Notes relating to 'definitions, concepts and challenges', LSSI Inequalities event, 18/6/2015, note taker - Sarah Irwin

What is inequality?
Various definitions - or elements of possible definitions, were discussed. These included:

- differential access to power and resources; inequalities in access to services; experiences and outcomes;
- social inclusion and exclusion
- structural arrangements and patterns of cultural bias, discrimination, values and moral judgements;
- discussion of tensions between inequality defined sufficiently precisely to allow measurement - and broader conceptions of in/justice and of power.
- generational inequalities
- needs relating to ethnicity, and problems where majority assumptions do not meet needs of/ misunderstand minority groups' needs (discussed especially in relation to health service)

There was also discussion of diversity and inequality; related complexities in defining 'appropriate inequalities'; the generality of arguments in favour of justice and potential for a more focused ethic and practice around tackling 'unacceptable inequalities' (cf Sen). Much discussion related to health; also labour markets; welfare; ethnicity.

What key concepts are linked to work in inequalities? -

These examples are not exhaustive of the issues raised:

- Vulnerability; precarity;
- inclusion and exclusion;
- Capitals - social, economic, cultural;
- structure / agency; and ability to translate concepts across different levels / scales of analysis (including between local/ regional and global);
- intersectionality;
- feminism
- anti-racism / addressing BME exclusions

Also identified as important were dilemmas in measuring inequality and if/how formal measurement is consistent with researching power relationships. And how to sufficiently grasp the multi-factorial nature of inequalities, complexity and heterogeneity. There was some discussion of the scope of multi- or inter-disciplinary strategies in tackling complexity/ unlocking and conceptualising the interacting factors which shape inequalities. (Whilst also recognising that these will vary by context; may change through time; manifest differently depending on scale of analysis; appear different through different disciplinary lenses. Are there practical ways forward in advancing inter-disciplinary research then, and how? (see over)
Key challenges (and ideas about progressing interdisciplinary work)

The challenges are many and diverse, relating to how effectively social scientific research and measurements can access, and reflect, experiences of inequality and its heterogeneous nature; and multiple components. (How) Can a multidisciplinary approach help advance knowledge, resources or interventions? (How) Can we bring insights together in a productive way? Various different strategies were discussed relating to a cross-disciplinary network including:

a) systems biology metaphor - pooling diverse concepts to create more in-depth understanding

(a definition - Harvard medical school defines it: Systems biology is the study of systems of biological components, which may be molecules, cells, organisms or entire species. Living systems are dynamic and complex, and their behavior may be hard to predict from the properties of individual parts).

Is this metaphor a prompt to asking if there are interesting ways to bring together insights from different disciplines (could colleagues working on similar questions benefit from bringing aspects of their work together?)

b) are there key questions that could be asked across different disciplines? Given the multifactorial nature of inequalities; is there value in a problem focused agenda, in which we identify some specific challenges/puzzles/social problems and then bring different disciplinary perspectives to bear?

c) Relatedly - is there scope for sharing lessons learned across disciplines, where solutions or at least successful practice has been identified?

What happens when we bring to bear (on specific problems) particular methodologies in different disciplinary contexts (eg longitudinal research); and what can be learned?

d) Colleagues are at different stages of conducting research - from inception to research design, seeking funding, conducting research, analysing data, dissemination. Are there useful mechanisms for sharing knowledge across the research life cycle?

e) Are there key reference points which could bring colleagues together? For example the Equality and Human Rights Commission Reports - (including - forthcoming - 'Is Britain Fairer?' 2015) were identified to not capture intersectionalities; and the question was raised - would it be interesting to look at this from different disciplinary perspectives to see what is missing - as a focus for identifying common questions and concerns