

## **Women, the early development of sociological research methods in Britain, and the London School of Economics: A (partially) retrieved history**

### **Abstract**

Histories of sociology have concentrated on the development of theory rather than methods. This paper examines the work of five women researchers associated with the London School of Economics in the early twentieth century to highlight an aspect of this neglected history: the development of research methods. Mildred Bulkeley, Maud Davies, Amy Harrison, Bessie Hutchins and Varvara De Vesselitsky all carried out empirical research on the sociology of work, women and the household deploying multiple research methods, including surveys, interviews, observations, covert ethnography, and diaries and schedules for recording household diets and finances. Their work combined a sensitivity to social context and lived experience within a framework integrating the drive to social reform with a focus on scientific sociology. Very little of this work is known today. An awareness of it changes our understanding of disciplinary history, particularly with respect to the provenance of research methods, and their role in establishing of academic sociology.

### **Keywords**

History of sociology, London School of Economics, research methods, women

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## **Introduction**

As Platt and others have argued, histories of sociology and social science have tended to focus on theory rather than methods (Platt, 1996); Lengermann and Niebrugge, 1998). Within histories of methodology, survey methods have received by far the most attention, with the standard historical accounts privileging the survey work of figures such as Charles Booth, Seebohm Rowntree, and A. L. Bowley (see e.g. Abrams, 1968; Bulmer, 1985; Freeman, 2005; Goldthorpe, 2000; Kent, 1981; Marsh, 1982; Moser and Kalton, 1958). Methods such as the interview, participant observation, covert ethnography and documentary and archival research, have provoked scant historical interest (see L'Eplattenier, 2009; Nelson, 2010; Platt, 1983). Yet methodological innovation of diverse kinds was a key element in the development of sociology as a discipline. The 'practical devices' of social scientists (Savage and Burrows, 2007: 888) helped to convince other professions and social groups that this new approach to the study of social systems was a useful route to understanding the problems of, especially, *industrial* society.

This paper examines the role of five little-known British women researchers associated with the early work of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), the main academic centre in Britain in the first decades of the twentieth century for the development of sociological research. The *raison d'être* of LSE was to promote 'original investigation and research', concentrating on 'the study and investigation of the concrete facts of industrial life and the actual working of economic and political relations' (LSE, Arrangements for the Session 1895-6, cited in Thomas, 2005: 14). Mildred Bulkeley, Maud Davies, Amy Harrison, Bessie Hutchins and Varvara De Vesselitsky all carried out empirical social research on the economics and sociology of work, women and the household. A key resource, to which they contributed, was a programme of work funded at LSE by the Ratan Tata Foundation in India. By the end of the First World War, the Ratan Tata Department at LSE had become the country's leading authority on welfare research, with its publications constituting 'an important and overlooked contribution to the study of poverty in England' (Goldman, 2013: 82). The research carried out by these five women and others helped to lay the foundations for LSE's own successful future funding. Their research was important beyond LSE: it helped to establish a broad corpus of policy-relevant evidence supporting the growth of the welfare state, and it was associated with considerable developments in social science's own methodological toolkit.<sup>1</sup>

The account in this paper follows two earlier ones on the rise and gendering of 'settlement sociology' (Oakley, 2017) and the role of two other British researchers, Clementina Black and Margaret Harkness, who used various innovative methods as well as fiction in documenting leading social issues of their time (Oakley, 2018a; see also Oakley, 2018b). It first discusses the context of the five women's research, and then outlines the methodological work of each. It concludes by discussing some of the mechanisms responsible for this missing history, and its implications for standard histories of how sociology developed.

## **The women and the context**

The history of research methods cross-cuts the domains of sociology, social policy and social work, in part because these domains were not clearly differentiated from one another in the early twentieth century (Kent, 1981; Shaw, 2009). The tradition of philanthropic visiting linked with the rising vogue for social investigation and the concern with collecting verifiable 'facts' provided a strong rationale for methodological development (Livesey, 2004; Nord, 1995; see also Deegan, 1991; Lengermann and Niebrugge, 1998; McDonald, 1993, 2004). Social policy was becoming for the first time a central focus of British intellectual thought. Disparate groups of professionals, reformers, academics and philanthropists struggled to arrive at a framework within which policy could be informed by the emerging methods of social science (Harris, 1989). The growth of state intervention in health, education and welfare sectors increased this pressure. As in other countries such as Sweden, France, Germany and the USA, there was a close connection in Britain between social reform and investigative activity, on the one hand, and the development of empirical social science, on the other; both were areas that provided work for women whose legal and social situation excluded them from mainstream masculine activities. Operating in this social reform arena, women could engage with scientifically informed political issues which were otherwise the province of male homosociality.

The five women whose work is discussed in this paper were part of a network of women reformers and researchers connected through their location in London and their links to a number of reform and research organisations such as the

Women's Industrial Council, the Women's Trade Union League, the Fabian Society and the Sociological Society. They were chosen as 'case-studies' because of their involvement in both activist and sociological networks, and their connections to LSE as the major institutional focus for sociological work. While they did not hold secure university posts, they fit Deegan's criteria for being so described (involvement in research/teaching, membership of sociological organizations, authors of sociological works, seen by others as participating in sociological activities (Deegan, 1991: 7)).

All five women would have known at first hand, and been influenced by, the contributions to social science of Beatrice Webb, the 'self-created empirical sociologist' whose formidable energy had helped to create both the LSE and the Fabian Society, and who provided much of the material and methodological inspiration for the publications and reform policies of the famous 'firm of Sidney and Beatrice Webb' (Shaw, 1938: 9). Beatrice Webb was the architect of the Webbs' framework for the scientific study of social life, which she had built up before the onset of their partnership through an exposure to Spencerian sociology, a reading of the works of Britain's first social science methodologist, Harriet Martineau, and the exploration of working-class communities using covert ethnography and informal interviewing (Broschart, 2005; McDonald, 2004; Webb, 1938). Beatrice Webb considered the object of social enquiry to be the discovery of social facts, with 'the method of the interview', a 'process of skilled interrogation' and the sociological equivalent of 'the chemist's test-tube or the bacteriologist's microscope' (Webb, 1926:469). Her experience working on Charles Booth's monumental survey of *Life and Labour of the People in London*, led her to advocate 'a subtle combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis' as 'a necessary factor in social studies' (Webb, 1926: 263). She articulated this in a series of publications and lectures on methods of investigation at LSE beginning in 1904.<sup>2</sup>

The overall aim of the Ratan Tata work at LSE, whose curious origins are amply covered elsewhere (Harris, 1989; <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsehistory/2017/10/23/researching-inequality-lse-and-the-ratan-tata-trust/>), was to conduct 'Research partly by special enquires and partly by a record and tabulation of facts' in order to address 'legislative and administrative measures dealing with poverty' (Harris, 1989: 46). The socialist economic historian R.H. Tawney was hired in 1913 to direct the work. The first project was an extensive review of the impact on wages and working conditions of the 1909 Trade Boards Act (TBA). This was the first legislation in Britain to set legally enforceable minimum wage standards. The Ratan Tata Department's TBA studies were attempts to obtain reliable evidence about the effort to impose minimum wage standards which had for long been a goal of campaigning organisations such as the Women's Industrial Council (which made some of its own data available to the Ratan Tata researchers). The TBA was a 'cautious' step in the eradication of sweated industry, the British state's first real attempt to control low pay. Although cautious, it marked a fundamental shift in social and economic thought in contesting the doctrine of free competition and the Victorian ideology of economic individualism (Blackburn, 1991). In this sense, it was a reform which sits alongside others such as the provision of school meals, pensions, and unemployment and sickness insurance, as founding stones of the modern welfare state.

### **Mildred Emily Bulkley 1881-1958**

Tawney himself was the author of the first two reports of the TBA research which looked at the operation of minimum rates in the chain-making and tailoring industries (Tawney 1914, 1915a). One of the people thanked in his introduction to the first of these was 'Miss Bulkley', for help in preparing statistical tables. Mildred Emily Bulkley was born in 1881 in Hampshire, the eighth of nine children of a well-resourced middle-class family: She registered at LSE as a student for a degree in economic history in 1898, and acquired a first class honours degree in 1906. She is listed in the Ratan Tata publications as the Foundation's Secretary, a position on which her staff file at LSE offers little information, although it does record her appointment as Tawney's research assistant for over 25 years.<sup>3</sup>

Mildred Bulkley wrote the third in the series of Ratan Tata Foundation imprints describing research into the boxmaking industry (Bulkley, 1915). Boxmaking was dominated by female labour and it included the notorious industry of matchbox-making which was a favourite subject for early twentieth-century social policy researchers, especially with regard to the conditions of homeworkers. Bulkley's monograph used both documentary and qualitative evidence, drawing on access to Trade Board papers, and on personal interviews with employers, workers, Trade Board inspectors and others. Between 30 and 40 workers were visited, 'a number far too small, of course, to yield results of any statistical value,' but useful in corroborating or modifying 'impressions gained from other evidence, and as showing the workers' point of view' (Tawney, 1915b: x). The latter point was methodologically important. Bulkley and her team<sup>4</sup> interviewed 370 home workers, mostly

in London. This mix of methods combined quantitative and qualitative information, and deployed the modern logic of triangulation, all to address a policy question of undoubted importance – whether state intervention in the setting of wage standards promoted or impeded the welfare of industrial workers. As regards women workers, this debate drew colour from the long-running argument for and against the effects of protective labour legislation (Feurer, 1988).

Aside from the boxmaking study, Mildred Bulkeley performed multiple research ‘assistant’ duties for others, and she also carried out as ‘groundbreaking study’ of *The Feeding of School Children* (1914) (Field, 2015). This was an ambitious and comprehensive examination of the ways in which local authorities had responded to the 1906 Education (Provision of Meals) Act, a welfare measure empowering them for the first time to provide food out of public funds for needy school children. Her research on this topic was part of a wave of interest in child health and nutrition sparked in the late nineteenth century by both imperialist and humanitarian concerns (Davin, 1996). She aimed to collect detailed and reliable data about what school meals were actually provided, reporting the results of research into 322 English local authorities. Of these, 131 made some provision for school meals, while the rest simply ignored their new statutory powers. Again, Bulkeley’s statistics were derived both from official returns and from detailed local observations and systematic enquiries. The result was many individual case-studies, here of one London centre:

‘The dinner was served in a large, dreary parish hall, to some 200 or 300 children. ...Order was well preserved, but only by means of the frequent ringing of a bell, and by the enforcement of absolute silence...Before being given their food, the children were told to hold up their hands if they were “big eaters,” the margin of waste being minimised in this way’ (Bulkeley, 1914: 169).

What and when children were fed varied enormously. In common with a practice which was widespread in social research at the time – the use of international comparisons - Bulkeley included data on ‘The provision of meals abroad’ - in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France (Paris was regarded as the model for school meal provision), Germany, Holland, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the USA. Other chapters of *The Feeding of School Children* reviewed the evidence about the extent and causes of malnutrition, and the effect of school meals on children and their parents. #Another issue of great concern in the policy debates of the time was that of how ‘needy’ children deserving of school meals should be selected. Bulkeley analysed the faults in all existing methods of selection (mainly by medical examination or by teachers and School Care Committees). The only ‘logical conclusion’ here was ‘the provision of a meal for all school children, as part of the school curriculum.’ This would do away with ‘all pauperising discrimination’ and it would be difficult to over-estimate the medical benefits (Bulkeley, 1914: 223-4).

### ***Varvara De Vesselitsky 1873-1927***

Of the eight people thanked for collecting information in Mildred Bulkeley’s boxmaking industry study, one, ‘Miss V. De Vesselitsky’, receives particular mention for carrying out the ‘difficult’ investigations into homeworkers’ conditions in London (Tawney, 1915b: xii). Tawney’s second TBA report also singled out ‘Miss De Vesselitsky’ who collected the information on homeworkers and the Tailoring Trade Board, and who was ‘principally’ responsible for a chapter of the book (Tawney, 1915a: xii). Varvara De Vesselitsky also published two single-author Ratan Tata Foundation monographs, the first on women homeworkers in the tailoring and boxmaking industries in 1916, and the second on the wartime budgets of working-class families in London in 1917. She co-authored with Mildred Bulkeley a remarkable study of working-class money-lending (De Vesselitsky and Bulkeley, 1917), one of the first major studies of this topic (Taylor, 2002).

A little older than Bulkeley, and dying much sooner, Varvara De Vesselitsky had a variegated career. She was born in 1873, probably in France. Her mother, Julia, was an American citizen and her father Gabriel de Wesselitsky, a diplomat, historian and writer, who had fought in the Balkan wars and knew most of the leading European statesman of the time. Through him Varvara is linked to the political struggles of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Russia.<sup>5</sup> At some point, probably in the early 1890s, Varvara’s branch of the family moved their base to England. In 1908 she appears in the US Census as a teacher in Denver, Colorado, at an elite girls’ private school. One of the other teachers at ‘Miss Wolcott’s School’, whom De Vesselitsky would have known, was the progressive reformer Helen Ring Robinson, the first female state senator, sponsor of minimum wage laws for women and active participant in the women’s peace movement during

the First World War (Pascoe, 2011). Thus, De Vesselitsky is likely to have had some familiarity with suffrage and pacifist politics.<sup>6</sup> She and her brother Sergei De Wesselitsky were naturalized as British citizens in 1923.<sup>7</sup>

De Vesselitsky's *The Homemaker and the Outlook* is a 'minor classic of modern industrial, urban, female life, and of the "subjective" impact of social administration from the recipient's point of view' (Harris, 1989: 45). It reports an inquiry carried out in 1913-14 into the living and working conditions of tailoresses and boxmakers living in East London. Although this was part of the Ratan Tata Department's efforts to study the working of the TBA, De Vesselitsky's research covers a much broader ground. Women's homework as a social and political issue united philanthropists, medical and sanitary professionals and social investigators (Atkinson, 1994; Coffin, 1991). Most investigations deployed the method of detailed case studies, thereby failing the test of generalizability. De Vesselitsky's study was different. The tailoresses in her study, 877 of them, lived mainly in Stepney, and the 330 boxmakers in Bethnal Green and Hackney.<sup>8</sup> The participants were visited at home, many more than once, and some continued to be visited well after the inquiry was over. De Vesselitsky followed the prevailing convention in calling the interviewers 'visitors' or 'inquirers'. Like Bulkley, her interest was in both 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' approaches. She noted that, 'Homework appears at first sight to be a jungle which defies analysis. Every type of family circumstances and economic condition and personal idiosyncrasy is included in it' (De Vesselitsky, 1916: 12). But examination of the data showed distinct patterns: most of the homeworkers were married or widowed women: 78% and 16% of the boxmakers, and 70% and 29% of the tailoresses. Many were also 'elderly',<sup>9</sup> and many worked because their husband's earnings were irregular or too low, or because they were simply the main breadwinners. The qualitative data were crucial in demonstrating the fluid lines dividing employers and employees. For example, many tailoresses, while appearing to be homeworkers, actually gave out work 'in a small way' themselves. Thus they had an interest in both the fair payment and the underpayment of wages. This was a complication that the TBA had overlooked – 'the average homeworker is not what the TBA describes as "ordinary"', observes De Vesselitsky (1916: 23, 110). Her account of the different classes of boxmakers – from 'fancy' boxmakers through plain cardboard boxmakers to common matchbox makers, the 'lowest form' of boxmaking – supplies a degree of sociological detail that is missing from many other contemporary accounts of women's work in the industry.

Varvara De Vesselitsky's research into wartime food budgets, *Expenditure and Waste*, published in 1917, is one of the earliest sociological studies to describe in detail patterns of working-class money management and spending. It followed Maud Pember Reeves' much better known and overtly campaigning *Round About a Pound a Week* (1913); in fact the two studies have one household in common (De Vesselitsky, 1917: 30). De Vesselitsky asked a 'small number of typical cases' in her study, the wives of dock labourers, carmen, or general labourers, all living in a slum in the vicinity of the docks, to keep budgets over a two- or three-week period between November 1915 and January 1916, noting the price of each article purchased as well as its price two years previously. A budget form was supplied and the 'budget mothers' were visited and revisited at different times of the day and week 'so that not one of them should escape' (De Vesselitsky, 1917: 5). Food occupied 55% of the budgets. The increase in food prices during the war, particularly for staple items such as bread, sugar and tea, meant that the poor suffered most.

The ostensible reason for De Vesselitsky's survey, to examine the effects on family budgets of wartime rising prices, fades into the background as she focuses on documenting the cultures of finance and nutrition of this urban industrial community. It is a typical example of the way in which, in such research, a single policy question expands into a broader sociological study which in turn calls for innovative methodological development. The study of money-lending among the London poor De Vesselitsky carried out with Mildred Bulkley, and which they published in *The Sociological Review*, is another adept sociological analysis of working-class culture. Borrowing and lending were known to be common features of this culture, but who are the borrowers and who are the lenders, and why *are* these practices so embedded in working-class life? From a methodological point of view, money-lending is a subject that investigators must lead up to carefully – a house-to-house inquiry focused on this was out of the question. So De Vesselitsky and Bulkley used as sampling frames lists of applicants for a charitable fund and 'dental cases' identified by School Care Committees. The questions about money-lending could then be inserted into visits that took place for other reasons.

The result was a 'fairly respectable' sample of women living in Limehouse, East London. Out of the first 100 women visited, only three did not resort to pawning or borrowing or both. Female money-lending was the dominant form, and it was

informal, trading in the small sums needed to cover the everyday expenses of households. The most striking feature of De Vesselitsky and Bulkley's findings resonates with Vesselitsky's earlier homemaker study: the overlap between women who borrowed and women who lent was like the difficulty of distinguishing between women who took in homework and those who gave it out. In both cases – of money and labour – these were communities marked by 'survival' networks of mutual aid among poor women who shared 'extensively and un sentimentally' in an effort to compensate for a fragile male wage-based economy (Fearon, 2011; Ross, 1983: 6). In other words, it is only by intensive study of particular cases in their local context that the irrelevance of imposed categories of experience can be revealed. All this anticipates more recent sociological studies of women's central role as both users and providers of credit (Ford and Rowlingson, 1996).

### **Elizabeth Leigh Hutchins (1858-1935)**

Elizabeth Leigh Hutchins, known as Bessie, was the most prolific of the five women who are the focus of this paper. Between 1900 and 1928 she published five books, and more than 80 research-based articles, chapters, pamphlets and extended reviews (for a list see Madden et al, 2004: 244-248). She was an active member of key social research organisations, including the British Association (she was secretary of its Research Committee), the Royal Statistical Society, the Sociological Society, the Women's Industrial Council (she was on its executive committee and edited its journal, the *Women's Industrial News*) and the Fabian Society (for which she was also an executive committee member from 1907-1912 and a founder member in 1908 of the Fabian Women's Group). Her association with LSE began in 1896 when she attended as a student and was taught by Beatrice Webb, with whom she worked on Fabian Society research material (see e.g. Webb, Hutchins and the Fabian Society, 1909). The LSE connection persisted through lectures Hutchins gave there on women's work and public health and on social science and administration, and through her link with the Women's Industrial Council and a joint course on social and sanitary science offered by LSE and King's College for Women. Although Hutchins herself was not formally linked with the Ratan Tata Foundation, she worked closely with some of its researchers, particularly Amy Harrison; after Harrison's marriage to one of the Webbs' researchers, Frederick Spencer, Mildred Bulkley was engaged in his place by the Webbs for the next seven years as their 'permanent research secretary' (Webb, 1948: 153).

Bessie Hutchins was the daughter of a London solicitor, Frederick Hutchins, who had married a Cornish woman, Emily Every. Her best-known contribution to the genre of works on industrial employment, *A History of Factory Legislation* (1903) was written jointly with Amy Harrison. It was a thoroughly researched account of the state's progressive intervention in regulating the conditions of work in factories and workshops. In his preface to the book, Sidney Webb praised it as the first systematic treatment of the subject (Webb, 1903); *A History of Factory Legislation* remained for a long time the standard text on the subject and continues to be referred to today. Hutchins' concern with the damaging effects of uncontrolled capitalist competition on vulnerable workers led to her particular interest in the historical background to women's position: her *Women in Modern Industry* (1915a), drew on a wide range of sources to look at how the industrial revolution had affected women's work. Although historical in nature, its methodology is important in reflecting a concern for the *systematic* collection of evidence to address policy questions. In company with other women historians, Hutchins disproves 'the old misconception that women's industrial work is a phenomenon beginning with the nineteenth century' (Hutchins, 1915:1; see Abram, 1909; Clark, 1919). *Women in Modern Industry* focused on unmarried women, and it acted as a companion volume to another book published the same year in which Hutchins also features – the WIC survey of *Married Women's Work* (Black, 1915). Hutchins directed the research and conducted the analysis for, and wrote, the longest chapter of the book, on the occupations of women in the woollen and worsted trades of Yorkshire. Much of her chapter is given over to the heart-rending case-studies of the 95 female weavers, spinners, wool-combers, and rag-pickers who were 'investigated' (Hutchins, 1915b). Other empirical studies published by Hutchins include the employment of women in paper mills (1904) and the work of typists and shorthand writers (1906). The paper mills study reported 'private inquiries in the neighbourhood of London' (Hutchins 1904: 235), and involved interviews with women workers and their employers, combined with Census data, factory inspectors' reports and evidence from the Children's Employment Commission. In the study of typists and shorthand writers Hutchins describes a survey of 220 workers carried out by their trade association, providing tables of data on working hours, salaries, years of experience, and the nature of the work.

Hutchins had an exceptional talent for the interrogation of statistical data. Her ground-breaking paper on 'Statistics of women's life and employment', read and discussed before the Royal Statistical Society in 1909, was dismissed by her as a 'slight and imperfect investigation' (Hutchins 1909a: 236), but it is a good deal more than that. In fact, it is one of the earliest attempts at a systematic analysis of what today we would call 'gender' differences. Hutchins looks at sex differences in life expectancy and death rates and in 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' counties and towns, at marriage and employment rates among women, and at sex differences in crime. She queries the general assumption that women lead more sheltered and less exhausting lives than men: they die of childbirth-related causes, do enormous amounts of housework without any labour-saving devices, and also, where they do work alongside men - here Hutchins inventively compares death-rates in different rural and urban areas - they appear to be less vulnerable to premature death. Hutchins' paper is notable for its evidence about social class differences in mortality, and, like other female users of official statistics, she points out the deficiencies in these, for example, 'it would be very useful and interesting if we could form an estimate of the number of women occupied in the care of children, but...we do not even know how many women are mothers of children' (Hutchins, 1909a: 215,229).

The approach Hutchins takes to another of her topics, *The Public Health Agitation 1833-48*, 'a little book' based on lectures she gave in 1908 at LSE (Hutchins, 1909b: 7), is noteworthy, not only for its historical detail about Edwin Chadwick, Thomas Southwood Smith and other founders of the public health movement, but for its embedding of public health work in a nexus of ideas about individualism versus community and the economics of free enterprise capitalism. Hutchins was a theorist as well as an empirical investigator, and she applied a class- and gender-sensitive analytic framework to a broad spectrum of social issues.

### ***Maud Frances Davies 1876-1913***

Maud Davies, an economic historian, social reformer and investigator, registered as a student at LSE in 1901 and studied there until 1907. Her father's job as a Poor Law schools inspector for the Local Government Board had given the family some familiarity with the vicissitudes of working-class life. At LSE, Davies's studies were supervised by the archivist and historian Hubert Hall and by Beatrice and Sidney Webb, who advised on the subject which led to the book for which she is most remembered, *Life in an English Village*.

Maud Davies's *Life in an English Village* was published in 1909. It was hailed as a 'classic of sociological enquiry', 'a new departure in sociological investigation' (Howells, 2013: 2; Dearle, 1910: 609). The book meticulously detailed the economic and social conditions of the parish of Corsley in Wiltshire, and thus did for a rural community what other investigators were doing for industrial areas. Corsley was a spread-out rural village consisting of scattered hamlets and a population (in the 1901 Census) of 824 people. One unusual aspect of Davies's study was that she knew Corsley well, as her family had lived there for some ten years; they lived, not in a cottage, but in a large elegant Georgian house in extensive grounds; her mother, as the 'lady of the big house' did charity work.<sup>10</sup> Davies's intensive investigation took two years and involved 220 households in interviews, observations, and dietary and budget studies: households were assigned random numbers to preserve anonymity. The aim was both to describe the circumstances of rural life and of determine the extent and nature of rural poverty. In order to do this, Davies followed and adapted the methods of Booth and Rowntree, collecting data on household income, and estimating the minimum cost of material resources 'sufficient for efficiency'. Her figures for levels of primary and secondary poverty (13% and 17% respectively) conflicted with the prevailing belief that rural labourers were the most poverty-stricken class in England.

Maud Davies devoted a whole chapter of her monograph to describing her research methods. She began with 'systematic' 'house-to-house' inquiries conducted over three months using a 'form' recording information given by adults or children in the 220 households. This included questions about occupation, family history, numbers and ages of children, and housing conditions. A second inquiry into earnings, diets, health care use and the characters of adults and children took more than a year and involved collecting information directly from families and about them from employers, neighbours, school authorities, and others considered to know the inhabitants well. Detailed family budgets and 'notes' on diet were also collected by, and from, a sample of families; 'Frequent calls were usually paid to the houses to see that particulars were being carefully entered' (Davies, 1909b: 138). An arresting item in her methodological toolbox was a series of observations she made on 13 days around Christmas time in 1905 of visits to Corsley's six public houses: of 'no. 3' at 9.50

p.m. on Christmas day, for instance, she recorded, '13 men, 1 wife, also 10 strangers, male and female. Gramophone [sic] and singing' (Davies, 1909b: 265). Her inquiries into the condition of Corsley children, which involved 169 detailed reports, were designed to identify any 'deficiency' in the children (defined as dullness, nervousness, laziness, dirtiness, 'peculiarity of disposition') which might be the result of poverty and poor diet. Some of her comments about the villagers, especially about drink, bad character and lack of thrift, contributed to the unhappiness some of them felt about the publication of the study. 'Slandering the poor' was the headline in the local newspaper reporting a parish council meeting which requested (unsuccessfully) the book's withdrawal from circulation (*Warminster & Westbury Journal*, 7 January 1910:8, cited in Howells, 2013: 23).

Like Hutchins, Davies crops up in the records of the Fabian Society, especially the Fabian Women's Group, to whose meetings she gave papers in 1911 on 'Women workers in village life' and 'Women in agriculture after the break-up of the manorial system' (reprinted in Alexander, 1988). She was a suffragist, and a committed member of the Writers' Club, a social and working centre for women authors and journalists. Probably the most controversial aspect of her life was her sudden and unexplained death, at the age of 37, on the London Underground line between Notting Hill Gate and High Street Kensington stations in the early hours of February 2, 1913. She had recently returned from a round-the-world voyage, engaged in another research interest prevalent among reformers at the time, the so-called 'white slave trade', and it was rumoured that her over-enthusiastic pursuit of the evidence was responsible for her death.

Maud Davies's chapter on 'rural districts' in Clementina Black's *Married Women's Work* was published posthumously (Davies, 1913). It set data from Wiltshire alongside comparable information from two other rural areas in Worcestershire and Essex, and demonstrated the same concern for both quantitative and qualitative information as *Life in an English Village*. For example, in the Worcestershire research Davies covered four parishes containing (at the 1901 Census) 663 people. She visited 'about thirty women', most of them labourers' wives. The women made their own bread, grew their own fruit and vegetables, walked five miles each week to the nearest town market, and many worked three or four 10-hour days a week for the local farmer. Davies's portrait of rural women's lives, like Hutchins' collection of historical data on wages and prices, was something of a correction to dominant views of rural poverty and pre-capitalist misery.

### **Amy Harrison (later Spencer) (1874-1970)**

Amy Harrison, who co-authored *A History of Factory Legislation* with Bessie Hutchins, was a researcher and author in her own right. Born in Derbyshire in 1874 to a hotel-keeping and farming family, she had been an undergraduate at Aberystwyth University, and achieved a BA degree from the 'extension' wing of London University in 1895. She then worked as a teacher in a Welsh intermediate school before settling in London and attending evening lectures in economic history at LSE in 1901-2. There she was awarded the Lucy Rose Research Studentship which enabled her to become a fulltime student, acquiring a DSc Econ in 1903 for her research into the effects on women's labour of Factory Act regulation, probably only the second student to get this degree.<sup>12</sup> Amy Harrison made a particular contribution to the work of Beatrice and Sidney Webb joining their team of research assistants sometime in the early 1900s, probably in 1903, and, taking her place alongside an ex-schoolteacher called Frederick Spencer, whom she married in 1905.

The LSE archives contain files of notes taken by Amy Harrison on the topics of provident dispensaries (organisations providing medical care for the poor (BLPES Archives and Special Collections, COLL MISC 0218), and conditions of women's work in Liverpool factories and workshops engaged in the printing trades and making matches, ropes, lint, paperbags and jute (COLL MISC 0486/2/10). This latter material was the basis for Harrison's sole-authored *Women's Industries in Liverpool*, published in 1904, which had the dual aims of describing the general condition of women's work in that city, and following the plan of other LSE studies in looking at possible effects on women's work of Factory Act legislation. It was 'the study of a particular set of economic facts by a trained and careful observer' (Gonner, 1904: no p no). Harrison's book records the difficult methodological challenges of any before-and-after study: collecting accurate historical data, and ruling out competing explanations for any changes noted. She visited some 70 factories and workshops employing 12-13,000 women and girls, with a list of questions about hours of work, wages, the gender division of labour, mechanization and rules for what were officially labelled 'dangerous trades'. Few firms had kept wage and time books for the period before 1867, when many industries were regulated for the first time. One problem was that work hours in Liverpool factories had customarily been shorter than in other places even before regulation; Harrison's investigation suggested



that this was due to both trade union pressure and employers' recognition of the 'economy' of shorter hours. Some of the most fascinating data in Harrison's study concern gendered customs for the division of labour between men and women, a feature of industry relevant to the then current and highly emotive issue of competition between men and women. Harrison's sociology observes that men's and women's work is 'usually quite distinct': 'Men and women are engaged either at different processes, or at different branches of the same process' (Harrison, 1904: 33). As with De Vesselitsky's study of boxmaking, the policy question that stimulated the research led to a more general sociological investigation into cultural categorization and economic theory.

Amy Harrison was one of four researchers who assisted Mildred Bulkley in her *The Feeding of School Children* study (Bulkley, 1915: pvii), and she also contributed to other work, including *Women in the Printing Trades: A Sociological Study* edited by the future labour prime Ramsay MacDonald (1904).<sup>13</sup> Unlike the other women discussed in this paper, her research career was interrupted by motherhood; three children were born in 1909-1912.

### **Discussion**

As Savage (2010) has noted, even in the 1940s, after the work of the women who are the focus of this paper was completed, British social science possessed a weak research infrastructure, and it occupied a small niche within a distinctly 'gentlemanly' academic culture. This gentlemanly culture had evolved from earlier conventions which obscured the contribution of women. Mildred Bulkley, Maud Davies, Amy Harrison, Bessie Hutchins and Varvara De Vesselitsky are five names in a litany of women social researchers who were active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and were all making extensive use of research methods that histories of sociology, complicit with this process of 'gendered academization' (Wisselgren, 2012, 2013), typically attribute to others and often to later dates. Thus the work histories of the women discussed in this paper illustrate enduring structures of patronage and patriarchy in sociology, with their consequence of precarious employment situations. Of the five women, only Maud Davies had inherited wealth to depend on: the others were self-financing and had to move from one short-term (and often part-time) post to another. While LSE stands out among academic institutions of the time as being unusually accommodating to women, both as students and as members of staff, women researchers associated with that institution were nonetheless slotted into what was a taken-for-granted masculine structure.<sup>14</sup> Within that structure there was clearly some space for the development of alternative intellectual networks; there was, for example, a notable concentration in the first decades of the twentieth century of female talent in economic history at LSE. Central figures were Lilian Knowles and, later, Eileen Power, and their various research students, such as Alice Clark and Annie Abram, all of whom challenged stereotypical historical narratives of women as unproductive members of society, focused on the living of everyday lives and were trying to take a broader approach to the study of communities and social issues than was advocated by most theory-oriented male economists and sociologists (see Berg, 1992, 1996; Smith and Zook, 2018). The lack of archival material (and, to date, of interest in the topic) means that we know very little about connections between these economic history researchers and other women researchers at and outside the LSE.

Disregard of women's sociological research work in histories of sociology probably has multiple causes. Two of the most important are the low status of empirical compared with theoretical sociology (see Abrams, 1968), and the low status of women vis-à-vis men as producers of social knowledge. In the complex story of how what we today call 'sociology' emerged from the welter of reform activities, social work, political activism, social realism fiction, and the application to social systems of natural science models, the separation of universities from their communities appears to have been crucial. Understanding and incorporating lived experience in what counts as knowledge, an approach in which women researchers often specialized, came to be relegated to the margins. Among other 'disremembering' strategies applied to women's work was women's widespread dismissal as research 'assistants'. Records show that all the women whose careers are tracked in this paper carried out research duties for other higher-status academics. Bessie Hutchins, for instance, took on the task of researching historical wage records in Britain from the sixteenth to the early eighteenth century for LSE's first Director, the economist W A S Hewins. She transcribed, catalogued, analysed and commented on 'a bewildering quantity of material' used (but scarcely acknowledged) by Hewins in his publications on the state regulation of wages (Hewins Manuscripts 138/310-25, BLH to WASH; see Hewins, 1898).<sup>16</sup> A close reading of prefaces and acknowledgements in better-known social research works of the time reveals a rich sprinkling of names suggestive of a wide range of technical and intellectual aid.<sup>17</sup>

The under-acknowledged contributions of research assistants is a general feature of knowledge production in different national contexts (Wisselgren, 2017). Connected with the under-valuation of women's research 'assistance' tasks is their assumed secondary position as wives. For example, although Charles Booth thanked his wife Mary for her 'constant sympathy' which made possible his work on the 17 volumes of *Life and Labour of the People in London*, she was really its co-director, participating in decisions, analysis, writing, and interpretation (Bales, 1991; Norman-Butler, 1972). Charlotte Payne-Townshend, a committed co-conspirator with the Webbs in the founding of LSE and a key funder of its early research, is another example; she disappears into the biography of her husband George Bernard Shaw (Dunbar, 1963).

The process of gendered academization has been superimposed on what Gans (1999: 291), amongst others, has termed 'sociological amnesia': the dominant tendency in sociology for a short attention span which guarantees the disappearance into the mists of time of any references to work more than a few decades old. One example of how this combination of factors operates is the notion popular in twenty-first century social science of a paradigm divide between 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' methods, with women seen as specializing in the former and men in the latter (see Oakley, 1998); a closer look of the kind contained in this paper at what women researchers actually *did* shows that in this period they were eclectic users of all kinds of methods. Striking in their methodological practices is the use of what today is known as a 'multi-methods' or 'mixed methods' approach (see e.g. Bryman, 2006; Teddie and Tashakkori, 2009). As Platt (1986) has observed, those methodological exemplars which most closely fit a linear historical narrative are those that fall into clear-cut categories, not the mixed methods approaches used by the women discussed in this paper. All five women deployed large-scale surveys, detailed case-studies, formal and informal interviewing, observation, ethnography and documentary analysis, as, and when, appropriate, in order to throw light on significant policy issues. They were aware of the importance of triangulation and relied on it to aid the interpretation of data, even if they did not call it that. Their approach to ill-founded causal inference (of which there was a lot at the time, especially in relation to such disputatious issues as married women's work) displayed considerable methodological sophistication. Sensitivity to the role of the investigator and about the blind alleys of investigator bias is also apparent.<sup>15</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The chief function of origin myths is to give the groups who perpetuate them a tradition of 'an honourable past'; such myths do not necessarily provide a reliable account of what happened (Platt, 1996: 267-8). Since the main emphasis in histories of sociology has been on the development of theory-oriented social science in university settings, the more free-ranging community-based work in which the five women who feature in this paper specialized has remained largely undetected. In scrutinizing such questions as the effects of legislation on women's labour; the condition of children's health; cultures of diet and financial management in working-class households; and rural poverty, the women's research was contributing to the knowledge base for welfare policy. It helped to dislodge prevailing and misleading assumptions and direct policy-makers to more appropriate and effective strategies for solving social problems. In the process (and central to its success) women researchers were responsible for a good deal of methodological development which has received little historical credit. Their own disadvantaged position in the academic community was an obstacle to the founding of any 'school' or 'centre' which would have ensured the survival and transmission of this methodological knowledge.

The result is a distorted historical record which omits an innovative research culture that thrived at the margins of mainstream institutionalized sociology. Arguably, the neglect of this culture has handicapped sociology with a slow and non-cumulative methodological development in which practices hailed as 'new' in the later twentieth century were in use much earlier. A revised narrative, such as that proposed in this paper, also puts a different complexion on what has been seen as the relatively late institutionalization of sociology in Britain. A flourishing sociological culture did exist, but it did not fit the 'gentlemanly' tradition in a number of respects. Firstly, it merged empirical and theoretical domains (Goldman, 2007). Secondly, it preserved the link between reformist ideals and knowledge practices, the 'mutual and interactive relationship' between social science and social reform (Wisselgren (2012: 195). In this and other respects, the story of British women's research activities and innovations ties these closely into parallel developments in the USA, especially the sociological research of women at the Hull-House Settlement in Chicago led by Jane Addams (Residents of Hull-House, 1895), which is disregarded in histories celebrating the rise of sociology led by white male theorists at the University of

Chicago (Bulmer, 1984; Hawthorn, 1987; see Deegan, 1990, 1997). Disciplinary definitions do change over time – ‘sociology’ as used in the early years of the twentieth century denoted a wider range of interests than it is does now – but systematic forgetting hampers both the historical record of sociology and its ability to respond imaginatively to methodological challenges.

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## Notes

1. Neither of these features of their work are recognized in existing histories of the welfare state, of social science, or, indeed, of LSE itself. The account in Dahrendorf's history of LSE of its early years notably omits any record of the endeavours described in this paper (Dahrendorf, 1986).
2. McDonald (2004: 217, 223) says that the best joint source for the Webb method is their Preface to *Industrial Democracy* (Webb and Webb, 1902:v-xix). The source for their *Methods of Social Study* (1932) was Beatrice's *My Apprenticeship* (1926).
3. Bulkley is only mentioned once in Goldman's biography of Tawney as the Secretary of the Ratan Tata Foundation and the author of two research reports (Goldman, 2013: 82).
4. She uses the plural pronoun 'we' in describing the investigation, and Tawney in his introduction refers to the three researchers who did the London enquiries (Tawney, 1915b: x).
5. The surname is variously spelt, although Varvara seems to have stuck to 'De Vesselitsky'. Her father was Gabriel Sergeevich Wesselitsky-Vojidarovich (Гавриил Сергеевич Веселитский-Божидарович or Gavriil Sergeevich Veselitsky-Bozhidarovich). A cousin of Varvara's, Lidia Veselitskaya, was a well-known novelist and translator with clear feminist sympathies and an interest in social justice: she was a friend of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and others. Thanks to Andrey D. Turov for providing this information.
6. Thanks to Patricia Halbert for drawing my attention to this connection.
7. Sergei is not listed on any of the family genealogy sites as Varvara's brother, but his marriage certificate is signed by 'G de Wesselitsky' as his father, whose occupation is given as 'late of the Russian Diplomatic Service'; *The Alpine Journal* (2005: 252) (Sergei was a prominent mountaineer) concurs in describing his father as a Russian diplomat and his mother an American. His and Varvara's naturalizations are listed in *The London Gazette* for 3 April 1923, p. 2505.
8. Estimates put the total number of women homeworkers in these two sectors at 15,000--24,000 (De Vesselitsky, 1916: 1).
9. Defined as over 45 years.
10. As Freeman (2003:129) rightly points out, Maud Davies' social position imparted certain moral preoccupations to her data.
11. Freeman (2003: 119) claims her death was a suicide, but he gives no evidence for this.
12. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/92943860@N00/5512977754>.
13. *Women in the Printing Trades* acknowledged the contributions of the WIC and five women (and one man), including 'Miss Harrison' who collected data in Bristol. This volume is unusual in carrying on the title page a list of investigators, naming five women 'and Others'.
14. See Evans, n.d.. Women made up 97 of the regular lecturers and 57 of the occasional lecturers in the period from 1895 to 1932.
15. The women identified in this paper are only a small sample from a much bigger universe of women investigators and authors of research reports in this period whose eclectic methodological approach has been similarly eclipsed but brought to our attention by recent scholarship (see e.g. McKibbin, 1978; Nelson, 2010; Nord 1995). Some other names that stand

out are Helen Bosanquet (1860-1926), Florence Bell (1851-1930), Mary Higgs (1854-1937), May Kendall (1861-1943), Martha Loane (1852-1933), Olive Malvery (1877-1914), Cécile Matheson (1874-1950), Mary Walker (1863-1913), and Mona Wilson (1872-1954), all of whom researched British living and working conditions using creative investigative methods.

16. She published separately on this subject (see Hutchins 1899, 1900). It seems from the Hewins papers that Hutchins also did research on the history of wages for Hubert Hall and for the economist and mathematical statistician Francis Edgeworth.

17. For example, there are references to the help given by Mildred Bulkley in texts by other LSE academics such as Henry Mess (1916), and, beyond LSE, in Eleanor Rathbone's *The Disinherited Family* (Rathbone, 1924), the history of women in the civil service by the civil servant Hilda Martindale (Martindale, 1938), and in a series of books on economic conditions in India (Burnett-Hurst, 1925; Jain, 1929). The Indian connection was probably made through the LSE economic historian Vera Powell, later Anstey (see Anstey, 1931).

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