

# THE PUBLIC VALUE OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Public value is integral to the very nature of the social sciences, since they emerged as separate disciplines out of moral philosophy in the eighteenth century precisely in order to better diagnose and improve the social condition. Engagement with social and human progress and with improvement and betterment marks social science as a public good. Incidentally, I would say the same about the humanities.

Two contemporary threats exist to social science, however, which, again, apply equally to the humanities. The first is the global university crisis, epitomised by the intensification of the audit culture and marketisation in higher education. With respect to the social sciences, I suggest we see this threat simultaneously as an opportunity to empower the social sciences in a new form of “public social science”. The second threat is the impact agenda, which is linked to the first but has developed dynamics of its own. I suggest social science can engage positively with the impact agenda since the process of impact is easy to demonstrate for the social sciences.

However, impact is also a deeply flawed approach to assess the public value of social science research. There are diverse views on the meaning, it is very difficult to measure, even within the policy evaluation tradition for which the idea of impact slips easily off the pen, and the hostility generated by the impact agenda, associated as it negatively with the audit culture, has turned the debate gangrenous and ruled out the possibility of reasoned argument. Difficulties over its measurement have resulted in prioritising certain forms of impact because they can be more easily measured, such that measurement drives the debate. Impact can thus be discriminatory. There is an inevitable – almost inherent – bias towards favouring research whose impact is more readily demonstrable; and this mostly because of its direct policy benefit or user engagement.

Furthermore, impact is reducible to activities not directly connected to the *quality* of the research, for impact is mediated by a large number of processes independent of its findings and their quality. These include the social networks researchers are embedded in for communicating their results and for engaging with users, especially powerful groups, researchers’ communication skills and their prior relationships with those who take up the results, like policymakers, the media and other users, the extent to which the field is one where policy debate is settled or still live, and how sensitised users already are to the potential benefit of the research findings. Reducing impact to metrics, like citation counts, further reinforces the self-referential and coincidental nature of impact. Impact is serendipitous, conditional, involving huge elements of chance and luck.

Given this argument, it may seem paradoxical for me to say here that impact is a sheep in wolves’ clothing; it is much more warm and cuddly and much less dangerous than it appears. Two dimensions of impact must be distinguished in order to demystify it: the *process* of impact and its

*assessment* (see Figure 1). By process is meant the method of delivering impact, by assessment its measurement. The process of impact can be simplified by reducing it to three questions which all social scientists can ask themselves about their research, even where it is theoretical: Who are the users of our research? How do I engage with them? What has been/could be the effects of this engagement? The assessment of impact revolves around one question. What is the evidence of these effects?

Answers to the fourth question, which define its measurement, are more difficult to conjure, especially *evidence* of effects which are independent of the effects themselves rather than duplicates of them. An effect of the research is the intended or unintended change, due directly or indirectly to an intervention, whereas impact is perceived as the intended or unintended effects on beneficiaries of the intervention, the impact on which is measured by its effects. This is circular argument and it is particularly tricky to accurately connect the research, its effects and the evidence of these effects. This repeats the observation that measurement is the most problematic part of impact. When systems impose the measurement of impact, impact can get reduced to the effects of the research, and when there is no independent evidence of impact separate from these effects, impact *is* its measures.

This produces one of the major paradoxes of the current impact debate: the meaning of impact is broad and inclusive to enhance its popularity, but its measurement is narrow and exclusive. The process of impact and its assessment operate in opposition to one another, with the inclusiveness of its meaning not resolving the complications of its measurement. A system that *insists* on its assessment thus ends up being heavily criticised and practitioners lose sight of the feasibility and desirability of dealing with the *process* of impact. The baby has been thrown out with the bathwater; social scientists have rejected impact because of the difficulties of its measurement.

Of course, the neo-liberal context in which impact has emerged contributes to the suspicion amongst social scientists that it is a wolf in sheep’s clothing, deceptive, dangerous and devouring. The marketisation of social scientific knowledge, via ideas of ‘impact’, ‘use’, ‘knowledge transfer’ and ‘benefit’, combine with the privatisation of public university education and enhanced state regulation of universities through the audit culture, to reinforce mutual suspicion between governments, higher education managers and social scientists.

I believe the debate therefore needs to move on from the public impact of social science to its public value. Public value is a vocabulary easier around which to develop a common conversation in order to conduct reasoned debate. Thus, my argument is not one in support of the narrow impact agenda that is currently dominating social science and higher education managers. I want to broaden the debate.

I advance five claims with respect to impact:

- social science is well equipped and readily capable of demonstrating the impact of social science research;
- impact, however, is a deeply flawed way of approaching the public value of social science;
- it is necessary to shift the terms of the debate away from the public impact of social science to its public value;
- value can be deconstructed into several types which show the diverse ways in which the social sciences have value;
- it is possible to develop a definition of public value that demonstrates social science to be a public good.

This involves deconstruction of the term 'value' (see Figure 2). There are at least three different meanings to the term: value as usefulness and utility; value as quality and worth; and value as judgement and evaluation. The first we might call use value, the second price value, the third normative value. They prompt further deconstruction. Use value can be direct or indirect, price value intrinsic or added (giving us the phrase 'value added') and normative value can be private or public.

Direct use value describes the level of usefulness of an item unmediated by other things, indirect is the utility accorded when used in combination with other things. Use value does not necessarily diminish when it is indirect. A single university has direct use value but its indirect use value can be enhanced when set in relation to all other universities within higher education as a whole. Intrinsic price value is the worth of the item inherent unto itself, such as the cost of running the single university or all the others in the higher education system. Added price value describes the worth of things when put to use indirectly, such as the price value attributed to a student's education that utilises the university or to universities' contribution to the local economy, all of which universities now feverishly estimate to head off criticism. Private normative value refers to the quality attributed to an item by an individual in terms of the status to them derived from possessing it, public normative value to the quality attributed to it more widely, such as its social status and cultural significance. Personal sentiment can attach immense normative value to an item which is of little meaning and status to other individuals or collectively, and vice versa.

Elements of use, price and normative value are run together in current debates about impact, where 'impact' is often narrowly reduced to use-value and where arguments about the defining purposes of subjects is often related exclusively to their economic benefits. The neo-liberal habit of attaching a price to everything in effect reduces value to price-value – what it costs. By developing an appropriate sense of the purpose of the social sciences, it is possible to establish a definition of their value that broadens it from economic usefulness and costs.

This conceptual vocabulary means that we have to assess the value of the social sciences across different dimensions of value, and that the assessment of their worth varies accordingly. For example, this conceptual deconstruction allows us to argue that the value of the social sciences is not to be found solely in direct use value (say, economic usefulness), as if this can be assessed in isolation from indirect use value (say, their economic usefulness when assessed in relation to other things, such as the economic usefulness of social science graduates across their working lives, or the indirect use value of social science research in combination with other scientific research, in the form of medical-social science research, biological and social sciences research, and climate change science and the sociology of climate change, and so on).

We can further argue that the price value of the social sciences (their cost to the public budget set against what they realise by their direct use value) is a very poor measure of value. If the focus is on price value, we should properly calculate both the indirect use value of the social sciences and their "value added" price value – the price value of the social sciences when measured by what they add to the use, price and normative value of other things. The price value of the social sciences, for example, should be set in the context of what they add to the price value derived from, say, student exchanges, intellectual tourism and social and cultural events, or the impact of social science research on transport policy, housing, the welfare state, 'race' relations, better hospital care for the dying, crime rates, and so on, and what added price value accrues from having people educated in the social sciences (in terms of, say, socially-informed citizenry, workforces, communities and the like). Social science research on inter-cultural and inter-ethnic relations, ageing and population demographics, sport, heritage and so on can be stressed as part of their added price value.

This multidimensional view of value also means that the normative value of the social sciences is an important dimension equal to their use and price value. This is not just meant in the narrow sense of what they add to the quality of life and status of individuals educated in the social sciences or to the lives of people affected by social science research, important as these are a measure of private normative value. It is that the value of the social sciences can be assessed by their contribution to the social values they help garner and disseminate in culture, the market and the state.

The public normative value of the social sciences, therefore, gives the social sciences two qualities against which their status should be evaluated: they not only generate information about society, they are a medium for society's reproduction. They are the way in which society can find out about itself and in so doing generate the *idea* of society itself. If it is thought that this sort of value is incalculable, it is no more so than the proper enumeration of the use and price value of the social sciences.

The language of 'public value', as distinct from 'public impact', is challenging precisely because it is not reducible to monetary calculation in the same way price and use value are, which is why establishing the public value of social science is so important for rescuing the debate back from the marketeers who reduce everything to use and price value.

My argument is thus simple and clear cut: making people aware of themselves as comprising a society helps in the development and dissemination of key social values that make society possible – cultural values like trust, empathy, altruism, tolerance, compromise, social solidarity and senses of belonging. These everyday virtues assist in society's ongoing betterment and improvement. The social sciences help us understand the conditions which both promote and undermine these values and identify the sorts of public policies, behaviours and relationships that are needed in culture, the market and the state to ameliorate their absence and restore and repair them. It is for these reasons that social science is a public good.

The public normative value of the social sciences lies in their direct engagement with the DNA of society – individuals, groups, social relations, civil society, culture, law, legal governance, the market and the state. They are modes for understanding the mechanisms through which we live socially and as such are essential for making social life possible. Social sciences dissect the DNA of society and the information this discloses helps them improve the quality of social life. As such, the social sciences exist within a moral and ethical framework and simultaneously

help to consolidate it as the framework within which everyone exists as social beings.

This is not the only form of value, however. People who declare the social sciences as a public good also need to recognise that the notion of public value into which it fits is multi-dimensional. 'Economic benefits' have to form part of the value narrative and use and price values(?) are

part of the debate about the public value of the social sciences. This means articulating that the social and cultural relevance of social science research has economic utility in addition to its other benefits. My argument is that the social sciences have both economic value and constitute a public good. Thank you.

## THE TWIN DIMENSIONS OF IMPACT.

### THE PROCESS OF IMPACT

#### Who are the users of my research?

##### Culture

NGOs, civil society (national and global), educated citizenry, cultural consumers, librarians, archivists, schools, media, public bodies, private organizations, charities, individuals, families, etc.

##### The state

Governments (local, devolved, national and regional), political parties, politicians, policymakers, civil servants, national and international strategists, etc.

##### The market

business, industry, trade unions, consumers, workers, etc.

#### How do I engage with them?

##### Culture

mailing lists, newsletters, website, social media, public talks, seminars, publications, popular writings and journalism, radio, television, posters, brochures, conferences and presentations, etc.

##### The state

publications, briefing papers and reports, workshops, talks, popular writing, presentations, etc.

##### The market

same as the above

#### What has been/could be the effects of this engagement?

##### Culture

behaviour and pursuits, understanding, civic and humanitarian values, public debate, public benefits, shared beliefs, health and well-being, health promotion, school performance, family relations, etc.

##### The state

evidence-based policy, management and use of public resources, decision-making, strategic thinking, etc.

##### The market

knowledge transfer, spin off companies, product development, evidence-based market behaviour and strategy, decision-making, management of economic and human resources, industrial relations, consumer behaviour and choice, dispute management, etc.

### THE ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT

#### What is the evidence of these effects?

##### Culture

take-up of research, influence on behaviours, beliefs, values and civic practice, etc.

##### The state

policy, practice, evaluations, improved public scrutiny and accountability, etc.

##### The market

Knowledge transfer, policy and practice in business and industry, strategic thinking, industrial relations, conflict prevention and dispute management, consumer evaluations, etc.

Figure 1. The twin dimensions of impact.

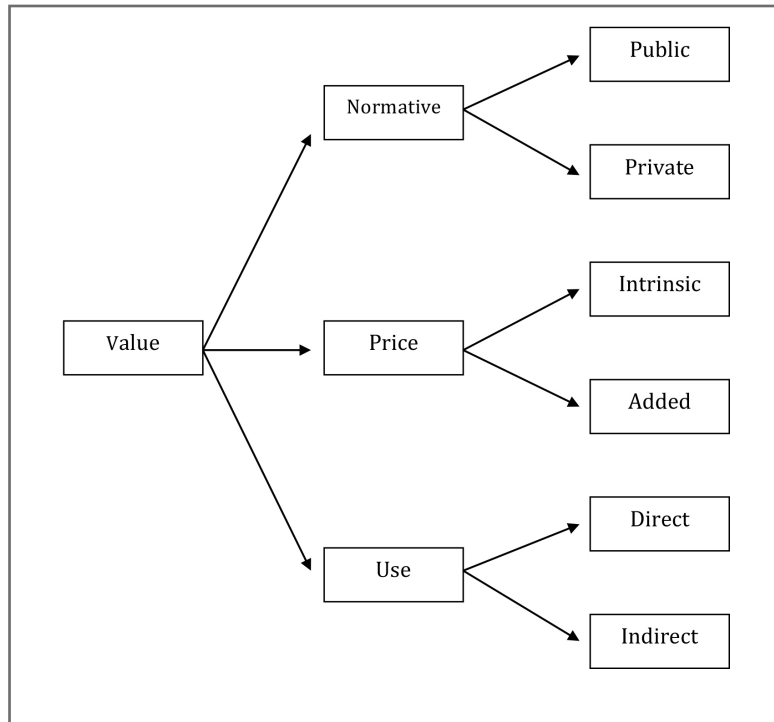


Figure 2. Types of value.

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