

## THE SUBEMPLOYED PROJECT

### Further comments on Questionnaires

(Comments on letter of 11th January, following numbering of original points)

#### 1. Work

This was an attempt to suggest the need to develop an operational definition of sub-employment, with finer categories arranged on a continuum, placing those who are in work in categories of degree of security, in relationship to "employment" <sup>rather than</sup> ~~ratio from~~ "present employment". Might not movement between jobs in the last 12 months be an important criterion? How much weight should you attach to factors connected with the present job if it is only one of half-a-dozen held in the last 12 months? There is also the problem of (a) changes of job within the same firm, (b) changes of workplace within the same firm, (c) changes of employer within the same job, or type of job, as well as (d) changes of employer and of type of job. The answers to several different questions might need to be used to develop a scale or typology. What is at issue is the concept of sub-employment. There are obviously problems in defining objective and subjective standpoints. Both are important but personally I would want to keep them distinct.

#### 2. Pay

If I understand your work in firms correctly you are accepting employers' definitions of employment skills, needs and values. I am disturbed by this, because of its implications for theory and policy. Therefore it seems to me important to develop (however roughly) alternative criteria, or criteria at least which will put employers' evaluations into perspective. I know there are huge problems but crude indications seem to me to be



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If I understand your work in firms correctly you are accepting employers' definitions of employment skills, needs and values. I am disturbed by this, because of its implications for theory and policy. Therefore it seems to me important to develop (however roughly) alternative criteria, or criteria at least which will put employers' evaluations into perspective. I know there are huge problems but crude indications seem to me to be



better than nothing. This surely means that you try to develop generalisable questions about work (going beyond conventional hours not only to heaviness but monotony, dexterity, dirtiness, danger, etc.) so that the rationality of pay (as well as security of employment) can begin to be seen, and the right questions asked about pay. O.K., no one would expect you to answer all these questions, but one side of our understanding of low pay is to bring out the characteristics of the work that is involved and the pay that is attached to that work. Moreover, pay itself has to be defined plausibly. How do you allow for big variations from week to week? How far should it include fringe benefits, including income in kind, and how far should fringe benefits be treated as a rather separate aspect of work security? So far as I am aware you have not yet answered these central questions. Then there is the "pay" (as I tried to put it provocatively) of the unemployed. The benefits they receive are related nowadays to their past work and pattern of work (redundancy pay, earnings-related benefits, likelihood of fulfilling eligibility for unemployment insurance benefits as distinct from supplementary benefits). The social security system must therefore be regarded as reinforcing the system of values adopted by the employer and should be analysed and discussed. Its trends must correspond to trends in patterns of employment, sub-employment and low pay. Exploration of social security experience will allow the development, again, of a typology of sub-employment - without reference necessarily to work experience. Questions about receipt of supplementary benefits and treatment at the employment exchange will again tend to produce a hierarchy of "desirable" and "less desirable" potential employees. This may be simply a continuation of the hierarchy according to security of employment among those actually in work. The sources and types of income (including other types of means-tested benefits) will help to show the "situation" of the sub-employed. All right, some of that will be feasible in the follow-up



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survey but the conceptual framework still needs to be seen in the main questionnaire. Thus if we are to prepare for pay to be subtly related to the characteristics of work we have to prepare for sub-employment income to be subtly related to the characteristics of sub-employment. Again this is part of the continuum of inequality.

### 3. Work situation

(Though perhaps the central concern is the social structure of the work force). My points were designed to call attention to the variations in pay and security of employment for "equivalent" work in different firms and to emphasise that there is not much sign in either questionnaire of an attempt to explain this. I hope I am wrong. I suggested that there may be social characteristics of the work rather than intrinsic labour market factors, which might help to explain this and that you did not appear to be exploring these in the surveys. There is the question of the social organisation of work, isolation at work, opportunities for informal regular groupings, formal trade union meetings, relations with supervisors and management, and the whole manifestation of the status hierarchy. Then there is the social relationship between firms, with all that this implies, and the differential status of firms in the locality. Isn't the relationship of the sub-employed to this "structure" important? May not pay and the "security" of employment be explicable in part through the delineation of this structure? Again you could not be expected to exhaust the possibilities, but can you do any specialised research without at least outlining, with indicators, the internal social as well as occupational structure of firms and the external structure of their relationships in this locality?



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#### 4. Subemployment and community

There is a similar need to show the relationship between the sub-employed and other institutions in the community. This is what I meant in asking for some account to be given (or rather sought in the questionnaire) of relationships between sub-employed (and workers) to household, family, street, local community, local bureaucracy, local unions, local firms in general. Resources and expressions of sympathy or of help are withheld or offered. They either reinforce the predicament of the sub-employed, or improve their circumstances and chances. Are there any pressures from these sources upon the scope or severity of unemployment? Again, it would be idiotic to expect you to go into detail, but hasn't an outline and haven't a few illustrations to be given to show the importance of this in any sociological explanation? This is pitched in terms generally of the employed in the locality and you have to decide how far to develop questions for all people of working age and how far only for the sub-employed. You suggest that for the latter the decisions can wait until we plan a follow-up survey but since these are central to the whole inquiry the decisions need to be set out at this stage.

#### 5. The definition of work boundaries and pay differentials

You say that surely employers define work boundaries? The preceding points suggest how the scope of employment is also determined by other institutions. This is surely true if we reflect about education, women and retirement ages and all I am saying is that in the structural situation, employers' temptations to lay off workers or take them on may be resisted, held in check, or weakly accepted by external social forces. These external non-market forces compel employers to adapt and sometimes revise their policies. But different firms have different workforces and different industrial and economic situations and are therefore



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differentially affected by the general movement of work boundaries. They need to be ranked according to criteria of pay, work security, "comprehensiveness" of recruitment of local population, as well as turnover (and turnover can itself be defined in ways which are sensitive or insensitive to the problems of the sub-employed). The firms also need to be ranked in terms of measures of pay dispersion. This is crucial if we are ever to explain or predict the relationship between changes in employment or industry and movements in the inequality of earnings. My reference to deviants was to firms which are deviants. Is it not possible to develop such an idea on exploitative criteria? My reference to Wirth was intended to imply the zoning of both firms and residential work populations according to forces which are of course largely external to the area but which are also internal. Industry is sited often on social as well as strict economic criteria and one has to be aware of the spatial as well as organisational and stratificational determinants of sub-employment and low pay. Again, you could not be expected to explore these latter points very far, but it would be wrong to neglect them entirely. Even to discuss them briefly is to put rather narrower and more specialised pre-occupations into necessary context.

#### 6. Earnings and household income

I am glad you accept the points about the value of distinguishing, and obtaining, last year's income and last week's income. While not suggesting you should have anything like the same number of questions about assets, social services and fringe benefits as cash incomes in your questionnaire I believe you should have nearly all the cash income questions, and enough of the others to defend the definition of concepts of household income and levels of living so as to be able to pronounce on the poverty or otherwise of the sub-employed. Maybe all that is necessary



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on social services in kind is welfare and school milk and meals. Maybe employer fringe benefits can be restricted to a slightly shorter version of Qs. 6-11 of the poverty questionnaire. Maybe assets can be restricted to (a) houses including own, (b) savings (Q.2 Assets), (c) stocks and shares (Q.3), (d) catch-all question (like Q. 17). Finally private income in kind might be restricted to value of garden produce or allotment, value of any regular gifts. So far as income is concerned I believe we should retain the possibility of comparison with the main poverty survey. I think you may not be aware of the considered judgments, effort and numerous consultations which went into the scope, order and form of the income questions in the poverty survey.

## 7. Social Policy

By implication if not design you will be "measuring the needs of the sub-employed". I propose simply that measurement should be explicit. To some extent needs and rights would be residually defined by applying criteria independent of employers' evaluations, as discussed above. But it also seems important to consider the question more positively, to fill in any gaps and attempt at least to contribute to the identification of the extent and type of occupational, income and other needs of this group of people. How can you ask about training, for example, without having some standard of comparison in mind? The form of the questions will show the degree of your acceptance of the status quo. Why should you accept it any more than not accept it? You cannot avoid the issue and I am only suggesting that by taking hold of it properly you can, with little extra effort, point up the potentialities of the analysis of data which already exist and by pulling together separate assumptions make possible a more integrated survey. The analysis of inequalities within work as well as outside work seems to me to have direct implications for



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rights. Again, the systematic confrontation of the consequence of this analysis seems to me to produce better ideas about the functions of existing arrangements, for the workforce - whether recruitment, training, work conditions, security, safety, or pay. Again, you could not be expected to cover everything. The really worrying question at present is whether you are covering any field of policy. If so, which, and how?

I have tried to discuss points which are common to the planning of the surveys both of firms and local populations. Each must collect data unobtainable in the other survey, but each will include data which complement or replicate the other. The co-ordination of the two surveys in relation to the research objectives remains the major problem.

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