

## **Futility and necessity: reflecting on an academic life researching poverty**

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For the avoidance of doubt, I firmly believe that academics in general – and academics researching poverty in particular – should be using their talents for a good greater than the (albeit worthy) pursuit of academic knowledge. I have walked this walk for much of my thirty plus years in higher education: but it has been a journey not without criticism from within and outside the house.

### **What difference does it make?**

I suppose I had a crisis of confidence in my early years as an academic. I lost confidence in the Academy. I had researched the 'quality of life of lone parents as a deprived population' for my PhD (University of Glasgow), progressing to my first paid research position, part of which explored the differences in perceptions and management of children's safety from families from more and less affluent areas (University of Manchester), and on to my first contract as a PI, which explored the inequities in access to commercial leisure space among the same (University of Manchester, then Glasgow Caledonian University). It was an exciting time, leading to many publications in peer-reviewed journals, affording me opportunities to engage academic audiences within and beyond my discipline, and taking me to places near and far to present at national and international symposiums, in Norway, Netherlands and across the length and breadth of the UK.

But as my career flourished, so my concerns with the Academy grew. [The 'cultural turn' in geography](#) seemed to me to be enriching social geography with the pursuit of the esoteric and the abstract, when I was confronting issues that seemed more present, and which were

impairing the quality of life as lived for some of the most vulnerable in society. It seemed indulgent to ruminate, rather than address. And yet, when speaking to those who seemed more attuned to my way of thinking – sociologists, and in particular social policy analysts – there was a sense that I was the one who obsessed with the esoteric at the margins, concerned as I was with the power of place, local action and challenging the taken-for-granted and everyday assumptions about the nature of poverty. Their imperative was ‘upstream’, to address the national drivers that would add to the pounds and pence that were not reaching many people’s pockets. Solace – or a sense of academic place - was to be found when a move back to Scotland to a ‘new’ university coincided with formative years of [Devolution](#) and finding an appetite for the applied (local) social geography that has always interested me.

### **These things take time**

I suppose I was fortunate that my research interests coincided with those of the [Scottish Poverty and Information Unit](#) that was based at my new place of work. The demand for research intelligence to further understanding and support decision-making in priority areas of Scottish Government responsibility brought us closer to those in civil society who were working to tackle poverty and to government officials who were charged with shaping the social policies that sought to reshape Scottish society.

Through time, connections were strengthened and reputations forged as we were, for example, [contracted to analyse \*Closing the Opportunity Gap\*](#), the second Scottish Government’s anti-poverty strategy (2004-2005), asked to provide learning support to the [Community Regeneration and Tackling Poverty Learning Network](#) (2009-2011), and [worked with the Child Poverty Action Group to bring together leading politicians and civil society operators in ‘Poverty in Scotland’ evidence and analysis volumes](#) that aimed to shape debate leading up to each Scottish parliamentary election (2003, 2007, 2011, 2016, 2021, plus the Independence Referendum of 2014).

When the UK government reneged in 2016 on its commitment to tackle child poverty by 2020, Scotland responded with the Child Poverty Act 2017 which, with cross-party support, committed Scotland to tackle child poverty by 2030. From this point onward, opportunities abounded to support the work of those tackling poverty in Scotland. Much of this work is focused on the national agenda, such as sitting as an external member on the Scottish Government's Child Poverty Programme Board (the body charged with responsibility for delivering on the 2017 commitment), or as a board member of the Vulnerable Consumers Group of Consumer Scotland or serving as a Trustee of the Scottish Pantry Network. But there is also recognition of the importance of the 'local' in these national ambitions.

### **Back to the old house**

For the last seven years, the Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit (relaunched and renamed in 2017) has been contracted to provide support to Scotland's 32 local authorities as they seek to discharge their responsibilities to tackle poverty locally. Such is the breadth of local action that we have developed a [Tackling Poverty Locally Directory](#) to share practice on the wide range of local actions that are being undertaken across Scotland (and beyond) to tackle poverty – each entry includes a 'how-to' guide to offer practical advice to others who might be interested in adopting or adapting these innovations themselves. At the time of writing, we have now published over 80 peer-reviewed case studies. We have also recently concluded on work for the Place-based Social Justice team within the Scottish Government supporting four communities of practice, bringing together local practitioners across Scotland to work together on one of the four challenges faced in tackling poverty locally, i.e., (i) adapting, adopting or scaling up local practice; (ii) shifting the spend; (iii) working across generations; and (iv) working collaboratively in place-based work.

The possibility of crafting a strong 'Impact case study' for the next [REF](#)<sup>1</sup> exercise is not the driving force behind my work. Rather, it is a belief in the power of applied geography and the recognition that there is a demand for the skills, perspective and support that academics can bring to support the work of those tasked with the responsibility of addressing complex social problems, such as tackling poverty. But, I am at heart an academic and thus hard-wired to ruminate, theorise, and reflect. Although when engaging practitioners, us academics are sometimes criticised for merely reiterating what those in communities already know, more commonplace is a sense that what we offer is necessary, complementary and welcome. And so, I am now off to grab a mug of coffee, before the remainder of my weekend is spent preparing a presentation, for and at the request of the Scottish Sheriffs on the contemporary character of poverty in Scotland.

Our work – your work – is far from futile and is necessary (albeit alone insufficient) as we work to challenge the problems that poverty presents.

### **End Note**

Any reference to the titles from a three-track 12-inch CD released by The Smiths in 1984 is purely co-incidental.

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<sup>1</sup> Research Excellence Framework (REF)