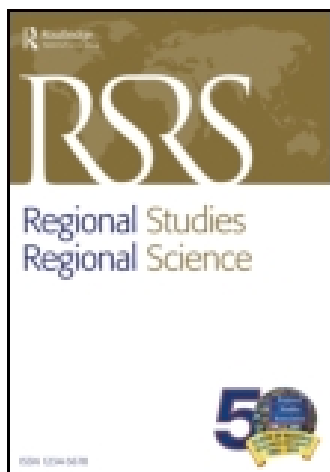


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The impact of place on policy outcomes

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EARLY CAREER ARTICLE

The impact of place on policy outcomes

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This paper explores the impact of place on policy outcomes by examining the implementation of economic development policy in the East Midlands of England. To do so it poses two questions: does the East Midlands meet any of the criteria that might be used to define a region and does this matter for the implementation of policy. As states look to establish new areas to attract EU regional funds, the nature of a region needs to be considered carefully. The paper argues that the idea of functionality is key to the coherence of a region and the subsequent success or failure of policy initiatives at the regional level. Regions which lack economic, cultural, or political cohesion will struggle to build governance networks and attract the involvement of the public and private sectors in policy initiatives.

Keywords: region; policy; East Midlands; functional labour markets

Introduction

Politicians, policy-makers and academics have long debated the ideal scale at which subnational policy interventions should be made (Paasi, 2001). These debates range from those who advocate ‘local’ solutions to those who favour splitting up the nation state into larger blocks. In the UK this is characterized by the localism vs regionalism debate (Ward & Hardy, 2012) between those who favour action at local government level and/or city regions and those who prefer the nine standard English regions. A similar process occurs within the EU with ‘new’ regions being created in ascension states for the purposes of bidding for EU funds (Baltina, 2012). Paasi (2001) points out that there are several studies both in academia and policy-making that use the term ‘region’ without first establishing what one is. Within academia a lively but relatively sporadic debate on the definition of regions has taken place. Cooke and Morgan (1998) gave a brief overview of their definition of a region;

[a] *region* is a territory less than its state(s) possessing significant supra-local administrative, cultural, political, or economic power and cohesiveness differentiating it from its state and other regions. (Cooke & Morgan, 1998, p. 64)

Paasi (2001) discussed the importance of emotion in creating loyalty, adding that the concept of ‘region’ goes beyond mere borders. However, policy-makers do not necessarily agree, with the debate on the different types of region in academia seemingly being ignored when new places for subnational economic interventions are being developed.

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The key question for this paper is whether or not a coherent region is necessary for economic development to work or whether economic planning can be successful no matter how arbitrarily the territory involved is decided.

This paper argues that an understanding of the characteristics of place is key to building governance capacity and networks. If the chosen space only shares a few common economic characteristics, then a campaign designed to draw on that regions business and population's commitment to that place may well be doomed to failure. The paper draws on empirical research into the work of the East Midlands Development Agency (EMDA) (Quinn, 2013). This research involved 29 in-depth interviews between 2009 and 2010 with key stakeholders from across the East Midlands and these form the basis of the discussions in this paper.

What is a region?

Broadly similar definitions to those of Cooke and Morgan (1998) appear in Tomaney (2009a, 2009b) and Paasi (2009). Paasi (2009) argues that a region needs to be able to garner loyalty or attachment from its people and business community if it is to function. Tomaney (2009b) outlined five different types of 'regions' – cartographic, economic, political, cultural and ecological phenomenon – while Paasi (2009) proposed four types – social, political, cultural and cognitive. This paper will use the first four of Tomaney's definitions along with those of Paasi to ask whether policy-makers need to consider the characteristics of a place when devising economic development interventions. 'Cartographic' regions are borne out of the need for both states and super-national bodies to collect data at the subnational level for planning and policy purposes. Within the EU, this led to the creation of the NUTS (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) areas and within England to the creation of standard regions.

An economic region is more interconnected than a cartographic region; here, the 'region' needs to have a clearly established economy which functions as a 'whole'. Within an economic region, policy is easier to implement and the buy-in of the private sector easier to achieve if businesses have a stake in the performance of their local economy. Developing this idea further, Tomaney (2009b) discusses the idea of functional labour markets where the economic footprint of an area forms the basis of links that develop within it. If there is no obvious economic rationale to encourage participation in networks then it is likely those networks will flounder.

The concept of a cultural region is based on a region's people being united by a common set of ideals and social experiences (Tomaney, 2009b). Paasi (2009) defines cultural and cognitive regions as ones in which the population take these shared experiences or 'collective memories' and make them the core of their identity. The culmination of a region emerging as an economic and cultural entity is being conferred a political region either through gaining political powers and institutions (Tomaney, 2009b) or through the willingness of its inhabitants to come together to fight for its preservation or even expansion (Paasi, 2009).

Is the East Midlands a region?

Examining the East Midlands using Cooke and Morgan's (1998) definition as a lens, there appears little to hold it together from a political, cultural or economic standpoint. Tomaney (2009a, p. 1) argued that 'regionalism pre-supposes a regional identity'. Regional identities cannot be imposed without something tangible to base them on, be that a shared economic history or similar social attitudes. Tomaney (2009a) argues that the process of regionalism

takes a territory and tries to marry it to its population. To do this, that space has to mean something to those people to gain their engagement. Hardill, Benneworth, Baker and Budd (2006) point out there is very little ‘regional consciousness’ in the East Midlands, and that people within it are more likely to identify with their county or city than the East Midlands. Dury went as far as to claim that the East Midlands:

does not constitute a geographical region ... [it is] the portion ... left over when other, more recognisable, regions ... were filled in. (Dury, cited in Hardill et al., 2006, p. 168)

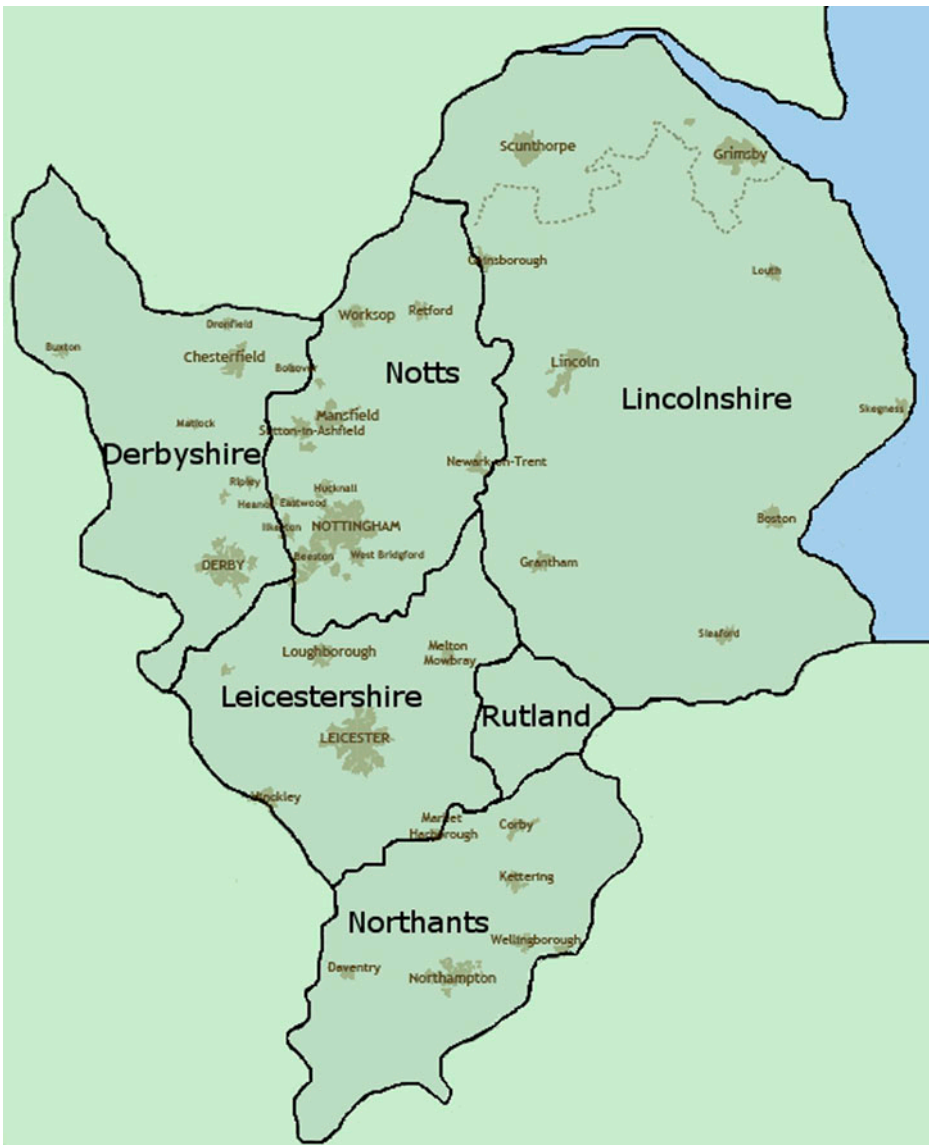


Figure 1. The East Midlands.

The East Midlands (Figure 1) meets just one of Tomaney (2009b) and Paasi's (2009) definitions of a region. As a cartographic region it was first identified by Fawcett (1919), and used as a defence area during World War II. The Major Government of the 1990s established Government Offices for the Regions, one of which was situated in the East Midlands. Labour then adopted these boundaries in 1998 when creating EMDA, although today it is only used for limited administrative purposes in bodies like the NHS. The region has a population of 4.2 million and contains 6 distinct counties and 3 medium-sized cities (Derby, Leicester and Nottingham). EMDA tried to pursue a single economic strategy for the region, but encountered problems with this as attempts to present the area as one region obscured the differences within it.

Moving onto the second criterion (economic region), although the three cities are similar in terms of size and industrial profile, they are not strongly connected. Quinn (2013) argued that the improvement in the economy of Leicester in the mid-2000s was achieved in direct competition with neighbouring cities rather than in collaboration with them. There is little to suggest that any economic success in Nottingham or Derby filters through to the rest of the region. Outside of the three cities, the economies of Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire are unconnected to the rest of the East Midlands due to a lack of transport links and distinct industrial profiles.

Champion, Coombes, Raybould and Wymer (2007) identified four different functional labour markets in the East Midlands. While there are undoubtedly similarities in the make-up of these labour markets, they are not reliant on each other. Northern Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire are much closer geographically to the Sheffield and Manchester labour markets than to those of Leicester and Northampton. Taking the economic region definition and applying it to the East Midlands, it would appear that a case could be made for at least four different economic regions existing within the one administrative ('standard') region.

Moving onto the political region criteria, we can see that the East Midlands exists as a European Parliamentary constituency, and until 2010 there was a Government Minister for the region and an East Midlands Select Committee. However, these developments were purely administrative rather than developments engendering a political identity. None had significant powers, and in the case of EMDA, there was some recognition of the need to move down a level in order to engage with the business community. It is difficult to make a case for East Midlands as a political region using Paasi's (2009) definition – few if any fought to preserve its institutions when the Coalition Government announced their abolition. Indeed, the only criterion that it can be shown to meet is the cartographic region.

Finally, it is difficult to put forward a persuasive argument for the East Midlands as a cultural region (Hardill et al., 2006). Within the East Midlands itself there are distinct differences between the three cities, the former industrial coalfield towns, the rural areas of Lincolnshire and the southern-looking Northamptonshire. There is no extensive collective shared memory about issues in the East Midlands, especially when compared to other regions such as Yorkshire and the North East.

Impact on policy outcomes

Having established that the East Midlands is little more than an administrative region, the paper now moves on to consider its key question: what impact did this have on policy outcomes? This is important, as there is little evidence that work done in academia on the nature of regions is taken into account when states and supra-national bodies

such as the EU choose to engage with substate tiers of governance. This apparent disconnect between academia and policy-makers has led to new regions being created to attract EU funds which have no historical, cultural or political precedence.

A number of the problems EMDA has had in its dealings with the subregions can be linked back to the issues relating to understandings of the East Midlands as a 'region'. The problems of such a disparate region, a perception of Nottingham bias, and the isolation of Northampton and Lincolnshire all had an impact on the extent to which EMDA was able to engage with the actors within its boundaries. EMDA was able to have an impact (ECOTEC, 2009) despite these problems, but interview evidence suggests that this impact could have been greater if more consideration had been given to the territorial make-up of the area.

Interviewees from Northamptonshire spoke of a complete lack of engagement with EMDA, arguing that the county was in the wrong region and that many businesses look to London and the South East, and not to the other areas of the East Midlands, for networks and governance. Indeed, at times EMDA seemed to work against Northamptonshire rather than with it. For example, EMDA lent considerable support to attempts to move the Formula One Grand Prix from Silverstone in Northamptonshire to Donnington in Derbyshire, causing resentment within Northamptonshire. While the other counties of the region were well represented on EMDA's board by 2010, EMDA had only recently appointed its second Northamptonshire-based board member.

Instead, respondents from Northamptonshire talked about the need to engage with the Milton Keynes South Midlands partnership, the Oxford–Cambridge Arc and the Corby–Kettering–Peterborough settlement. In addition, Northampton is not easily connected to the rest of the region via public transport, which increases the sense of isolation. This failure to engage with Northampton was especially concerning for EMDA given the importance of the county for the region's headline figures. Northamptonshire has some of the highest wages and levels of qualifications in the region as well as the lowest unemployment figures.

Throughout its lifespan, EMDA struggled to engage with the private and public sectors and this struggle to engage was evident across the region. EMDA was criticized for not being aware of their business base outside of Nottingham. Many respondents from Leicestershire, especially from the private sector, reported that EMDA's base in Nottingham and a perceived Nottingham bias meant that they were unwilling to engage with EMDA. While there are elements of local chauvinism at play here, there was an issue for EMDA in terms of the way it was perceived. In particular, EMDA struggled to get its message across in relation to private-sector investment in the idea of an East Midlands economy.

Business respondents from outside Nottingham frequently expressed frustration at what they perceived to be a lack of engagement from EMDA. Crucially, many of these respondents were heavily involved in Leicestershire-based business groups and in the formation of the Leicester and Leicestershire Multi Area Agreement, which in turn fed into the newly formed Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). Similarly, in Northampton, the formation of the LEP based on county lines has found it far easier to engage the local business community (Quinn, 2014). The appetite for engagement in the policy-making process among the private sector in both Leicestershire and Northamptonshire was apparent, but a regional body based on a 'new' cartographic region failed to attract their active involvement.

Table 1. Regional characteristics and their impact on policy outcomes.

Regional criteria	Does the East Midlands meet it?	Impact
Cartographic	Yes	Provided the region a set of established and fairly well-understood administrative borders
Economic	No	Difficult to build networks across a number of distinct competing labour markets
Political	No	Political power in the region came from the state (above) and the local government structure (below). No political mandate at the regional tier
Cultural	No	An apparent lack of a sense of place at the regional tier. Little to no buy-in to the idea of a regional strategy or identity

The East Midlands experience shows that the characteristics of a region does have an impact on policy outcomes and that governments need to consider these when deciding on the site of economic interventions. The fact that the region met so few of both Tomaney's (2009b) and Paasi's (2009) regional criteria caused a variety of different issues, which are summarized above (see Table 1).

Conclusions

The academic literature on defining a region together with the experiences in the East Midlands present a persuasive argument that sub-national economic development requires policy-makers to consider the 'make-up' of the space in which they operate. Regions need a sense of functionality if networks and institutions set up within them are to gain policy-business traction and maximize impact. Returning to the four kinds of region proposed by Tomaney (2009b) and Paasi (2009), the East Midlands clearly exists in a cartographic sense and had some political institutions, but could not be described as a political region. Similarly, it does not meet the criteria put forward for either a cultural or economic region. It contained a number of different functional labour markets that compete with each other rather than work together and this caused problems for EMDA's attempts to attract private-sector investment outside of its Nottingham base and build region-wide networks. The difficult nature of the region *did matter* and in the case of the East Midlands it is apparent that the characteristics of the region did have an impact on the success or failure of policy interventions. The LEPs were created from the bottom up based on existing territorial networks rather than imposed from above by central government. As a result they have been more business-driven than the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). This has implications beyond the East Midlands of England as both nation states and super-state bodies such as the EU frequently create new administrative areas within which to operate policy initiatives. Unless regions meet more than the most basic definitions of region-hood, then it is feared that the problems identified in this paper will re-occur. New EU regional creations in the East of the continent which lack cultural, political and economic cohesion are unlikely experience the same benefits that more established regions in the West did.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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