The investigation of inequalities requires researchers to grasp the complex nature of the problems to be investigated. Identifying associations is insufficient; the focus must be on claiming causal relationships in some way or another.

A summary of the discussion of research methods to address inequalities

All four groups identified mixed methods of qualitative / quantitative research as essential to the investigation of inequalities. Other terms used were a plurality of method and a variety of methods. There was little consideration of how these methods might be configured in this mix. Interdisciplinary working is recognised as important.

Recognising complexity means that many inequalities are expressed, addressed, perpetuated or resolved at different levels and scales within
systems. These require different methods of investigation because different questions need to be asked—at scales of individual, community, nation, internationally—as examples.

Methods are in the service of questions. As one person noted, ‘it could be any method, it depends on the question’. There is a wide range of expertise across quantitative and qualitative research, but each of the methods discussed was recognised as having both strengths and weaknesses. Some methods are very good at getting at what works in strongly controlled experimental studies, other methods are rather better at getting at nuance, detail, and the fine grain of the experiences through which individuals and groups make choices in their lives. All these methods can potentially play a part, but it is important to place the idea to be tested before the choice of method.

Research questions also need to be crafted in ways that accept the value of perception of people about what is important to them in addressing inequalities. Models of participatory action research are of significant value in this research.

Together, proposing questions for research and identifying the ways in which inequalities matter to people require us to think creatively about method. Creativity does not mean excluding particular methods because they are scientific / lab based / require sophisticated statistical skills / demand extensive and detailed coding, as examples instance, it means using methods because they are appropriate and best addresses the research problem under investigation. A randomised control trial is useful to understand what works in controlled circumstances, in which confounders can be controlled for. But the complexity of the investigation of inequalities often requires richer accounts that just ‘what works’. Creative use of other methods, perhaps even as a complement in the same study, such as performance, duet, narrative, ethnography, or visual methods might be the most appropriate method of enquiry.

The design of any investigation requires careful thinking about the outcomes of research. In universities are obliged to think about impact in certain ways, a focus on economic and societal impact in particular. But there are other ways
of thinking about impact. We must be brave and recognise the legitimacy of impact that might not fit snuggly with REF impact studies and research council impact statements. We might also have to think about the impact of the impact agenda on inequalities.

Research design should always orientate towards change. Methods can help here, research should consider want and how our research can help them to directly address inequalities in their lives.

This level of consciousness-raising in research can sit at odds with what policy makers want. One potential area of the impact of the impact agenda is the way it might focus attention instrumentally on the needs of policy. Often policy makers want messages that looking for answer to the question ‘so what?’ They also seek simple answers. Such messages can create tensions between our understandings of the complexity of inequalities, people’s perceptions of their wants and needs, and policy makers’ priorities.

Nick Emmel 19th June, 2015