

'Impact' Debate: members respond to the BSA President

RESPONSE 1

I think the idea of using the [BSA] London office for targeting events with opportunities for networking etc is a good one. Probably smaller, more focused events are more effective than larger gatherings. Do we need an electronic version of something like the old "New Society"? That provided the opportunity for social scientists to present recent findings and debates in accessible language and some points of meeting between scholars, practitioners and politicians. Is this an initiative that the Academy of Social Sciences might take on? I think the last time a cabinet minister addressed a BSA conference was back in the 1980s or thereabouts (Dr David Owen).

RESPONSE 2

I'm going to start out by speaking (writing) frankly -- I hope you don't mind. I found your message confused to a degree. It suggests that we need to "get beyond our resistance to crude notions of utility". I took this to mean that we have no choice but to find ways to "sell" sociology on the basis of its potential for generating increased economic value as such value is commonly understood (e.g. GDP growth).

But I didn't see anything in following passages that would be at all convincing in advancing such a case, and I doubt such a case could be made, certainly not in a way that would engage the work that most sociologists do.

What is more convincing is the notion that society's ability to actually *experience* economic value will "be mediated by sociology's capacity to enable society to make sense of it". This is, as your message makes clear in a more convincing way, where sociology can make a difference. But it is not the same as *generating* increased economic value in the sense that term is no doubt intended.

The potential for pursuing ideas in that latter mode is enhanced by the government's own adoption in recent years of certain elements of the discourse of "quality of life" or "well-being". There are signs of recognition that endless growth fails to answer the question: what do we do with all our of wealth? I think this is something that needs to be exploited with reference to "impact".

I have no doubt that the confusion I'm pointing to is much greater in the minds of the politicians etc who are pushing "impact" and the like. What I am suggesting, then, is that it might be desirable to exploit that confusion in ways that would allow us to make clear exactly what sort of social contribution we do make. I doubt it will work to try to convince people that that contribution is "economic"

in the conventional sense. I continue to think that there is more to be gained from demonstrating our role in enhancing other meanings and kinds of value. Perhaps it would be unwise to mount active or explicit resistance to crude notions of utility. But I don't think we can win by playing that game (how what we do enhances GDP growth) on its own terms -- much better in my view to continue to press the relevance of other terms.

RESPONSE 3

Much of the debate about impact seems to be about the extent to which impact should form part of the RAE and now its successor REF. That is how it should be assessed and what proportion of the occasional audit of scholarly activities it should comprise. I see impact more in terms of the day to day consciousness of a discipline and its findings. This may be because as the lone criminologist (and part time at that) in a small teaching orientated college I was not entered for the RAE – indeed none of my sociology or media colleagues were – so feel under no, or little, pressure to publish. Moreover, though a late entrant to the academy (half a career in the Home Office as an administrator/policy maker) possibly through good fortune and some connections find myself with some standing in my profession. Yet I have published sporadically on sexuality and criminology, green criminology, CCTV and more recently 'public criminology'. I also serve on an editorial board and done a lot of peer reviewing and some PhD examinations. However, I have also published online on my own website (the whole of my PhD and powerpoints of conference papers) and blogs. Media experience has included some TV, radio and print as well as backgrounding journalists. Basically my position is that irrespective of the need for audits - and recognising that early years scholars may also need to go down the academic publishing route - all scholars need to reach out beyond their discipline, institution and students. This may require supping with the media.

RESPONSE 4

I am a new lecturer (a sociologist) [in a] department of management. I have two thoughts about important points that should be emphasized in the new narrative.

First, I think we push firmly back to pressures that reduce all value to so-called economic value. This should not be a hard tack to push. After all, the heart of university education is a liberal education, and the humanities and social sciences are essential to that. In this sense, we would assert that trends toward reducing all measures of utility in university education to narrow economic metrics can be seen as an assault on the very conceptual foundations and principles of liberal education. Certainly -- with its emphasis on empirical, historical and comparative analysis; logical consistency; theoretical interpretation; academic debate and theoretical pluralism; understanding of diversity; and so on -- sociology can contribute to the construction of an informed, rational, engaged civil society in ways that simply cannot be measured by traditional, narrow economic metrics.

Second, as you have noted, sociology directly engages industry, science and economic development. Indeed, I and many of my sociological colleagues are housed in business and management departments. We help produce well-rounded managers. We provide managers with tools to deal with issues such as workplace diversity. Indeed, sociologists are perhaps the main discipline that provides in-depth, qualitative studies of workplace relations and organizational behavior. It is from the sociological tradition, mainly, that we management scholars derive many of their qualitative methodological innovations, while those coming from an economic background tend to focus on statistics and formal modelling, rather than in-depth analysis of real-world contexts. For decades, sociologists have systematically studied labor markets, organizational performance, regional economies, economic and workforce development, networks, and so on, adding fundamental, uniquely sociological insights into a range of debates over directly economic issues.

RESPONSE 5

Am a black and white kind of girl so excuse the naivety of the following but in sociology, given the nature of the subject, shouldn't we be talking to everyone?

Much of the research produced is extremely interesting and relevant for 'joe public' but is mostly inaccessible and where it is accessible it is in a form and language not everyone can easily engage with.

Given the relevancy of and public interest potential of sociological research surely there is no reason why research can't be re-written or converted into a language and format that is more accessible and appear anywhere including tabloid papers and magazines. The impact of the research and what is used for/what it contributes to in terms of policy and real lives is also not apparent to all, certainly rarely outwith social science. There is still a perception of costly naval-gazing regarding academia which is no longer justified but which is not sufficiently addressed.

My argument is essentially that if society in general knew more about what we do and why and what results it effects - the rest may follow - a more bottom up than top down approach perhaps.

RESPONSE 6

I think one of the things we need to stress and re-stress time and again is the importance of serendipity in all types of research, it has to be seen as an inherent part of the research process, as part of what makes critical academics valuable. This is true, I assume, of all disciplines. Part of what we should be arguing for in debates about impact is intellectual capacity to deal with, analyse, offer views on the new, the unexpected and the unintended. In the words of a great US thinker 'the unknown unknowns'. However unattractive and frustrating it may be for politicians we need people working in spaces which on the face of it seem not to be useful but which might become useful in the light of events or the passage of time. In doing so we have to acknowledge that by implication not all research will have, or ever have impact.

A nice illustration of this would be Iain Wilkinson's work on suffering which could be seen as esoteric, ivory tower etc. but is now seen as essential across a range of disciplines and fields including medical sociology and charitable giving. The second point is that a vital role for social science at one level is to simply bear witness critically to events. By implication this is historical in nature but it is important that sociologists, with their particular imagination, account for the first cut of history. An illustration could be the way sociologists have looked at redundancy, deindustrialisation and depression in the past and examine critically the effect of attempts to ameliorate industrial distress. This was important at the time, is historically important as a 'simple' record but also now the work of three decades ago comes into its own because of the recent economic events. It is important that social science research that seems 'simply' to be bearing witness continues to be funded so that we have a better historical view of social change. One of the exciting features of the last decade has been the ability of social scientists to revisit classic studies of the past and rethink some of the findings in the light of current concerns. Connected to this idea of bearing witness is the value in speaking truth, however unpalatable, to power. Many of the social issues which are lumped together under the banner of 'broken Britain' were subject to research in the 1980s and 1990s. The fact that politicians and policy makers chose to ignore them does not invalidate them. As part of that we should stress that having a critical social science capacity is part of civil society in the same way that the AHRC can make the same argument for the arts and humanities.

There is a need to argue both for this broader valuing of the social science in direct research terms as well as valuing the role sociology has in building and maintaining critical capacity at graduate and post graduate level. This sociological capacity needs to be seen as something distinct from economic or business literacy. Sociology has the ability to ask critical questions of both these disciplines framed within a social lens. That capacity cannot simply be collapsed into these other approaches. That is not to say that we don't have problems with that capacity, Harriet Bradley is doing a report for the ESRC on the state of economic sociology and I think this is where we need to do so work to build capacity.

I think there is an issue over dialogue and attentiveness to social scientists' ideas. There are undoubtedly problems with sociologists not being media friendly but we should also turn it the other way and say that dialogue is a two way process and that complex social issues are just that, complex. To some extent then we need to argue that social science literacy needs to be embedded within policy makers, or at the very least some effort needs to be made to engage with the sociological community. This is where the BSA, British Academy, Academy needs to play a role. I agree with you about making effective use of all of the strengths and structure we have including the London meeting rooms and creating one off events.

I think we need to recognise, and I am sure you do, that we need to provide some of the arguments that the ESRC Hefce can use to defend social sciences in the UK.

RESPONSE 7

There is a paper at: [Frank Bechhofer, Lez Rayman-Bacchus and Robin Williams \(2001\) 'The Dynamics of Social Science Research Exploitation' *Scottish Affairs*, No.](#)

36, pp. 124 - 155. It was part of a set of studies the ESRC commissioned so they should have the results from several studies and reports on them. Essentially the message is that tracing knowledge transfer is fraught with problems ... Robin Williams [at] RCSS knows a lot about this kind of stuff. I think it would be well worth getting in touch with him at R.Williams@ed.ac.uk.

RESPONSE 8

... the spin-out company that has had the greatest impact in Leicester has been located in the Social Sciences [at the University of Leicester]. It is a spin-out company that deals with security issues and arises out of work that Professor Martin Gill did in [the] Department of Criminology.

RESPONSE 9

I hope the BSA makes the case that changing social behaviours, values, attitudes, aspirations, policies and social structures is far more relevant, urgent and practical than investing hope in dubious technical fixes such as carbon capture or biofuels alone. The big challenge is to effect social change so that many people realise and find that they can combine high quality of life with lower consumption. An anthropologist Gillian Tett was among the first to warn about the credit crunch, Research about complex societies is likely to be much more useful than, for example, the pseudo-science of mainstream ethnomocis and modeling.

RESPONSE 10

I wondered if you had thought of using the recent BA Economists letter [below] as an illustration? Essentially, the economists explain the fact that their discipline did not foresee the economic crisis through the argument that everyone in the economic system was pursuing their own activities and no one had responsibility for the broader picture. As I understand it, one virtue of sociology is that it does offer opportunities to examine wider scenarios and alternative possibilities for social development outside the sphere of immediate an individual interest and concerns. Sociology did not predict the crisis, but many sociologists were pointing to the inherent instability of current arrangements in a way that other disciplines were not. Perhaps this is a way of indicating the value of academic activities that are not directly utilitarian (and which cost relatively small amounts of money in any case)

Letter sent from the British Academy

Her Majesty The Queen
Buckingham Palace
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22 July 2009

MADAM,

When Your Majesty visited the London School of Economics last November, you quite rightly asked: why had nobody noticed that the credit crunch was on its way? The British Academy convened a forum on 17 June 2009 to debate your question, with contributions from a range of experts from business, the City, its regulators, academia, and government. This letter summarises the views of the participants and the factors that they cited in our discussion, and we hope that it offers an answer to your question.

Many people did foresee the crisis. However, the exact form that it would take and the timing of its onset and ferocity were foreseen by nobody. What matters in such circumstances is not just to predict the nature of the problem but also its timing. And there is also finding the will to act and being sure that authorities have as part of their powers the right instruments to bring to bear on the problem.

There were many warnings about imbalances in financial markets and in the global economy. For example, the Bank of International Settlements expressed repeated concerns that risks did not seem to be properly reflected in financial markets. Our own Bank of England issued many warnings about this in their bi-annual Financial Stability Reports. Risk management was considered an important part of financial markets. One of our major banks, now mainly in public ownership, reputedly had 4000 risk managers. But the difficulty was seeing the risk to the system as a whole rather than to any specific financial instrument or loan. Risk calculations were most often confined to slices of financial activity, using some of the best mathematical minds in our country and abroad. But they frequently lost sight of the bigger picture.

Many were also concerned about imbalances in the global economy. We had enjoyed a period of unprecedented global expansion which had seen many people in poor countries, particularly China and India, improving their living standards. But this prosperity had led to what is now known as the 'global savings glut'. This led to very low returns on safer long-term investments which, in turn, led many investors to seek higher returns at the expense of greater risk. Countries like the UK and the USA benefited from the rise of China which lowered the cost of many goods that we buy, and through ready access to capital in the financial system it was easy for UK households and businesses to borrow. This in turn fuelled the increase in house prices both here and in the USA. There were many who warned of the dangers of this.

But against those who warned, most were convinced that banks knew what they were doing. They believed that the financial wizards had found new and clever ways of managing risks. Indeed, some claimed to have so dispersed them through an array of novel financial instruments that they had virtually removed them. It is difficult to recall a greater example of wishful thinking combined with hubris. There was a firm belief, too, that financial markets had changed. And politicians of all types were charmed by the market. These views were abetted by financial and economic models that were good at predicting the short-term and small risks, but few were equipped to say what would happen when things went wrong as they have. People trusted the banks whose boards and senior executives were packed with globally recruited talent and their non-executive directors included those with proven track records in public life. Nobody wanted to believe that their judgement could be faulty

or that they were unable competently to scrutinise the risks in the organisations that they managed.

A generation of bankers and financiers deceived themselves and those who thought that they were the pace-making engineers of advanced economies. All this exposed the difficulties of slowing the progression of such developments in the presence of a general 'feel-good' factor. Households benefited from low unemployment, cheap consumer goods and ready credit. Businesses benefited from lower borrowing costs. Bankers were earning bumper bonuses and expanding their business around the world. The government benefited from high tax revenues enabling them to increase public spending on schools and hospitals. This was bound to create a psychology of denial. It was a cycle fuelled, in significant measure, not by virtue but by delusion.

Among the authorities charged with managing these risks, there were difficulties too. Some say that their job should have been 'to take away the punch bowl when the party was in full swing'. But that assumes that they had the instruments needed to do this. General pressure was for more lax regulation – a light touch. The City of London (and the Financial Services Authority) was praised as a paragon of global financial regulation for this reason.

There was a broad consensus that it was better to deal with the aftermath of bubbles in stock markets and housing markets than to try to head them off in advance. Credence was given to this view by the experience, especially in the USA, after the turn of the millennium when a recession was more or less avoided after the 'dot com' bubble burst. This fuelled the view that we could bail out the economy after the event.

Inflation remained low and created no warning sign of an economy that was overheating. The Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee had helped to deliver an unprecedented period of low and stable inflation in line with its mandate. But this meant that interest rates were low by historical standards. And some said that policy was therefore not sufficiently geared towards heading off the risks. Some countries did raise interest rates to 'lean against the wind'. But on the whole, the prevailing view was that monetary policy was best used to prevent inflation and not to control wider imbalances in the economy.

So where was the problem? Everyone seemed to be doing their own job properly on its own merit. And according to standard measures of success, they were often doing it well. The failure was to see how collectively this added up to a series of interconnected imbalances over which no single authority had jurisdiction. This, combined with the psychology of herding and the mantra of financial and policy gurus, led to a dangerous recipe. Individual risks may rightly have been viewed as small, but the risk to the system as a whole was vast.

So in summary, Your Majesty, the failure to foresee the timing, extent and severity of the crisis and to head it off, while it had many causes, was principally a failure of the collective imagination of many bright people, both in this country and internationally, to understand the risks to the system as a whole.

Given the forecasting failure at the heart of your enquiry, the British Academy is giving some thought to how your Crown servants in the Treasury, the Cabinet Office and the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, as well as the Bank of England

and the Financial Services Authority might develop a new, shared horizon-scanning capability so that you never need to ask your question again. The Academy will be hosting another seminar to examine the 'never again' question more widely. We will report the findings to Your Majesty. The events of the past year have delivered a salutary shock. Whether it will turn out to have been a beneficial one will depend on the candour with which we dissect the lessons and apply them in future.

We have the honour to remain, Madam,

Your Majesty's most humble and obedient servants

Professor Tim Besley, FBA

Professor Peter Hennessy, FBA

British Academy Forum, 17 June 2009

The Global Financial Crisis – Why Didn't Anybody Notice?

List of Participants

Professor Tim Besley, FBA, London School of Economics; Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee

Professor Christopher Bliss, FBA, University of Oxford

Professor Vernon Bogdanor, FBA, University of Oxford

Sir Samuel Brittan, *Financial Times*

Sir Alan Budd

Dr Jenny Corbett, University of Oxford

Professor Andrew Gamble, FBA, University of Cambridge

Sir John Gieve, Harvard Kennedy School

Professor Charles Goodhart, FBA, London School of Economics

Dr David Halpern, Institute for Government

Professor José Harris, FBA, University of Oxford

Mr Rupert Harrison, Economic Adviser to the Shadow Chancellor

Professor Peter Hennessy, FBA, Queen Mary, University of London

Professor Geoffrey Hosking, FBA, University College London

Dr Thomas Huertas, Financial Services Authority

Mr William Keegan, *The Observer*

Mr Stephen King, HSBC

Professor Michael Lipton, FBA, University of Sussex

Rt Hon John McFall, MP, Commons Treasury Committee

Sir Nicholas Macpherson, HM Treasury

Mr Bill Martin, University of Cambridge

Mr David Miles, Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee

Sir Gus O'Donnell, Secretary of the Cabinet

Mr Jim O'Neill, Goldman Sachs

Sir James Sassoon

Rt Hon Clare Short, MP

Mr Paul Tucker, Bank of England

Dr Sushil Wadhvani, Wadhvani Asset Management LLP

Professor Ken Wallis, FBA, University of Warwick

Sir Douglas Wass

Mr James Watson, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

Mr Martin Weale, National Institute of Economic and Social Research

Professor Shujie Yao, University of Nottingham

RESPONSE 11

I very much appreciated your discussion of 'impact' ... quite a lot of our time is spent on KPIs: working out how to demonstrate value for money to the research councils.

One thing that occurred to me whilst reading your discussion was that we ought not capitulate to the discourse of economic impact as the measure of value of research entirely. It is the 'logic' of the markets that has led to the current economic situation and need to cut spending, so perhaps that logic is flawed and not to be applied exclusively in order to solve the crisis. The crisis has prompted public reconsiderations of the merit of valuing everything in terms of profit, values generally and quality of life and Sociology has something to add to this debate. It makes a valuable contribution in terms of scrutiny, critique and social justice. As you say, we need a systematic engagement strategy in order to communicate to the general public a) what Sociology is and b) what strong contributions it has made, and continues to make, to British society. Someone could be commissioned to produce an accessible review of the impact of social science on the mainstream e.g. in the realms of women's rights, education, race and postcolonialism, genetics, war etc, which would then be publicised nationally (beyond Radio 4). Individuals, of course, have their own media and government avenues and could be encouraged to collaborate/cooperate/pool resources for the furtherance of the discipline as a whole rather than just the promotion of their own research.

As you say, Sociology offers a lot on urgent social issues such as climate change and it's nigh on impossible to demonstrate the direct economic impact of such research, so let's push for the other forms of impact: policy recommendations, civil engagement, public awareness raising etc. I certainly agree that we cannot ignore the reality of limited funding, but addressing the problem is not necessarily synonymous with getting 'beyond our resistance to crude notions of utility'. We can challenge such notions through robustly promoting the genuine benefits of social research and presenting the social consequences of the exclusive application of crude notions of utility.

Thank you for kick-starting this debate in Sociology and preparing us for the future.

RESPONSE 12

The question you raise of 'speaking with' is particularly relevant for me coming from a social work perspective... I think this is an area that has lots of potential for collaborative development. Social work texts are littered with references to 'power', 'discrimination', 'gender' and 'culture', but the underlying conceptual apparatus is generally very impoverished, and even where it exists students are rarely forced or inclined to take it to that level of study. Whilst nursing, within the academy at least, has gone down the road of embracing a highly empiricist research agenda, we haven't even adopted that level of rigour. Instead, a very utilitarian managerialist framework holds sway.

On another matter, following a conversation with [the Chair of the] Social Policy and Social Work RAE panel, I did a quick analysis of key social work journals on SCOPUS of % of articles not cited. What it showed was that it took about four years for most of the journals to reach a rate of even 50% of articles cited at least once. [The Chair] had intimated to me that this was the kind of figure that held in social policy - I haven't tried it for sociology. What it means, however, is that it appears to take the social sciences longer to reach impact - at least in relation to academic discourse - than in the natural sciences, on which the REF model is essentially based. For that reason, even if we successfully argue for a greater emphasis on medium to longer-term impact than immediacy, the 4 year average makes it almost impossible for REF census dates to have any meaningful relationship to outputs within the timeframe it is supposed to be considering. A brilliant publication appearing even 1 or 2 years before the census date is likely to score low for impact and not be eligible for consideration in the next round, by which time it may actually demonstrate a very high impact.

I'd be interested to know the outcome if you tried to monitor sociology journals.

RESPONSE 13

Read your article with interest. As an applied social science department we are heavily engaged in policy work, knowledge exchange and as well as using that work to enhance or teaching in sociology, social policy criminology, housing and social work. The Department also did well in the recent RAE.

However, the SFC cut our R monies by £700k. So we ticked all the boxes, yet got filleted. I copy a letter I sent to the Cabinet Secretary for Education in Scotland which sought to try and draw out just why this happened. I still await a reply.

I am not sure if Scotland suffered a bigger hit in R than equivalent Departments in England and Wales, but my feeling is we did.

I think what needs to happen now is for this narrow economic impact agenda to be challenged, as well as the idea that science is societies only saviour. What has greatly surprised me is how arts and social sciences has just accepted it has a lesser future in academia and society. Surely we need to point out just why our contribution is significant and important. If we continue to say nothing then people might just assume we do not really offer society that much.

25 June 2009

Fiona Hyslop MSP
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
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Dear Fiona

Following our telephone conversation earlier in the week, as agreed, I write to ask you to clarify why there has been no consultation on a significant shift in research resources to Scottish Universities following the Research Assessment (RAE) Exercise 2008. In your letter of Ministerial Guidance to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) there was no mention of a major resources shift to Science, Technology, Maths and Medical (STEMM) subjects, and away from Social Sciences and the Arts.

At the last RAE in 2001 STEMM accounted for 67% all research monies (R). As a consequence of the latest R funding settlement, following the 2008 RAE the R allocations to STEMM now account for 71% of R monies. This shift in resource is not due to the £5 million premium to STEMM you announced to support the Scottish Governments Science Strategy, but rather reflects the outcome of an unannounced shift in the Scottish Government's higher education strategy.

In *The Times* of 1 April 2009, Mark Batho, Chief Executive of the SFC is quoted as saying that the cuts in resource affecting both Stirling and Strathclyde "*was almost entirely due to their research performance*". In the same report you are quoted as stating that the "*strength of the research base in our Universities was identified by the recent RAE*".

Yet, as the Head of Department which scored extremely well in the RAE, with 50% of our outputs in 4* and 3*, thus achieving the second highest rating in Scotland, and in the top 15 UK Social Policy and Social Work Departments, I am now having to deal with a cut in R monies of some £700K, which equates to the salaries of some 12 staff members. Given we did so well, but lost out so heavily, a pattern repeated in Social Science and Arts departments throughout the country, I could not equate either your comments, or those of Mark Batho to my financial reality.

In trying to explain this conundrum, I discovered that the SFC altered the calculation on "Other Activity Indicators – covering the volume of research assistants, the number of postgraduate research students, and research grant and contract income – to such a degree that these measures now account for almost 40% of the entire R calculations, before the actual research quantity element is considered. This Scottish specific switch also ensures a built in bias in favour of STEMM given the research structuring of such subjects.

It has been said by SFC officials that by introducing this change, then unlike the situation in England and Wales, there was no need to 'ring fence' STEMM. In England and Wales, both the Education Minister, and the funding council have issued explicit statements announcing this funding policy shift. This has not occurred in Scotland. As Cabinet Secretary do you support of this major shift in funding, and if that is the case where is the public statement announcing your support for this change? If you are not in support of it, and that would appear to be the case given your Ministerial letter to the SFC, are you aware that this is what has happened?

Further, the SFC's financial memorandum with institutions states explicitly that if there is to be a major shift in funding then the SFC is required to consult with the affected institutions. There has been no consultation to this effect. The meetings held by this institution with the SFC prior to the announcement of the financial repercussions following the RAE, were as detailed in *The Times* report of 1 April, and in no way could be construed as a consultation about how changes to the R funding

calculation would leave an Arts and Humanities focused institution like our own so seriously exposed. Across the whole of Scotland this policy shift has resulted in a 33% cut in Social Sciences R monies, a 29% cut in Arts and Humanities funding, and a 10% cut in Sciences, thus amounting to a per researcher cut of 18% overall.

This is a serious matter given it runs completely counter to the policy objectives of the Scottish Government. Social Science research in Higher Education currently makes major contributions to meeting the government's core goals in relation to the Healthier Scotland, One Scotland, Safer Scotland and Smarter Scotland agendas. My own department is currently working with the Scottish Government undertaking research on social care in dementia; child welfare and protection; on taking forward the 'Shifting the Balance of Care' agenda; on crime reduction and criminal justice matters; and a whole host of other core social welfare reforms. Our research capacity to meet these Governments objectives is now compromised. To lose two-thirds of our research income, the equivalent of 12 posts, in a top rated department of 50 academics will seriously curtail our productivity.

I would welcome your response to the serious concerns raised here. If it would help I am also quite willing to meet with you to go through the details on these concerns.

Yours sincerely

RESPONSE 14

On the notion of 'impact' and the role of sociology, I can give a further example to those you mention. I am a cultural sociologist now lecturing and researching in the field of criminology ... Over the past year, I have had a very interesting and stimulating experience engaging with a range of groups including the security services, military, police, policy makers, and international counterterrorism experts who are all looking for alternative ways of construing and dealing with the problem of security and threat in the contemporary and future global context. It seems that they are only too aware that previous frameworks and concepts have proven ill suited to dealing with these issues, and many high ranking officials and other actors are becoming more convinced of the need to take a broader view of the issues involved, to include specifically aspects of culture and social history which tend to be overlooked by other professionals and academics whom they consult for advice and guidance. Increasingly, I find myself alongside linguists, anthropologists and theologians in group discussions, as opposed to exclusively empirical psychologists, military and political scientists as would have been in the not so distant past. This is a very positive development, not least as a way of assisting these individuals and agencies in developing policies more in line with human rights and social justice as opposed to being dictated by the machinations of political and/or military force.

[As with] Goffman's seminal research sponsored by the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, such links are crucial, especially during times when exercises in new forms of social division and control are emerging. Sociologists and others who specialise in 'culture' are key to making sense of these important and extremely volatile social phenomena.

RESPONSE 15

This is a very interesting topic and close to my heart. As a ... member of the BSA currently working in a foreign country (but still notionally subject to the same pressures as a member of the commonwealth of Social Sciences). This is also a theme that under the newly reconstituted Faculty of Arts at Macquarie University, Sydney, we have begun developing a position paper on Arts, Humanities and Social Science research to address these very themes. Particularly considering:

- the pressures of commercialisation (such as the absence of patents, marketable technology and the like)
- cross-disciplinary collaboration (in a diverse and diversifying intellectual marketplace)
- increasing administrative burdens on academics in relation to generation of research (from the feared RQF to the ERA [down-under] and the RAE in the UK)
- relevance and importance of impact and citation metrics (in the light of different authoring and publication styles between natural and social sciences)

..and these are just the issues that float to the surface in a steering committee before we get down to the nitty gritty of representing the interests of politics, security studies, anthropology, sociology, history, media and technology, dance, music, and more in one framework for understanding who we are and what we do.

I think there is one particularly important issue here. How do we ensure that we are able to remain critical and independent?

The distinct push of commercialisation, economic impact and the notions of 'relevance' are underpinning themes of every attempt to imagine academic endeavour and freedom of critical enquiry into a form of glorified consultation for the ratification of pre-determined policy imperatives at the governmental level of operation. Academic enquiry in the social science MUST remain free of the steering influence of funding imperatives. Bodies like the ESRC are vital to sustainability of academia, yet the streaming of funding is often an apparent categorisation of topics into marketable pigeon-holes that see less welcome critique fall-by-the wayside. It must be remembered that even in natural sciences most of the great advances in technology were invented with no specific purpose in mind; Penicillin for example.

The critical reflection and exploration of questions that may have no economic or policy relevance are now more important than ever in an age with no secular centre, with a higher portion and percentage of people than ever before representing no specific religious affiliation we are beginning to see the impact of the enlightenment's rationale of a new knowledge of man over the knowledge of god reflected in the general public of western society to an unprecedented extent. Understanding the conflict emerging in everyday life of such issues is not marketable yet is vital to issues of cultural integration, social cohesion and quality of life - such issues are at the heart of the war on terror, anti-radicalisation and related debates - who can deny such interconnections and interplay are at the heart of academia and must be supported. Economic relevance or not these are key issues that require freedom of thought and critical enquiry as well as sustained funding.

Underpinning all of this is the absence of civic duty in the sense of community created by neo-liberal economic and social policies stemming from the change in government organisation and ideology from Nixon onward, but championed during the Reagan and Thatcher through the Blair and Clinton years.

There is a fundamental challenge facing the social sciences in mobilising the academy towards realigning this rational choice model of humanity and civil service towards an new multi-variant and flexible understanding of the better angels of human nature. This challenge requires community engagement and the realisation of uncomfortable truths around the type of knowledge that we are producing and its impact in real terms. Activism must be revitalised, ideology brought back into focus and a realisable alternative to neo-liberalism brought into the frame of debate, or we will be doomed to repeat our mistakes for another generation.

RESPONSE 16

The problem with the Thatcherite/ Reaganite emphasis on 'economic value' is that too often economic value is wrongly viewed only in terms of money.

However, as you have acknowledged in the e-mail it is necessary for Sociologists to deal with realities.

I suggest that it is imperative for the BSA to identify key stakeholders across central government and then build strong relationships with them in order to persuade these key people of the value of Sociological research, teaching and study.

I suggest the BSA pay direct attention, in particular, to building relations with key civil servants within the new Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (which covers higher education) and the current Secretary of State, Lord Mandelson. It is also important to take heed of opinion polls, which indicate that it is very likely the Conservative Party will be in government from May 2010.

I believe the BSA should therefore also build links to David Willetts, the current shadow minister, who is likely to assume Lord Mandelson's current role from next May. These relationships with central government would be in addition to the strong links the BSA already has with the variety of professional and research bodies that you have identified below.

RESPONSE 17

I am a member of the BSA, as well as the Leisure Studies Association (LSA), of which I am the (recently elected) Chair.

I agree entirely with your statement that we cannot work alone on these matters, and a united front is vital. The LSA is a paid-up member of the Academy of Social Sciences, and this is probably a good organisation through which we can express our

views. I think the link between social theory and practice through work of the BSA and the LSA (and other professional academic societies that are more multidisciplinary around a subject or with a tighter specialised focus) needs to be stressed in any narrative. Much of the research done within the scope of the LSA is related directly to policy developments and challenges around wellbeing, cohesion, and human flourishing – but this research is invariably driven by the methodology and theory of parent disciplines such as sociology. The cross-fertilisation is not just due to sociologists like myself working within the LSA, it is seen also in the involvement of LSA members ... in the work of the BSA (the Sport Study Group and the Leisure and Recreation Study Group).

I suggest we need to keep in contact on this matter, and possibly other areas where we can work together collegiately to promote sociology and sociological research.

Do you think it is worth attempting to pursue other related professional 'social science' societies, eg the Political Studies Association, to try to come up with a common narrative?

RESPONSE 18

I would add to your list as an important impact the methodological one: discussion, critique and training on methodological issues helps to maintain standards of accuracy and relevance of research and policies [and measurement of impact!], as well as contributing new techniques to the repertoire. That's an area where we might perhaps cooperate with the SRA and its marginally commercial membership.

RESPONSE 19

I am glad to see that the BSA addresses the issue of 'impact' and the drive towards economic utility at British universities. Of all the questions you raise in your letter, I would like to address the issue of 'how do we say it'...My research deals with issues of intimate citizenship, cultural change and globalisation, focusing primarily on Mexico. At the start of my PhD, I was widely encouraged by my supervisor and other established sociologists as to my potential in British sociology. However, in my job search around the end of my PhD, I was told explicitly at a number of universities that had shortlisted me that my research, publications, etc. were just not relevant to the instrumental and policy-focused concerns that are increasingly important. I have since then moved on into a tenure-track position at one of the regional campuses of Georgia State University in the USA, although I regret that I had to leave Britain.

The point I would like to make is that there seems to be a large degree of passivity in the way in which sociologists and their institutions relate to the demands of politics, industry and other funding bodies for 'research of real-world relevance'. What seems to be happening, to my admittedly limited knowledge, is that the power structures inherent in academic life and research funding are exerting huge pressure on sociologists to acquiesce to crude notions of utility, whose critique previously had

been a centrepiece of the sociological enterprise. With corporations, academic managers and other actors unconnected and often adverse to the idea of the sociological imagination dictating what the scope of permissible and 'useful' research is, sociology runs the risk of losing much of its intellectual and critical potential and being reduced to a service industry for a variety of business endeavours. I have witnessed a variety of related changes and developments in the nine years [of] my undergraduate and postgraduate studies, and I believe that I am not overstating the issue. Indeed, several older sociologists of international standing [have] admitted that, by today's narrow criteria of 'excellent' research, they probably would not even have been appointed as lecturers anymore.

I wonder why sociologists do not seem to be able to use their conceptual and practical knowledge of economic and political processes to engage with the pressures of industry and politics on more equal terms. I believe that the conversation between sociology and the institutions on which they depend should take place on equal ground. This involves, on the one hand, an increasing interest among sociologists to connect their research to professional practice and publish beyond academic circles. On the other hand, I think that it should also involve an attempt to critically engage with the idea of the utility of research and the respective mindset among academic managers, politicians and funding bodies.

Given the early stage of my career, I do not feel qualified yet to make more concrete suggestions as to how this dialogue could be established. From the reactions to my position I have witnessed on the part of academic leaders, I understand that it is deeply unpopular at present. However, I do think that standing firm on the basic principles of the sociological imagination is something that is particularly important at this point.

RESPONSE 20

I agree with much of what you say. It occurs to me that the debate stimulated by Michael Burawoy on 'public sociology' over the last 4 years or so addresses many of the issues regarding what we are doing, and how we ensure the right range of impacts on different audiences. It might help to prevent a knee-jerk reaction to the current pressures - though it would be interesting to know how Michael Burawoy himself is thinking about the serious expenditure cuts which California is already facing.

RESPONSE 21

Medical sociology is the largest section within the BSA and on various indicators roughly equals the size of all of the rest of UK sociology put together. Many medical sociologists work in applied settings such as medical and nursing schools, and make contributions to better clinical practice, although whether this leads to economic benefits for the nation is arguable. However, your argument about engagement and relevance is likely to be strengthened if you emphasise the contribution of this subdisciplinary area.

As a sub-theme, I think every sociology department in the UK ought to have a substantial group of medical sociologists on their staff, if they are to be seen as representing the discipline to students. This is not, currently, the case.

RESPONSE 22

Thanks for sharing these thoughts with the members – it's a welcome development. These are important issues.

I agree that we need a narrative that takes account of, but isn't subservient to, the demand for economic utility, and I agree with your outline of that narrative. But the story will only stand up if we can demonstrate that lots of sociologists ARE actively engaged with civil society, contributing to action on climate change, working practically on inter-cultural relations etc etc. In other words, that we are doing something more than reading, writing and speaking (important though all of these are). My sense is that most are not. So I'd suggest the BSA undertakes some quick research on this, at least covering the membership. A SNAP survey might get some interesting results.

My other point relates to the 'to/with whom do we speak' question. I agree that we need to speak to the powerful, but I do think you should add other potential audiences. One of these is the people we meet in this somewhat mythical space called 'civil society' – the other people who are actively, personally engaged with civil, social, economic, ecological and political issues in their neighbourhoods, towns etc. If we are working in those fields as citizens, we should make sure people know we are 'sociologically-minded' citizens. Another important constituency is schools. We shouldn't simply offer to visit schools to recruit students, we should offer to talk about sociology and its usefulness. Finally, I think we need to encourage all our members to make much more use of local media (papers, radio, tv,) and popular internet sites – again, with their sociological hats on. I'm always astonished how hard it is to get other sociologists on the air.

-----Original Message-----

BSA President discusses 'impact'

The BSA President, Professor John Brewer, writes about the impact of sociology in the face of budget cuts and the need to measure economic value, and calls for your comments. Please read and contribute to the debate for replying directly to Professor Brewer at j.brewer@abdn.ac.uk.

There are two related debates occurring now on the impact of humanities and social science research: one on how to measure the research's impact in the forthcoming Research Excellence Exercise consultation, and one on the broader question of how the humanities and social sciences might justify themselves given the push towards using economic value as the measure of effectiveness.

The BSA has always been keen to ensure that sociological research in the UK compares well with that carried out internationally – it is participating at the heart of the international benchmarking exercise conducted by the ESRC (see p. 16 of your upcoming members' newsletter, Network) – and that the productivity of publicly-funded sociological researchers is recognised.

One way of thinking about impact within humanities and social sciences is through the social and cultural relevance of our research. This might be measured in the following ways: engagement with civil society; contributions to what the AHRC calls civic capital; the promotion of teaching and learning; and contributions to policy and policy consultations.

At a meeting organised by the British Academy and attended by heads of humanities and social sciences learned societies, the Academy's President, Baroness O'Neill, warned that we could not ignore the importance of economic impact, in the light of impending budget cuts and changes in government. Most humanities and social sciences subjects do not have links with industry and the market, and knowledge transfer in our areas tends not to be reflected in spin-off companies and the like. So work on the economic benefits of housing research, inter-cultural relations, ageing and population demographics, sport, heritage and so on will have to be stressed, once we get beyond our resistance to crude notions of utility.

This means that the BSA needs to develop a new narrative about impact that acknowledges the economic benefits and which also broadens the debate. This 'impact narrative' might make reference to sociology's engagement with the big issues of future industrial, scientific and economic change – sustainability, labour migration, climate change, peace processes, the link between demographic shifts and welfare demands and the like, as well as our ongoing interest in the cultural and relational dynamics of social life. If the traditional values by which we judged the purpose of humanities and social sciences research have been replaced by economic utility, then our new narrative should not ignore this but should stress that economic, industrial and scientific change in the future will be mediated by sociology's capacity to enable society to make sense of it. This means articulating that the social and cultural relevance of our research on quality of life issues, climate change or inter-cultural understandings, for example, has economic utility in addition to its other benefits.

We can develop such a narrative – the issue is what we do with it. Three questions seem important: with whom do we speak, to whom do we speak, and how do we say it?

The BSA cannot speak alone. The Research Councils, the British Academy, the Academy of Social Sciences and Universities UK are some of the bodies that are beginning to develop a narrative about impact to which the BSA must contribute. Our comfort zone needs to be stretched further, however. Baroness O'Neill remarked that humanities and social sciences learned societies would find it useful to develop alliances with natural and medical scientists, who also complain at crude notions of economic benefit. The BSA might need to reconsider its natural allies and find ways of engaging with strangers. Sociology needs, for example, to link with environmental sciences to discuss climate change, with medical sciences to debate future welfare demands and with economics when thinking about sustainability.

Those who we should speak to include politicians of all the leading parties, government ministers, and their shadows, political advisors, senior civil servants, and so on. Our narrative needs to be heard at the centre of power.

The BSA needs to engage in building relationships for its narrative to be heard at the top level. This means using hospitality events and lectures at the London office as means of social networking. It means we must identify ambassadors with connections at this level who can champion the discipline and put forward our narrative. The Academy of Social Sciences is a good body for us to use and the British Academy would benefit from co-ordinating campaigns and strategy with it. The BSA might develop an Academicians Group who can take this agenda forward within the Academy of Social Sciences.

Defining impact and its measures seems challenging, and lying behind this are broader questions about the visibility of sociological research. Who are the 'publics' that we wish to engage with, what are the forums to use, and who are the right ambassadors for the different forums?

Email your thoughts to me now: [**j.brewer@abdn.ac.uk**](mailto:j.brewer@abdn.ac.uk)

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[A version of this article also appears in the Summer 09 issue of *Network*, the BSA's newsletter for its members.]