Combining research methods in a study of the UK's unmet needs

Challenges and questions

Background paper for roundtable -21st July 2008

Part of the Young Foundation programme Mapping emerging and unmet needs

Background

The Young Foundation's Mapping Needs programme brings together a coalition of more than a dozen independent foundations and funding bodies to develop new insights into how social needs in Britain can be prioritised and met. The two-year project aims to provide an independent overview of changing needs, as a complement to current research and to guide the policies and actions of foundations, government and civil society.

This workshop is one of a series of events which will contribute to our programme. It will focus on the issue of combining methods in social research, and in the Mapping Needs programme specifically. This paper explains why we want to use a mixed methods research design, lays out the combination of the research methods we plan to use in this study and offers an account of our approach to mixed methods research. The paper closes with some reflections on the challenges that this approach leaves us with and poses a set of questions that we hope to discuss with you at the seminar on 21 July.

In a sense, this exercise can be thought of as an attempt to meet the challenges posed by Bryman in his 2004 review of *'mixed strategy research'*: he concluded that in a significant proportion of journal articles reporting on the use of mixed methods, no rationale for that methodology was offered and that where a rationale was offered there was often a mismatch between that rationale and how the different methods were used in practice (Bryman, 2004). We hope to draw on insights into what works to in order develop an approach that is appropriate in meeting the goals of this project.

Aims of the programme

The Mapping Needs programme aims to:

- Identify badly met or unmet needs in the UK
- Consider the distinction between psychological and material needs and explore the incidence of material and psychological needs in the UK.
- Gain a better understanding of *multiple*, *severe* and *persistent* needs and the connections between needs
- Offer insights on emerging and intensifying future needs
- Understand how people and communities buck trends in meeting their own needs *'against the odds'*
- Help to understand the measurement problems associated with identifying unmet needs

As this last objective suggests, these objectives form part of a broader, longer term and ongoing goal to develop better ways of understanding social needs through social research and meeting social needs through policy and practice.

Our approach to mapping needs

We define need as *'what, if not met, can cause serious harm or socially recognisable suffering'* (Doyal and Gough, 1991). *'Harm'* means being prevented from pursuing one's own vision of a good life, whatever that vision might be, through illness or depression, lack of skills or discrimination.

This project takes Doyal and Gough's theory of human needs as a starting point (Doyal and Gough, 1991; Gough, 2004). According to this body of work, all human beings require certain resources to meet three basic, universal psychological needs for *autonomy*, *competence* and *relatedness*[1]: these include adequate nutritional food and water; protective housing; appropriate health care and significant primary relationships.

To this extent, we accept an objective account of human need, whilst recognizing, (as do Doyal and Gough) that these requirements need qualification in relation to contemporary expert knowledge and local subjective needs. We also recognise that these local needs, and the resources required to meet them (or 'needs satisfiers', will be understood differently across different fields of enquiry and experience. Further, needs will be perceived differently as societies change, and perceptions of what resources are

[1] Autonomy means, the capacity for self determination and critical participation. Competence means, the ability to operate effectively within environment. Relatedness means feeling significant for others, feeling integral to social life (Gough, 2004)

necessary to achieve a socially acceptable standard of living will also alter and evolve (see for example Bradshaw et al. 2008). To meet these concerns, the following framework will enable us to explore need from a number of perspectives in our research:

Figure 1 Mapping need across four perspectives

Real life knowledge People who experience and live with need	**Front line knowledge** People directly meeting and observing need and the consequences of unmet need
Service agency knowledge Organisations delivering services to meet need, assessing need and evaluating the impact of unmet need.	**Formal knowledge** gathered by government; statisticians; foundations; academics; think tanks; social scientists

We offer this framework as a tool, rather than as a definitive account of the perspectives that need to be accessed in this research, since the boundaries between these groupings or perspectives are likely to be fuzzy and problematic. For example, where would the voices and experiences of those who care for people at home be heard? In our workshop discussion, we hope to return to this framework and to consider it critically with you.

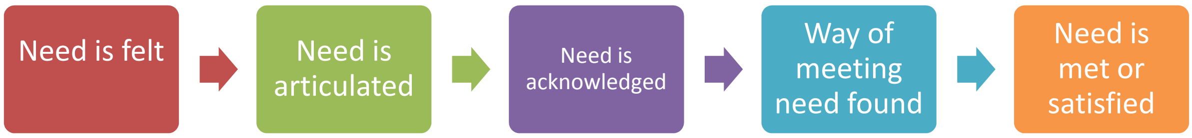
As well as needs being interpreted in these four spheres, incidence of unmet need and patterns of emerging or intensifying need will be determined by factors operating at a series of levels:

1. **Structures and systems**: people's needs will be affected by structural and systemic factors, including shifts in market demand for a particular skill, rising food or housing prices, political structures, inequalities and social policies that define eligibility.
2. **Surrounding supports**: people's needs will be affected by their immediate context, i.e. the support given to them or the obligations they owe or feel to their family, friends and communities.
3. **Self**: the way individuals understand themselves, their relationships with others and their place in the world will also determine the needs they

experience: their inherited dispositions or characteristics, their experiences in childhood, their self-efficacy will all shape how they experience, resist or magnify macro and meso-level factors.

Associated with each of these domains will be the potential to make claims on resources to meet needs. At the level of structures and systems, claims will be made in the market place, and there will be competing claims for recognition, resources and political entitlements from the state. At the intermediate level, there will be claims for help, support and respect from communities, families and friends. Then at the level of the self there will those claims people can make of themselves, on their capacity to make changes in their lives, to practice more self-discipline or to develop skills. The notion of *'claim making'* helps throw into relief the fact that there are a series of stages that must be traversed before a felt need can be met (see figure 2): first, that need must be articulated or demanded; second, needs must be acknowledged in the public realm (e.g. by policy makers); third, a means of meeting that need must be found (by families or communities, civil society, the private sector, or the state); and lastly, that need must in fact be satisfied. There will be a number of needs also met which skip one or more of the stages, or have to loop back to a previous stage. A more nuanced schema will apply when a need is partially met or requires more than one satisfier.

Figure 2 Stages in meeting needs



This linear model describes the process from felt need to need satisfaction, and the stages at which this might break down. Whilst in practice, the different stages cannot be understood in isolation, separating them out like this might help to unpack the complex causal relationships that take place between them. Our research methods need to address need in and between each of these stages, to provide a *thick description* of the external influences on need and to untangle the *complex causal patterns*, which weave through these stages and create unmet need.

Our rationale for mixed methods research

In order to meet the objectives laid out above, to map need across these four domains and shed as much light as possible on how the three levels described above influence need and processes of need satisfaction, the research will employ a mixed methodology. Greene provides a useful definition of mixed methods research, describing it as

> *'an approach to investigating the social world that ideally involves more than one methodological tradition and thus more than one way of knowing, along with more than one kind of technique for gathering, analyzing, and representing human phenomena, all for the purpose of better understanding'* (Burke Johnson et al. 2007).

As this definition suggests, our decision to use a mixed methods approach springs from the conviction that only through a combination of research methods can we hope to meet the objectives laid out above. More specifically, our rationale might be thought of as having two strands: first, a *pragmatic* rationale and second, a *principled* rationale which reflects both our conception of the social world and our commitment to social justice.

Our choice to use mixed methods is pragmatic to the extent that it frees the Mapping Needs project from the dualisms and paradigm wars of quantitative and qualitative research. This *'third research paradigm'* attempts to

> *'fit together the insights provided by qualitative and quantitative research into a workable solution … improve communication among researchers from different paradigms as they attempt to advance knowledge …[and] offer the best opportunities for answering important research questions'* (Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Connected to this, our mixed methods approach is a response to the limitation of particular research methods. For example, we know that service data doesn't penetrate particularly well into the last decile and that census and other official data may not penetrate particularly well into the last centile of the population. It is in these contexts that qualitative methods become integral to our research design, in particular in light of our aim to focus on *multiple, severe and persistent need,* which (we suggest) might be experienced by just those individuals who may be excluded from quantitative datasets (think of undocumented migrants, older people in residential homes, people with no fixed address, or individuals who face barriers to accessing services that could help meet their needs).

Techniques like *time-space sampling* and *respondent driven sampling*, which have evolved to reach populations that researchers can find hard to access in the absence of bespoke techniques, hold particular value here. Moreover, qualitative methods offer the chance to explore and understand heterogeneity within the vertically defined groups (BME groups, drug users, homeless people) frequently used to structure quantitative analysis (Dale, 2005).

This is not to say that quantitative methods are considered secondary to qualitative methods: this research holds each in equal status. Central to the methodology is a recognition that quantitative data tells us many things that qualitative techniques cannot. For example, statistical analyses can help test hypotheses across large populations and help control for the impact of other variables on a particular phenomenon. Quantitative analysis can therefore contribute to untangling cause and effect relationships in ways that qualitative methods cannot.

In summary, mixed methods research generally and our methodology specifically can begin to *'strategically combine qualitative and quantitative methods, approaches, and concepts in a way that produces complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses'* (Burke Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). In 1985, Cook (cited in Burke Johnson et al. 2007) used the term *'critical multiplism'* to describe this strategy, in which research questions can be examined from different perspectives, each of which involves a different methodology and a different set of biases. Rather than seeing quantitative and qualitative research as mutually exclusive and incompatible paradigms, we take the view that both methods are important and useful and that by utilising both, research can be more illuminating, accurate and robust.

Our second rationale is based on principle rather than pragmatism, and reflects our understanding of the social world as complex and multi-dimensional. Thus, our strategy for mixed methods research *'involves recognising that the social world and the issues and problems we seek to research are multidimensional, and that different dimensions might exist in an uneasy or messy tension, rather than being neatly integrated within one plane or dimension'* (Mason, 2006).

So, in this programme we are emphatically not attempting to triangulate data that is collected by different methods. In their typology of mixed methods research[2], Greene et al. (1989) explain that by triangulating data, researchers seek the convergence and corroboration of results from different methods and designs studying the same phenomenon. One reason that triangulation might be rejected as a technique is that in reality *'different methods and approaches rarely corroborate each other straightforwardly'* (Mason, 2006). However, a more fundamental problem lies behind our rejection of this method. Triangulation becomes impossible once researchers accept that there is no one social reality that can be known. As Bourdieu puts it, in order to understand what goes on in the world, points of view

> *'must be brought together as they are in reality …through simple juxtaposition, to bring out everything that results when different or antagonistic visions of the*

[2] Greene et al.'s (1989) schema identifies five justifications for combining quantitative and qualitative research: triangulation; complementarity; development; initiation; and expansion.

> *world confront each other – that is, in certain cases, the tragic consequences of making incompatible points of view confront each other, where no concession or compromise is possible because each one of them is equally founded in social reason'* (Bourdieu, 2006).

By bringing multiple research methods together, the Mapping Needs programme aims to juxtapose the data provided by each different method in order to see consistencies and inconsistencies, utilising *'creative tensions'* (Mason, 2006) where they emerge rather than seeing them as an obstacle to clear conclusions. For example, by contrasting the formal knowledge of 'experts' in the social sciences and service delivery with the (equally expert) grounded knowledge of people in specific context, we might shed light on blockages or barriers to meeting need as it is experienced in 'real lives'. Furthermore, we hope this approach will help move us towards an approach which capture the dynamics between local subjective experience and wider social, economic and political forces. In sum, we believe that the methodological eclecticism that runs through the Mapping Needs programme will produce a superior research product than mono-method research (Burke Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

However, there is a conflict between this methodology and the aim of our research. Returning to the objectives laid out on page two, we need to transform this four dimensional (see page three) into a picture of need that has application in policy and practice. Where accounts across the four perspectives agree, practical implications will emerge more easily. Where tensions and inconsistencies emerge, we will have to dig deeper and think carefully about how recommendations for more effective ways of meeting needs can arise from contradictory accounts of need from our four perspectives. There are a series of possible criteria which could be used to do this, for example:

- **Should we give priority to the marginalized?** Where one or several of the accounts represent the voices of marginalized groups or individuals, there may be good reason to privilege their voices in thinking about practical solutions. Similarly, where one or several perspectives reflect or support existing practices and yet where unmet need remains, there may be good reason to privilege the accounts of other perspectives. This kind of rationale underpins the approach of Holland et al. from the Q-squared research programme at the Centre For International Studies, University of Toronto:

> *'The working hypothesis underpinning the design of mixed-method diagnostic tools is that dysfunctional everyday relations between service providers and users or between government officials and citizens may be symptomatic of deeper, embedded*

institutional norms that are characterised by inequalities in power … Empowerment and social change require a level of transformation in critical consciousness that challenges habitual or everyday interaction and decision making.' (Holland et al., 2007).

- **Should we give priority to formal knowledge?** Where the issue under examination is tightly intertwined with complex structural or systemic factors, there may be good reason to privilege the 'formal knowledge' of people with expertise about those systems and structures, or at least, consider their perspectives prior to the perspectives of people unfamiliar with structural and systemic factors and constraints.

- **How can we, and ought we to reflect on adaptive preferences?** How do we account for *'adaptive preferences'* (Gough, 2004) ie, where people adapt to local conditions and may not be aware that the quality of their lives could be different. One of Gough's basic needs is for *'critical autonomy'.., 'the capacity to situate the form of life one grows up in, to criticise it and, if necessary, to act to change it'*(2004: 302). The crucial question here is how we might begin to make the judgment that the preferences people have articulated are *adaptive* and might be different if that person could critically reflect on their circumstances.

There are likely to be a host of other possible criteria for translating incoherent or contradictory findings into actionable practical findings, some of which are likely to emerge as the research progresses and in the process of fieldwork and analysis.

One further and final rationale for a mixed methodology is that it also reflects a political commitment to social justice. If the social world is complex and multidimensional, in order to maximise need satisfaction '*all groups with knowledge about this context should have the ability to participate in research into needs satisfiers and to contribute to policy making'* (Gough, 2004). By employing methods that tap into perspectives across the four domains described above, we hope to meet this condition.

Our methods

We are in the process of designing and finalising our specific methodology for this programme and table 1 offers a summary of the combination of methods we hope to use.

Table 1: Research methods to map need across four perspectives	
Domain/perspective	Methods to access knowledge
Real life: • **People who experience and live with need.**	• Ethnographic studies in local areas. Each study will focus on a different set of research questions, for example around the needs of night workers, NEETS, older people in care, or teenage mothers. • Overview of expert users/individuals research data (evaluations by service users, participatory research). • Public participation and engagement (exact methods to be confirmed)
Front line: • **People directly meeting need, observing need and involved in the consequences of unmet need.**	• Knowledge mining (combinations or surveys, interviews and focus groups) of key individuals/organisations within local studies, including people at the forefront of local services as well as other local experts (taxi drivers, hairdressers etc)
Service agency: • **Organisations involved in delivering services to meet need, measuring and assessing need and evaluating the impact of unmet need.**	• Knowledge mining (combinations or surveys, interviews and focus groups) of key individuals/organisations, including local perspectives on emerging, intensifying and persisting unmet needs. • Analysis of service data, including take-up gaps, referral statistics and outcome evidence. • Overview of local strategies and needs assessments.
Formal: • **Organisations and individuals claiming expertise through macro-level possession of statistical, academic, policy, strategic and scientific insight into need.**	• Knowledge mining (combinations or surveys, interviews and focus groups) of key individuals/organisations, including government, local government, business, philanthropic foundations and civil society organisations. • Synthetic overview of current research (across methodologies and specialities) bearing on unmet need. • Quantitative analysis of administrative and other data sets. • 'Expert' futures work to anticipate emerging, intensifying and persisting unmet needs.

As this table shows, we are not only mixing a quantitative survey with qualitative interviews as with much mixed method research. We are combining different research methods *within* the two paradigms of quantitative and qualitative research:

for example, as well as local ethnographies, we will be undertaking focus groups with service providers and frontline workers and later in the project we hope to include methods of public participation and engagement in the research. As well as reviewing current statistical knowledge we will be undertaking new secondary analysis of administrative datasets. By mixing approaches to the research objectives in this way we hope to generate a rich body of data that will illuminate perceptions of need from the four perspectives in the best way possible.

Iteration and sequencing

Sequencing is always a crucial question in mixed methods research as it largely defines the interaction and dialogue that will occur between different types of data. In this programme, our use of different methods will largely be concurrent and to the extent that it is possible, we hope this will facilitate dialogue and an iterative engagement between different components of the research as they progress. One exception to this will be the local studies, which will occur sequentially (with overlaps), so that the methods used at this stage can help hone and inform the fieldwork in the next.

Specifically, because these studies will aim to access some of the most marginalised individuals in society, we hope that as each progresses we can learn more about practical ways to reach these groups and individuals. Each of our local studies will explore different issues (for example, the experiences and needs of night workers or pregnant teenagers): they are not *case studies* that replicate the same questions in several areas. This design will provide us with a series of windows through which to consider need; why some needs remain unmet; how other needs are met; and how needs are experienced together in particular constellations. This leaves us with a particular challenge in thinking about how we draw the findings of these studies together in a convincing way.

As we start to plan our local studies and to consider how to gather, identify and analyse secondary data, we need to translate our broad research objective into more specific research questions for the different aspects of our research. Our local studies are being designed to focus on particular issues, marginalised groups, or social situations, and research aims or questions will inform the specific methodology used in each case. We could begin with categories of people who we might consider to be living with complex needs, for example travellers, street children or refugees. Alternatively, we might consider contemporary issues as starting points, for example, teenage pregnancy; undiagnosed dementia; knife crime or maternity services.

One of our local studies based in London, will begin from the point of view of people who work at night. This will be primarily an exploratory case study: little is formally known about the social impacts and needs associated with night work (more is known about the medical impacts) and so it make sense to begin this study from the experiences of individuals in question, in an exploration of needs and issues associated with working at night. The researchers will accompany night workers as they work their shifts, to experience night work themselves, and capture their voices and views of night workers in their own terms. We hope that this kind of exploratory methodology will shed light on numerous other *'tangential needs'* experienced by night workers or their families, which will have wider relevance to the Mapping Needs programme.

The following research questions will drive this particular component of the programme:

- Does regular night work disconnect or marginalise people from rest of society?
- Does it create exclusion or sense of difference?
- Do night workers feel they are recognised or sufficiently acknowledged by society?
- How do night workers manage their social lives? Family lives?
- How do they organise shopping, doctors' appointments, childcare?
- Does working at night effect diet?
- Does it put pressure on family life and social lives?
- Do shift workers have fewer opportunities to participate in social activities?
- What opportunities do employers offer night workers?
- Do they feel treated differently?
- How many night workers vote?
- Do they have opportunities to get involved in civil activity/community issues?

A slightly different research methodology will be employed in our Bedford case study, where initial meetings with stakeholders in the area have suggested a possible focus on young people who are not in education, employment and training, particularly through the lens of mental health in a particular cluster of wards towards the south-east of Bedford of the town. Our research questions here might include:

- How common is it for young people not to be in education, employment and training nationally and in Bedford?
- How is the phenomenon spread across geographical and social contexts?
- What is the relationship between not being in education, employment or training and mental health problems, or 'psychological needs' more generally?
- What are the experiences of young people in Bedford who are not in education, employment or training?

We might begin here with government statistics on *'NEETs'*: defining this social problem in these terms has come from government and it therefore makes sense to begin our research here. Then we would talk to local service agencies like the probation service, Job Centres, mental health services, youth centres and talk to those working/living with young people day to day, like parents and teachers; and to then to young people themselves. It is likely that the stories told by young people will disrupt those perspectives which are wider and perhaps removed from day to day realities. Thus, through the lens of *'NEETs'*, we would expect to uncover a range of unmet need.

These local studies will sit beside a synthetic overview of existing and current research on need, as well as secondary analysis of administrative data sets. One challenge for the research is to find a way to locate these local studies in this broader research exercise in a convincing way. The research questions for the quantitative analysis will have to be specifically designed to test hypotheses which we have generated from our background and early research into the severity, persistence and complexity of needs. For example we might test a hypothesis about the impact of certain life events and psycho-social stresses on people's resilience and ability to avoid acute indebtedness, worklessness or homelessness. We might also want to test hypotheses about the clustering of certain types of unmet need over a population. In designing the quantitative strand of our research we will have to think carefully about how to link and create a dialogue between our local studies and our statistical analyses.

Questions and challenges

This paper closes with a series of questions and challenges we hope to discuss with you on the 21st:

- Is the rationale that underpins our methodology robust?
- (Where) are there particularly good examples of mixed methods research to draw on?
- How can we refine the framework of perspectives offered in figure 1, page 3?
- What criteria (in addition to or instead of those listed on page 7&8) can we use to translate incoherent or contradictory findings into findings with implications for policy and practice?
- How might we, in practice, link our different data analytically?
- How can we link and create a dialogue between our local studies and our quantitative research?

- How can we assess and reflect upon the quality of this research in light of the absence of clear criteria for quality assessments of mixed methods research?
- What findings is our research strategy likely to produce?
- How might we, in practice, accessibly write up and communicate the potentially complex findings of this research?

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