

# Keynote 1 – The public value of SSH

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## **The Public Value of the Social Sciences: Professor John D Brewer**

- **Public value is integral to the very nature of the social sciences and humanities.**
- **Engagement with social and human progress, and with improvement and betterment marks social science and humanities as a public good.**
- **Two contemporary threats exist: a) the global university crisis, epitomized by the intensification of the audit culture and marketization in higher education; b) the impact agenda, which narrows what impact means.**
- **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 a flawed way to demonstrate public value and to show social science is a public good.**



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## Why is it flawed?

- **There are diverse views on the meaning of impact.**
- **It is very difficult to measure.**
- **It generates hostility because of antipathy to the audit culture.**
- **It prioritises certain forms of impact because they can be more easily measured, such that measurement drives the debate.**
- **Impact is also discriminatory. There is an inevitable - almost inherent - bias towards favouring research whose impact is more readily demonstrable.**

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- **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;**
  - **How sensitized 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.**

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- Impact is also a sheep in wolves' clothing; it is 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*.
- 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?

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- The *assessment* of impact revolves around one question. What is the evidence of these effects?
- Answers to this 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. It is difficult 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.
- Impact gets reduced to its measures.

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- The debate therefore needs to move on from the public impact of social science to its public value.
- 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.

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- **This involves deconstruction of the term ‘value’.**
- **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.**
- **Elements of use, price and normative value should be run together in current debates about impact, but ‘impact’ is mostly reduced to use-value, and the defining purposes of universities and their degree subjects to their economic benefits.**

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- The normative value of the social sciences is an important dimension equal to their use and price value.
- The normative public 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:
  - A) they not only generate information about society
  - B) 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.

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- **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.**

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- Normative public value is NOT the only form of value.
- People who declare the social sciences as a public good also need to recognize 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 value 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.