Desperately Seeking Reductions in Health Inequalities: Perspectives of UK researchers on past, present and future directions in health inequalities research

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ABSTRACT

Following government commitments to reducing health inequalities from 1997 onwards, the UK has been recognised as a global leader in health inequalities research and policy. Yet, health inequalities have continued to widen by most measures, prompting calls for new research agendas and ‘advocacy’ to facilitate greater public support for the upstream policies that evidence suggests are required. However, there is currently no agreement as to what new research might involve or precisely what public health egalitarians ought to be advocating. This paper presents an analysis of discussions between 56 academic researchers to consider the feasibility that research-informed advocacy around particular ‘solutions’ to health inequalities may emerge in the UK. The data indicate there is a consensus that more should be been done to learn from post-1997 efforts to reduce health inequalities, and an obvious desire to provide clearer policy guidance in future. However, discussions regarding where researchers should now focus their efforts, and who researchers ought to be engaging with, reveal three distinct ways of approaching health inequalities, each of which has its own epistemological foundations. Such differences imply consensus around reducing health inequalities is unlikely to materialise. Instead, progress seems most likely if all three approaches are simultaneously enabled.

Abstract word count: 200

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INTRODUCTION

The UK has been recognised as a global leader in health inequalities research and policy, with recent government-led policy efforts to reduce health inequalities being described as “historically and internationally unique” (Mackenbach, 2011). Yet, despite the raft of policies intended to reduce health inequalities, introduced between 1997 and 2010, the UK’s health inequalities have continued to widen by most (though not all – see Bambra, 2012; Barr et al, 2014) measures (Thomas et al. 2010; Thorlby and Maybin 2010). This failure has prompted multiple commentaries and calls for ‘advocacy’ to facilitate greater public support for the kinds of upstream policies that available evidence suggests may be required (e.g. Bambra et al. 2011; Mackenbach, 2011).

In Chapman’s (2007) terms, public health advocacy includes (amongst other things) working to place and maintain issues on public and political agendas (and exploiting opportunities to do so), discrediting opponents of public health objectives and working to frame evidence in persuasive ways (e.g. via metaphors or analogies). In other words, ‘advocacy’ involves strategically ‘selling’ public health objectives to a range of non-academic audiences. This way of thinking about advocacy, which Carlisle (2000) has termed ‘representational’, implies that health inequalities researchers would first need to achieve some kind of consensus around the policy (or societal) changes they are trying to ‘sell’. Yet, there is currently little agreement as to what exactly it is that public health egalitarians ought to be advocating (Horton, 2012). Other definitions of ‘advocacy’ are more akin to Burawoy’s (2005) notion of
‘public sociology’, in which researchers engage in dialogue with members of the public, work collaboratively with organisations representing public interests and generally try ‘to make visible the invisible’ (Burawoy, 2005: 264). Here, ‘advocacy’ involves working with relevant communities to ensure that voices which might traditionally be ignored are given due regard; a ‘facilitational’ form of advocacy, in Carlisle’s (2000) terms. In either case, ‘advocacy’ clearly involves something more than the widely accepted model of researchers working with senior civil servants to try to develop evidence-informed policy responses to health inequalities (see, for example, Petticrew et al, 2004).

Calls for more ‘advocacy’ to reduce health inequalities therefore raise important questions for researchers about the ways in which we work to effect change. As Scambler (2012) points out, the phrase ‘tackling health inequalities’ means different things to different people:

‘Articulated as Weberian ideal types, for those coming from a ‘policy sociology’ perspective engagement for change involves working with people of influence; while for those coming from a ‘critical sociology’ perspective it can involve working against them (Burawoy 2005).’ (Scambler, 2012: 139)

This paper takes a sociological approach to exploring these different ways of approaching health inequalities, reflecting Burawoy’s suggestion that we should ‘apply sociology to ourselves,’ in order that we become more conscious of the forces driving our research (Burawoy 2005: 285). It presents an analysis of the perspectives of 56 UK-based researchers
involved in health inequalities debates to explore how researchers feel about the development of the field so far and what kinds of activities they think researchers should be undertaking. After briefly describing the methods and data sources, the paper is divided into four sections. First, we consider what the data suggest researchers feel they have learned (and not learned) from health inequalities research and policy experiences in the UK to date. Second, we explore where health inequalities researchers think future research efforts ought to focus. Third, we examine the kinds of activities health inequalities researchers think they ought to be undertaking in order to promote evidence-informed change. The fourth, concluding section draws the findings together, arguing that the data identify some important divisions amongst health inequalities researchers regarding the kinds of work it is appropriate and desirable for researchers to undertake; schisms which appear to map onto epistemological, ontological and ideological differences. These differences require attention because they appear to be contributing to professional contestations, especially around research funding, and therefore seem likely to undermine efforts to achieve the kind of clear policy messages that public health advocacy requires. Indeed, the contrasting ways of thinking about health inequalities (and the wider world) lead not only to differing preferences regarding the future direction of health inequalities research but also to different understandings of the role that research, and researchers, play (and ought to play) in public policy debates.

The paper builds directly on two earlier (linked) articles that explored the views of small number of senior researchers and civil servants on evidence for tackling health inequalities (Petticrew et al, 2004; Whitehead et al, 2004). Like this earlier study, we have produced a
companion paper that comparatively assesses the perspectives of policy actors to those of
the researchers discussed in this paper ([removed for anonymity during review]). As well as
providing a contemporary update, our research considers the views of a broader range of
researchers and policy actors representing a variety of academic disciplines, career stages,
and academic or policy-related institutions (56 researchers and 58 policy actors compared
to the nine senior researchers and seven senior civil servants involved in the earlier studies).
Looking back on the findings of these earlier studies, the paper focusing on the views of
senior researchers concluded that there was, at that time, ‘significant potential for rapid
progress to be made in developing both evidence based policy and policy relevant evidence
to tackle health inequalities’ (Whitehead et al, 2004: p817). In light of subsequent claims
that policy efforts to reduce health inequalities have been relatively unsuccessful
(Mackenbach, 2011), it seems apt to create space to once again reflect on the kinds of work
that health inequalities researchers produce and engage in, and to consider progress and
potential future directions. The planned changes to the UK’s constitutional arrangements
including the devolution of key responsibilities from Westminster to some large urban local
authorities in England and the governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well
as current fears regarding the likely impact of austerity-led reforms on health inequalities
underline the timeliness of this endeavor (Bambra et al, in press; Pearce, 2013; Reeves et al,
2013).

METHODS

A two-day symposium was held in Edinburgh (UK) in December 2012 at which 87
participants from a range of sectors discussed the legacy of health inequalities research and
policy and considered potential directions for future research. Participants were invited to the event on the basis of their involvement in health inequalities research, policy, practice or advocacy. Selection was informed by two previous qualitative research projects (reference removed for anonymity during review) and by the professional networks and expertise of a Steering Group (see acknowledgements). Efforts were made to ensure that researchers were involved from a range of: disciplinary backgrounds; career stages; institutional locations; and specific areas of expertise within health inequalities research.

14 one-hour focus groups were undertaken during this event, in which 76 symposium attendants participated. There are many definitions of focus groups; we adopted a style based upon a loosely facilitated approach to generating organised discussion, as suggested by Kitzinger (1994). For the first seven (morning) sessions, participants were divided according to their profession. Academic researchers were allocated to three separate groups, according to their primary methodological expertise (which was ascertained via website profiles and checked via emails prior to the event): (i) quantitative; (ii) mixed methods; and (iii) qualitative. This division was made to ensure that the focus groups provided a range of views from researchers working in different academic traditions and with a variety of epistemological perspectives. Researchers working in public sector and policy settings were allocated to other groups. In the context of this paper, the term ‘researcher’ includes individuals involved in research working across a range of settings (e.g. in knowledge broker organisations and the public sector, as well as academia) and applied to 56 symposium attendants (see Table 1). All of these individuals had published articles in academic journals focusing on health inequalities and/or the social determinants of health,
and health inequalities in the UK were a primary research focus for most. However, a small number of researchers were invited to participate on the basis that they had a relevant area of expertise that would otherwise be lacking (this included two health economists and two political scientists focusing on corporate policy influence, all of whom had an interest in health equity). The disciplinary backgrounds of participants varied widely and included anthropology, economics, epidemiology, geography, public health medicine, political science, social policy and sociology.

Table 1: Focus group participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Groups</th>
<th>Participants in the first focus small group discussions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus group 1</td>
<td>11 researchers who primarily employ quantitative methods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group 2</td>
<td>10 researchers who primarily employ mixed methods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group 3</td>
<td>10 researchers who primarily employ qualitative methods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group 4</td>
<td>2 (out of 11) individuals who primarily identified themselves as being involved in public health advocacy were researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group 5</td>
<td>4 (out of 14) individuals working in public health policy and practice were researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group 6</td>
<td>8 (out of 11) individuals involved in public health knowledge exchange in one group were researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group 7</td>
<td>7 (out of 9) individuals involved in public health knowledge exchange in another group were researchers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total participants = 76 (total involved in research = 56)**

**Participants in the second focus group discussions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chosen topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Research agendas beyond health and what can we do to reduce health inequalities?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Lived experiences of health inequalities&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Participatory research and policy&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Evaluation&quot;</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
7 participants, of whom 5 were involved in research (4 quantitative academic researchers and 1 public sector researcher). ‘Evaluation’

14 participants, of whom 7 were involved in research (all academics, 3 of whom primarily employ mixed methods, 1 quantitative and 2 qualitative) ‘Welfare reform / retrenchment’

14 participants, of whom 12 were involved in research (2 qualitative academics, 1 mixed methods academic, 2 quantitative academics; and 6 researchers working in public sector / policy settings) ‘Encouraging researchers, policymakers and practitioners to work collaboratively’

| Total participants = 70 (total involved in research = 50) |

During the first set of focus group discussions, participants were asked to generate a list of suggestions for future health inequalities research agendas. Participants were then asked to indicate which topics they were most interested in discussing further and were allocated to one of seven afternoon focus group discussions on this basis (see Table 1). A small number of participants were unable to stay for the whole day (so 56 researchers participated in first set of focus groups and only 50 in the second set).

Each focus group was facilitated by a member of the Steering Group and participants were asked to discuss the questions outlined in Box 1.

**Box 1 - Main questions for participants in the focus group sessions:**

*Questions for the first seven focus groups:*

1. What kinds of research should researchers working to reduce health inequalities focus on?

2. What should health inequalities researchers be doing (if anything), beyond academic work, to support efforts to reduce health inequalities?
Questions for the second seven focus groups:

1. What specifically would this new research agenda involve?
2. What needs to happen to facilitate/enable this kind of research activity?
3. What, if any, are the potential problems with developing this kind of research agenda?

Discussions took place under the ‘Chatham House rule’, which enabled all participants to share the content of discussions with others but only on a non-attributable basis. All participants were asked to sign written consent forms enabling the focus groups to be digitally recorded and transcribed, before being anonymised (by XX). Two authors (XX and XX) read all fourteen transcripts and jointly developed a thematic coding framework. The transcripts were then coded using NVivo 10 software (XX and XX each led on coding half the transcripts and then cross-checked the other seven transcripts for consistency). The anonymised, coded transcripts were made available to the other Steering Group members for further analysis.

RESULTS

1. What have we learned so far? Researchers’ reflections on the legacy of health inequalities research and policy in the UK

1.1 Post-1997 policy advice & limited learning

The findings reveal widespread concern among researchers about the failure to adequately learn from the multiple policies and interventions intended to tackle health inequalities in the post-1997 UK context. Participants attributed this failure to the complexity of health
inequalities and the policies intended to address these inequalities as well as to research funding and methodological constraints.

Several academic researchers specifically picked up on Mackenbach’s (2011) article, which had been circulated in advance and which argues that, despite some partial successes, the English strategy failed to reach its own targets of a 10% reduction in inequalities in life expectancy and infant mortality. This claim was disputed by a small number of researchers, particularly with regards to health inequalities between ‘Spearhead’ and other areas. The ‘Spearhead’ group of 70 local authorities and 62 primary care trusts was introduced in 2004 in the 88 most health deprived areas in England as the focus of government interventions designed to reduce health inequalities (Department of Health, 2004). More recent analysis seems to support Mackenbach’s (2011) assessment. Barr and colleagues (2012), for example, present data which suggest that, despite some success, overall people in ‘Spearhead’ areas did not experience the improvement in health that was promised. Indeed, one of the main areas of agreement across the researchers participating in the symposium seemed to be that efforts to tackle health inequalities in the UK had been less successful than people had hoped, and this was perceived to be at least partly because health improvements had been greater for those already doing well.

Beyond this broad assessment, there was a palpable frustration amongst many researchers that national-level analyses have ignored the potential for learning lessons about what has (and has not) worked amongst the multitude of different policies and interventions that were implemented across the UK between 1997-2012:
'I think we really need to pin down what’s worked in the last 15 years. And when I re-read the Mackenbach paper...I felt a little bit annoyed. [...] It must have been relatively easy [...] to go back and pull out some key policy documents and then look at the targets. And you hear them say, ‘okay, well folks this didn’t work’. But [...] I think we need to be really clear [...] about what we’ve learned over the past 15 years, and what we’re confident about and what we don’t know about.'

As several participants highlighted, a failure to reduce health inequalities at a national level does not rule out the possibility that some interventions and policies were successful but that the impacts were negated by other policies, or that health inequalities policies prevented the gradient from getting even steeper. Responding to suggestions made by some policy actors at the event that there are examples of geographical areas within the UK in which health inequalities have reduced, researchers widely agreed that not enough effort has gone into collating the multiple analyses and evaluations that have been undertaken of local and national policies and interventions in the UK. Without this kind of detailed, comprehensive analysis, there was concern that it would remain difficult for health inequalities researchers to adequately support future decision-making.

1.2. A lack of clear policy solutions

In addition, some researchers expressed frustration at what they perceived to be an ongoing reticence within the research community to provide clear policy guidance as to the kinds of policies most likely to reduce health inequalities:
Academic: ‘I’m remembering... when the ’97 Labour government came in and said they wanted to do something about health inequalities, they looked around at us researchers and said, ‘well, what should we do?’’

Academic: ‘It was embarrassing.’

Academic: ‘And we’ve spent […] time since the Black Report [Black, 1980] knocking down all the criticisms of what we were doing. We haven’t been developing our own agenda, so I think we want to forget about being defensive and we want to say, well, these are the things which the government, if it’s serious, could do.’

Reflecting the comments above, the UK Labour government that was elected in 1997 commissioned an independent inquiry into health inequalities research (Acheson, 1998), which made 39 recommendations. It had, therefore, proved possible to develop some policy guidance from the available research at this time. However, these recommendations were criticised at the time for being vague and un-costed (with no hierarchy for the 39 recommendations) and for under-representing structural and socio-economic determinants (Davey Smith et al, 1998). The focus group discussions drawn on here suggest that this situation has not yet improved substantially enough to enable the kind of evidence-based policy advice that both researchers and policymakers have expressed a desire for (Whitehead et al, 2004).


2. Proposals for future health inequalities research agendas

Reflecting the palpable concern with developing clearer policy guidance, when asked what researchers ought now to be focusing on, the most common responses centred on means of improving knowledge about the actual and likely impacts of different kinds of policies and interventions. However, there were sharply contrasting perspectives on how best to enhance this kind of knowledge.

2.1 Improving evaluations

For some researchers, the need to improve knowledge about what works in reducing health inequalities necessitated far more rigorous evaluation of interventions intended to address inequality, with a focus on efficacy and cost-effectiveness (see Egan et al. 2009; Wanless, 2004). One senior academic went as far as suggesting that researchers should decline to be involved in assessing interventions/policies where proper evaluation was not possible:

‘I think researchers should be tougher in saying [to policymakers], ‘if you do it like that, then we’re not going to be involved in the evaluation’. [...] That’s my feeling, that researchers should take a stronger line, and also the politicians should, but I think researchers have a role in actually saying, ‘if you do that evaluation that way, even if you give us five million quid, we actually can’t give you the answer’.’

However, two linked concerns about a turn towards evaluating interventions were also evident. First, some participants claimed it was difficult to obtain resources and support to evaluate the impacts of macro-level policy shifts and/or non-health policies on health
inequalities, particularly where policy changes might be expected to have a negative impact on health inequalities, such as the current welfare reforms. As a consequence, some researchers argued that a focus on evaluating interventions unintentionally leads to the widely-discussed problem of ‘lifestyle drift’ (Popay et al. 2010):

Academic: ‘Often the focus on... randomised control trials, classical intervention studies means that most of the most important determinants [are not assessed]. I mean [...] things to do with welfare reform and occupational structure are not going to be easily evaluated in that way.’

Second, relating to this, several researchers argued that there has been a dearth of macro-level policies implemented within the UK over the past 30 years that might be expected to reduce health inequalities and, therefore, limited opportunities to evaluate policies likely to reduce health inequalities. For example:

Public sector researcher: “We need to do more intervention research but part of the problem we’ve got, I think, over the last decade or so is that there’s so few promising interventions, in truth, that have happened at a policy level that we would want to really spend a lot of time evaluating. So we’ve had Health Action Zones, we’ve had the tobacco ban [i.e. the smoking ban in most indoor public places], we’re going to have, hopefully, minimum pricing, but beyond that there’s very few big policy experiments.”
The difficulties in evaluating policy shifts and interventions in the real world, where policies are rarely implemented in ways which enable randomised comparisons, has been widely discussed in public health (e.g. Perkins et al. 2010). Specific suggestions from participants as to how researchers might address this included: (i) paying more attention to the impacts of policy changes and interventions on known social determinants of health, without necessarily requiring health indicators to be captured (see Bambra et al. 2010); (ii) working more closely with policymakers to roll out major policy changes in ways which allow for a proper evaluation; and (iii) expanding methodological approaches (see below).

Despite these suggestions, for some participants it seemed that the increasing funding opportunities for evaluation orientated research were actively ‘damaging’ health inequalities research by narrowing the focus onto behavioural and individualised interventions that are easier to evaluate using positivist/quantitative methodological frameworks. The concerns raised by some participants are summed up in a recent essay by Ted Schrecker:

‘Use of the randomized controlled trial (RCT) as the gold standard for intervention research, sitting atop a hierarchy of evidence [...] incorporates a set of methodological value judgments that merit reconsideration. Although examples exist of sound RCTs of large-scale policy initiatives [...] many kinds of interventions and policies cannot be assessed using RCTs, for reasons of ethics, costs, logistics, or all of these. Even when an RCT is conceptually possible, insisting on evidence from
RCTs may build into intervention research a bias against larger-scale, contextual interventions that are difficult to evaluate in this manner.’ (Schrecker, 2013: 742)

In line with Schrecker’s account, several of the more qualitative researchers involved in discussions argued that a preoccupation with evaluating interventions was squeezing out other types of research, with one senior academic referring to her sense that health inequalities research was increasingly being guarded by a ‘trial police’. For another senior academic, these concerns prompted a rejection of the very terminology associated with the evaluative turn within public health:

“I’ve got to the point now where, for a long time I’ve not used the word lifestyle - it’s a refusal in me to actually even use the term and I’m getting the same feeling now with the word intervention: I can’t bear it when people start talking about interventions in relation to the health of deprived communities. [...] I can’t bear the imposition of the straightjacket of the kind of work we do...”

The data presented in this section underline the obvious methodological tensions within the multi-disciplinary field of health inequalities research and suggest that researchers prioritise particular methodological approaches (usually their own) over others. A likely effect of this is the compartmentalisation of research funding in ways that potentially encourage partial investigations into complex issues. The final quotation suggests there may be a related division in the kind of language that different researchers choose to employ.
2.2 Expanding our methodological toolkit

Most participants agreed methodological innovation, including greater use of mixed methods, is required to develop better understandings of the impacts of policy change on health inequalities but more precise suggestions differed. Some researchers were concerned that the right things are not yet being measured (for a debate on this topic, see Frank and Haw, 2011; McCartney et al, 2013) but several (more quantitative) researchers suggested emerging data linkage opportunities could afford new opportunities for understanding the impacts of different kinds of interventions and policy changes on health inequalities:

Academic: “One of the other areas which is growing in capacity and interest is the data linkage. I simply see that as [...] another way of being able to better evaluate social interventions, policy or whatever. Primary data collection, as we all know, is really expensive and if [...] we could draw on comparative stuff, qualitative stuff, primary, quantitative and... routine data across not just medical but across education, criminology, justice, then I think you could begin to get a...very rich picture of what might be working and what might not be working.”

Overall, there seemed to be a consensus that there is a need for a more interdisciplinary approach to studying health inequalities and that the researchers need to become more imaginative at incorporating different kinds of data sources into analyses (see Table 2).
2.3 New research directions

When asked to consider new research directions, the most common theme throughout discussions was the need for research to help understand the impacts of major policy reforms currently being implemented in the UK (e.g. public funding cuts and, in England, NHS reforms):

Senior academic: “I think one of the things that’s really important [...] is the absolute reality that the impact of public sector cuts and the welfare cuts which are utterly savage, I mean savage [...] I mean that’s the reality and I think, as researchers within public health [...] that’s a really important issue to take on-board, kind of morally…”

In order to better understand the impacts of economic distress and austerity measures on people’s health and wellbeing, researchers suggested: (i) exploring historical and international experiences of similar situations (as noted above); and (ii) undertaking more in-depth qualitative research to better understand people’s lived experiences of these changes:

Researcher: “How good [...] is the research community at knowing and understanding communities and working with communities, quite genuinely listening to them? [...] None of us do actually really listen. [...] It’s about actually listening to people about what it’s [...] like for [them] where they’re living and what are the challenges they face on a daily basis - which will often be different from what we think they are, because we don’t know, because we’re all middle class.”
However, another researcher challenged the above assertion, arguing instead that a particular focus on deprived communities can shift the focus away from the need for population level change, whilst also unintentionally stigmatising people living in communities labelled as ‘deprived’:

Researcher: “We do tend to conceptualise health inequalities as [being] about particular well-defined communities, and of course it’s all about the gradient. It’s not only about the people in those communities, and sometimes I think we do harm by focusing so much on the deprived communities and calling them ‘deprived communities’. [...] Sometimes you make the stigma worse [...] because you’ve defined them as deprived communities and all your documents say, ‘we’re focusing on people in these deprived communities.’ [...] And I see the faces, sometimes, of the admin staff with some of the things that I write, where we say we’re going to prioritise these deprived communities, and they live there! And they say, ‘but wait a minute, actually we’re not deprived, we live there - it’s a perfectly good community’. And I think we need to be a bit careful about saying there are some people who suffer from health inequalities and they’re the deprived folk, then there’s everybody else...”

These kinds of concerns reflect the findings of a recent seven-country comparative study of the effects of poverty, undertaken by Walker and colleagues (2013), which argues that the shame associated with poverty is one of the most important dimensions for understanding how and why poverty impacts negatively on people’s lives. Likewise, a quotation from
Susan George, employed in one of the symposium presentations, warns researchers against studying ‘the poor and powerless’, who ‘already know what is wrong with their lives’, noting that this kind of research can be used in ways other than those intended by the sympathetic researcher (George, 1976: 289).

There is, therefore, a dilemma facing health inequalities researchers; whilst many participants suggested it would be extremely helpful to have more in-depth insights into the everyday experiences of living in difficult circumstances to better understand health inequalities (with several noting how different researchers’ own lived experiences tend to be), there were also clear concerns around the potentially stigmatising consequences of this kind of research.

George’s suggestion is that researchers ought to instead work to better understand ‘the rich and powerful’ (George, 1976: p289) and several researchers supported this idea, calling for more research to understand how well-resourced actors work to shape policies in ways which contribute to health inequalities. This is a strand of research that has so far been under-explored within health inequalities, although Scambler has drawn attention to the issue via his ‘greedy bastards hypothesis’ (Scambler 2007, 2009) which asserts that ‘Britain’s widening health inequalities can be seen as a largely unintended consequence of the voracious, strategic appetites’ of capitalist power elites (Scambler, 2012: 137). Specifically, several researchers argued that the role of corporations in generating health inequalities required exploration:
Knowledge broker: “One thing that I think has been under-investigated is the paradox that currently most of the immediate causes of premature mortality are due to overconsumption of, whether it’s tobacco, alcohol, food and drugs, and yet the impact is the greatest on most disadvantaged groups. And it seems to me that we’ve not really focused enough on the free market economy and on the big multinational companies and the way in which they can exploit, particularly the weakest, to create this sense that, ‘I must have this, I need this to make me happy,’ and so on, with absolutely devastating results.”

Beyond the above suggestions, which stimulated significant discussion, there was a wealth of further suggestions for topics deserving of more attention within health inequalities research. As it is not feasible to discuss each suggestion within the space of this paper, Table 2 provides a summary.

Table 2: Researchers’ suggestions for future directions in health inequalities research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics requiring further research</th>
<th>New/emerging topics to explore</th>
<th>Suggested /conceptual approaches</th>
<th>Suggested collaborations, links &amp; syntheses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Links between income, job status and health inequalities by studying the organisations in which we work (e.g. NHS bodies and universities);</td>
<td>• Likely (and actual) impacts of contemporary welfare cuts, austerity measures, etc on health inequalities;</td>
<td>• More mixed methods research to develop comprehensive methodological approaches to studying health inequalities;</td>
<td>• Invest more resources in comprehensively collating/synthesising the various existing analyses of the impacts on health inequalities of interventions and policies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The impacts of social and structural violence(^1) on health inequalities;</td>
<td>• Likely (and actual) impacts of NHS reforms (in England) on health inequalities;</td>
<td>• More ethnographic and anthropological methods to better understand people’s life-worlds (including using innovative approaches such as ‘human libraries’);</td>
<td>• Work with policy scholars to better understand the policymaking process and the factors necessary to facilitate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Further research notions of community</td>
<td>• Develop links between environmental / climate change &amp; health inequalities research;</td>
<td>• Public, political and policy perceptions and understandings of health inequalities;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Likely (and actual) impacts of climate change on health inequalities;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) Social and structural violence refers to political and economic inequality (Farmer, 1997).
| Role of corporations in health inequalities debates and in shaping the policies impacting on health inequalities; |
| Identify more ‘intermediate’ structural determinants of health inequalities to enable better studies of the relationship between upstream changes and health inequalities (helping to guard against ‘lifestyle drift’); |
| Investigate the relationships between violence, drugs & health inequalities (esp. in Scotland); |
| Research social and economic inequalities as well as health inequalities (given what is known about the links between these broader kinds of inequalities and health inequalities), both because this kind of research may be more informative and because local communities are more likely to engage with it. |
| Work with policymakers to ensure commissioned evaluations are rigorous (consider refusing to undertake commissioned evaluations where this is not possible); |
| Exploit emerging opportunities for data linkage (both in terms of quantitative data sets and linking quantitative data sets with available qualitative data); |
| Exploit the increasing availability of secondary qualitative data sets, such as oral histories; |
| Undertake more participatory / collaborative research with relevant communities. |
| Work to integrate studies of health inequalities with relevant concepts in political science, sociology and social theory. |

It is worth noting that some researchers with interests in qualitative methods claimed that funders were increasingly more inclined to fund quantitative studies and that, ‘where qualitative aspects are included,’ there was ‘a tendency for them to be seen as of marginal importance and stripped out’. This seems important given that most of the methodological suggestions put forward by researchers (as summarised in Table 2) involved qualitative / mixed methods research.

### 3. Suggestions for improving the influence of health inequalities research on policy and practice

There was a strong emphasis throughout discussions on the need to improve links between health inequalities research, policy and practice but, clear differences of opinion regarding the best way to achieve this.
3.1 Getting the public on board

Reflecting recent suggestions that health inequalities researchers ought to do more to ensure future governments have the necessary democratic mandate to implement some of the upstream measures that evidence suggests may be required (Mackenbach 2011; Whitehead and Popay, 2010), many participants emphasised the need to improve relationships between health inequalities researchers and public (as opposed to policy) audiences:

Academic: “We’re not hugely public and most of us don’t write commentaries for newspapers or letters to the papers, or do those sorts of media things that economists do all the time. [...] There are enough of us really who have known for a long, long time that if you want to improve the public health and reduce health inequalities you’ve got to deal with the structural determinants, and still most members of the public don’t think that. They think people die early because they’re feckless, reckless, smoke and drink too much. So, we haven’t got it across, not just to policymakers, we haven’t got it across to the public.”

Other researchers challenged these claims, noting that there has been insufficient research in this area to really know what the public think about health inequalities. One researcher argued that the studies of lay perceptions of health inequalities point to a relatively sophisticated understanding of the social determinants of health, at least in communities bearing the brunt of these inequalities (e.g. Popay et al, 2003). Nonetheless, researchers
involved in the symposium seemed to feel it was at least as important to communicate and engage with local communities / the public as they did to engage with policy audiences. Indeed, some of the discussions involved some reflection as to who, ultimately, health inequalities research is for:

*Academic: ‘I am now struggling to understand who my research is for. And do I want to waste my time doing research for a government who is either going to punish me for daring to study the effects of ill-health in housing estates, or just disregard my research? And so now I’m thinking it’s kind of like an opportunity to reflect on what I’m doing, and it was a bit uncomfortable really just sitting here and listening to [symposium presentations and discussion] because they all seemed to be saying, blatantly, [...] who is the research for?’*

The unspoken implication of these kinds of contributions seemed to be that the public, or local communities, are important agents of change, although how public and policy perceptions of health inequalities might link was not explicitly discussed.

Overall, there seemed to be a consensus that health inequalities researchers need to get better at engaging with various non-academic communities. However, there was a distinction between researchers who emphasised the importance of listening to, and working collaboratively with, relevant communities (as the above participant went on to do) and those, such as the following researcher, who focused on the need to enhance general public interest in, and understanding of, health inequalities:
Academic: ‘If you look back at the pioneers of social policy, […] Richard Titmuss, Peter Townsend, Brian Able-Smith […] and all the rest of it, they would tell you that one op-ed piece in a broad sheet newspaper is worth 25 peer review journal articles. […] Or speaking to the local radio or whatever. So I think communicating to real people in a practical way needs to be part of what’s seen as our legitimate activities.’

These two differing ways of framing engagement map onto the contrasting definitions of ‘advocacy’ outlined in the introduction; whilst the former seems to be more about helping people to get their voices heard (‘facilitational’ advocacy – Carlisle, 2000), the latter seems to be about ‘selling’ particular issues/goals (‘representational’ advocacy – Carlisle, 2000; Chapman, 2007).

3.2 Getting political

A few researchers went further, arguing that it is essential for health inequalities to work more strategically to achieve social and policy change, including by developing better advocacy skills:

Academic: ‘There’s a reluctance to recognise that public health is essentially a political discipline […] I do think it’s indefensible that advocacy isn’t a core public health competence and… I don’t think it’s a coincidence that lots of the pressure for advocacy being integrated into the public health curriculum has come from people like Simon Chapman [in tobacco control] who’ve long argued that, why is it that
we’re prepared to go on and make media appearance without any training, but will sit down and rehearse a conference paper that’s going to be listened to by 20 people?’

However, there was also palpable apprehension amongst some participants about the ability of academic researchers to take on advocacy roles:

Academic: ‘I’m uncomfortable with that because… not because advocacy’s wrong but because some people within the community are better suited and skilled to engage in advocacy than others. So I prefer the word grounded - I think even if you’re not good at advocacy, if you’re engaged in this field you should ground yourself in real everyday experiences with people in communities.’

Some participants suggested that, rather than becoming advocates/lobbyists themselves, researchers ought simply to develop better links with other kinds of campaigners and policy advocates, such as third sector organisations. However, others expressed concern that the topic-based nature of many third sector organisations could mean such an approach might unintentionally exacerbate ‘lifestyle drift’, and place a greater focus on ‘the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff […] than your fence at the top’. These kinds of debates suggest it may also be useful to work to better understand the role of third sector organisations within health inequalities debates.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION
Reflecting collectively on the views of the 56 researchers who participated in the symposium, it seems clear there is a strong desire to be able to identify and coalesce around agreed recommendations for action to reduce health inequalities. Beyond this, however, three distinct ‘types’ of researcher seem identifiable, each of who has definable preferences with regards to the most promising areas of research, the most appropriate methodological approaches and the most important non-academic audiences to engage with. The three ‘types’ are described below in the manner of Weber’s (1962) ‘ideal types’ (i.e. the descriptions are logical constructions which help elucidate some of the coalitions and divisions which are evident within the data); in reality (as discussed further below), individual researchers often made contributions that would place them in more than one of these categories.

(i) **Policy-focused positivists**

This type of health inequalities researcher is strongly committed to the idea that quantitative, experimental research designs provide the most useful insights into understanding what works to reduce health inequalities. In terms of moving health inequalities research forward, researchers in this category tended to promote the need for more (and better) evaluations of interventions and policies, including through the exploitation of data linkage opportunities. They came across as policy-focused, in the sense that they want to ensure the research is useful for policy-audiences (who were often conceived of in a relatively narrow sense, i.e. senior civil servants and ministers). However, in prioritising scientific independence and methodological rigour, it was also clear that they
were wary of researchers becoming co-opted by policymakers or interpreting data through a political/ideological lens.

This way of approaching health inequalities came under significant criticism during symposium discussions for at least four reasons. First, some researchers argued that, no matter how hard researchers might try to persuade policymakers of the benefits of rolling interventions out in ways that enable effective evaluation, major policy changes tend to be driven by reasons other than research, making it unlikely that this will change. A small number of ‘hard-line’ researchers in this category argued that researchers should simply refuse to engage in evaluations which they felt were likely to be hampered by the policy design or roll-out. However, the most common, ‘softer’ response was to suggest that researchers needed to supplement traditional approaches to evaluation with broader, more sophisticated methodological approaches. Second, some researchers expressed concern that a greater focus on evaluation orientated research results, in practice, in ‘lifestyle drift’ (Popay et al., 2010: 148), both because it is difficult to apply rigorous, quantitative evaluative methods to macro-level (or even meso-level) policies and because large-scale policy shifts are relatively unusual, limiting opportunities to study the impacts of macro policy changes. Third, some researchers criticised the ‘elite’ orientation of this way of working, which tends to focus on the views of experienced researchers and senior bureaucrats, paying little (if any) attention to the views of the communities most negatively impacted by health inequalities (see Scambler, 2012). Finally, some researchers simply noted that the benefits of this approach for reducing health inequalities remain unproven
(i.e. that, despite investments in this way of working, advances in our knowledge of how to reduce health inequalities remain limited).

(ii) Empathetic ethnographers

Other participants argued that health inequalities researchers need to interrogate what health inequalities mean in people’s social worlds (Scambler 2012: 144). These researchers called for more priority to be afforded to listening to, and working to understand, the experiences of communities experiencing the brunt end of health inequalities. Reflecting Ruth Lister’s assertion, these participants were often overtly critical of research in which ‘those with every day experience of living in poverty’ are treated as research objects, rather than having ‘their thoughts published’ (Lister, 2004: 2). This approach was much more ethnographic in nature, with preferred methods including in-depth qualitative methods to capture the complexity of people’s everyday experiences in order to help: (i) better understand the pathways linking upstream determinants and health inequalities; and (ii) prioritise research issues overtly impacting on the people bearing the brunt of health inequalities (rather than assessing what is worthy of further research based on identifying gaps in the available evidence). This group of researchers seemed committed to ‘advocacy’ in the sense of working to help voices that are often ignored to become more audible (Carlisle, 2000), including by co-producing research with communities (Letcher and Perlow, 2009).

Within symposium discussions, this kind of approach to studying health inequalities seemed to enjoy broad support. However, multiple contributors said they felt that funders were
unlikely to provide resources for this kind of research. Three criticisms of this approach were also put forward, including by researchers who seemed generally sympathetic to qualitative research. First, some researchers cautioned that a focus on researching poorer communities exacerbates the tendency for to conceptualise health inequalities as a matter of 'health deprivation' (i.e. a problem caused by the poor health of poor people), rather than a ‘social gradient of health’ (see Graham and Kelly, 2004). Second, relatedly, some participants argued that this can be unintentionally stigmatising for the communities involved. Third, some researchers questioned whether commitments to working with communities necessarily effect change (although some successful examples were cited – see Martin et al, 1987; Roberts et al, 2011).

(iii) **Critical materialists**

Taking a rather different approach, some participants called for more attention to be paid to exploring how ‘elite’ actors (including corporations) shape policies and debates in ways which create and exacerbate health inequalities. For these participants, the link between health inequalities and wider social and economic inequalities seemed undisputed so their priority for future research was less about trying to understand the aetiological pathways linking policies and interventions to everyday health experiences and more about working to reveal the extent to which society is becoming less equal, who is shaping these decisions and how power relations are enacted (see Coburn, 2004; Navarro 2009; and Scambler, 2012). It was suggested this kind of work involved drawing on social and political theory, as well as empirical research (again, see Scambler, 2012), another area for which there seemed to be some consensus that funding support was limited.
From this perspective, health inequalities research is, in itself, a political activity. The notion that researchers ought to be engaging in advocacy therefore tended to be supported by researchers in this category and involved working ‘to provoke critical thinking’ and public awareness of, and agitation against, the power imbalances underlying health inequalities (see Krieger et al, 2012). However, it was unclear that researchers in this category had a defined sense of what they were advocating for (rather than against). As Scambler (2012) notes, the prospects for realising the conditions in which social and economic inequalities might be substantially reduced is a challenge more often posed than taken up. Without being able to offer obvious ‘solutions’, there are some important ethical questions to be addressed. For, if the communities in question do not have control over the levers shaping the structures that are negatively impacting on their lives, drawing attention to the health-damaging effects of these structures may, in itself, have damaging implications (including the kind of stigmatising impacts discussed earlier).

Where do we go from here?
The three ‘types’ of health inequalities researcher outlined above are illustrated as distinct from one another for heuristic purposes. In reality, it was evident from discussions that the boundaries between these different ‘types’ were not as distinct as the descriptions above might suggest; indeed, several researchers made contributions to discussions that could lead them to be positioned in more than one of these groups. Moreover, while participants were selected with a view to ensuring a range of perspectives, there are likely to be other perspectives that were not captured through this research (certainly some areas, such as
health economics, were under-represented in the sample, despite specific efforts by the Steering Group to attract health economists to the event). Nonetheless, the focus group discussions suggested that the three different ways of approaching health inequalities outlined above are informing three different routes forward for future health inequalities research. This, in turn, appeared to be informing competing sources of policy advice (e.g. advice based on the best available evaluations of specific interventions versus advice informed by critical analyses of overarching policy paradigms) and contrasting views about who, beside other researchers, academics ought to be engaging with (national level policymakers, local communities or the wider public).

The different approaches seem to relate to deeply-held epistemological and ideological positions that are unlikely to shift. Researchers who are strongly committed to positivist approaches are unlikely, for example, to appreciate the benefits of ethnographic or co-produced research and may dismiss critical materialist work as being overtly ideological (see Gieryn, 1983; Smith, 2013a). Focusing on trying to persuade each other of the benefits of our preferred way of working therefore seems ill-fated. Yet, in the context of limited research funding, the data suggest that different types of researchers do view themselves as competing with one another. This is unsurprising to the extent that it reflects well-established phenomena within the sociology of science. Gieryn (1983), for example, describes scientists undertaking what he calls ‘boundary work’ in order to distinguish between what is considered to be ‘science’ and what is not, with a view to enhancing the credibility of their own research and, therefore, their access to resources. This kind of ‘boundary work’ was evidence within the focus group discussions, with some health
inequalities researchers in each of the three categories criticising methodological approaches that differed from their own and challenging the legitimacy and funding of other types of research. Such divisions seem likely to promote the continued compartmentalisation of methodological approaches to studying health inequalities, despite the fact that many researchers acknowledge there was a need for more mixed methods research to better understand the complexity of interweaving and dynamic inequalities.

All this suggests the field of health inequalities research is unlikely to appear cohesive to external (e.g. policy and advocacy) audiences. This is despite the fact that: (i) focus group participants generally agreed that the 2008 economic crisis and subsequent 2010 ‘austerity’ agenda of public cuts were likely to have important (largely negative) impacts on health inequalities; (ii) a recent online survey of researchers suggests that there are areas of consensus around policy recommendations (Smith and Kandalik Eltanani, 2014); and (iii) many of the researchers involved in the symposium made contributions which would place them in more than one of these categories.

Rather than pitting these three ways of approaching health inequalities against one another a more promising approach might be to better enable space for each of these different ways of working, particularly when it comes to studying the complex effects of clusters of policy changes, such as the current ‘austerity’-led welfare reforms. Indeed, if we consider areas of public health in which significant policy and societal changes have been achieved, such as tobacco control, there is evidence that all three kinds of approach have made important contributions (Smith, 2013b). Over time, it seems plausible that different approaches may
lead to similar conclusions about the most desirable (or effective) kinds of policy responses, or that a combination of insights from the various approaches collectively contribute to reductions in health inequalities. Moreover, as Petticrew and colleagues (2004) identify, different policy actors may be more or less persuaded by different kinds of evidence. This requires researchers to step back from ‘boundary’ debates about what is, and what is not, considered legitimate (or even optimal) within health inequalities research. This is, however, likely to be particularly difficult in the context of an increasingly market-based university system (Marginson and Considine, 2005).

While the current situation does not make ‘advocating’ to reduce health inequalities impossible, it certainly makes it more challenging than recent calls imply (Mackenbach, 2011), particularly as the distinct approaches to health inequalities identified in this article themselves evoke different ways of thinking about ‘advocacy’ and policy change. For example (thinking back to the introduction), only ‘empathetic ethnographers’ appeared to conceive of ‘advocacy’ in the ‘facilitational’ manner that Carlisle (2000) describes; and while ‘policy-focused positivists’ and ‘critical materialists’ both appeared to favour a ‘representational’ form of advocacy, their conceptualisations of the kind of audiences and work involved in this differed in ways reminiscent of the distinction Scambler (2012) makes between ‘policy sociology’ and ‘critical sociology’. Hence, without (at the very least) a greater appreciation of these different ways of working within the research community, it is likely to be difficult for researchers to contribute to developing effective advocacy for health equity (Farrer et al, 2015).
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