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Combining data, enhancing explanation

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Combining data, enhancing explanation

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1. Introduction

I am going to start with a poem. I am sure you know it (The Blind Man and the Elephant, a poem by Saxe, a version of an ancient Indian tale):

“It was 6 men of Indostan
To learning much inclined
Who went to see the elephant (though all of them were blind)
That each by observation might satisfy his mind

The first approached the elephant
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side At once began to bawl
God bless me but the elephant Is very like a wall

The second feeling of the tusk
Cried Ho, what have we here?
So very round and smooth and sharp – to me tis mighty clear
This wonder of an elephant Is very like a spear.”

The Third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands, - thus boldly up and spake:
'I see', quoth he, the Elephant – is very like a snake

And so it goes on until all 6 different perspectives have been described. For me it serves as a nice metaphor for thinking about a purpose of combining methods, and combining data, specifically: bringing together different perspectives, in order to better picture the elephant. Mostly our research questions refer to complex phenomena with many facets. Different methods, and kinds of data, can allow a more comprehensive picture to emerge.

Many caution, rightly, against naivety in bringing together data. It is not simply a case of bringing together lots of data, in an additive way, to get a more comprehensive picture. After all, different kinds of data may be giving a different kind of picture.

So I would argue that, firstly:

We need conceive data as offering specific kinds of evidence, *as particular rather than all-revealing slices through our research problem*. This should be part and parcel of our data analysis.

Secondly I would argue that:

The way in which we bring together data should be informed by substantive and theoretical engagement with the problem in hand. Hopefully the data will contribute to expanding our understanding, and perhaps expanding our resources for explanation.

I and my colleagues at Leeds and Manchester are members of Multidimensional Methods for Real Lives Research (or Real Life Methods). This is a Node of the NCRM. The Node is in its early days so it is too soon to report on the research. However, we will be seeking to bring together methods and data in ways which

can enhance social scientific understanding and explanation. In one sub project we will be researching young teenage lives across family, school and friendships, over time through a qualitative longitudinal study, and across levels of analysis: micro level qualitative, survey based and secondary analysis of national level data sets. In another subproject we will be researching networks and communications in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, and their links to health, and access to healthcare. In another we will be exploring family resemblances, and ideas about the meaning of family and kinship in people's lives. Within and across these projects a range of methods will be used (e.g. interviews of different kinds, observation, survey method, visual methods such as photo-elicitation and video, metaphor analysis; researching social and communications networks: ie. a range of techniques for generating data. Additionally we will explore a range of issues in the use of methods, such as ethics in using visual method; the scope for combining data, and so on. We are especially interested in researching social contexts. As I said it is too soon to report on this research. What I want to do however, is to explore some issues in researching context in my paper, with reference to other research problems. I do so because I think this is very relevant to a particular set of problems in sociological explanation.

I want to explore how attitudes and values on the one hand link to social circumstances on the other. I am going to talk through some empirical material, and I will also reflect on bringing together different sources of data, in researching this issue.

Clearly there are many ways to combine data, and many examples of good practice in this area. Bryman 1988, 2001, Hammersley 1992, Kelle 2001, Hammond 2005, Brannen 2005 and many others have explored and classified the kinds of ways in which multi strategy, and mixed methods research proceeds and has been used quite widely by social science research. For example, we might consider multi methods research in terms of complementarity of different kinds of data; of triangulation, of initiation (e.g. discrepancies may be tackled to provide a broader or even renewed explanation of the issues under investigation). Focusing specifically on within-qualitative methods, Noblit and Hare offer models for meta-ethnography, advocating translation across studies to identify processes operating across diverse contexts.

In this paper I will be thinking about combining data from different sources to revisit some explanatory problems. The problems I have in mind arise from a theoretical and analytic gap between people's outlooks and values on the one hand, and their social circumstances on the other.

This has a broader significance, since I think separation of normative and social processes works against an adequate understanding of social change. The issues reflect some current key concerns in sociological debates. Hopefully they therefore hold some general interest. But for a social science research methods seminar I guess the key thing I want to underline is that:

How we understand empirical data cannot be separated out from the substantive and theoretical issues we are tackling. Empirical data provides a particular slice through our research problems. And we need to understand how this is the case: not simply that we don't get the whole picture in one shot, so to speak, but we get a specific angle.

For example, if we interview people we know they have a specific position or vantage point on the issues on which they are questioned (it is often this

diversity that we want to access). However, often we need also better understand the specificity of people's vantage point. This is often a conceptual issue.

One brief example helps illustrate the general argument.

There is plenty of evidence that people tend not to self identify in class terms.

Q: Do you think of yourself as belonging to any particular class?

"No. I don't think I would really but, er, you know. No."

"I'd just say ordinary" (Savage 2000, p. 111).

"No, I just think I am me, and this is how I am, take me or leave me, you know" (Savage et al 2001, p. 882).

This sort of typical response has provided a puzzle for class analysts. Why do we have this seeming disalignment between the class ridden social structure and people's social identities? Why do people not more readily identify in class terms?

It is here that categories are imported: or, there is a jump between levels of analysis.

For example, some argue that we have witnessed a pattern of responsabilisation. A rolling out of the ideology of individual responsibility, means people read their social world in individualised terms.

Others recently have argued that people disavow class. Seeing in it a misrecognition of their real identities and capacities, people resist class categorisation. Crudely stated, the seeming irrelevance of class to people's identities is read as a moral indictment of an unjust system.

In both cases an additional process is brought in to shoehorn people's 'odd' presentations of themselves into line with their diverse positions in the social structure.

But: an alternative account of social location (and of the specificity of people's vantage points) allows us to see their accounts as entirely consistent with their social circumstance. In short, we need to recognise patterns of association, interaction, and the tendency for people to engage with 'people like themselves'. In their closest and most meaningful interactions they tend to associate with like others. Consequently they typically describe themselves as middling, and social class is not necessarily a key component of social identity. People's sense of themselves is shaped and expressed in specific contexts and patterns of association, not as a direct reflection on the structure as a whole. (They do not routinely take the bird's eye view like the social theorist does). So despite being situated in a hierarchical structure people do not routinely reflect upon that structure. In short, when we analyse what people say we need understand their social position, and also their vantage point. But this will not come from the data alone. It is a conceptual issue.

I was invited to reflect on issues of explanation in my presentation, and I will later explore examples in data analysis with this in mind. I turn now to some problems in sociological explanation.

2. Puzzles in sociological explanation

Recent developments in sociology, the cultural turn, have engendered a renewed interest in agency, norms, values and moral process. The developments have been important. They have encouraged more extensive and detailed exploration of the texture of human experience, and challenged orthodoxies about the nature of these experiences. Beliefs, values and so forth are now at the heart of understandings of social life.

However – we are left with some significant problems of understanding and explanation. Why? Because the emphasis on agency, subjectivities and moral components of social life has left difficulties in understanding how these meld with structural processes.

Sometimes the two sides are separated by design. For example:

a) Recent influential theories tell us there is a disjuncture between the two.

Some theories of social change in late modernity describe a weakening of the link between values and outlooks, and objective social conditions. Here values appear to be less bound up with social conditions. For example, in theories of individualisation, Beck speaks of consciousness rushing ahead of conditions. In new theories of gender and work, some argue that values have a new power in determining choices and behaviours.

Some influential perspectives, then, see values as having a new relevance to people, and to how we organise social life.

Sometimes the two sides are separated by default. For example,

b) a tendency in recent qualitative research to focus on issues of value and morality etc, but with less emphasis on broader social structural arrangements, and difficulties in connecting with these.

I think there is a risk that this alleged gap between subjective orientations and social circumstance is overstated and unhelpful. It needs bridging within analysis. I think we need to take the realm of the subjective and of values very seriously. But the evidence still seems to suggest that subjective orientations are closely linked to people's social circumstances and social position.

Further, I think if we understand how the two are linked we in fact get better insights into the shape of social diversity. I think that conceptualising contexts, of belief and action, is something of a missing layer within a good deal of recent sociological analysis. We need more consideration of how people are embedded in diverse contexts; how these contexts are themselves experienced; the form that contexts take.

Research has been not great in analysing context. Quantitative research tends to pull against accessing contextual specificity in illuminating general patterns; Qualitative research illuminates aspects of contextual specificity, but faces

difficulties in locating such specificity, and in scaling up to illuminate general social processes.

I would suggest that to better explore the links between subjective views and objective social arrangements we need: a better conceptualisation of social contexts, and of how people are socially positioned. Holstein and Gubrium (2004) warn against qualitative researchers simply making overtures to social context, without 'empirical warrant'. For example, class and social structure are sometimes invoked in explanation with fairly limited empirical specification. Rather, Holstein and Gubrium argue, context should be analysed as it is recognised by, or related to, social actors and their activities. I will focus on how social contexts relate to attitudes and outlooks. I turn now to an example of the importance of context, as revealed across different data sources, with reference to the salience of race and ethnicity.

3. Ethnicity and belonging

A significant literature in race and ethnicity focuses on difference, particularly discourses of racial /ethnic difference. Many (e.g. Solomos and Back 1996) argue that there is a gap between the realm of values, and social circumstances. To tackle this gap it is useful again to think about context and how we can access it. My argument is that we can draw on different data sources to reveal the importance of context in diverse constructions of ethnicity, difference and social belonging. Here I take as a particular focus, social association and interaction. I consider secondary and primary analyses here.

In 'New Ethnicities and Urban Cultures' Les Back (1996) undertook a study of two specific neighbourhood contexts, and revealed constructions of racial difference and racism to be strongly shaped by contextual specificities. We can see links between values and the social and economic contexts in which they hold force. Using ethnographic methods Back took local level context as an object of analysis, as well as individual level belief and action, and explored the meshing of the two. These were closely related, and helped 'ground' an understanding of the relevance of different kinds of discourses around race and anti-racism.

Tariq Modood and his colleagues undertook linked qualitative and quantitative studies for the PSI (Modood et al 1994; 1997). They explored the perceived salience of race and ethnicity to people, amongst other things. They looked closely at the social positioning of different ethnic groupings, in Britain, in terms of patterns of social integration, alongside subjective beliefs about similarity and difference. The data reveals a diversity of subjective beliefs in Britishness and belonging, and strong links between beliefs and the patterns of association and interaction within and across ethnic boundaries.

We can complement these other studies with analysis of primary data gathered through one particular project done as part of CAVA. (The ESRC Research Group for the study of Care, Values and the Future of Welfare)¹. The study was not for purposes of exploring ethnic identification and patterns of association but there was evidence on ethnicity and belonging within this qualitative study with Pakistani and British Pakistani people living in Bradford. The data provides some evidence on perceptions of belonging and difference. An inductive mode of analysis generated a thematising of the data along the lines of differing

perceptions of belonging; and is indicative of an association between such perceptions, and contexts of action and interaction: that is how people see themselves as positioned in diverse communities and networks..

To illustrate this we can explore expressions of belonging. These lay on a spectrum. At one end were those who held strong emotional (and associational) ties to Pakistan (I describe these respondents under a heading 'Pakistani belonging'). Exemplifying this is Zarqua. She was 26 and came to Bradford from Pakistan four and a half years before the interview, and after marrying her British born husband, through an arranged marriage. She does not work, and lives with her husband in his parents' house, along with his brothers and their wives.

Of her daughter she says:

Zarqa: We took her with us to Pakistan. She saw Pakistan and was very pleased. Now she is very young. We will take her again when she is grown up.

Q: Why is it important for you to take her to Pakistan?

Zarqa: She should know where her parents were born and which is our real country. The country belongs to her father and grandfather. That is our real country.

At the other end of the spectrum were those who clearly identified Britain (or, at least, Bradford) as home (I place these under a heading 'British belonging'). Exemplifying this was Iffat. She was a 19 year old student, was born in Britain, has family and relatives in Bradford and around Europe, lives with her family in a predominantly white area, and is a student at Bradford University. She was asked about her sense of home:

Q: But what is home then?

Iffat: Here

..

Q: Where are you told is your home?

Iffat: Here, Bradford, definitely Bradford. Its weird because my friends and stuff they normally say Pakistan.

Q: Do they?

Iffat: They'd actually say this is their home this is where they were born and raised but our parents home is Pakistan. I think that's why they call it back home but I can't call that back home because I don't see that as home

For the most part respondents lie between, and I have characterised them as having a 'dual faceted belonging', seeing Britain or England, or more definitely Bradford, as home, yet also expressing in quite strong terms the significance to them of a Pakistani identity and sense of belonging:

For example:

Shameem is female, 33, was born in Britain, holds a higher degree, lives in Bradford in a predominantly Asian area, and she works in Leeds. She identified a mix of communities to which she felt she belonged: relating to work, to residence and to the Muslim community.:

"... identity isn't hard and set it just depends what mood you're in or what is the current situation"

(There is evidence of a link between this kind of contingency of belonging, and the asymmetry of minority/majority norms, and concerns about discrimination, but not room here to discuss it). The data I have presented is all strongly suggestive of the importance of a link between varying perceptions and social contexts, of association and interaction. Analysis of context reminds us how cautious we should be of making too much of generalising categories, of ethnic membership for example. It encourages us to do what many researchers recently have argued for (e.g. Walby; Anthias): that is to *locate difference*, rather than take it as a starting point of analysis. I think the different data sets here are helpful in giving different, but complementary lenses on ways in which contextual specificity 'counts', yet in all cases it is also part of conceptual understanding of broader processes.

My second example casts context in terms of the changing conditions of, and assumptions about, social action, here with reference to gender, work and care.

4. Gender, work and care

I want now to reflect on some issues in the reshaping of gender, care and work. Again, this is a particularly brief version of an argument developed in much more detail elsewhere. The substantive and conceptual issues are different to the ethnicity example. The theme is constant though: that it I will again be exploring links between attitudes and values on the one hand and social circumstances on the other hand.

A number of researchers have argued that values are more important than in the past for understanding women's work and care behaviours. Some identify a discrepancy between position and disposition; or values and dispositions are seen as more autonomous of structure than they were in the past (e.g. Hakim; but also others).

"..lifestyle preferences and values are becoming more important determinants of behaviour, relative to economic and social structural factors" (Hakim 2000; and others similarly).

So for many, it appears that subjectivities are more autonomous from social structural processes.

I will again bring to bear different data sets in exploring if, and how, we can locate attitudes and values. By finding an absence of evidence of separation does not necessarily completely undermine Hakim's argument (It doesn't prove an evidence of absence). However, I seek to confront an argument of a newly determining significance of values, with evidence that we can in general locate values. Further, it often provides us with more insights about social circumstances where we do so.

We can explore links between subjective outlooks and social circumstances through a variety of different data sets.

At a general level, national level data sets shows clearly the increase in employment participation amongst mothers of young children over recent decades. At a general macro level we can say there is a correspondence between general attitudes and extant patterns of behaviour. Additionally trends in attitudes about the perceived appropriateness of mothers' of young children working over recent decades parallel trends in behaviour. (*Of course, attitudes may be reflecting extant patterns of behaviour. E.g people might not have thought about it much, it might 'seem appropriate' because that is what people do, and might change broadly in line with incidence of behaviour*) There is a risk that such generalised attitudes are 'artefactual'.

What if we ask the question of those for whom it has the most immediate salience: women with young children, and compare their attitudes with their own behaviours. BSAS data reveals a strong association between people's own behaviours and attitudes

(note: amongst mothers of pre-school children:

if they worked, 66% stated they thought similar mothers should work, only 14% said they should not;

if they were full time carers, 64% thought similar mothers should stay at home, only 16% thought they should work).

In a small scale survey done within CAVA, attitudes amongst mothers showed a strong association with their own patterns of behaviour, and with their own socio economic circumstances. This was revealed through attitudinal data (attitude statements; vignettes for example).

What happens when we explore the issues through a more in-depth qualitative lens? First a few more words about the changing context of gender, work and care. In general we have a picture where many women are working more, especially through the period when they parent young, pre-school, children. Two incomes are more necessary to maintain people's desired living standards, women are more likely to work through the family building period; women's earnings are more core to household resourcing, notions about the propriety of mothers' working have changed, and work has become more central to the identity of women who are mothers of young children. (at least across a broader sweep of the population than previously).

Ideas about appropriate roles for women and men have altered. The changes are more significant for women. I have argued elsewhere that women hold work as more central to their identities, and more mothers of young children hold a work related identity as well as a mother identity. In short – I would suggest a shift in mothers' social identities is closely linked to changing conditions. Again – there is no evidence of consciousness rushing ahead of conditions (Beck), or values being autonomous of social structural processes. On the contrary, they appear to be very closely linked, even in a time of significant changes.

Taking as examples working class women from the CAVA Mothers, Care and Employment study, it is significant that, even amongst the relatively few women who express clearly their full commitment to full time parental care for their children there is also a clear sense of paid work as simultaneously a core part of these women's identities.

For example: Theresa (Burnley, GCSE level only) encapsulates what Duncan terms a 'primarily mother' orientation, saying:

"I believe if you have children you should fetch 'em up yourself rather than like you get your career mums who can go out to work and somebody else has fetched your child up and I don't believe in that really",

Nevertheless this woman returned to work as a health care assistant when her child was 10 months old. She has a job share arrangement with her husband, both doing 25 hours as a care assistant. She was asked:

Q: And you say that that is because you found it difficult to be just at home?

A: Yeah. Yeah I found it hard work, I needed to see other people and do other things as well as be at home. I needed to be myself as well as being a mum".

That is, whilst her commitment to care may be paramount, she still sees work and its sociability as core aspects of her identity. Others expressed a similar theme. For example, Jessica, in discussing her return to work when son was young said:

"I wanted to go back to work. I don't know why – but I did. I think it were – it were important for me to get back to being that person, not just being me little boy's mum"

Another respondent who encapsulates the 'primarily mother' orientation was Christine, who said:

"I couldn't see t'point of having a child and leaving him with somebody else",

yet despite this view she has worked fairly extensively in unskilled (factory and cleaning) jobs through family building. Her desire for work is financial, yet this 'pecuniary' motive appears inseparable from issues of her own independence:

A: ... I've always had money so I were always scared of just relying on his wage and then I'd say yeah, but what happens when I want summat ... do I ask you for money, I says: 'I don't think it'll work out like that' and he says 'yeah yeah of course you ask me' but ye know, its not, I can't. I've always had a job, from 19 I've always worked and I've always had me own money

Evidence on gendered differences revealed in aggregate level trends suggests that women are more at the forefront of change than are men: pushing it through desires for work based independence and the ability to shape family living standards as much as reacting to changed exigencies of economic need. (In data the men were laggards but came around to what they saw as the practical benefits of their partners' working) Overall, we can see the centrality of work to all these women's identities. I would propose these provide examples of how a work related identity, as well as a mother identity, is core to these mothers' outlooks.

Over recent decades we have seen a change in the structure of opportunity and constraint for women, and men, and a shift in their social location and identity. Paid employment has become, in many contexts, a more routinised aspect of women's experience across the life course (of family building and childcare). It is deemed more necessary in maintaining living standards, and deemed more natural, more a part of women's identities. For many women now work seems

the normal thing to do even when children are young – in a context of shifting norms, and structures of opportunity and constraint, people orient to the world as they find it. It becomes as normal that a child's maternal role model should be a woman who works, as it does that she should be a full time homemaker. Evidence reveals not a new loosening of the subjective and objective but their ongoing mutuality, even in a period of significant social change. The data by itself cannot clinch the argument. Here I have used it in an illustrative way. But it helps reveal a consistency between values and contexts and is, I would argue, part of a more adequate concept of social change in the area of gender, work and care.

5. In conclusion

I have sought to explore links between attitudes and values, and social conditions, using different data sets in doing so. The different sources of data are partial, and give us different angles, and contain their own specific difficulties.

I have tried to keep a focus on social context, and rethink some difficulties in sociological analysis. I am aware I have brought data together in a fairly additive way in making my case. There are so many issues I have not touched upon in talking through my specific examples. And inevitably I have given a very particular run through some major areas of debate. However, what I want to underline in all this specificity is, I hope, the more general argument: that data is produced, but it can give real insights. In pulling together some examples, I have tried to think through some ways in which we might access, and conceptualise contexts. This allows us to get a better analytic purchase on people's diverse social positions, and their diverse vantage points. This is crucial for enhancing understanding and explanation of general social processes.

In respect of the metaphor with which I started the paper: I would argue that what we need do is better understand how our evidence often reveals a particular perspective upon, or 'slice' through, a problem. The use of different methods and sources of data may help in this. The general task is to understand the ways in which different methods and data sources will yield a partial or particular lens on what are, typically, complex, multi-faceted problems. In turn this means that the movement between data and theory needs to be a two-way and ongoing process. This way we may better picture an elephant!

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NOTE

Please note that I refer at points to work developed in more detail in my recent book:

Irwin, S. (2005) *Reshaping Social Life*, London: Routledge.

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