Social research—the emergence of a discipline?

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This paper advances the conjecture that Social Research is becoming a discipline in its own right, independent of substantive disciplines such as sociology, social policy or political science. In the first part of the paper I briefly examine the historical foundations of research and the factors that led to its growth in the last two decades. In the second part of the paper I discuss the implications arising from an increased demand for methods training, in particular the potential impact of autonomous degrees and pathways in Social Research on traditional social science disciplines.

Introduction

To claim one is a ‘social researcher’ is perhaps analogous, in its ambiguity, to claiming to be an ‘engineer’. The analogy itself is especially appropriate for two quite different reasons. That of vagueness, the example of ‘engineer’ is so often presented to social science students to illustrate the difficulty of attributing social class on the descriptive basis of occupation. By engineer we might mean Brunel, or someone who fixes the toilet! Similarly to claim to be a social researcher, as opposed to a criminologist, educationalist, sociologist or political scientist, implicitly rejects these descriptions in favour of one that can alternatively (or simultaneously) suggest the ability to conduct rigorous investigation in the social world, or metaphorically just fixing the toilet.

But the analogy may be especially appropriate nowadays as social researchers become more like engineers, or technicians and less like scientists. Now I do not mean this in the sense that social research is less ‘scientific’ than it was—this is a different matter (see Williams 2000) but as social research becomes a more generic practice and more people call themselves social researchers rather than sociologists, political scientists etc., then the focus of much of the research shifts to, what might be termed, engineering solutions. This may or may not be a bad thing and some may dispute whether social research is becoming more generic, or if it is does that necessarily mean engineering solutions?

The evidence for the growth and emergence of social research as a discipline is partly artefactual and partly anecdotal. My reflections in this paper will depend on the latter a great deal and they must therefore be seen as a falsifiable hypothesis—which of course could be tested through research! Nevertheless whether one agrees that the particular scenario I suggest is accurate or not, there are questions to be asked about the status and future of social research as a separate activity, as opposed to the empirical arm of a given substantive discipline.
The concept of ‘social research’ has been around a long time, but a lot of this time it was really shorthand for ‘sociological research’. Indeed in Jennifer Platt’s history of the genre in the United States it is described as ‘sociological research’ (Platt 1996). Social research in the days of Lundberg, Lazarsfeld or the Chicago School was sociological, indeed sociology was the foundational social science discipline (Madge 1963: 564–7). Empirical studies of social conditions, political behaviour etc., were subsumed to a great extent under sociology, yet the link of theoretical sociology to empirical sociological research was, even in this ‘golden age’, more de jure than de facto. Platt discusses this in some detail, concluding that the fit between theory and research was at best a rough one, that there was a division of labour between theorists and methodologists and that the discipline was divided ‘among specialisms, cohorts and institutions in ways which promote differentiation’ (Platt 1996: 140).1 Even if social research was once sociological research, the sociology and the research were so often parallel rather than integrated activities. In Britain, things were somewhat different. Social research never was exclusively sociological research and was as much linked to other substantive disciplines, in particular social policy and social administration, with a long tradition of empirical research going back to the studies of Booth and Rowntree, in the 19th century (see for example Mishra 1977, Bulmer 1978, George and Wilding 1984). The impetus to research was often a concern about social conditions, though this concern was itself rooted in particular views of what society was, or should be like. Nevertheless, what was called social administration and later social policy is not easily defined and is characterized by a number of different approaches (e.g. functionalist, pragmatic, collectivist etc.) and specialisms (e.g. welfare, housing, criminology etc.).

I am not suggesting that US, or British, research had no theoretical basis, but rather that the theory driving the research often derived from a particular specialism. Housing research, for example, could be seen as a central concern of social policy, yet it retains a theoretical and empirical autonomy (see for example Malpass and Murie 1999). Robert Merton’s concept of the ‘middle range theory’ (Merton 1968 [1957]: 39–72) describes well the positioning of such work in relation to higher level theories and research. As Menzies (1982: 123) describes it ‘Middle range theory seeks to establish scientific laws about the impact of particular social features on particular activities and avoids making comprehensive statements about society’. Merton’s conception of middle range theory was intended for sociology, but one could venture to say that quite a lot of social science research is grounded in middle range theory (Williams and May 1996: chapter 6), with some sitting a little closer to a substantive discipline, whilst other research can be seen as having theoretical roots in a small sub discipline, or it might be multi disciplinary. An example is that of counterurbanization research. Counterurbanization refers to a demographic trend in Western countries, since the 1960s, whereby population flows are away from, rather than to urban areas as was the case previously (Champion 1994, Perry et al. 1986). The history of counterurbanization research can be
seen as a broad coalition of demographers, population geographers and sociologists. Alternatively it can be seen as a micro discipline relatively independent of the substantive disciplines, its research founded on a body of theory particular to it and with researchers specialising in only this.\textsuperscript{2}

Traditionally in academia the existence of sub-disciplines or multi disciplinary work, of this kind, represented a division of labour and the worst that happened was, as Platt claims, that there was only a rough fit between researching and theorizing. In an environment, such as exists now, where the demand for empirical research and the climate in which that demand grows there is a threat to that division of labour.

Indeed it would seem that a great deal of social research is now innocent, or virtually innocent of specific disciplinary ties. There are in the UK, for example, a number of organizations such as the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) and the National Centre for Social Research (NCSR) (formerly SCPR) who conduct research in areas of broad policy concern, but this is a remit more often driven by client or funding priorities or national/local government policy goals than the testing or developing substantive disciplinary theories. The history of this kind of research goes back a long way both in the social administration and social statistics traditions (Pinker 1971). These later converged around similar kinds of research interests mainly problem solving in the public sphere. Researchers (and particularly senior ones) are at least partially peripatetic, retaining some links to academic institutions or government bodies and increasingly research and research training partnershps are being forged between research organizations and academic institutions\textsuperscript{3} with a concomitant blurring of divisions of labour in research between academia, the voluntary and government sector.\textsuperscript{4} At a regional and local level, the modernization of British local government has led to a proliferation of ‘research and information’ units, whose task is to provide a range of data to support local policy initiatives.\textsuperscript{5} The skills required of researchers at both national and local level are generic. A typical researcher in a county council research unit may be designing a ‘quality of life survey’, providing traffic flow data and applying for funding to conduct research linked to crime prevention within the same week (this is an actual example!).

The growth of social research

There has then, in recent years, been a move toward organizations hiring social researchers as opposed to sociologists etc. and toward people describing themselves as social researchers. Moreover a market in goods and services serving an activity called social research has grown up.\textsuperscript{6} To explain where all these social researchers have come from we need to look at what has happened in the public and voluntary sector in the past twenty years or so. In the UK circa 1980 much of social research was conducted by universities, though there was a long standing tradition of policy related research being conducted by organisations such as the PSI or SCPR (and of course government mainly through the Office of Population Census and Survey).

History may well show that the influence of Thatcherism on public life became the major causal factor in the growth of social research as an activity
in its own right, in the UK, not by promoting it, but by undermining the traditional disciplinary providers of intelligence on policy formation. This is a point made recently by Ian Christie, deputy director of the think tank Demos (Christie 1999: 36–7). The influence of Reaganite policies in the US might be similarly cited, but for my examples I will refer to the UK.

In the 1960s the demand from the public and voluntary sector was for, what might be termed ‘agents of change’, who took seriously Marx’s motto about change rather than knowledge (see for example Cowley 1977). But the neo conservatism of the 1980s indirectly led to a culture of measurement in public life (see for examples of this in DHSS 1985; Audit Commission 1989). This culture may be attributed to the prevailing ideology of ‘value for money’, operationalized through audit trails, financial accountability and probity in central and local government. This in turn produced a regime of grant applications, funding bids and a crossover of personnel between the public and voluntary sector. Measurement to prove need and demonstrate performance became (and remains) an important feature of public life and is epitomized in growth of ‘evaluation research’ in the past fifteen years (Caulley 1993, House 1993, Pawson and Tilley 1997).

In the 1980s the voluntary sector grew enormously and this growth was at least partially the result of the contracting out of services previously administered by government and in some cases the creation of whole new non governmental organizations to carry out such tasks. In the space of a decade charities such as Shelter, the National Children’s Home, Help the Aged etc. grew from a role in fund raising and public awareness, to major players in social welfare. As this happened there was a concomitant growth in the measurement of need and the effectiveness of strategies to meet that need’ (Breton 1985, Saxon-Harrol and Kendall 1994).

By the 1990s virtually every large voluntary sector organization, local authority or health authority was either carrying out its own in house research, or commissioning outside bodies, such as universities or research units, to carry out research. For two reasons health authorities require special mention here: firstly that the NHS reforms of the 1980s explicitly built in a notion of performance measurement (DHSS 1985) and secondly the growth of ‘public health medicine’. The former has been one of the biggest contributing agent of the growth of evaluation research, whilst the latter has been the manifestation of ‘joined up thinking’ around the linking of social factors to poor health. This has resulted in campaigns such as ‘health promotion’ and through funding mechanisms specifically asserting a holistic approach to poverty and health (the latest and most comprehensive manifestation of this are Health Action Zones (HAZ)). Importantly it has meant that not just social scientists require research training, but also GPs, nurses, midwives and health policy analysts are encouraged to become at least research literate, whilst many have actually become researchers first.

Universities still remain major players in doing research and not just training researchers. But what they do and how they do it has changed in at least two important ways. Firstly universities are under pressure to produce ‘relevant’ and interdisciplinary research. The pressure mostly comes in the form of funding tied to particular external goals. For example the following are excerpts from the preambles to current ESRC research ‘themes’:
Research programmes aim to harness and strengthen the UK social scientific and policy relevant topics of strategic and national importance. The programmes aim to encourage positive interdisciplinary collaboration within and between disciplines.

Questions concerning the relationship between economic growth and development and patterns of deprivation and inequality, and fiscal policies to alleviate them, are important to this and other themes, and point to a research agenda that further integrates social and economic analysis. (http://www.esrc.ac.uk)

The academic social researcher, if she wants government funding, must harness their skills and imagination to ever improving economic and technical performance and the alleviation of social problems. She must demonstrate the pragmatic relevance of the researcher to external users in every application for funding. Often she will work in a research unit geared up to take advantage of funding opportunities from the public sector and which will market its research skills and expertise in a very similar way to a market research company. This then is the second way in which universities have changed in the way they do research—through pro-active marketing of their skills. The following are website examples of how university research is ‘sold’:

Members of the Centre have an impressive track record of research and consultancy with funders including local authorities, voluntary organizations such as the Nuffield Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Trust, government bodies such as the Department of Health (DoH) and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and international organizations including the World Health Organization (WHO). Through this work they have acquired expertise in the development of research and evaluation strategies appropriate to the needs of particular organizations, actively involving funders and service users in the research process and in the effective dissemination of findings across a range of relevant constituencies. (Centre for Health and Social Care, University of Bristol, http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/SPS/)

The University has a variety of staff who are experienced consultants in their own fields. They are able to offer their services to assist with anything from day-to-day problems to long-term strategic issues, and can often guide clients to funded assistance from a variety of sources, including UK government and the European Community. (University of Central England, Research and Consultancy, http://www.uce.ac.uk/aboutuce/reshome.htm)

A visit to almost any UK university social science website would reveal something similar and if the description of current and past research is to be believed there is an awful lot of research going on. Indeed there appears to have been a massive (and as far as I know unmeasured) growth in the amount of social research undertaken in the academic, public and voluntary sector.

The demand for social research training is more measurable. The number of Master’s degrees in social research, in England and Wales, has grown from just 3 on offer in 1980 to over 30 in 1999 and the number is still growing. Many of these have an explicit evaluation component and students are typically public or voluntary sector workers, studying part time, to develop research skills to deploy in their own fields. Many are funded by employers who often encourage the pursuance of such training through incentives such as promotion or secondment. More recently a few universities, in the UK, have begun to offer social research degrees at undergraduate level. A different market, that of young people about to enter university for the first time, who wish to become explicitly social
researchers is targeted by my own university, with marketing emphasis placed on skills training and employment prospects. The diet comes in two forms: a Minor pathway (one third of the degree) combining with a range of disciplines including sociology, social policy, criminal justice, statistics and computing and vice versa in a Major pathway, where the student is first and foremost a researcher, but with some interest in a substantive discipline.

Something like a dialectic of demand and training seems to be developing, whereby the demand for researchers has led to the development of training programmes (ranging from 3 year degrees to one day courses). The quality and quantity of training itself made better and more research possible. In particular the emergence of sophisticated microcomputer based analysis tools, initially in quantitative methods and more latterly in qualitative methods has moved the scope and possibility of social research (quite literally) from the abacus to complex mathematical models in thirty years. The average graduate student equipped with SPSS 9 can achieve (in quantity at least) more work in one afternoon than Lazarsfeld could have achieved in a month! But of course educationally this comes at a cost. Even a one years masters degree cannot give students anymore than an introduction to many of the research techniques available and any specialisation will undoubtedly require further training. Three year undergraduate degrees in social research are potentially as full of technical content as those in electrical or mechanical engineering. Indeed the sophistication and the demand for such sophistication in social research is (or is potentially) enough to elbow out other social science content (other than perhaps the philosophical and methodological foundations of method).

The demand for social researchers in the public and private sector has then been an important contributing factor in the emergence of an autonomous activity that is social research. There is, or there will be, a significant number of people who trained as and work as social researchers rather than in one of the traditional substantive social science disciplines. They are not professional sociologists, political scientists etc., but social researchers. This has implications for the future of social science in general.

**Social research as technology**

Jennifer Platt’s account of social research in the United States suggests that a theory/research separation has long existed, at least as far as the operationalization of ‘grand theory’ goes. Arguably most academically based research was and is driven by ‘theories of the middle range’, even if these cannot be directly attributed to substantive disciplines. Yet much of the research that goes on outside of academia is *ad hoc* and the response to very specific problems. That is not to say that the design of studies does not depend on knowledge of specialist areas in social science, but that the connections are looser and the research is not about theory testing, or theory building. This kind of research might be described as engineering solutions to problems, it is the use of a body of knowledge in technical application, or what Karl Popper referred to as piecemeal solutions (Popper 1986: 64–70). It is, of course, exemplified by evaluation research, or action
research in the voluntary sector. One can speculate that this has not been recognized (and sometimes explicit) mission of human betterment. The concept of pure research never held much sway and ‘value free’ research has long been regarded as a discredited adjunct of positivism (Williams 2000: 107–109). Consequently all or most research was seen to be about betterment and a ‘science’/technology divide inappropriate, yet it would seem that a great deal of social research has a relationship to substantive disciplines, analogous to that of technology to science.

I am not suggesting this is a bad thing in itself, simply that we need to recognize what is the case. Social science and its constituent disciplines have never had, unlike the natural sciences, a notion of an attendant technology—the routine application of techniques to problem solving. Ad hoc research aimed at producing (say) solutions to problems of crime in a particular community has been thought of as social science, as much as research which tests and builds theories of deviancy. An analogy in the physical world would be to term ‘physics’ both work on developing a new alarm clock and the search for new elementary particles. To do this would be to abolish the distinction between engineering and physics.

To think of research as technology has implications for how it is thought about and taught. A recognition of a division of labour between ‘scientist’ and ‘technologist’ should lead to a consideration of the relationship of social research to other social science disciplines. The difficulty is that even if my conjecture about much of social research being technology is correct, it remains that a lot of it isn’t. Which means that the technological aspect of research can have the same kind of relationship to the foundations in social science, as engineering has to physics, but the scientific aspect of research cannot. It needs theoretical justifications to specifically drive the object of investigation.

What is odd then about considering social research as a discipline, is that it’s **raison d’etre** is as a set of tools for investigation. It doesn’t have a body of theory that says the social world is like this, or like that. Its disciplinary foundations are epistemological justifications of the methods used to successfully investigate the social world in particular ways. What is missing in social research are the ontological foundations that are present in the ‘traditional’ substantive disciplines and are able to generate theory to be tested by research. To use a natural science analogy one last time: there may be technologies that produce new alarm clocks and soaps, but these technologies are based on the theoretical understandings and empirical research of physics and chemistry not ‘natural science research’.

To train social researchers, as social researchers rather than sociologists, economists, political scientists etc. runs the risk of producing technologists who are equipped only in investigative skills (and perhaps their methodological/philosophical foundations) and have little or no knowledge of sociological or political theory (etc.). It also has implications for other disciplines. To what extent should methods be taught to sociologists or political scientists? What is the role of these disciplines in relation to social research? Are they to deal only in (what Menzies called) ‘theoreticians theory’ (1982: chapter 1), self referring and untestable? What
happens to these disciplines if they are no longer invigorated by a vibrant research culture? The above mentioned Ian Christie takes a slightly different view suggesting that the shift toward a research culture outside of the universities is serving to reinvigorate sociology in a new form ‘the sociologists with clipboards’, ‘carrying out a a great deal of basic, survey-type, empirical research’ (Christie 1999: 36–7), though he nevertheless does believe sociological theorizing of the kind purveyed by Beck or Giddens is becoming marginalized and increasingly separated from such research.

Concluding remarks

There is clearly something called social research that is not sociological research, political science research, human geographical research, etc., nor is it just simply a set of tools servicing these disciplines because social research has ‘cast off’ and is doing its own thing quite separately from these disciplines. Yet is it a discipline itself? The barrier to this must be that it is primarily about ‘how’, not ‘what’, with the former a necessary but not sufficient condition for a discipline. Some of the ‘new’ researchers are technicians who are ‘puzzle solving’, often at a community level, but others are social scientists with a broader based training. The researcher may be a generic technician, or she may be a generic social scientist. Thus the growth of social research, whether or not it should be considered a discipline, may actually be evidence of a more generic or interdisciplinary approach to social science as a by product of the growth of social research. Its theoretical basis lies in theories of the middle range and is only influenced by the substantive disciplines at second hand. The outcome of this may be to reconfigure social science in terms of its constitutive disciplines, but for this to happen there has to be a recognition amongst researchers of the importance of theoretically driven investigation (at the very least in the university sector) and a recognition by theorists that their research should have, or lead too, testable consequences. Such a recognition has particular consequences for research training. Is it wise just to train ‘social researchers’, or should there be at least a substantial portion of the training in (what might be called) non investigative social science? The alternative could be a situation where social research is contingent upon transitory fashions in social or economic policy and methodologically nothing more than a pragmatically driven conceptual empiricism.

Notes

1. Platt is not suggesting that theorizing was absent in sociology in this period. Indeed sociologists have always attached great importance to ‘theory’ and have ‘theorized’ at all levels (Mennell 1974: 1–5). However the difficulty has always been in how one gets from a theoretical proposition to evidence of the phenomenon (and vice versa). There have been many attempts to resolve this from the ‘operationalism’ of Lundberg (1950) or Blalock and Blalock (1971) to, more recently, the advocacy of theoretical models by John Skvoretz (1998) and the ‘bottom up’ approaches of analytic induction or grounded theory (see Bryman 1988: chapter 4). One might speculate that the apparent ‘divorcee’ I go on to describe below might have been prompted by this historical difficulty in the ‘parent’ discipline of
2. Counterurbanization ‘theory’ can be said to begin from a refutation of classical migration theory which held that migrants were rational economic actors in possession of full information about the implications of migration. Instead migration is explained by heterogeneous motives that have a more sociological basis (Perry et al. 1986).

3. The Centre for Applied Social Surveys (CASS) is a recent example. The centre is partnership of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the National Centre of Social Research (NCSR) and the University of Southampton.

4. The England and Wales Census Longitudinal Study (LS) is jointly managed and provide by the Office for National Statistics ONS) and the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, at the Institute of Education, London.

5. An example of such can be found at; http://www.cornwall.gov.uk/County-of-Cornwall/Default.htm

6. A principle aim of CASS is to provide training for social researchers and increasingly ESRC training is generic, rather than discipline specific. The publisher Sage, have for some while, produced a separate catalogue for social research. They also produce ‘do it yourself kits’ for surveys and qualitative research.

7. At least one UK polytechnic (North London) launched an undergraduate Social Studies degree pathway solely dedicated to teaching social research methods to cope with a nascent demand for trained researchers. The PNL pathway was closely associated with the successful Survey Research Unit, run by John Hall and Dave Philips. The Unit both carried out community surveys and assisted community organizations in doing so. At the time such interdisciplinarity and emphasis was unusual. Thus the orientation was somewhat different to the Masters’ Degree in Social Research offered by the University of Surrey since 1974.

References


