



“So, is that your ‘relative’ or mine?” A political-ecological critique of census-based area deprivation indices



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ABSTRACT

Census-based deprivation indices have been widely used in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Canada and UK to measure area-based socio-economic inequalities. This paper examines the indicators used in census-based area deprivation indices using a political ecology approach. We question whether the current indicators of deprivation derived from census data are meaningful for the all age groups and minority groups in the population, with a particular focus on deprivation indicators used in New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom. We comparatively reviewed methodological papers and reports that describe the indicators of deprivation in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Canada and the UK from 1975 to 2014. We consider the relationship between the notion of standards of living and measurements of deprivation and explore how hegemonic cultural constructs are implicit in measures of deprivation that privilege a Eurocentric, ageist and gender normative construction of statistics.

We argue for more political ecological analyses to studying the relationship between social inequalities, geographies, health inequities and political economy to transform structures of oppression and inequality. This requires turning the analytical gaze on the wealthy and privileged instead of defaulting into deficit models to account for inequality. Studies of deprivation and inequality would benefit from understanding the processes and operations of power in the (re)production of socio-economic and health inequities to inform holistic strategies for social justice.

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1. Introduction

In contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand (NZ), Canada and the United Kingdom (UK), area-based measures of socio-economic inequality have been used in public health discourses and beyond to measure and map deprivation in small-area blocks. This paper builds from our previous analysis on the politics of relative deprivation (Fu et al., 2015) using a political ecological approach to re-think and re-incorporate an analysis of power into geographic and sociological inquiry into area-based deprivation. While a holistic account of the historical processes that have produced conditions of deprivation and inequality is beyond the scope of this paper, our aim is to interrogate the ethnocentrism, ageism and gender biases in the construction of deprivation indices through a close examination of the indicators and demographic categories used from the census. We focus on deprivation indicators used in

New Zealand (Atkinson et al., 2014), Canada (Pampalon and Raymond, 2000), and the United Kingdom (Townsend, 1987; Townsend et al., 1988; Carstairs and Morris, 1989, 1991) and ask:

1. Are census-based area deprivation indices relevant to all groups, including minority groups in New Zealand, UK and Canada?
2. Is the relationship between standards of living and deprivation taken into account in constructing these indices?

Our perspective is primarily based in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and we offer an inter-disciplinary analysis influenced by anthropology, public health, Hauora Maori and quantitative geography. We posit that an understanding of inequality and methodologies of researching inequality necessarily requires a broader understanding of political ecologies.

Our previous paper (Fu et al., 2015) provided a Foucauldian critical analysis of deprivation measures, with a particular focus on power. In this paper, we critique deprivation measures further, using a political ecological framework to examine historical and contemporary ‘uses’ of deprivation. Within this framework, we

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investigate how such uses or measures of deprivation are strongly influenced by social, political and economic contexts. Together, these two papers examine the role of power and privilege in relation to measuring deprivation, from different theoretical perspectives and using different contextual explanations.

Political ecology emerged in the 1970s as a theoretical offshoot of political economy approaches (McLaughlin and Dietz, 2008; Bryant, 1992). Political ecology situates humanity within a broader ecological context and focuses on the systemic interrelations between environmental, historical, political economic structures and processes, and, in addition, acknowledges the role of agency (or lack of) within such contexts (Zimmer, 2010; Elmhirst, 2011; Baer, 1996; Bentley, 2013; Blaikie, 2008). One of the first uses of the term was in Eric Wolf's critique of the importance of situating local adaptation within broader processes of political economy (Stonich, 1999). Fundamentally, a political ecological approach also seeks to correct social injustices and transform hegemonic power relations embedded in physical and social geographies (Forsyth, 2008; Rocheleau, 2008). We argue that studies of deprivation and inequality would benefit from understanding the processes and operations of power (Harvey, 2011) in the (re) production of socio-economic and health inequities to inform holistic strategies for social justice.

Whilst the focus here is on census-based area deprivation indices, we contend that inequities research more broadly needs to consider power relations and apply methodologies that are not complicit in systems of inequality (Smith, 1999; Brecher, 2005). Ignoring or mystifying the causes of inequality, not practicing reflexivity and treating the dominant political economic system as inevitable are forms of academic complicity, which limits the possibilities of achieving social justice and equity. There are clear methodological and epistemological issues concerning the population groups excluded from definitions and norms in the academic construction of 'acceptable' standards of living in developed nation-states with growing cultural diversity and ageing populations. This critique of hegemonic cultural constructs in deprivation indices is not specific to deprivation, but extends to the wider social contexts and statistical and census data collection.

Despite growing evidence of burgeoning socio-economic inequalities and widening economic gaps resulting in unprecedented levels of poverty globally (Chan et al., 2014; Saunders, 2015; Glasmeier, 2014; Cribb et al., 2013), reducing such differences have not been a major priority at a government level in NZ for the past 20 years (Rashbrooke, 2013). Notwithstanding Canada's legacy as a leader in advancing policies on the socioeconomic determinants of health (Lalonde, 1974; WHO, 1986; Epp, 1986; Federal, Provincial and Territory Advisory Committee on Population Health, 1994), the government uptake of policies in Canada has also been relatively low (Frohlich et al., 2006). The extent to which reigning governments commit to such policies needs critical reflection, but is beyond the scope of the current paper. Perhaps a rethinking of strategies is required when policy makers are part of the problem rather than the solution. These relations of power are inevitably linked to the entrenchment and exacerbation of socio-economic inequality, which sets the context for this paper. We endorse previous calls made to decolonise methodologies (Smith, 1999), including in deprivation research to challenge academic complicities in the (re)production of inequalities.

2. Methods and scope

Building on our previous work (Fu et al., 2015) this paper presents the results of a critical review of methodological papers that describe the construction of area or census-based deprivation

indices. We focused particularly on literature from the UK, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Canada from 1975 to 2014. The main key word terms used in databases searches involved combinations of "deprivation index", "area deprivation", "standard of living", "living standards", "NZDep", "deprivation" with "UK"/"Britain", "New Zealand" or "Canada." We restricted our search to these three nation-states since as area measures of deprivation were first established in the UK (Holtermann, 1975; Townsend, 1987), while Aotearoa/New Zealand and Canada are both colonial settler societies with a history of British colonisation that also derive their theoretical foundation of deprivation indices from the UK. Histories of colonialism are important within our political ecological analysis as a process that has shaped the racialised compositions of inequalities in health and socioeconomic status in which indigenous populations are often disproportionately located in the most disadvantaged (Atkinson et al., 2014; Bhopal, 2006; Borell et al., 2009; Durie, 2005; Coombes, 2006; Bourassa et al., 2004; Broadway and Jesty, 1998; Pampalon et al., 2010; Robson et al., 2010; Smith, 1999). Additional searches of published and unpublished work by key authors were also undertaken to capture a more complete discussion related to the development, design and theory of deprivation indices and their construction.

3. Critical analysis

3.1. Census and area-based deprivation

Townsend's (1987) influential paper on relative deprivation, which extended Holtermann's (1975) seminal work on urban deprivation in Great Britain using census data, has been used as a theoretical base for deprivation indices and constructions in the UK, Canada and in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Pampalon and Raymond, 2000; Pampalon et al., 2010, 2014; Salmond et al., 1998; Atkinson et al., 2014). The New Zealand Deprivation index [NZDep] (Crampton et al., 1997) and Pampalon and Raymond's (2000) Canadian index were created as tools for resource allocation, advocacy and research. The Canadian and NZ index offered a small-area method of measuring deprivation, which have been argued by Salmond and Crampton (2000, p.11) to provide "powerful predictors of variation in health status." However, a discussion on what constitutes socially accepted, institutionalised or customary standards of living is starkly absent from census-based deprivation literature.

The use of census-based area measures of deprivation attracted increased international attention as a measure of area-based inequalities following the Alma Ata movement in the 1970s, (Salmond and Crampton, 2000, p.9) and the publication of the Black Report in the UK (Townsend and Davidson, 1982). Townsend's (1987) definition is the most commonly used in the construction and use of area deprivation indices:

"a state of observable and demonstrable disadvantage, relative to the local community or the wider society or nation to which an individual, family or group belongs" (1987, p.125).

Townsend's concept of deprivation was then delineated into two types: material and social. Material deprivation referred to the lack of customary items, resources, amenities and physical environment specific to a particular society. Social deprivation is then the non-participation of social roles, responsibilities, relationships that are customary within a particular society (Townsend et al., 1988, p.36). Townsend elaborated:

People can be said to be deprived if they lack the types of diet, clothing, housing, household facilities and fuel and

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