

Identifying Areas of Poverty in Sheffield

- A BRIEF OUTLINE

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A couple of years back I (C.T.) was asked to provide what was initially technical expertise in an exercise that formed part of the Sheffield City Council's focusing of its policy of positive discrimination. As it turned out, the collaboration demonstrated clearly the relationship between technique and political analysis. It was an informative opportunity to work within a context where the latter didn't have to be fudged.

The Background to the Study

At a seminar on Positive Discrimination held in September 1982, the Sheffield City Council agreed to undertake a revision of its 'Priority Areas of Deprivation'. The definition of Priority Areas was part of the City Council's continuing development of Urban Programme Work, main line programmes, local planning exercises, as part of the fulfilment of its policy of Positive Discrimination. The existing Priority Areas had been drawn up in 1978, using information from a Household Survey (1977) and a Grassroots Survey (1978), from which areas of 'multiple deprivation' had been identified. By 1982, the information on which the declared Priority Areas was based was now up to five years out of date and had, most specifically, been superseded by the 1981 Census.

The decision to up-date existing Priority Areas, employing 1981 Census data, was hardly one that was unique to Sheffield. In the wake of the availability of Census Small Area Statistics local authorities all over Britain were stuffing enormous data sets, chosen to demonstrate the prowess of their computing power, into 'black box' statistical packages and declaring the emergent output 'areas of multiple deprivation'. For those who were unable to lay their hands on the necessary hardware or software, help was at hand in the form of an all singing, all dancing, 'off the peg' universal typology of small areas, aggressively marketed by the suitably acronymed C.A.C.I. All good stuff; plenty of jobs for statisticians; but totally a-theoretic and a-political.

Explanations of Deprivation

At the heart of the conceptual abyss lay confusion as to precisely what was meant by 'multiple deprivation'. Although knowledge of it rarely informed priority area studies, a range of, often conflicting, explanations of 'deprivation' underpin existing studies. To provide some clarity on these, one of us (M.R.) prepared the accompanying diagram of differing explanations of urban deprivation. (See Diagram 1). What it shows is a continuum of explanations, from 'Social Pathological' to 'Structural', upon which a number of exemplary studies have been located together with their defining features. Those studies located towards the social pathological end of the continuum will tend to emphasise characteristics of deprivation which arise from the deviant behaviour of deprived groups within society - crime rates, rejection of educational opportunities, failure to maintain the quality of their physical and social environment. Studies towards the structural end of the continuum will emphasise the structural position of deprived groups, particularly, in the socialist formulation, their lack of access to and control over the means of production.

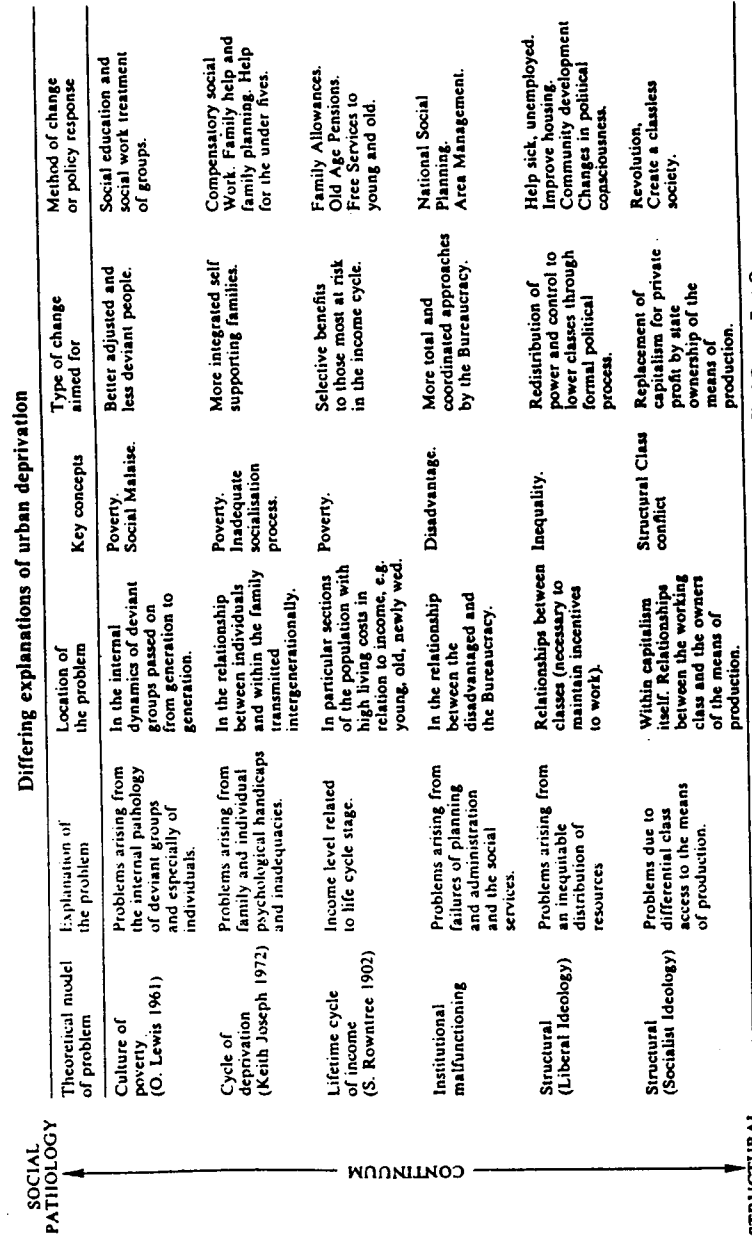
The distinction is not a mere academic nicety. Consequent to the choice of theoretical explanation will be a corresponding policy response. Social pathological responses will call for improved social education, more policing, etc. Structural responses will demand more jobs, and the provision of facilities to provide equalisation of access to the means of production, such as nurseries.

The choice of explanation is a clear political one. If that wasn't already obvious then witness recent public pronouncements on the phenomenon of 'football hooliganism'. The Sheffield City Council holds a view of the world which lies to the structural end of the continuum. (Although it is quite a relief to work in a context where you feel that you don't have to conceal your politics, there is the danger of the complementary discomfiture of feeling that you've got to wear them on your sleeve - the 'right on' tendency).

Choice of explanation, if made explicit, will of course have consequences for the choice of social indicator to be included in such a study.

Social pathological explanations will include measures of the social deviancy that these explanations accentuate. Our, structurally oriented analysis, drawing also upon Lifetime Cycle of Income Theories, specifically avoided these; rather, we selected variables in three main groups "direct indicators", "indirect indicators" and "interpretative indicators".

Diagram 1



"Direct indicators" consist of deprivations in themselves. These included over-crowding, lone parent families, unemployment variables and variables concerned with social class. 24.

"Indirect indicators" were variables which may enable the existence of deprivation to be inferred, but which do not necessarily constitute deprivations in themselves. These included households lacking a car, large households, and variables concerned with the numbers of children and pensioners. These variables can crudely be viewed as either: proxy measures of possible lack of income (e.g. lack of a car); factors which might make poor households poorer (e.g. family size), or measures of people particularly liable to be discriminated against (e.g. New Commonwealth or Pakistan households). Obviously none of these variables are necessarily a problem - a family could score highly on all these indirect indicators and still be in no way considered as deprived. For example, lacking a car in Sheffield is not necessarily a deprivation due to the excellent cheap bus system. Therefore, these indicators are most useful when used in combination with the direct indicators discussed above.

"Interpretative indicators" are not measures of deprivation, but aid the geographical analysis of the distribution of direct and indirect indicators. These include in-migrants during the previous year, council housing, students and furnished and unfurnished rented accommodation. This would enable a poor condition housing area occupied by students for short periods to be differentiated from similar rented bad housing occupied by families for years on end. The careful use of interpretative indicators proves useful in making value judgements when combined with direct and indirect indicators.

Analysis

Analytically, the study was conducted on fairly conventional lines, with extensive use of cluster analysis. Here also, though, we proceeded discerningly, adopting a two-stage process. In the first stage CLUSTAN was used, essentially as an exploratory tool, to investigate the statistical properties of the set of variables. These were then modified to remove some redundancy and to correct an over-emphasis on demographic structure. In the second stage, Stan Openshaw's CCP (Census Clustering Package) was used, to enable detailed exploration of the solution space.

At this analytic stage, we felt it important to retain the multi-dimensional nature of the data set - in keeping with the differing significances of the variables employed (as identified above) and in order to allow a more selective interpretation. Thus, we specifically rejected the use of an "index" approach, derived from principal component analysis or otherwise, as obfuscating the role played by individual variables in their contribution to that index. Thus, for example, a cluster which scored highly merely on interpretative indicators (say, in-migrants during the previous year) could be excluded from further

consideration as not constituting a deprived area (in this case, merely, a new owner occupied housing estate). 25.

Grassroots Survey

The cluster analysis identified 24 candidate 'Areas of Poverty', (a terminology that we explicitly switched to from the more nebulous concept of 'deprivation') of which six were designated "acute", having exceptionally high scores on all direct poverty indicators. We were conscious though of the potential dangers of relying solely on the use of census data, given both the limited coverage of topics in the census and the restrictions imposed by the Census's unit of aggregation (the enumeration district). In order to augment and to confirm the results of the Census analysis a survey was carried out of Grassroots Workers throughout the City, as a consequence of which the identified areas were increased to thirty.

In all, just over 500 grassroots workers responded to the Survey. That we clearly have progress to make in winning political commitment to the exercise was illustrated by the pattern of response. Of the 87 City Council members only 17 responded to the Survey: of the 43 County Council members only 4. This contrasted with the police, who returned 105 out of 109 questionnaires.

From Analysis to Policy

Most importantly perhaps, this political commitment has to be demonstrated in a more fundamental way by realising a substantial shift in resources and opportunities towards the defined areas. A number of departments do use the declared 'Areas of Poverty' for priority purposes - for the Urban Programme; by the Education Department, for the provision of Nursery facilities - but it would be difficult to argue that these represent a meaningful shift. In a number of recent exercises, specifically the planned reorganisation of secondary education and the introduction of a system of tertiary colleges, the shift has undoubtedly been in the reverse direction.

The presence of rate-capping, the punitive 'fines' that Sheffield has incurred for so-called "overspending", together with the sheer size and static nature of 'base budgets' provide little by way of specific development resources. Which is why, in this context and indeed even in a more favourable one, politicians committed to positive discrimination must have the conviction to effect substantial re-distribution of main-line programmes. When the conviction comes at least the City Councillors of Sheffield will be well informed to know exactly where to put their money.