

An aerial photograph of a large crowd of people, seen from above, scattered across a light-colored surface. The people are in various poses, some walking, some standing, creating a sense of movement and density. The image is the background for the book cover.

FOREWORD BY KENNETH PREWITT

*The*  
**IMPACT** *of*  
THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

HOW ACADEMICS AND THEIR RESEARCH MAKE A DIFFERENCE

SIMON BASTOW · PATRICK DUNLEAVY · JANE TINKLER

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US EDITION  
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# Foreword

## The impact of the social sciences in the UK – a view from the US

Kenneth Prewitt

It is a pleasant task to write this short guide for American readers, especially those who might set the volume aside because it is 'only about the UK'. Although true that its immediate focus is the UK, the findings and arguments strongly, consistently echo conditions familiar to any American reader. This comes as no surprise. What differentiates the social science project in the UK and the US is slight when stacked up against their similarities. As evidence of this, I offer a small and only illustrative sample of the similarities: we share common origins in German social thought and academic practice; we share nearly identical disciplinary structures based in very similarly designed universities; in both countries social science careers are not limited to the academy but in good measure are pursued in the three branches of government, as well as think tanks, advocacy groups, consultancy firms and business enterprises; social sciences in the UK and US benefit from – and contribute to – extensive, high quality national statistical systems; in each country funds for social science come from a mixture of public and private sources (though the US foundation sector has been a comparatively larger funder); the UK and US are similar in how social science overlaps arts and humanities on the one hand and, also, biological, natural, and engineering sciences on the other.

At a more fundamental level, the social science enterprise in the UK and in the US, since their beginnings, have engaged two fundamental projects: deepening the scientific understanding of social behavior and structures; and, bringing the resulting knowledge to bear on improving social welfare, economic growth, and national security. In both countries, the 'science project' and the 'nation-building project' continually overlap, each feeding off the other. It is the nation-building project that motivates a long preoccupation with 'external impact' – that is, in addition to other scholars and our students, to whom are we talking? Are they listening? Do they get what we are saying? Are they acting on it in ways that we intended?

To turn more specifically to *The Impact of the Social Sciences*, I first emphasize that the US has no comparable study. In one respect, however, this doesn't matter. If in *Impact* every reference to the UK were redacted from this US edition, American readers might assume that the country being described was, in fact, their own. For



example, the various pathways that lead to impact in four external sectors – business, government, civil society, and media – will be familiar to the American reader. As will concern that the impact of social science is not as broad as it should be, or worries about the dismal state of public understanding of science, or puzzling over what the arrival of digital data means for the social sciences, or lamenting that consulting firms and think tanks are commercializing academic social science without investing in its infrastructure. Even the cited literature, starting with Lindbloom and Weiss, signals the US as much as it does the UK.

*Impact* commissioned an econometric estimate of the economic value of academic social science to the UK government and other external sectors. This effort concluded that in 2011, £19.5 billion was ‘spent on the translation and mediation of social science research by sectors outside universities.’ The sectors accounting for the bulk of this expenditure are the UK government and the banking and finance sector. The estimate of £19.5 billion is four times the wage bill associated with academic-based social science.

For the US to match this in absolute terms, the external sectors would be investing \$31.3 billion annually on using social science research, and of course a much higher dollar amount if the US investment were adjusted for its comparatively larger social science sector. The US has no such study, but it does have an extensive policy enterprise and a large, well-paid cadre of economists working in its finance industry. Perhaps the four to one ratio would hold true in the US as well.

But I should not push the point of similarity too far. The US does not have, as the UK does, a government research council that ‘consults extensively with the most relevant government department(s) about meeting policy needs and priorities for information and evidence at the same time as the academic needs or interests in this area.’ There is not in the US anything similar to the UK’s excellence framework, which ‘is providing additional incentives for academics engaging in impact activities’, incentives that are ‘mainstreaming impact support within universities’. It is unlikely that a survey of American social scientists would echo UK findings: social scientists report that their impact comes close ‘to realizing their disciplines’ full potential for influence’.

The impact of social science is primarily defined by Bastow, Dunleavy, and Tinkler as *visibility*, and is extensively measured through bibliometric, scientometric, and altmetric methods. These few sentences generally summarize what the UK study reports about visibility in the arena of public policy:

- the government is far more omnivorous than business in at least sucking in and initially considering new research
- social science academics have generally been much more plugged into government and policy making [than into the commercial sector]
- many social science academics have robust links with central government departments, regional and local governments, regulators, public sector health care agencies, public corporations or the huge range of quasi-government bodies.

In general there is in the UK a thick and comfortable relation between social science and the government. With respect to executive branch agencies, this could be



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said of the US. This does not hold with respect to Congress and its control of government funding for social science. As I write (November 2013), many voices in the US congress question the value of the social sciences and of social statistics, or at least assert that they are of lower priority than other claims on federal funds.<sup>1</sup> My own reading of the US political climate leads me to trace these doubts about the value of social science to its failure to demonstrate 'usefulness' in national security, economic growth, and social welfare. This takes us to our final point.

Defining impact as visibility is fine as far as it goes. High visibility, however, does not directly translate into high levels of use. Impact and use are not the same phenomenon. The authors of *Impact* imply this in the following passages:

Yet the processes involved in social science research influencing wider decision-making have been relatively little studied in systematic ways, and consistently under-appreciated by observers outside academia.

Given that social science impacts have been more discussed than studied, the available quantitative evidence on social science impacts on policy making is no exception.

These passages bring to mind a conclusion reached in 1978 by an American committee appointed by the National Academies of Science/National Research Council, as reported in *Knowledge and Policy: The Uncertain Connection*.<sup>2</sup> The report lists specific steps taken by the government to connect scientific knowledge and policy. It then concludes:

We lack systematic evidence as to whether these steps are having the results their sponsors hope for ...

What knowledge do we possess that is relevant to the formulation of social R&D policy?

Regrettably (and ironically), we possess little knowledge obtained through research that will help answer this question.

More than three decades later, another National Academies committee issued a similar report, titled *Using Science as Evidence in Public Policy*.<sup>3</sup> This Report notes that in the period between 1978 and 2012, the policy enterprise bringing scientific evidence to bear on policy had steadily expanded, was better funded, became methodologically more sophisticated, and altogether more professional. But the connection between knowledge and policy was no less uncertain in 2012 than it was in 1978. The research literature on knowledge utilization, well developed in the UK

<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Prewitt, 'Is Any Science Safe?' *SCIENCE*, Vol 340 3 May 2013, and 'The Congressional War on the Social Sciences,' *Pacific Standard*. June 2013.

<sup>2</sup>L. Lynn, Jr. (Ed.) (1978) *Knowledge and Policy: The Uncertain Connection*. Washington DC: National Academies Press.

<sup>3</sup>K. Prewitt, T. Schwandt, M. Straf (Eds), (2012) *Using Science as Evidence in Public Policy*. Washington DC: National Academies Press.



and the US, with its emphasis on constructing typologies of use, had made little headway in answering the question we most want to answer: what conditions explain why knowledge is sometimes used, sometimes not; and even when used, it is not always as its producers intended.

*Using Science as Evidence* provides an explanation for this lack of progress – basically that the focus on strengthening science (e.g., experimental methods in science-based-policy, or evaluation of what works) does not itself offer any systematic explanation of use. Nor does *Impact's* account of the UK offer much beyond anecdote when it briefly shifts from impact to how and when and where knowledge is used by policy makers.

Impact, as analysed in this volume, is a step toward research on use, in the sense that an 'invisible' science will not be used. The next step is to focus on use itself. Some preliminary ideas about how to do so are presented in *Using Science as Evidence*. For example, scientific knowledge is used as evidence in policy arguments, and social science can study what types of arguments are accepted by policy makers as valid and sound. To approach use from the perspective of policy argument – a form of practical reasoning – draws attention to the psychological processes influencing the acceptance of science as evidence, including mental models, schemata, prior knowledge, situated cognition, and related organizational circumstances – as well as institutional logics, practices, cultural assumptions.

Of course there is much more to be said about a research agenda for investigating use, but that can wait. Here the concluding thought is obvious. *Impact* provides a rich tapestry of social science in the UK from the perspective of its visibility across many sectors external to the academy. Although the US has no immediately comparable study, it is easy to make the case that much of what we learn from the UK is applicable to the US.

However, in neither country has the phenomenon of use itself been adequately conceptualized from the perspective of the policy makers. It is they who decide whether to make use of science in policy argument. A careful observer of the American scene comments that we may have 'a well-developed theoretical and empirical framework for the 'innovativeness' or 'productivity' of the research activities that go on within institutions that do research' – here a list of factors similar to those used in *Impact*: citation rates, collaboration networks, patents and patent citations, and stakeholder involvement. But that is a starting point, not the end point: 'we have little reason to be confident that the metrics of healthy research institutions are also the metrics of potential social benefit.'<sup>4</sup>

It would be an important step forward if this volume could motivate joint UK and US attention to the research task of figuring out the metrics of social benefit, and then determining when and why the policy maker connects productive research to social benefit.

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<sup>4</sup>Daniel Sarewitz (2011) 'Institutional Ecology and the Social Outcomes of Scientific Research', in *The Science of Science Policy*, K.H. Fealing (ed.) et al. Stanford U Press. p. 347.