert Putnam (1995).

So we can see that there are complex relations between forms of participation in which people express their identities, passions and enthusiasms, and those forms in which they express their political interests and demands.

## Why people get involved

Take another look at the list from Activity 2.

Start of Table

|  |
| --- |
| Written a letter of complaint about public services in your area |
| Helped to run a club |
| Volunteered to help people in need |
| Joined in a campaign to improve your local area |
| Attended a public meeting |
| Signed an online petition |
| Joined a book club |
| Played sport in a team |
| Voted in an election |
| Attended a religious service |
| Signed up to a social media platform, such as Twitter or Facebook |
| Joined a trade union |
| Taken part in a protest or a march |
| Voted in a reality television show |
| Stood for election to a political body, a civic organisation, or a club |
| Served on a committee of an organisation locally or at work |

End of Table

Some of the activities seem more ‘instrumental’ than others. People engage in them in order to express their opinions and in the hope of influencing other people by doing so. Writing a letter, voting, attending a public meeting or going on a protest march might all fall into this category: forms of participation in which people seek to express their ‘voice’.

Start of Activity

**Activity 3   Having a voice**

Allow 5 minutes for this activity

Start of Question

From the list above, identify the activities that you think have expressing one’s opinion or voice (expressive participation) as a primary purpose.

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Activity 3   Having a voice](" \l "Session3_Discussion2)

End of Activity

## New ways of participating?

So far in this course you have seen that participation might be differentiated socially, depending on people’s access to resources such as money or time.

Do you think that the further development of web-based, online forms of communication is likely to transform participation? Do these technologies enable anyone anywhere to become involved, to express an opinion and become part of wider movements to influence events?

For example, the events in Egypt in 2011, which led to the overthrow of the authoritarian President Hosni Mubarak and contributed to the Arab Spring, were widely discussed in terms of a ‘Twitter revolution’. This referred to the idea that social media had been an important medium for circulating dissenting opinions about the regime before and during the dramatic events of January 2011.

Start of Figure



Figure 4

End of Figure

Social media can therefore combine both individual and collective dimensions of participation. Sending a ‘tweet’ might seem like an individual act but in the case of the Arab Spring of 2011, the significance of social media lay in spreading information about when and where demonstrations were going to be held. The defining image of the Arab Spring, the massed congregation of people in public squares, was a reflection of forms of communication that relied on both old-fashioned street posters and new social media to assemble people into collective, shared forms of public participation.

The same relationship between social media, individual networking and collective action was identified in much of the commentary surrounding the urban riots that swept through England in the summer of 2011. It was widely reported that those involved in the riots had been assembled through the use of social media technologies, in particular Blackberry messaging services.

In a different vein, the proliferation of mobile communications since the early 2000s has also given rise to new forms of public performance, such as the ‘flash mob’. A flash mob is a form of spectacle in which a group of like-minded people, coordinated through mobile telecommunications, gathers together in a public place. The group usually perform an act of some satirical, ironic, entertaining style, such as coordinated applause for no reason, or pillow fights.

Different activities, then, can be combined to join people together to express their voices. We can see here how new media technologies can facilitate both quite conventional forms of participation, such as street protest, and wholly new forms, such as the flash mob.

## Participating in social science

You have already seen some of the different activities through which people join in with others to pursue their interests, to make demands on others and to share in the benefits of social life.

In this section, we will look at how social scientists interact with their research participants – those people undertaking everyday activities who are the focus of social science investigation and the source of social science data. These are the people who are counted by social scientists, interviewed, observed, explained and interpreted, and informed and shaped. Social science interacts with people to study what they are doing, how and why, and also what they think about things.

There are various ways in which social science investigation depends on the participation of people in research to generate data and evidence, and to inform understandings. Table 1 summarises some of the forms of participation in social science methodologies that social scientists make use of.

Start of Table

Table 1   Forms of participation in social science methodologies

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Social science method** | **Form of participation** |
| Experiments | Taking part in psychology experiments |
| Surveys | Answering survey questions and completing questionnaires |
| Focus groups | Taking part in discussion groups |
| Qualitative interviews | Answering interview questions |
| Ethnographic observation | Interacting with social scientists, being observed |
| Quantitative measurement | Being counted |

End of Table

Without people participating in these ways, social science would not be possible to begin with.

## Taking part in social science

Table 1 provided a rather schematic way of thinking about the forms of participation by ordinary people in social science. Another way of thinking about this issue is to reflect on what the people involved in the different types of social science research actually have to do.

Quite a lot of social science research involves people letting social scientists into their homes, to undertake interviews for example, or, in the case of ethnographic research, to observe their ordinary routines. Participant observation involves researchers accompanying people during their everyday routines, for example when they are at work, riding on a bus or doing the weekly shop. Taking part in a focus group can involve attending a meeting in a particular place, with the venue chosen by the social scientist.

Social science depends on people’s participation in other ways too. For example, censuses are an important source of social science information, undertaken by national governments. The value of census data depends on the willingness of everybody, in principle, to fill in and return a census form.

Not all social science involves this degree of engagement with social scientists. A great deal of social science involves what are sometimes called ‘unobtrusive methods’ (Lee, 2000). These methods do not involve direct interaction or elicitation between researchers and research participants. Using letters or other documents is one example of an unobtrusive method. The rapid development of digital media in the 21st century has vastly expanded the scope of unobtrusive research methods. Many everyday activities, for example what we buy, where we travel and how much energy we consume, can now be surveyed, collated, aggregated and analysed without any direct engagement between analyst and individuals. These sorts of activities can all now be monitored, and perhaps even predicted, by the vast storage and analytical capacity of digital technology. In the era of what has been called ‘big data’, the conventional approaches of social science to data generation and explanation are being rapidly transformed (Savage and Burrows, 2009).

One of the things that most concerns people about these developments is the idea that information about us can be used for purposes that we have not consented to, and can even be collected without us knowing.

Start of Figure



Figure 5

End of Figure

Start of Activity

**Activity 4   Have you ever taken part in a social science research project?**

Allow 5 minutes for this activity

Start of Question

Take a few moments to think about whether you, or someone you know, have ever participated in a social science project, bearing in mind the different forms of participation listed in Table 1. Note your thoughts below.

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Activity 4   Have you ever taken part in a social science research project?](" \l "Session4_Discussion1)

End of Activity

## Enacting participation

Start of Figure



Figure 6

End of Figure

Social science that is concerned with finding out what people do can make use of both obtrusive and unobtrusive methods. Social science that is concerned with finding out what people think – their own understandings of their situations, or their opinions about an issue – has to engage with people directly. Social science research is therefore dependent on getting people to take part in various activities aimed at eliciting simple yes/no answers all the way through to providing detailed, discursive reflections on people’s activities.

It’s not only social scientists working in universities who engage with people in this way. Opinion polls, for example, depend on people answering questions, usually over the phone. Increasingly, all sorts of organisations make use of online surveys to collect information about people's opinions on certain issues'. Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose (1999) suggest, in fact, that the rise of opinion polling in the twentieth century is an example of social science actively shaping the phenomena it sought to investigate. For them, by applying survey methods, for example to the investigation of political opinion, social scientists can be seen to help expand the opportunity for the differentiated ‘voice’ of ordinary people to be heard in the public realm. At the same time, opinion polling requires people to take a certain stance on issues if they want to be heard.

In a similar vein, it has been suggested that social science contributes to the development of what has been called ‘the interview society’. According to this idea, the proliferation of the interview in popular culture is another aspect of the democratisation of opinion (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997). This refers to the claim that interviews have become central to how we make sense of who we are. It is a practice that shapes the expectation that people can reveal their motivations and authentic self to expert interviewers, whether this is a journalist, a therapist or detective or, indeed, a social science researcher. This argument holds that qualitative social science methodologies have helped to enact social worlds by shaping a new model of what it is to be a person – a model in which the central idea is that we are all potential informants with something meaningful to say about ourselves and the world around us when interviewed.

## Expressing an opinion

In the film ‘Social science, poverty and participation’, an important dimension of the tradition of social science research associated with Townsend was the insistence on defining poverty in relation to accepted norms of what was required to take part as a member in society.

Start of Figure



Figure 7   Peter Townsend

End of Figure

As you watch the following film, ‘Townsend and definitions of poverty’, try to spot the relationships between how poverty is measured (or described), how it is defined (or understood) and the impact of Townsend’s work (or how it helped to enact the social world in new ways).

Start of Media Content

Video content is not available in this format.

Townsend and definitions of poverty

[View transcript - Townsend and definitions of poverty](" \l "Session4_Transcript1)

End of Media Content

Townsend’s definition of relative poverty was radical when he first proposed it, although it has now become more widely accepted. This is how Townsend defined poverty in his 1979 study, Poverty in the United Kingdom: A Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living (1979):

Start of Box

Start of Quote

Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong.

(Townsend, 1979, p. 31)

End of Quote

End of Box

This definition has informed policy making around poverty and social exclusion in a number of national and international contexts. As you saw in the film, it is an example of social science informing and shaping public debate and policy making, or of helping to enact social worlds.

The key point of Townsend’s definition is the emphasis it places on the ‘customary’ and ‘approved’ understandings of diet, amenities and living conditions required to participate. Just what activities this involved, and what resources were required to support participation, were not meant to be arrived at independently by the social scientist, reasoning about these things from a distance. This means that social science research into poverty and social exclusion is not just about investigating the lives of particular groups of poor or excluded people. It is also about developing methods to gauge the views of the population at large about these matters and, specifically, establishing a consensus about what are ‘necessities’ in particular places and times.

## What do people need to participate?

The tradition of research that Townsend helped to develop now informs a great deal of social science investigation into poverty. Broadly speaking, this tradition informs an approach that defines poverty or deprivation in terms of the enforced lack of necessities, where the definition of these necessities is determined by surveying public opinion.

Research using this approach involves two steps. The first step requires asking a broad range of people which things they think of as ‘necessities’, that is, the sort of things everyone should be able to have access to and not do without. The second step is to establish which people do not have access to these necessities.

This approach to investigating participation as a key criterion of poverty and social exclusion depends on people participating in social science practices themselves.

In 2010, the largest ever social science project on poverty and social exclusion started: the Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) project based at the University of Bristol and involving social scientists from several other UK universities.

One part of the PSE project is the ‘Necessities of Life’ survey. You might want to spend a few minutes taking part in this survey yourself by visiting the [PSE website](http://www.poverty.ac.uk/take-part).

Remember that you are being asked for your opinion – there isn’t a ‘right’ answer that you should try to identify.

Try to keep an eye on how the questions are implicitly asking you not just what resources or amenities you think people need, but also about your views on what sorts of activities people should be able to participate in as members of society.

When you have completed the survey, return to this section of the course. The PSE Necessities of Life survey, and the larger tradition of social science research on poverty of which it is one part, illustrate two important dimensions of how social science helps to enact social worlds:

* As you have seen in the ‘Social science, poverty and participation’ film, this approach has played an important role in informing how poverty is understood as a public issue, and how it is addressed as a policy problem. This approach to defining and measuring poverty has influenced the development of official measurements of poverty and social exclusion in the UK, in the European Union and by the United Nations.
* The survey you have just taken part in exemplifies the idea that social science can shape the social worlds it investigates. It is a simple example of a broader process by which social science methodologies, deployed by academics, by governments and by commercial organisations, have contributed to the process in which people are expected to be opinionated.

## Conclusion

This course has introduced the topic of participation in order to develop your appreciation of how social science helps to enact social worlds.

You have seen how social science investigation of participation ranges from work that focuses quite narrowly on forms of political participation, such as voting, to broader understandings of participation, such as belonging to clubs or churches, or just engaging in ordinary routines of family life. You have also seen how social science depends on people being involved in the generation of evidence and data.

The course began by defining enactment as having two aspects: informing public debates and shaping social worlds. You looked at how social science has helped to enact social worlds using the example of social science research on poverty. Poverty is, of course, an issue that is highly contested and controversial, not least in terms of its definition, and so this example of social science research also underscores the degree to which social science descriptions and understandings are always caught up with issues of evaluation.

You have seen that social scientists have played an important part in transforming the meaning of poverty, how it is measured, how it is judged, and what is done about it. By developing understandings of poverty that emphasise participation in social life, social scientists have influenced how poverty is described – how data are collected and interpreted. Fundamentally, in changing how poverty is described and understood, social scientists have had considerable influence in informing public debates about the extent and causes of poverty, and also in shaping policies aimed at alleviating poverty. In short, social science has played an important role in enacting debates and policies about poverty.

The emphasis on people participating in social science has been an important part of the process of social science enactments of poverty – by taking part in survey research that helps to define benchmarks of basic necessities.

Throughout this course, you have seen that the ways in which social science describes social processes – through methodologies such as surveys, for example – and the ways in which social science explains social processes – using concepts and theories – are always related to the ways in which social science informs debates and shapes outcomes (how it helps to enact social worlds).

In this course, you have learnt:

* how and why social scientists investigate participation
* how participation is described and understood by social science in terms of particular evaluations of the importance of certain activities
* that participation is crucial to social science definitions of public issues such as poverty, inequality and social exclusion
* that social science depends on various forms of participation by ordinary people to generate data and evidence and to contribute to the development of explanations and interpretations.

## Take the next step

Start of Figure



End of Figure

If you enjoyed this course, why not explore the subject further with our paid-for short course, Media, politics and society?

[Find out more about Media, politics and society.](http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/short-courses/adxs001?cid=website-7822502337)

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## Further reading

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## Acknowledgements

This free course is an adapted extract from the course DD206 The uses of social science, which is currently out of presentation.

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## Solutions

## Activity 1   Evaluating types of participation

#### Discussion

There is no correct answer to this question.

Nevertheless, you might want to think about why you have ranked some activities as more important than others. Is it because you are more involved in some of these activities than others, or you would like to be?

Asking people what they think is important in defining participation in society has been a key aspect of social science research. So your opinion on these matters is exactly the sort of thing that social scientists are interested in finding out about. In fact, social scientists often expect people to have strongly held opinions on all sorts of matters. The fact that your opinion might differ from someone else’s reminds us that the issues social scientists expect us to have opinions on are inherently contested.

Social science might be seen as helping to enact social worlds by giving people the opportunity to express their opinions. More broadly, it makes differences of opinion on contested issues visible by encouraging the widespread expectation among people that they should have opinions on all sorts of matters and should have the opportunity to express them.

[Back to - Activity 1   Evaluating types of participation](" \l "Session2_Activity1)

## Activity 2   Do you do any of these things?

#### Discussion

Some of these activities are forms of ‘political’ participation in a conventional sense. Voting in an election, signing a petition or joining a union might fall into this category. These activities also exemplify participation as a means of expressing one’s voice, individually or as part of a wider collective organisation.

In contrast, joining a book club, playing sport or attending church are all ways of participating in wider networks, but they are not primarily political. Nevertheless, they can certainly be thought of as ways of participating that are important in people’s lives and enable them to express valued aspects of their identities such as a faith commitment, an enthusiasm for football or a passion for learning. This second set of activities might be thought of as forms of ‘civic participation’, that is, as ways of taking part in the social life of local communities, towns and cities, nations or international networks that extend far beyond the narrow concerns of politics as conventionally defined. You will consider other possible ways of categorising activities in the next section.

[Back to - Activity 2   Do you do any of these things?](" \l "Session3_Activity1)

## Activity 3   Having a voice

#### Discussion

Here are the activities that we thought counted as examples of participating as a means of expressing one’s opinion or voice.

* Writing a letter of complaint about public services in your area
* Joining in a campaign to improve your local area
* Attending a public meeting
* Signing an online petition
* Voting in an election
* Joining a trade union
* Taking part in a protest or a march
* Standing for election to a political body, a civic organisation, or a club

You might not have chosen the same activities as us, but that’s okay. People do not engage in these activities only to express their voice; they might go on a march, join a union or become a member of an organisation for other reasons too – to make friends, show solidarity or maintain relationships. But the important thing to bear in mind throughout this course is the idea that ‘having a voice’ is an important part of ‘being able to influence the circumstances of one’s own life’ (Ruth Levitas’s definition of political participation in the film ‘Social science, poverty and participation’).

[Back to - Activity 3   Having a voice](" \l "Session3_Activity2)

## Activity 4   Have you ever taken part in a social science research project?

#### Discussion

Activities that you might have taken part in and that might have contributed, directly or indirectly, to social science investigation could include a focus group, a health study or a survey questionnaire. If you haven’t taken part in social science in this way, then you might have voted in an election or filled in a census form. If so, then you have also contributed to social science investigation because election results and census data, though not directly generated by academic researchers, are both important sources of social science description.

Finally, you might have a loyalty card with a supermarket or other retailer that rewards you for shopping with particular stores or outlets. If you have, then again you are contributing to the generation of social science data. Loyalty cards are used by retailers to generate detailed descriptions and understandings of the tastes of their customers.

[Back to - Activity 4   Have you ever taken part in a social science research project?](" \l "Session4_Activity1)

# Social science, poverty and participation

## Transcript

NARRATOR

Social scientists have played a major role in measuring, documenting, and defining poverty. And this work has had a significant effect on public debate and policy. A key aspect of this influence has been the emphasis placed on the importance of participation in defining poverty, and the fact that poor people cannot fully participate in society.

JONATHAN BRADSHAW

If poverty means anything, it means separation from society. And you can't just represent separation of society by thinking about food and shelter and clothing, physiological things, because society is more than that. It's relationships, access to services. And participation is a general term for describing the ability to do things that normal people do in a society, and not just to have what normal people have.

NARRATOR

Charles Booth was the first social scientist to look at poverty. He used observers to classify the lives of households living in London in the 1880's. Booth defined the poor as those whose means were insufficient according to the normal standards of life in this country.

JOHN VEIT-WILSON

In Britain in the late nineteenth century, there had been an economic decline. There have been more people coming to the cities. And this was seen as a large social problem by the middle classes, ruling classes. And there was a great interest in knowing what was the scale of the problem.

Charles Booth was interested in the question of how many of this increasing number of poor people were there. This wasn't about causes. Poverty was taken very much for granted as part of the natural order. But how large was the problem?

And so the significance of his using an army of observers and reporters to go around the working class areas of London was to be able to put numbers on, and to begin to grasp some kind of classification of the different depths of poverty which were seen.

JOANNA MACK

I think Booth has a twofold significance. First and most obviously, perhaps, is his impact on the way we see poverty and poverty measurement. But equally significant, I think is his impact on the social sciences, more generally. And what Booth saw was the importance of actually going out on the fields, and actually finding out things on the ground, of measuring them, of recording the data, of, in his case, mapping the data. So you actually began to see patterns and causes of poverty.

NARRATOR

Booth colour- coded his maps of London, marking the poor areas in blue, and those he called vicious, semi-criminal, in black.

JOANNA MACK

Here we have a map Stepney in East London. You can certainly see on this map that whole streets get that classified as vicious semi-criminal. There's no wealthy at all in Stepney. If you chanced to look at some like the Kensington or Westminster maps, you'd certainly find the wealthy. But here you have large chunks, which are poor, very poor. And you have some which are middle mixed, as well, nearby. But I think it's the significance of the kind of concentrations of the poor that began to make people think about policies and interventions that could be done to change the situation.

NARRATOR

The other major social science study of poverty in the Victorian era was by Seebohm Rowntree in 1899. He took a more systematic approach than Booth, and looked at people in York who were living below what he considered to be a poverty threshold. Rowntree defined poverty as an income insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency.

JONATHAN BRADSHAW

This is Rowntree's first study of poverty in York, published in 1901. And it's remarkable work. He interviewed every working class household in York, 33,000 households.

We can see on this map where the poor were concentrated. And he was very preoccupied with the relationship between poverty and drinking. And so he has marked on the map with red dots all the pubs in York.

Charles Booth, in his studies of poverty in London, had attempted to count the poor, using one of the rough methods. But Rowntree established a new poverty threshold. And he was the first person to really count the numbers of people who fell below that threshold and to identify what kinds of people they were, and to establish that the causes of poverty were structural. They were principally low wages at the time. This led to a complete transformation in thinking about the causes of poverty. No longer could be seen as the fault of the poor. But it was due to problems in society.

And this led to research, perhaps for the first time, having a profound influence on policy. And Rowntree's findings were taken up by the liberal government and led to the initial legislation that established our welfare state in Britain.

NARRATOR

After the Second World War, social scientists began to look more closely at defining poverty. In the 1960s, Peter Townsend conducted the first national survey of poverty in the UK. His view was that poverty was relative, not absolute.

JOHN VEIT-WILSON

The idea was to find out what were the points at which deprivation pressures started. So that one could get an idea of what people expected and what they suffered deprivation from. This was qualitative. I tell you that the median length of my interviews was 3 and 3/4 hours. I conducted often over more than one day. You can understand we were really very intensively asking about these things. This was not tick box stuff.

JONATHAN BRADSHAW

Well in the immediate post-war period, I think everybody thought with the establishment of the welfare state, that poverty had more or less been abolished. And using the definitions that Seebohm Rowntree had used, which were based on the nutritional adequacy of the diet the people could afford. And they had more or less, poverty had more or less been abolished.

But Townsend's contribution was to dismiss the methods of Rowntree and to argue that you could only understand poverty as relative. He was a sociologist. And he argued that poverty should be understood as not just the lack of basic necessities for survival, but the inability to participate in society, and to enjoy the normal things that people at the time we're enjoying.

RUTH LEVITAS

Definitions of poverty matter because they embed in them a notion of what poverty entails. If you think poverty is just a lack of income, you do not get at what the fabric of that experience actually is. You do not get at what the impact of that is on people's lives. Concepts and theories of poverty are about deepening our understanding. Both of the experience and of the causal processes that produce it.

NARRATOR

Townsend's research was controversial, as it was published in 1979, when a new conservative government had just taken office.

DAVID GORDON

You have to understand at the time, the government was trying to eradicate poverty by removing the word from the dictionaries. That they denied that poverty existed. That poverty was something that occurred in Africa or had occurred in Victorian Britain, but didn't exist in modern day Britain.

NARRATOR

Although Townsend's findings were rejected by the government of the day, his research had long lasting effects.

JOANNA MACK

Townsend was an extremely influential and seminal figure in poverty research. He did a number of things. But I think the most important ones were to do with these widening of the definitions of poverty. To focus more widely on things like participation and being part of the society in which you live in. And to do that, he developed a whole range of indicators of deprivation. These would include not just things like food and clothing, but also leisure activities and social activities.

JONATHAN BRADSHAW

Peter Townsend's work and the introduction of the relative concept of poverty transformed the way we talked about poverty in the post-war period, introduced new ways of measuring it, and led to a whole raft of new policies for the civilian disabled, for families with children, unemployment, who had not been part of the post war beverage plan.

SPEAKER 1

This series is about the poor in Britain today.

NARRATOR

In the 1980s, television entered the debate. Breadline Britain, a landmark TV series worked with social scientists to introduce a new element to the study of poverty. The participation of the general public in defining what poverty is.

JOANNA MACK

When you're looking at poverty, you're making a value judgement about what's necessary to live in the society which you're doing. Now to make that value judgement , you want to try to lift it away from yourself. What I think of it doesn't matter one way or another. What matters much more is what other people think.

And we felt like looking at the public's view was actually a very good way of doing it because what we're essentially looking at is what we, as a collective, as a society as a whole, think is necessary. And that is defined socially, and is defined by the public.

NARRATOR

The programme makers drop a long list of items, and ask the public which they consider to be necessities.

SPEAKER 2

Heating is top of the list of necessities. Yet around 3 million people in Britain today cannot afford this obvious necessity.

JOANNA MACK

When we first asked this question about what items people think are necessary for living in Britain today, no one had ever asked it before. So we didn't actually know whether there was going to be a consensus.

What we actually found was that people's views about this were very, very similar across social class, across age, across genders, across ethnicity. Whatever dimension we took, people had a very consistent view about what was necessary for living in that society. Now that was extremely important to us because it actually meant that we could begin to move towards a minimum standard, which was perceived by people as a whole, not just by one particular group. But by society, generally.

JONATHAN BRADSHAW

Poverty has always been a highly contested concept, with people taking different positions on the basis of their ideological position. Indeed they're judgments about human nature. And ...the benefit one gets from involving the public in making these judgments, rather than academics, just drawing lines and income distribution, or drawing a list of items, is that it gives a democratic legitimacy to the thresholds that you're using. And therefore, really more bite in discussions about policy.

The Breadline Britain survey was really responsible for introducing deprivation measures into the way government measures poverty now. And also they used extensively in the European Union surveys on poverty. So they were very influential in developing deprivation as a way of measuring poverty.

JOANNA MACK

I think what's been really interesting about this work is the way that it has been has been taken up internationally. Because what we now get an idea of is what people see as to be necessities in a wide range of countries, not just rich western countries. But also, for example, there's been worked on in South Africa, which is how South Africans- what they feel to be necessities for living today in South Africa. It comes up, of course, with a different sort of list. I mean, for example, a wheelbarrow is seen as a necessity in South Africa. You can understand why. Because you need it to cart-- to bring your water around.

But a lot of it is very similar. it touches the same sort of bases. It touches the bases of housing, of food, of social participation, of some kind of leisure activities. Equally what's interesting if you go to places like South Africa is that their standard set are a above those in the majority of people in the population. So this kind of approach enables you to look at very diverse types of countries.

NARRATOR

In the '80s and '90s, researchers documented the growing inequality that was taking place in the UK.

JONATHAN BRADSHAW

I think that Tony Blair's commitment to eradicate child poverty in 1999 was driven by the research that had been done in the 1990s, showing that family policy was still a serious problem, and that Britain, during the Thatcher period, had moved down the international elite table. By 1997, we had the highest child poverty rates in the European Union. And that was really quite a shock to New Labour when they came to Parliament. And the Blair strategy for eradicating child poverty was really driven by these research findings.

NARRATOR

In the late 1990s, researchers at Bristol, working on the poverty and social exclusion project, were influential in drawing attention, not just to poverty, but to the broader issue of social exclusion. They looked closely at participation.

RUTH LEVITAS

In relation to participation, we're trying to look at economic, social, cultural and political participation. And of course, we asked people questions about whether they voted in the last general election. But actually, that's an incredibly thin measure of political participation.

So we have got some questions which attempt to push a little further at people's sense of being able to influence the circumstances of their own lives. I would say I think there's a very tricky issue here because if you ask people directly about political participation, a lot of people will immediately switch off and say they're not interested in politics. And they may, nevertheless, be involved in forms of community participation and organisation, which might be deemed to have at least a political aspect to them. So I think the question of establishing what constitutes political participation is actually very, very tricky indeed.

NARRATOR

The Labour government of 1997 saw social exclusion as a key issue and set up a unit specifically to address this.

DAVID GORDON

Social exclusion is sometimes difficult to define. It means different things to different people. The way we have tended to use it in the poetry and social exclusion survey is that there are people who are unable to participate in the normal activities that most people take for granted, and also have the normal possessions that most people take for granted. They are not able to do things that you or I would just assume everyone should do. Go have some leisure activity, help their children to have friends and have parties and give presents on Christmas or other occasions, visit friends and family in hospital.

Now poverty often stops people doing that because they have a lack of money. Social exclusion is about people who not only can't do that because they have a lack of money, but can't do that for other reasons. They're excluded because they may be disabled or discriminated against or because there's no transport to get them to social activities.

So social exclusion as-- we see it as a wider concept that poverty. It's about why people are prevented from doing the things they want to do, not just because of lack of money, but because of all the other constraints that are often placed upon them.

NARRATOR

Researchers have also sought the participation of people from poor communities in documenting and defining poverty. The charity, Children Northeast, recently distributed hundreds of disposable cameras to children and young people in and around Newcastle.

SARA BRYSON

We asked children and young people to document and record what their life was like where they lived. We felt that there's a lot of academic research about poverty. And we've got a lot of facts and figures. But what that doesn't tell us is how that impacts on a child's life or what's most important to them. And we just wanted to get a better understanding of that. But also bring children's voices to the debate, the regional debate about poverty, because so far, they've been completely absent.

The biggest single theme that emerged was housing. There were more photographs of housing taken than anything else. And what the children told us was that they were concerned around overcrowding. There were a lot of pictures of shed bedrooms. They were concerned about damp. They were concerned about things being in a state of disrepair that took a long time to be fixed.

They were embarrassed to bring friends home after school. So they tended not to. They were embarrassed about where they lived. And they didn't want people to know where they lived because they felt like they would be judged if people could see the conditions that they were living in.

NARRATOR

The research was powerful, not just in what the photos captured, but also in what was missed out. There was little evidence that children were participating in activities which cost money, such as school trips, going to the swimming pool, or the cinema.

SARA BRYSON

We found that children were really excluded from opportunities, in some of the most basic opportunities. So from the 11,000 images that we had returned, one image of a cinema was returned. And that was the only thing that was photographed that had an entrance fee.

JOANNA MACK

All of the research that's been done on poverty which has looked at people's participations found that poor people can't participate fully in society in which they're living. The supplies to both adults, to pensioners, to children, across the spectrum, one of the key things that they can't do is become a full and active members of their society.

NARRATOR

Social scientists, since the days of Booth and Rowntree, have played an important role in measuring and documenting poverty. And over time, this has shifted people's understandings of poverty. The aim has been to inform and shape public debate and policy making so that the lives of the poorest members of society might be improved.

DAVID GORDON

Every 10 years, or so, since Peter Townsend's original survey in the late 1960s, we have tried to do independent surveys of the government to advance the state of the art in poverty measurement, and to provide high quality scientific evidence to policy makers that they can use to better target and have more effective and efficient anti-poverty policies.

JOANNA MACK

I think that approach we've taken to identify a consensual message of defining poverty has had quite a substantial impact on both the policy debate and indeed on policies that have been implemented.

When I first worked in this area back now in 1983, the result of dispute about what was poverty, in particular it was a strong body of opinion that felt that poverty could be defined absolutely. But it was to do with starvation. It was to do with health.

What I think we found since then is the debate has begun to shift so that this kind of more relative view of poverty, the one that accepts that participation is an important part of poverty that it is set according the standards of the society you're living in, has become to be much more widely accepted.

[Back to - Social science, poverty and participation](" \l "Session1_MediaContent1)

# What counts as participation?

## Transcript

RUTH LEVITAS

In relation to participation, we are trying to look at economic, social, cultural, and political participation. And of course, we ask people questions about whether they voted in the last general election, but actually, that's an incredibly thin measure of political participation. So we have got some questions which attempt to push a little further at people's sense of being able to influence the circumstances of their own lives.

I would say I think there's a very tricky issue here, because if you ask people directly about political participation, a lot of people will immediately switch off and say they're not interested in politics, and they may nevertheless be involved in forms of community participation and organisation which might be deemed to have at least a political aspect to them. So I think the question of establishing what constitutes political participation is actually very, very tricky indeed.

[Back to - What counts as participation?](" \l "Session2_MediaContent1)

# Poverty and social exclusion

## Transcript

DAVID GORDON

Social exclusion is sometimes difficult to define. It means different things to different people. The way we have tended to use it in the poverty and social exclusion survey is that there are people who are unable to participate in the normal activities that most people take for granted and also have the normal possessions than most people take for granted. They're not able to do things that you or I would just assume everyone should do – go have some leisure activity, help their children to have friends and have parties, and give presents at Christmas or other occasions, visit friends and family in hospital.

[Back to - Poverty and social exclusion](" \l "Session2_MediaContent2)

# Townsend and definitions of poverty

## Transcript

[MUSIC PLAYING]

NARRATOR

After the Second World War, social scientists began to look more closely at defining poverty. In the 1960s, Peter Townsend conducted the first national survey of poverty in the UK. His view was that poverty was relative, not absolute.

JOHN VEIT-WILSON

The idea was to find out what were the points at which deprivation pressures started so that one could get an idea of what people expected and what they suffered deprivation from. This was qualitative. I tell you that the median length of my interviews was three and 3/4 hours, and conducted often over more than one day. You can understand we were really, very intensively asking about these things. This was not tick box stuff.

Jonathan Bradshaw

Well, in the immediate post-war period, I think everybody thought with the establishment of the welfare state that poverty had more or less been abolished. And using the definitions that Seebohm Rowntree had used, which were based on the nutritional adequacy of the diet that people could afford, and poverty had more or less been abolished.

But Townsend's contribution was to dismiss the methods of Rowntree and to argue that you could only understand poverty as relative. He was a sociologist, and he argued that poverty should be understood as not just the lack of basic necessities for survival, but the inability to participate in society and to enjoy the normal things that people at the time we're enjoying.

RUTH LEVITAS

Definitions of poverty matter because they embed in them a notion of what poverty entails. If you think poverty is just the lack of income, you do not get at what the fabric of that experience actually is. You do not get at what the impact of that is on people's lives.

Concepts and theories of poverty are about deepening our understanding both of the experience and of the causal processes that produce it.

NARRATOR

Townsend's research was controversial, as it was published in 1979 when a new conservative government had just taken office.

DAVID GORDON

You have to understand at the time the government was trying to eradicate poverty by removing the word from the dictionaries, that they denied that poverty existed, that poverty was something that occurred in Africa or had occurred in Victorian Britain, but didn't exist in modern day Britain.

NARRATOR

Although Townsend's findings were rejected by the government of the day, his research had long lasting effects.

JOANNA MACK

Townsend was an extremely influential and seminal figure in poverty research. He did a number of things, but I think the most important ones what were to do with this widening of the definitions of poverty, to focus more widely on things like participation or being part of the society which you live in. And to do that, he developed a whole range of indicators of deprivation, and these would include not just things like food and clothing, but also leisure activities and social activities.

JONATHAN BRADSHAW

Peter Townsend's work and the introduction of the relative concept of poverty transformed the way we thought about poverty in the post-war period, introduced new ways of measuring it, and led to a whole raft of new policies for the civilian disabled, for families with children, in employment, who were not being part of the post-war Beveridge plan.

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