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Mind the Gap?: The persistence of pathological discourses in urban regeneration policy

by

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Mind the Gap?: The persistence of pathological discourses in urban regeneration policy

‘[T]o proclaim that a policy or program will “narrow the gap” is a goal which all strata of society can support: those at the lower end of the gap wish to close it by assimilating, as well as those at the upper end who are guided by the metaphor that immigrants will be “absorbed” under the presumption that they will do the “absorbing”. “Absorption” suggests both that the values, beliefs and feelings of the absorbing group will not be changed, and that the result will be a single, homogenous layer.’ (Yanow, 1996: 198)

Abstract

Urban regeneration policy has historically framed policy problems using a discourse that pathologises areas and spatial communities. Since 2001 in England, and 2002 in Scotland a structural change in policy has occurred where citywide partnerships are now meant overcome structural spatial inequalities, countering pathological explanations. This paper uses historical and discourse analysis to evaluate one of the major community regeneration strategies developed by the Scottish Executive in 2002: *Better Communities in Scotland: Closing the Gap*. It seeks to ask whether structural change in policy was paralleled by discursive change; what discursive path dependence is evidenced? The text is placed in the historic context of UK urban renewal policies dating back to the launch of the Urban Programme in 1968 and particularly the policy discourse created by the influential Conservative government policy of 1988 *New Life for Urban Scotland* and the wider discourses of poverty and neighbourhood renewal policy created by Labour governments since 1997. The close textual analysis of the text shows that *Better Communities in Scotland* continues to

pathologise spatial communities. Although this suggests a degree of historical path dependency, the historic breadth of the analysis also problematises simple historical determinism.

Introduction

This paper presents a critical discourse analysis of Scottish and UK urban regeneration policies produced over 40 years. This shows a path dependency, or a historic legacy, of a ‘mega-discourse’ that pathologises spatial communities within the policy discourse. Pathological discourses – those that talk of ‘bad’ communities – effectively blame communities for the problems that they suffer. These ‘common-sense’ explanations for the problems of certain areas are important because they frame possible policy interventions (Stone, 1989). By seeing the problem as being the communities themselves, the discourses often lead to ‘inward-looking’ interventions – community centres, community development projects or local employment initiatives – that are all but futile in countering the socio-economic, citywide and global factors that lead to spatial economic inequalities in our cities (Hall, 1997; Carley and Kirk, 1998).

The problems of inward-looking area-based initiatives have been recognised by policy-makers in the UK for a number of years (Dabinett, Lawless, Rhodes and Tyler, 2001). The UK government’s *A New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal* (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001) proposed that local authorities should create citywide Local Strategic Partnerships to create outward-looking public-sector led partnerships to overcome spatial inequalities. This was mirrored by the devolved government in Scotland in 2002 when it proposed in the policy *Better Communities in Scotland:*

Closing the Gap (hereafter *Closing the Gap*) that all regeneration activities should be the responsibility of citywide Community Planning Partnerships. These bring together all public and voluntary-sector organisations to overcome the inequalities suffered by the less-affluent areas of urban Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2002a). The question for this research is did this policy change also produce a parallel shift away from using a pathological discourse?

The close textual analysis of *Closing the Gap* below is set in a wider, historical discourse analysis of UK regeneration policy over 40 years and the emergence of a distinct Scottish regeneration policy since the 1980s. The close textual analysis does show that *Closing the Gap* continues to frame the policy debate in terms of the ‘mega-discourse’ of spatial pathology. However, the historical context to this questions any direct discursive path-dependency in Scottish and UK policy. As the narrative of analysis unfolds it is apparent that the pathological discourse has changed overtime with political and policy changes, particularly at the grand-level of New Labour policy discourse and in the intertextuality (Fairclough, 2003) between this and the micro-discourse, the text of *Closing the Gap*. The continued use of the grand, pathologising discourse reflects the strategic use of language by policy makers, particularly to shift the burden of improvement away from the ‘assimilated’ (or included) of Yanow’s quote above, to the communities that are the subject of the policy itself. The policy may be entitled *Close the Gap*, but the discursive choices made by those who wrote the policy all but preclude policy choices that would actively close the gap between the poorest and most affluent communities in Scotland.

Analysing urban policy discourses

Discourse analysis has been used in policy studies to understand how policy is

conceived and presented by policy makers (Fischer and Forester, 1993; Hastings, 2000b). As Stone (1989) suggests, policy texts can powerfully present causal stories to make the logic of policy intervention irrefutable. These stories, parts of wider social discourses, assign blame to individuals or groups while empowering others to find solutions (Fischer, 2003). Social policy discourses therefore have the power to reproduce ideology and enact that as social action (Fairclough, 1992; Fischer, 2003).

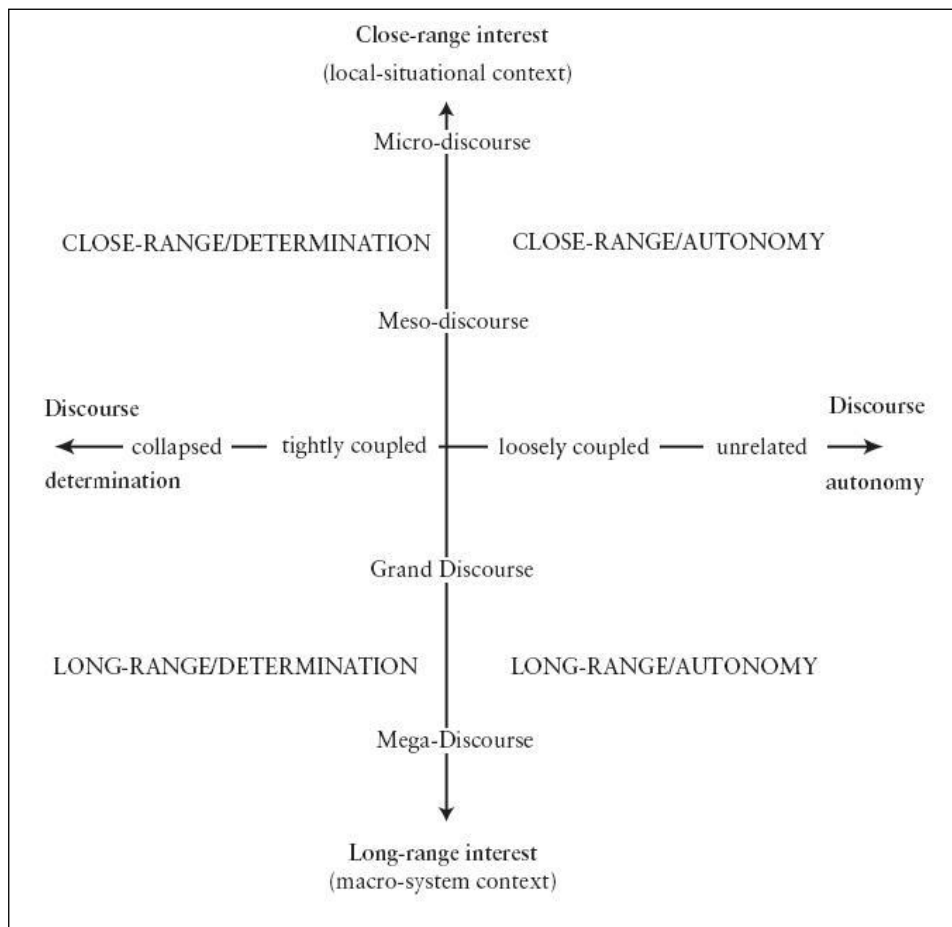


Figure 1 – Varieties of discourse (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000:1135)

Discourse analysis within the social sciences is becoming a widespread and differentiated methodology (van Dijk, 1997). The techniques range from the close, linguistic analysis of Fairclough’s Text-Orientated Discourse Analysis (1992; 2003) to the wide-ranging historical studies of Foucault or Said (1977; 1978). All these methodologies recognise the socially embedded nature of discourse – speech and text – and the close relationship between utterances or texts and wider social structures

and discourses.

Many of the differences between discourse studies concern views as to how texts relate to wider discourses and a social “reality”. For some, text and discourse is everything and they are constitutive of society. For others, the relationship is dialectic between socio-historic context and discourses. Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) use figure 1 to illustrate these variations in approach. This research is towards the bottom-left of this diagram. On the horizontal axis, it has acknowledged the texts of regeneration policy are embedded in a unique socio-historical context that determines many aspects of the discourse. Moving down the vertical axis, the research has placed a text, or micro-discourse (*Closing the Gap*), within a meso-discourse of Scottish New Labour social policy, a grand discourse of New Labour social policy and the mega-discourse of pathological explanations in urban policy discourses. Working down from the mega to the micro discourse reveals the ideological work needed to be carried out by each discourse to maintain the logic of the mega-discourse even when the social context is changing (Fairclough, 2003).

Because of this methodological breadth the corpus of material analysed was large (table 1). The text of *Closing the Gap* was closely analysed to understand how its *lexis* (the ordering of words and grammar) reconstructs and reproduces higher-level discourses. Many lexical devices are common to Neo-Liberal, New Labour and other political discourses and the location and use of these in the text is central to this analysis. Of particular interest were the use of lexical devices such as nominalisation – the use of abstract nouns to obscure agency, and equivalences – lists that make very different things appear similar obscuring causation (Fairclough, 2000; 2003). Also of interest was the use of *enthymemes* as a rhetorical device within the text – an argument where it is assumed that the audience has the knowledge to complete the

logic of the argument, (Gill and Whedbee, 1997).

Discourse level	Corpus
Mega-level Construct pathological discourses	Historical analysis of policy discourses (Furbey, 1999; Atkinson, 2000)
Grand-level Re-form pathological discourses in terms of a New Labour policy discourse	Analysis of UK Labour government policies (Watt and Jacobs, 2000; Levitas, 2005)
Meso-level Reflect and reconstruct discourses in a unique Scottish policy context	Scottish urban policy documents (Scottish Office, 1988; 1990; 1993; 1998; 1999)
Micro-level Textual reconstruction of all discourses	<i>Better Communities in Scotland: Closing the Gap</i> (Scottish Executive, 2002a)

Table 1 – Corpus of sources for discourse analysis

To elaborate on the social construction and reception of the discourses, a key civil servant involved in drafting the text of *Closing the Gap* was interviewed. The electronic archives of *The Scotsman* and *The Herald* newspapers were searched from 1999 onwards for data on how the policy was received and reconstructed in social discourses

The Mega-Discourse – Constructing Pathologies

The historical analysis of policy by Furbey (1999) highlights the metaphorical nature of “regeneration”, “redevelopment”, “renewal” and “renaissance”. Although these terms suggest a rebirth or profound change, the concept in policy has become associated with a more conservative, organicist process of slow renewal and change. These metaphors then enable governments to concentrate their efforts on the excluded, rather than the excluders – it is the excluded that need to be reborn. This shifts the blame onto these communities (Furbey, 1999). This is an historic problem with UK urban policy since it emerged in the late 1960s in response to President Johnson’s ‘War on Poverty’ in the USA (Atkinson and Moon, 1994; Atkinson, 2000; Fischer, 2003). Early adoption of these pathological discourses simplified the debate on a very complex social phenomenon and demonised the communities that were to

be subject to the policy, for example in the comprehensive Community Development Programme (CDP) launched in 1969:

‘Their [the CDP teams’] brief rested on three important assumptions. Firstly that *it was the ‘deprived’ themselves who were the cause of the ‘urban deprivation’*. Secondly, the problem could best be solved by overcoming these people’s apathy and promoting self-help. Thirdly locally-based research into the problems would serve to bring about changes in local and central government policy.’ (CDP Interdisciplinary Team, 1977: 4, emphasis added)

The CDP experience also shows the problem of using a pathologising discourse to frame policy solutions:

‘A few months’ field-work in areas suffering long-term economic decline and high unemployment was enough to provoke the first teams of CDP workers to question the Home Office’s original assumptions.’ (CDP Interdisciplinary Team, 1977: 4)

Concentrated community development could not overcome the structural economic inequalities that led to urban deprivation. This policy implementation gap, created by pathological explanations, was recognised by the mid-1970s with research increasingly showing the key role wider-socio-economic changes and patterns of development had in recreating urban deprivation (Atkinson and Moon, 1994). The policy response in the Inner Areas Act 1978 recognised structural causes of urban deprivation and proposed large-scale partnerships of public and private sectors and local communities to provide long-term, outward-looking support and redevelopment (Department of the Environment, 1977; Atkinson and Moon, 1994). This policy therefore offer an, albeit brief, alternative discourse and alternative policy solutions for urban regeneration, counter to pathological explanations.

This was short-lived. Urban policy in the 1980s began to pathologise spatial communities within a wider Neo-Liberal, Thatcherite discourse, particularly in

Scotland with the Conservative government's *New Life for Urban Scotland* (Scottish Office, 1988). This policy has been seen as one of the most important urban regeneration policies in Scotland, and perhaps the UK, for framing subsequent policy approaches to regeneration (Hastings, 2000a). The strong Conservative ideology of the policy and its implementation has been widely recognised (Kintrea, 1996; Collins, 1999; Hastings, 2000a; Johnstone and McWilliams, 2005). It presumed Scotland had become dependent on the state through the housing and benefits system, impeding "natural" entrepreneurial activity (Kintrea, 1996; Collins, 1999). The answer was to be partnerships of the private and public sectors and the community on peripheral local authority housing estates. This would make communities responsible for themselves and would reinvigorate entrepreneurial spirit through business involvement, an emphasis on job skills training, and extra support for start-up companies (Scottish Office, 1988).

Applying Fairclough's Text-Orientated Discourse Analysis, Hastings (2000a) shows how the lexis of the *New Life* policy document actively downplayed the pre-existing Scottish culture of working-class self-help through nominalisation of the community's role. Pathologising communities as deficient continued in two successive Conservative government policy documents *Urban Scotland Into the 90s* and *Progress in Partnership* (Scottish Office, 1990; 1993). The latter emphasises '[t]he inclusion of the private sector in the [*New Life*] partnerships' (Scottish Office, 1993:6) suggesting that 'these activities help to break down the suspicion of private enterprise which undoubtedly exists in some disadvantaged communities' (Ibid.: 20) even though the evaluation of *New Life* showed private sector involvement was minimal or at best problematic (CPC, 1999).

New Life demonstrates the path dependency of pathological explanations. It is

still important in urban regeneration policy discourse in Scotland in the way it began a meso-discourse of Scottish urban regeneration policy; a narrative of the uniqueness, and the unique success of Scottish regeneration initiatives emerges. Within the document, before the policy actions are outlined, successes to date are highlighted, stating that '[a] great deal has therefore been achieved. Results are there for all to see and the economic potential of areas once neglected is being realised' (Scottish Office, 1988: 9). This is reflected more subtly in the contemporary academic discourses (see: Taylor, 1988; McCrone, 1991). For example, writing for an academic audience the then Chief Economic Adviser to the Secretary of State for Scotland, Gavin McCrone (1991), emphasises the unique Scottish approach that has led to *New Life*, concluding:

'The Scottish approach, as described in this paper, has been one of evolution in the face of problems which are at least as severe as any found elsewhere in the UK...But enough has been achieved, most visibly in the case of Glasgow, to give one some confidence that, given the right amount of commitment, the problems can be overcome.' (McCrone, 1991: 937)

As will be shown, this view persists in Scottish policy to the present day, constructing a unique pathology of Scottish places.

A Grand Discourse – New Labour Discourses

The innovations in policy presentation and language after Tony Blair became leader of the Labour Party in 1994 were notable and commented upon at the time, including the use of concepts such as social exclusion (Fairclough, 2000; Levitas, 2005). Tony Blair was oft-quoted as describing social exclusion as 'a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown.' (Scottish Office, 1998:3)ⁱ Levitas (1998; 2005)

deconstructed social exclusion revealing how New Labour concentrated on a moral or a social explanation for poverty. In policy discourses what is most important about the concept is the ability to use its inherent complexity to hide causation and place blame for social outcomes onto those in society who are experiencing social exclusion. The structural inequalities that cause poverty are then obscured in policy debate removing wealth redistribution as a viable policy option (Levitas, 2005).

In government, New Labour, implemented policies to tackle social exclusion largely through area-targeting (Levitas, 2005; Coaffee and Deas, 2008). Important to the geographic conception of social exclusion was the incorporation of communitarianism into these policy discourses, derived from the functionalist sociology of Putnam (2000) and Etzioni (1997). In this way New Labour policy created a moral geography of the neighbourhood where certain neighbourhoods are constructed as immoral and as such must be the subject of policy to (re)create civil society (Whitehead, 2004). In policy implementation this means while these communities are suffering from severe socio-economic problems, they are also expected to be the prime agents in turning themselves around and lifting themselves out of deprivation (Imrie and Raco, 2003; Kearns, 2003). This grand-discourse re-constructed pathological explanations in distinctly New Labour terms; recreating it in terms of social exclusion and communitarianism to maintain electoral support and ‘Third-Way’ ideology (Watt and Jacobs, 2000; Levitas, 2005).

A Meso Discourse – New Labour Policy in Scotland

In 1997 the New Labour government at Westminster began a consultation on the policy document *Social Exclusion in Scotland* (Scottish Office, 1998). The result of this was a social *inclusion* policy (Scottish Office, 1999). The consultation document

reconstructs the meso-discourse of Scottish urban policy, possibly as a result of the administrative devolution of urban policy to the Scottish Office since 1945 (McCrone, 2001), highlighting the unique successes of *New Life for Urban Scotland*:

‘The Government is committed to a comprehensive approach to area regeneration in Scotland, to improve the life chances of people living in some of its most deprived communities...The policy is based upon the New Life for Urban Scotland partnerships which have effectively tackled many of the problems of social exclusion by adopting a holistic multi-agency approach.’ (Scottish Office, 1998: 4)

However, the justification for the further development of this partnership model is in terms of the grand New Labour discourse and social exclusion. The whole text, although only eight pages long, portrays social exclusion largely as a result of an individual’s life choices, such as choices on leaving compulsory education. It even employs the Prime Minister’s definition of social exclusion (see above). The text also often hides causation and blame using lexical devices such as lists that develop equivalences (Fairclough, 2000). This can be shown in this example, ‘defining the problem’ of social exclusion in Scotland:

‘A combination of factors contribute to exclusion, in particular poor housing, low incomes, lack of work experience in the family, low educational attainment, ill health, family stress and the impact of drugs misuse and crime’ (Scottish Office, 1998:7)

This presents as equal various factors contributing to social exclusion which range from those entirely outwith the control of the excluded, such as poor housing, to individual moral choices – drugs misuse. The equivalence also precludes a nuanced understanding of the last factor, crime. The text is not clear as to whether being a victim of crime leads to exclusion, or criminal behaviour leads to exclusion. However, being placed next to the immoral behaviour of drugs misuse, the text

suggests it is the choice to be involved with criminal behaviour that leads to exclusion. The list also removes agency through nominalisation: so poor housing and ill health gain similar characteristics. Blame, such as poor housing management, is not mentioned. By obscuring agency the various problems of social exclusion become equivalent, and blame and responsibility for solving the problem can be placed where it is politically convenient (Stone, 1989; Fairclough, 2000).

Following the Prime Minister's definition of social exclusion statistics are also used to highlight the problem:

‘(ii) 74% of multiply deprived households and 80% of severely deprived household rented their homes from local authorities or other public sector landlords.

(iii) Single adult and children households made up 20% of multiply deprived households compared with only 5% of households overall.’ (Scottish Office, 1998:3)

Again, agency here is not clear: the presentation of statistics in this way suggests people are socially excluded *because* they rent their homes and are multiply deprived *because* they are single parents. This ignores the long-acknowledged role local authority housing allocation and planning policies have in concentrating and exacerbating deprivation, and the role welfare benefits for single parents plays in creating and worsening their poverty (Paisley CDP, 1978; Levitas, 1998). The two points could have been written to say:

‘(ii) of those households who suffer multiple of severe deprivation, 74 per cent and 80 per cent respectively also rent their homes from local authorities or other public sector landlords.

(ii) although single adult and children households are only 5 per cent of all households, they make up 20 per cent of multiply deprived households.’

The first point then presents social housing as a tenure choice and not a cause of

deprivation and the second highlights the social exclusion and injustice suffered by single parents in society.

This New Labour discourse was not wholeheartedly accepted by the policy community within Scotland. One of the eventual policy outcomes was the Scottish Social Inclusion Network. Fawcett (2003) found the term ‘social exclusion’ was not popular with the professionals, academics and community members who made up the network:

‘From the outset, the Network insisted on the use of a different terminology from the English equivalent (‘inclusion’ rather than ‘exclusion’)...Many interviewees [in their research] spoke of the ‘negativity’ of this type of language, and the dangers of ‘pathologising’ certain groups such as the homeless, the unemployed or lone parents.’ (Fawcett, 2003: 446)

The grand discourse of New Labour was being resisted and reconstructed at a Scottish level to become a distinctly Scottish meso-discourse.

The Scottish Office responded to these concerns with their social *inclusion* strategy *Social Inclusion Opening the Door to a Better Scotland* (Scottish Office, 1999) published on the eve of devolution. The substantive policy outputs were the Scottish Social Inclusion Network and a further 13 new Social Inclusion Partnership (SIP) area-based initiatives, to supplement the 24 partnership areas created by the previous Conservative governments (Macpherson, 2003). The timing of publication is important for the way the text is formed. As a publication of the Scottish Office at Westminster it lauds the triumphs of the New Labour government in reducing social exclusion – specifically the national minimum wage and the New Deal for the long term unemployed (Scottish Office, 1999: 16 & 23). The document speaks of an inclusive society and ways to foster inclusion, but in closer analysis it continues the New Labour approach to social exclusion. The onus throughout is on the excluded to

change their behaviour. For example, a supply-side explanation of labour markets emphasises increasing opportunities to work by ‘action to improve an individual’s employability, in terms of their skills and circumstances’ (Scottish Office, 1999: 17). Although ‘the conditions of the prevailing labour market’ are acknowledged as a potential barrier, macro-economic solutions are discounted in favour of local enterprise initiatives:

‘But much can also be done at a more local level in terms of economic development and support for business, to help increase the opportunities every participant in the labour market has to find work’. (Scottish Office, 1999: 17)

This presumes a supply-side explanation predicated on fully functioning labour markets with full inclusion of those-not-in-work, underplaying the social barriers to inclusion in labour markets. The strategy also outlines ‘specific barriers to inclusion’ (Scottish Office, 1999: 28-30) again highlighting particular groups or behaviours for intervention, including choosing healthy lifestyles, rough sleeping, criminal behaviour, drug misuse and prostitution.

A communitarian discourse is then used to justify the SIP programme. The text rhetorically asks ‘What are the characteristics of a strong community?’ going on to answer its own question with:

‘First, its infrastructure will be sound: people will live in decent homes, streets and lighting will be looked after, there will be opportunities to find work, to learn, to shop or to have fun within the community, but there will also be good, affordable transport links with other places where work and other opportunities can be found. People will be proud of their community, and will have chances to take part in representing the community or in other community or voluntary activities. The community’s schools will be good, improving, and respected. There will be good childcare and pre-school education provision.’ (Ibid.: 43)

This description, answering the rhetorical question, is written in the future conditional tense. The lexis therefore presumes that some communities are not strong, or weak, but could be strong if they gain these characteristics. The use of equivalences and nominalisation in describing these characteristics again hides causation and burdens communities. The first sentence removes agency for the environmental upkeep of a community – the statutory responsibility of local authorities for street lighting and decent homes is not mentioned. These are part of the ‘community’ and presumably also the responsibility of the community. It then goes on to burden the unemployed with finding and travelling to work, again not stating who should provide these jobs or remove barriers to employment. This is equated with the leisure activities of shopping and having fun, although the burdens of unemployment and poverty create an inescapable barrier to most of the leisure activities enjoyed by the included in society (Toynbee, 2003). The schools again are ‘the community’s’. It is not altogether clear whether the schools themselves will be improving, but the burden for improvement is clearly placed on communities – the schools are theirs and they must respect them. On the other hand, the childcare and pre-school provision is not the community’s. Young children can have agency removed and avoid the blame for poor childcare, unlike the parents of school-age of children who carry the burden of improvement.

The document goes on to state that ‘Excluded Communities’ exist (Scottish Office 1999: 47) and the text takes a discursive return to the meso-discourse of Scottish urban regeneration and the partnership approach:

‘But good progress has been made towards a new approach. The four pilot partnerships set up under New Life for Urban Scotland in the late 1980s have achieved substantial improvements in many of the common measures of deprivation, including significant reductions in unemployment, crime and low

educational attainment as well as improvements to the physical environment through investment in housing and local amenities.’ (Scottish Office, 1999: 47)

At the dawn of devolution community regeneration policy therefore continued to pathologise communities, downplaying the structural causes of urban deprivation using the New Labour grand discourse. Direct links were made within policy to the problematic *New Life for Urban Scotland* programme which was accepted uncritically within the meso-discourse of Scottish urban policy. The pathologising discourse had changed over time, but it still blamed communities for their poverty. The one-off initiatives that resulted, such as the *New Life* partnerships and SIPs, were battling against wider structural, social conditions, and like the CDP, were doomed to failure (Carley and Kirk, 1998). In 2002 the Scottish Executive changed the policy approach with the introduction of long-term, citywide strategic partnerships – Community Planning Partnerships. The following section will address whether the policy document that introduced this change, *Closing the Gap*, also produced a discursive change in the construction of deprived communities.

The Micro Discourse – *Closing the Gap*

The key document for this analysis, *Better Communities in Scotland: Closing the Gap* was published in July 2002. The drafting process began in June 2001 with heavy ministerial involvement with an initial consultation event held in November 2001 with key stakeholders. Successive drafts were then worked on between civil servants, Ministers and special advisers. This process was continuing during a period of extensive public sector reform with three major changes to governance and policy delivery structures occurring. Firstly, a new executive agency, Communities Scotland, was created in 2001 combining the housing delivery agency Scottish Homes

and the area regeneration division of the Scottish Executive. The *Closing the Gap* strategy therefore became the ‘framework for Communities Scotland’ (Interview data). Secondly, the new Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 was being drafted. This created a statutory basis for the community planning partnerships that were to combine existing area-based partnerships into single local authority-wide, cross-sectoral partnerships. The policy focus also moved towards enhancing mainstream service provision, rather than using additional resources for specific initiatives:

‘...obviously there were other things happening across the Executive in terms of developing legislation the local government legislation that set up community planning partnerships so I think the emphasis of the document starts to focus much more on public service delivery’ (Interview data)

Finally, policy implementation in Scotland was becoming more managerial, paralleling policy shifts in Westminster since the early 1990s (Clarke and Newman, 1997). The 2003-06 spending review committed all Scottish Executive departments to ‘closing the opportunity gap’ objectives – to close the gap between the most deprived and median communities in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2002b).

So the final document analysed here was very different from the first draft. Earlier drafts were much larger, containing extensive analysis both of the problem and proposed solutions. The removal of this text from the document was on Ministerial request, so the final document can be seen as a distillation of Ministerial intent in summer 2002:

‘when I left the document was much thicker [laughs] and I think it was the Minister’s view that they wanted a much smaller easy to read document I think...I think it was draft number twenty or probably more when it was published so a lot of the detailed analytical stuff was taken out because they didn’t want that. Again that reflects what Ministers wanted and what we thought you’d put into a policy document.’ (Interview

data)

Although the policy was meant to herald a new, sustainable, strategic way of carrying out regeneration, as the policy developed its main output was a £318 million Community Regeneration Fund (CRF) to be spent over three years on those datazones in the bottom 15% of the new Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD).ⁱⁱ Although this approach was more strategic than previous policies, the public funding provided was negligible and could not overcome structural inequalities. In the 2006-7 £106 million was spent in the CRF, or 0.36% of the Scottish Executive budget of £29.2 billion of total managed expenditure for the year (Scottish Executive, 2005). Yet this small allocation of funding became the Scottish Executive's flagship policy to combat poverty and social exclusion. When it was announced by the Communities Minister, Malcolm Chisholm, he said: '[t]his £318m is a substantial investment which will improve the lives of thousands of Scots and is targeted at the most deprived areas across the country' (*The Herald*, 10 December 2004). The *Closing the Gap* document provides the discursive evidence of the reasoning behind this funding allocation through its dependence on a pathological discourse.

The document is short, 31 pages in four chapters, and attained the Crystal Mark from the Plain English Society for ease of understanding. It is a very bland document, compared to other glossier policies – civil servants referred to the cover as 'sludge green' and the contents were plain black and white text. It is divided into a Ministerial forward summarising the content; a summary section; the first chapter 'Our Vision' that actually states the nature of the problem as perceived; a second chapter on 'Making Change Happen' justifies partnership working; the third chapter develops the emphasis on using mainstream services and the final chapter delivers managerialist recommendations on monitoring and evaluation and explains the new

indices of multiple deprivation.

The lexis of *Closing the Gap* repeats many of those discursive trends of outlined above. Quite early on there is a clear statement of what the Scottish Executive thinks a community should be:

We know that all communities are different and that there is no simple rule that determines whether a community works or not, but we want to build communities:

- where people feel safe in their homes and their neighbourhood;
- where people have a sense of belonging and trust;
- where people want to live;
- where people have the opportunity to learn, work and play; and
- where people can grow up, work, bring up children and retire.

(Chapter 1, paragraph 7, page 8ⁱⁱⁱ)

This text uses a communitarian discourse to emphasise the benefits of communities in emotive terms: ‘people *feel* safe’, ‘a *sense* of belonging and trust’. By suggesting ‘whether a community works’ the text also implicitly suggests other communities are “broken” or do not work and are thus constructed as the object of policy (Stone, 1989; Schneider and Ingram, 1993) in terms of the grand New Labour policy discourse.

The text continues to use the meso-discourse of the uniqueness and success of Scottish policy is also used:

3 Scotland has a long and respected record of community regeneration work, and there are many examples of local initiatives that have successfully tackled problems of deprivation, including education, health, crime, jobs, housing and the physical environment. Projects in Scotland have often led the way in providing new solutions to long-standing problems and, together with regeneration programmes in other countries, have tested and developed approaches which are now widely accepted as the heart of community regeneration. For example, local regeneration programmes have emphasised partnership working and community involvement, and much has been learned from this experience about the vital factors that are necessary for successful partnership working and meaningful community involvement.

(Chapter 1, paragraph 3, page 7)

This causal story of Scottish policy is then developed to maintain and reconstruct the

mega and grand discourses. The text explicitly rejects structural, economic analyses of the problem of urban deprivation, suggesting this policy initiative is more likely to succeed than its precursors:

Delivering change

9 We know that it is possible to turn disadvantaged communities around to create a better life for those who live in them. We do not accept the belief that deprivation and poverty cannot be avoided, nor the negative view that we have tried and failed and there is no more we can do. We have learned many lessons from our past approaches to regeneration but some are critical and these support our new approach.

(Chapter 1 paragraph 9, page 7)

The paragraph apparently begins with a clear and strong argument. However, the double negative in the second sentence and the ambiguous use of the pronoun ‘we’ mean this is not plain English and this complexity hides a much stronger argument. In the first half of the second sentence the double negative – not and cannot – obscures an argument that can be rewritten as ‘we believe poverty and deprivation can be avoided’. This, more direct argument, would be predicated on equality of both outcome and opportunity. The second part of the sentence also uses the double negative to obscure an argument that can be rewritten as ‘we can succeed and there is more we can do’. By obscuring the argument in this way, the text avoids making explicit commitments to extensive public policy measures to tackle inequalities and deprivation.

This argument is sustained in the rest of text by the use of a discourse of social exclusion that conflates macro-economic, labour-supply and moral explanations of poverty, disguising causation. The Ministerial Foreword presents a list creating equivalence to this end:

The time for talking is over. Nearly a third of Scotland's children still live in poverty. There are still too many neighbourhoods where crime and the fear of crime are commonplace and too many streets scarred by litter and graffiti. There are still too many Scots who feel excluded from the economic prosperity and social and cultural benefits the rest of the country enjoys at the start of the 21st century.

(Ministerial Foreword, page 4)

Although poverty is first in this list, it is solely child poverty, with children as passive victims. It ignores the role worklessness, the benefits system and low pay for adults has in creating child poverty. The list immediately moves onto immoral behaviour, creating equivalence between crime, the fear of crime and the environmental problems of littering. Worklessness and poor pay are acknowledged, but in terms of people *feeling* excluded. This suggests they could be included if they did not feel this way, if they tried harder. Another problematic equivalence is presented at the end of the first chapter when justifying community education and development:

24 As well as working with communities, we must also work to build individual skills, particularly literacy and numeracy. A high percentage of people with low levels of literacy and numeracy live in disadvantaged areas, have low-skill jobs and incomes, or have health problems and disabilities. We are supporting work to tackle these problems, both directly and by creating a development centre within Communities Scotland that will support the people providing these services.

(Chapter 1, paragraph 24, page 12)

This paragraph is actually discussing wider policy changes in community learning and development, with a shift away from encouraging communities to critically engage with service providers, to an apolitical process of improving literacy and numeracy. To justify this in the text of *Closing the Gap*, the middle sentence of the above paragraph conflates causation into an equivalence that becomes almost baffling in its logic. The sentence could be rewritten to explain likely causation by stating that a high percentage of people who live in disadvantaged areas have low levels of literacy and numeracy and health problems and disabilities which lead *to* low-skill jobs. Placing 'live in disadvantaged areas' at the forefront of the sentence suggests area-effects may be at work – living in an area causes low levels of literacy and numeracy. Although there is some evidence that area-effects do exist, they are not as dramatic as the text asserts (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2001). Again, agency is obscure. The

paragraph initially asserts that literacy and numeracy are individual skills, but the second sentence then contradicts this by linking these skills to geography: ‘people with low levels of literacy and numeracy live in disadvantaged areas’. The spatial community then becomes a “black-box” of undifferentiated social systems, justifying area-based intervention.

A moral conception of social exclusion is also used within the text to place the onus of policy delivery onto individuals and communities. Although the community can be deficient and be the subject of policy intervention, it must also take advantage of opportunities to produce successful policy outcomes:

Building skills and confidence in disadvantaged communities

17 Service improvements are not enough on their own to bring about change. We also need to build skills, resources and networks, and motivate individuals and communities so they can take advantage of opportunities and work to promote their own wellbeing.

(Chapter 1, paragraph 17, page 11)

This is also apparent in the equivalences presented above, if people gained skills and worked hard they could be included. Previous analysis of the document has revealed it does portray communities negatively, particularly by suggesting deprived communities lack confidence and skills (Hastings, 2003). Yet, the text needs to carry out a great deal of ideological work to sustain this argument. These two successive paragraphs show this through their use of the rhetorical device an *enthymeme*:

14 People in deprived communities are also more likely to rely on public services as their only safety net when things go wrong. They are less likely to have assets, such as savings or property, or a salary they can use to take out a loan to help them meet the repayments. Also, their social networks will not give them access to jobs and other opportunities that are available to other people.

18 As we have already said, people in deprived communities are less likely to have access to the resources they need when things go wrong. Increasing individual skills – particularly **literacy and numeracy** – and building the resources and networks within a community can help people find ways of tackling problems locally and can also help stop those services failing in the first place. It will also mean that communities can influence and work with providers to make sure that they get better local services.

(Chapter 1, paragraphs 14 and 18, pages 10-11)

The first sentence of paragraph 14 asserts that when things go wrong people rely on nets and for people in deprived communities these nets are public services. This assumes the ‘other’ people of the last sentence rely on their own, private nets. This is contrary to the universalism of most public sector spending reiterated by the Scottish Executive in its own spending review (Scottish Executive 2004). Connecting this to the second sentence we see the type of net these people need is savings, property or a salary. Therefore the public service safety net that deprived communities rely on is social housing and the benefits system; private housing is the norm to aspire to and to rely on welfare benefits when in need is wrong. In the last sentence the text segues from using economic terminology to the social terminology of communitarianism. The whole paragraph then becomes an *enthymeme*, the implicit argument being if you own economic capital, you own greater social capital and are a better person.

The second paragraph extends this. The text can be rewritten as: public services fail, not because they are poorly provided or under-funded, but because people cannot tackle problems locally themselves, because they lack networks, because they lack resources. This argument explicitly pathologises those in the communities as lacking or being at fault. To sustain this argument the change from the economic to social terminology is reversed – the resources lacking are literacy and numeracy, not savings or property. People do not learn these skills, they metaphorically build them like an ‘other’ person might build their private house. Communities then become the subject, means and end of the *Closing the Gap* strategy.

The impact this pathologising discourse has on the proposed policy solutions can be seen when the plans for a superior index of multiple deprivation are briefly discussed later in the document:

Measuring success

13 Together with the action plan we need to create a solid framework to allow us to measure progress in tackling the problems our disadvantaged communities face. This must go beyond measuring particular inputs and outputs and needs to allow us to track change over time for the main priorities of health, jobs, education, crime and transport.

(Chapter 4, paragraph 13, page 24)

Indices of multiple deprivation have been welcomed for providing data about the extent and geography of socio-economic deprivation and adding transparency to spatial spending decisions (Noble, Wright, Smith and Dibben, 2006). In the paragraph presented above, the index instead becomes a tool to measure communities. Agency is not stated so it is never clear who is ‘tackling the problems’. More problematically ‘progress’ is nominalised to remove agency: ‘to allow us to measure progress’ rather than ‘to allow *us* to measure *our* progress’. It is not statutory agencies that are being measured on their success, but communities themselves.

Most of this discourse is presented at the beginning of the text and begins to break down in successive chapters, especially when policy solutions begin to be discussed. The policy measures proposed by *Closing the Gap* are intended to challenge structural inequalities, contrary to the pathological explanations of the first chapter. The second chapter highlights the need for partnership working to produce sustainable outcomes for deprived areas. The text immediately highlights the role communities must have in producing these outcomes:

‘There are good examples of joint working and community involvement. Budgets are being brought together so that money can be spent flexibly on what is needed locally, not just on what it has always been spent on. Communities themselves are getting involved in delivering the services | that are needed to make a difference. This last point is particularly important.’

(Chapter 2, paragraph 6, pages 13-14, | representing the page turn)

This constructs an empowered community directing resources to deliver lasting change and overcoming structural inequalities. This is reiterated three pages later when it is asserted that: ‘Partnership working needs a willingness to...give up power.’ (*Chapter 2, paragraph 18, page 16*). In the third chapter there is an acknowledgement that deficiencies in public services exacerbate and contribute to concentrated deprivation: ‘We need to work together with agencies and partnerships across Scotland to make sure that people living in disadvantaged areas have the services to which they are entitled.’ (*Chapter 3, paragraph 3, page 17*). Agency and blame are clear – people have not been getting a level of service they have a right to expect, yet the earlier pathologising of communities makes community planning a more problematic policy tool overall.

The Text in Society

The *Closing the Gap* strategy was not universally accepted when published. At a conference in August 2002, it was noted that the policy initially offered no extra resources (Bailey, 2002). One anti-poverty campaigner from Glasgow’s East End was also noted as saying: ‘[t]he emphasis in the document on building ‘social capital’ implied that communities do not have it already. She questioned the idea that others should come in and ‘build capacity’ when it is already there.’ (Bailey, 2002: 10). This was not a uniquely radical view. Three years previously, a number of the reports of the Scottish Social Inclusion Network provided an alternative discourse of social inclusion and exclusion. These state the role structural inequalities have in recreating spatial patterns of deprivation, noting local action can only ever be a palliative, not a long-term solution (SSIN Strategy Action Team, 1999). Community involvement is seen as essential, but this must truly empower communities, with a conclusion entirely

contrary to that of *Closing the Gap*:

‘community participation should not be seen as a pre-requisite for the delivery of decent services. People living either in poor or more affluent areas are entitled to both quality services and an acceptable living environment. We should not accept a situation where people living in more deprived communities have to go to countless meetings or engage in endless arguments with decision makers simply to receive a level of service that other people take for granted’ (SSIN Strategy Action Team, 1999: 23)

Generally there was little political enthusiasm for regeneration plans that would tackle structural inequalities and in many respects *Closing the Gap* did not have a lasting legacy. Indeed, in 2006 the Scottish Executive announced a new regeneration policy *People and Place* (Scottish Executive, 2006). The policy proposed nurturing public-private partnerships to produce physical change, particularly through government supported Urban Regeneration Companies, a return to ABIs.

An immediate criticism of the new policy was that there was little mention of the role of communities. The response was that the almost forgotten *Better Communities in Scotland: Closing the Gap* document was the statement on communities in regeneration – they were partner documents. Interview data suggests that this was actually an afterthought:

Interviewer: So the Ministers wanted it to be this companion piece the physical development.

Interviewee: That wasn’t the intention but I think when we published that was the first kinda we got ehm we got questions about what about communities and so actually we didn’t kinda do, or elaborate hugely on communities or anything, because it was kinda, a lot of the community stuff was included in this document [points to a copy of *Closing the gap*].

Interviewer: because looking at them as a sort of longitudinally it appears like policy has changed quite dramatically with *People and Place* but actually it hasn't its just addressing the other side of regeneration.

Interviewee: It's the other issues. You can't just address community regeneration you have to look at the wider, the economic stuff the physical stuff, the environmental stuff and the social stuff. And it has to kinda go together otherwise yeah you're not gonna kinda achieve the sustainable transformation of communities you've got to look at all angles.

(Interview data)

Pathological discourses of 'good' and 'bad' communities, make the logic of this view of physical intervention irrefutable and poverty becomes understood almost solely as a spatial concept.

Conclusion

This paper has charted almost 40 years of discursive change in UK and particularly Scottish regeneration policy. Across this period, pathological explanations for spatial concentrations of poverty have dominated discourses, with change being a reflection of political trends. In the 1980s communities were characterised as being not entrepreneurial; from 1997 they were characterised as being socially excluded in New Labour's grand discourse. The meso-discourse of Scottish policy allowed these discourses to be reconstructed in the Scottish policy context. The historic discursive legacy of *New Life for Urban Scotland* was used to justify pathological discourses in the face of resistance from groups such as the Scottish Social Inclusion Network. The *Closing the Gap* strategy, with its commitment to use mainstream public sector resources to overcome structural, spatial inequalities, could have also been an

opportunity for discursive change in policy away from the dependency on pathological explanations. Yet, the discourse analysis presented here shows there was no direct break with the past suggesting a complex path dependency in policy discourses. It reconstructed the concepts of social exclusion and communitarianism of New Labour's grand discourse in a Scottish context using the meso-discourse of Scottish policy. The mega-discourse of pathologising spatial communities could persist through intertextuality and discursive change over time which masks an underlying path dependency.

This analysis does not want to needlessly criticise the positive action taken to improve the lives of the poorest in Scotland. To paraphrase Kochis 'there is no claim that the metaphors [or discourses] used are *prima facie* fake or misleading; the point is simply to show that the underlying assumptions are crucial to framing problems and suggesting solutions.' (Kochis, 2005: 32) But in areas targeted by the *Closing the Gap* strategy community representatives speak ironically of living in a "so called area of deprivation" – with air quotes. For all the lauding of success in the Scottish policy discourse, policy interventions have not 'turned around' these communities and stigma, supported by pathological discourses, still exists. *Closing the Gap* did not offer an alternative to this discourse. To draw on the opening quote from Dvora Yanow, it made the idea of closing the gap easy for the Scottish public – the gap would be closed by the poor helping themselves. Public policy solutions to the problems of concentrated deprivation are required and they must acknowledge the scale of the problem and fully engage public-sector partners and the socially included to provide lasting solutions and change (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2002).

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ⁱ A google search for the phrase "a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals" on 25 February 2008 found around 281 results; substituting "short-hand" found around a further 50 results.

ⁱⁱ Datazones are standardised geographical areas with an average population of 1,000 used to calculate the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Where possible and appropriate, sections of text from *Closing the Gap* are presented as image captures of the pdf of the original document to give an indication of the style of presentation.