Edinburgh Research Explorer

Problematizing interactions between social science and public policy

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Abstract
In January 2013, eleven scholars convened to share their experiences and views of the relationship between social science and public policy. The participants agreed to formalise in writing their key contributions and reflections on the day. This Forum article – necessarily reflecting diverse views – is a select composite of those contributions, and invites further debate.

Introduction
From New Labour's call for evidence-based policy (Cabinet Office 1999) to the more recent 'impact' agenda (HEFCE, 2011), the past 15 years have witnessed a growing emphasis on interactions between research and policy, as least in the UK (Davis et al, 2000; Pain et al, 2011; Solesbury, 2001). Initiatives to enhance relations have also come from within the Academy; indeed, for some social scientists, engagement with actors beyond the University is considered the *raison d'être* for their discipline (e.g. Burawoy, 2005; Eldridge et al, 2000). In practice, this has involved social scientists working in a range of roles including action oriented research with communities, providing advice and evidence to organisations and governments, and writing popular books in the manner of the traditional public intellectual.

Whilst recognising the value of applied and engaged scholarship, we do not think that these developments have been accompanied by sufficient critical analysis of the roles that social scientists have taken on (although see for example Burgess (2005); Kemp and Rotmans, (2009); Owens (2005)). Funded by the ESRC, Scottish Government and Defra, Parry and Murphy were conducting research that seeks to further our understanding of the relationship between social science and public policy, particularly in the area of environment and sustainability. Informed by this research, in January 2013 Parry and Murphy facilitated a workshop with the purpose of asking how do actors in the worlds of social science and public policy interact and, learning from this, what roles can or should social scientists play in the future?[1]

Who participated in the workshop? Parry and Murphy's research guided them to invite participants from the disciplinary domains of Science and Technology Studies and Policy Studies for two reasons. First, there is a strong tradition in both of interacting with policy in a variety of roles. Second, scholarship in these areas provides a wealth of conceptual tools for thinking critically about such interactions. That said, no one was asked to represent the full range and vitality of discussions in Science and Technology Studies and Policy Studies, so there are gaps in what follows. It is equally important to note that participants were identified because they already engaged with ideas from both disciplinary domains. We also acknowledge that other fields and disciplines both within the social sciences and beyond work across the divide between research and policy (in applied and critical ways) and we hope to engage with these in the future. Following the workshop, all participants were asked to write 1-2 paragraphs relating to the focus of the day, 'understanding the relationship between social science and public policy', and it was left open to each contributor to identify one or two insights based on the days' discussions. Drawing on those written reflections and

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[1] The aims and focus of the workshop emerged from their ESRC funded project, 'Engagement, Interaction and Influence', as part of the Sustainable Practices Research Group (SPRG). In the context of the SPRG, the Engagement, Interaction and Influence project is both a research and engagement project seeking to further our understanding of the relationship between social science and public policy, particularly in the area of environment and sustainability.

notes from the day, this article sets out some of the key points that emerged through our meeting and invites further reflection and discussion.[2]

In response to dominant models of policy
What is policy? Where are policy decisions made? What do policy actors want from social science? Our answers to such questions shape how we go about interacting with and influencing policy. It is for this reason that we need to develop critical conceptualisations of relations between social science and public policy to inform our action. Further, these conceptualisations need to challenge dominant but inaccurate or incomplete understandings of these relations currently circulating among scholars within the academy and among those people involved in policy making, and the implied model of action that they call into being. As Wehrens and colleagues note, the disjuncture between research and policy is often conceptualised in terms of 'knowledge to action gaps' and this, in turn, has stimulated efforts to build 'bridges' to overcome these 'gaps' (Wehrens, et al., 2011). From this perspective, the relationship between research and policy is conceived in a linear, uni-directional manner, with 'science' providing solutions for identifiable 'policy problems' (Wehrens, et al., 2011).

Recent decisions to develop incentive structures within academia to improve the relationship between research and policy (both process and outputs) are largely informed by these kinds of linear, instrumental, utilitarian conceptualisations. Demonstrating 'research impact', for example, now forms a significant section of the research grant application process for all of the major UK funding councils and the UK's national Research Excellence Framework (REF) requires institutions to provide case studies of research impact (which will account for 20% of overall scores awarded). In other words, in the UK obtaining both core research funding (largely distributed on the basis of REF scores) and a significant chunk of project-specific research funding is now dependent on researchers' abilities to respond adequately to questions about the broader (non-academic) value of their work and their efforts to engage with potential research users. While laudable in its aims, there is the danger that by focussing on rewarding 'demonstrable' research impact that the REF 'impact agenda' promotes research that simply supports existing policy approaches (and which may even be commissioned by policy sources), given it is far more likely that this kind of research will be cited in policy documents than work which is critical, challenging or innovative.

In contrast, we argue, our engagement with policy[3] should be informed by a model which includes at least three related processes occurring within policy: (1) the epistemic culture and practices (especially of civil service science) within which policy is embedded and through which it is enacted; (2) the range of language-based registers through which policy is, literally, articulated (i.e. multiple forms of 'translation' are going on); and (3) the technology of documentation that mobilises and standardises policy-in-the-making. Here, the social sciences are one of multiple, diverse evidence-bases that make an important and growing contribution towards policy at all levels. At the same time other factors are at work: new fields of inquiry mean the available evidence can be highly uncertain; understanding, other than formal evidence – notably expertise, experience and judgement – comes into play; and the contingencies of events can make it difficult to deploy evidence. Put

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[2] Some points are spotlighted in the text boxes in order to highlight the range of views and experiences present at the workshop, while others are woven into the body of the article itself and capture the broader intellectual and political terrain in which the participants consider themselves to be operating.

[3] Here we mean either actors involved in policy making, or our engagement with policy outputs themselves (such as documents, regulations and procedures).

differently, the day-to-day routines of policy actors are important in shaping the specific mechanisms, spaces and artefacts through which they interact with social science (see Freeman, Griggs and Boaz 2011, Wagenaar 2004).

At the same time, greater reflexivity is required on the part of social scientists regarding our epistemic culture(s) and day-to-day routines. As Griggs (Box 1) argues, subjecting the worlds of both policy and social science to critical investigation – particularly around the tacit knowledge practices in both – understands interactions between social science and public policy in terms of contingencies, challenges as well as possibilities. Importantly, social science should not be conceptualised as a distinct domain to policy with clear boundaries but instead should be understood as interrelated in terms of its characteristics (e.g. both are characterised by forms of tacit knowledge – although not necessarily the same tacit knowledge) and in terms of having porous boundaries where actors participate in both social worlds. Further, inherent in such an approach is a rejection of clear-cut ideas of 'uptake', 'use' and linear, uni-directional accounts of how social science relates to policy processes and outcomes, which we extend further in section four below.

Box 1 Tackling Tacit Knowledge (Steven Griggs)

Most would acknowledge that the meetings and interventions that take place as part of the policy process are repeat encounters, structured by ritualized practices (Cook and Wagenaar, 2012; Freeman and Maybin, 2011; Wagenaar, 2011). They play out through the particular staging and performances of what are for most practitioners familiar dramas and tragedies, as well as the odd comedy. Skilled actors in these performances are well-rehearsed; they know the script, where to put in a pause or wayward glance, and how to gain the desired response from their audience. They are in this sense immersed in the tacit craft of policy-making which they have acquired over time through an apprenticeship of 'doing' policy. They know what rhetorical appeals to make and when, what narratives capture attention, and what arguments can persuade even the most recalcitrant of colleagues. In short, they might be seen as the artisans of their everyday practices, reconstituting the social and political logics of particular regimes, 'gripped' by social imaginaries and ideological narratives of threats and promises (Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Griggs and Howarth, 2011; Howarth, 2009, 2013).

That policy making is a craft poses no particular surprises. All occupations have their own particular learnt ways of working and making legitimate claims. Academia as a profession is in this way no different from any other profession, whatever its own internal divisions and specialisations. Yet this existence of particularistic crafts puts in place sets of hurdles for those academics seeking to engage with policy-makers and work across occupational boundaries, not least often rival expectations, competing understandings, different timescales and incompatible performance and regulatory demands. All too often, policy-makers problematically position academics as the providers of 'truth' and guidance as to how to resolve the current set of 'wicked issues' they are addressing (Sullivan, 2011). Such constructions serve the ideological narratives of both sides of the dialogue – in that the reputation of academics can be reinforced and policy-makers are given the hope, often false, of a solution to the contradictions of their everyday practices. Indeed, academics, at least the more reflective, know fully-well that the best that they can probably offer are uncertain contributions along the lines of 'under particular conditions, and in a given context, it is likely that …'

Moving beyond models of how actors in the worlds of social science and public policy interact, we now turn our attention to analytical tools available for understanding them.

Theories and concepts for understanding interactions
Scholarship within the disciplines of Policy Studies and Science and Technology Studies, has developed well-established theoretical and conceptual frameworks that are useful for understanding the relationship between actors in the worlds of social science and public policy. In this regard, Frank Fischer's work on interpretive policy analysis (Box 2) is a core contribution in the field of Policy Studies.

Box 2: Interpretive Policy Analysis (Frank Fischer)

Basic to understanding the gap between knowledge and action is the analytical process of interpretation. Interpretive policy analysis seeks to tease out the social meanings that actors attach to different forms of knowledge. To understand the relevance of knowledge to courses of action the analyst must enter the policy context to tease out and understand what the actors think they are doing when they do it. The analysis has to get inside the situational context of action-situations of multiple realities – and find out what the actors thought they were doing when they were doing it – i.e., to discover the stories or narratives they tell that reveal the relevant social meanings, purposes, goals, intentions and motives.

Quantitative analysis is not irrelevant to this setting; it can tell us about variables that come into play, and something about the direction the variables are moving. But only a closer interpretive analysis inside the situational policy context can offer us an understanding of how and why these variables are connected. Only through interpretive analysis can we discover the various possible explanations of what particular policy actors thought they were doing when they engaged in an action pertinent to the causal relationships.

Because such reasons are generally discrete and context dependent, they seldom permit empirical generalization of the type sought by mainstream social science. Whereas empiricists see the role of qualitative/interpretive research as generating hypotheses for quantitative analysis, interpretivists turn the argument around and contend that empirical findings are useful in identifying the relations that interpretivist have to explain. It recognizes that policy participants act in terms of their interpretations of, and intentions toward, their external conditions. Rather than being governed directly by these conditions, they assign meanings to these conditions which orient their action toward them. These intersubjective meanings serve as quasi-causal 'warranting conditions' which make particular action or belief more reasonable, justifiable or appropriate, given the desires, beliefs and expectations of the actors. As such, intersubjective meanings quasi-causally affect certain actions not by directly or inevitably determining them, but rather by rendering specific actions plausible or implausible, acceptable or unacceptable, conceivable respectable, or disputable.

But the interpretive task doesn't end here. The analyst has to operate on two levels., He or she needs to understand the actors on the ground who are innovating new forms of governance, as a policymaking process (usually taken to be the task of qualitative research). As such, the interpretive policy analyst needs to bring these

local (situational) understandings in relation to theory and models of the larger system (also interpretive constructs).

In a similar vein, Parry and Murphy (Box 3) offer a complementary framework from Science and Technology Studies for analysing the interconnections between social science and policy actors, and how they are or even might be achieved.

> Box 3: Understanding collaboration between social science and public policy as trading zones (Sarah Parry and Joseph Murphy)
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> The theory of 'trading zones' offers one useful framework for understanding collaboration between social science and public policy. Coined by Peter Galison in his 1997 book, *Image and Logic*, it was developed to explain how collaboration and exchange is possible between incommensurable subcultures within the sciences. Central to the problem of collaboration is the problem of communication, which are resolved at a local level through the development of 'trading languages' by actors involved in a given trading zone. Trading languages can range from the most simplistic (jargons) to the development of simple languages characterised by a few hundred words (pidgins) to the most complex (creoles). Importantly, trading languages are taken to include the co-production of diagrams, objects and practices as forms of communication. Central to this model is an account of collaboration that rejects notions of pure, distinct, homogenous communities but instead emphases their entanglement (and the nature of that entanglement). Further, the theory of trading zones offers not only a way of analysing how collaboration takes place but also insights into how it might take place – how trading zones might be formed in the future. Analyses of previous or existing trading zones and the forms of trading languages that sustain them can provide insights relevant to those seeking to enhance relations between social science and public policy in the future.

Both the interpretive policy analysis and trading zones approaches resonate with Rein's (1980) argument that the very notion of research 'utilization' or 'use' is unsatisfactory because it suggests a one-way process in which research influences policy but is not itself informed by policy. With their focus on sites of interaction, it is therefore more helpful to think with Rein's notion of 'interplay' between research and policy. For instance, to understand the relationship between social science and public policy, both approaches (Boxes 2 and 3) involve the analyst focussing on the meaning of the actors involved in any given interaction – particularly through language – including the local, situated nature of such meanings. The trading zones approach (Box 3) widens the analysts' focus to explicitly include artefacts and technologies, along with explicating the multiple forms of knowledge brought to, or even created through, interactions between diverse actors.

In keeping with the idea of 'interplay' is the concept of 'coalitions' for capturing both the formation and nature of relationships between the worlds of social science and public policy. While there are different explanations in the Policy Studies literature for what binds a coalition together – e.g. by ideas (Haas, 1992), discourses (Hajer, 1995), beliefs (Sabatier, 1988) – a coalition framework compels us to think in terms of networks. Importantly, social scientists are then understood not as external actors to the policy process but instead as members of coalitions – of the epistemic culture and practices within which policy is embedded and through which it is enacted (see also Box 1).

Given the above, the socio-political context of our interactions with policy – whether mandated through the REF impact agenda or the prominence of 'policy sociology' (Burawoy, 2005) which hails us to attend to policy questions – implores us to generate clear articulations of not only our analytical tools for understanding such interactions but also our normative agendas. In doing so, we might adopt a processual approach to our normative agendas such as that encouraged through Burawoy's (2005) 'public sociology'. That is, working with communities to identify their concerns, their troubles, and building our research agendas with them. However, to do so does raise questions about distinctions between different modes of practising the craft of social science – between academics and activists (cf. Scott, Richards and Martin, 1990) – and the associated interconnections between research, writing, activism, values, ethics, politics and power (cf. Parry and Murphy, 2013). Moreover, the opportunity to develop such research agendas will in part depend on the changing political and economic drivers of policy as culture and practice, and the opportunities and closures such changes bring.

Challenges and opportunities of interacting with policy
What do these insights into both policy and social science – as complex, interrelational domains, characterised by craft – tell us about the challenges of their interactions? Discussion at the workshop about our experiences of interacting with policy processes challenge two assumptions found in dominant models of policy (see Cabinet Office, 1999; HEFCE, 2011; Wehrens et al 2011): (i) that policymakers will welcome an increase in the numbers of researchers seeking to influence policy; and (ii) that policymakers want researchers to tell them what to do. In practice, as outlined in the previous section, actors involved in policy making processes are dealing with a large volume of competing sources of evidence and this makes it hard to cope with more. Further, policymakers are often more interested in ideas (or stories) than in evidence – even evidence that appears to tell a compelling 'story'.

A further challenge – one that is reflected in Katherine Smith's concerns (Box 4) regarding her research into public health policy – relates to situations when social scientists encourage others to think about their 'personal troubles' and little more. This raises ethical issues for social science if such contexts do not also involve providing some means of/ideas about how to challenge or change these troubles. This concern relates to policy actors as much as wider publics.

> Box 4: What role for social science in policy? (Katherine Smith)
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> An important question that arises for me is: Should researchers be trying to construct policy solutions from their research or are there good reasons for suggesting researchers should restrict themselves to undertaking research and analysing and interpreting evidence? This made me think of Weber's (1946) argument in *Science as a Vocation*, that the role of science is not to tell us (or our political leaders) what we (or they) should do, or how we should live, but rather to make more meaningful choices possible. However, I am also conscious that when I think about which areas of public health research have had more and less influence on policy, it is the researchers who have been prepared to go beyond analysing evidence to suggest specific policy responses that do appear to have had more influence. This is, for example, a strong feature of tobacco control research (which appears to have been very influential, at least in the past fifteen years), whereas researchers working on obesity and health inequalities (both of which appear to remain relatively un-influential within policy) have continued to focus on debating

competing aetiological explanations, rather than promoting potential policy interventions. This left me feeling rather conflicted – whilst I am sympathetic to Weber's view of the role that science should extend to social science, I am also sympathetic to Said's arguments about the role of intellectuals, as he outlined in his 1993 Reith Lectures:

> At bottom, the intellectual in my sense of the word, is neither a pacifier nor a consensus-builder, but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do. Not just passively unwilling, but actively unwilling to say so in public (Said, 1994: 17).

> And yet I feel (as some of the group discussion also touched on), there is something unethical about being highly critical without also working towards alternative visions of how things might be.

Rather than regarding these issues as *problems* 'to be overcome', an alternative approach might be to engage with the diverse range of stakeholders in the communities, cities and regions as co-producers of knowledge (cf. Jasanoff, 2004) and policy that can co-identify and address medium and long-term problems. Existing evidence bases and data sources – those from within and outside of academia – should be drawn on to underpin this process. Such co-production is never simple and carries its own dangers – of short-termism, competing vested interests and presumptions of a possible consensus which may be difficult to achieve.

Future research and engagement challenges
Developing our thinking on all the fronts discussed thus far is required and represents a broad – if not daunting – challenge for our future research and engagement endeavours. By way of drawing together these threads, we offer three future research directions.

First, our reflection on the socio-political context in which social science is currently operating requires critical analysis and engagement from within the Academy, about the Academy (cf. Burgess, 2005; Burrows, 2012). Following Rein (Rein 1980: 367), the challenge is less about exploring the links between research and policy and more about 'uncovering the latent policies which organise the empirical research carried out by social science'. Again, eschewing a one-way conceptualisation of how social science influences policy processes and outcomes, we must ask how we are transformed by the wider context but also by specific interactions we experience? Thus, our role goes beyond doing interactions with policy actors to also include studying interactions between social science and public policy in its multiple forms and sites.

Second, there is an absence of a systematic analysis of both the experiences of different kinds of interactions between social science and public policy, and analytical approaches for understanding them. Indeed, in writing this Forum article we have found it difficult to identify a shorthand way of writing about this relationship that doesn't simplify and yet isn't verbose. Creating a typology out of both of these elements, drawing on insights from Science and Technology Studies and Policy Studies, offers a fruitful starting point for future research and engagement agendas. Beyond questions regarding how to characterise social science and public policy interactions (descriptive) are also ones regarding how such interactions should be organised (normative). Reflecting on the workshop discussion, Robert Evans has taken some first steps to generate a typology and its dimensions for capturing

both the descriptive and normative aspects of social science-public policy interactions (Box 5). Whilst Evans' typology is only one possible way of beginning to systematically explore the types of interactions that occur, the challenge here is to insert real projects into each cell and see what theories (descriptive or normative) make sense.

Box 5: A typology of different kinds of social science-public policy interactions (Robert Evans)

		Inside or Outside Policy Institutions	
		Social Science is inside Policy	Social Science is outside Policy
How open or fixed is policy domain?	Upstream / Open	Deliberative workshops to reach consensus on policy options or choices Social scientists as part of policy network or coalition	Qualitative (probably) or quantitative methods to document range of views for / against Social scientist as independent and critical
	Downstream / Fixed	Qualitative or quantitative methods to measure public support / opposition. Social scientists as experts on social world	Qualitative (probably) or quantitative methods to document range of views for / against Social scientist as independent and critical

Third, as Les Levidow elaborates in Box 6, working with civil society organisations in a co-productionist mode offers, as we suggest above, new research and engagement opportunities for social scientists seeking to interact with actors involved in the worlds of public policy. Combining critical research and advocacy roles over a long-term time frame confirms Owens' (2005) suggestion that interactions may take place over a whole career rather than being restricted by the parameters of a research project. Importantly, the interactions involved extend beyond civil society organisations to include civil servants in an iterative process as the social scientist engages with multiple social worlds.

Box 6: Combining critical research and advocacy roles (Les Levidow)

Since the late 1980s I had drawn on critical perspectives from civil society organisations (CSOs) for designing research on regulation and innovation in the agro-food area. When the European Commission launched a call for 'cooperative research', based on a report advocating 'transdisciplinary engagement with stakeholders and public constituents', I took up the opportunity to include CSOs as full partners in a project, Co-operative Research on Environmental Problems in Europe (CREPE). This focused on the EU's agenda for a bioeconomy, which began as a means to relaunch the Life Sciences for non-food applications.

Although any such project would have engaged with the policy process, the CREPE project did so by critically analysing policy assumptions and processes. We analysed how the bioeconomy agenda was outsourcing the EU's expertise and future vision to multinational companies in the 'inclusive' guise of European Technology Platforms. Beyond the dominant agenda, agroecological approaches were being promoted by

the newly formed Technology Platform Organics, towards a different kind of bioeconomy, with support from CSOs. So this initiative provided an opportunity to analyse contending accounts of the same policy concept, by drawing on theoretical frameworks from discourse analysis and STS (Levidow et al., 2012, 2013). CSOs' involvement in our project suggested helpful ways to do a critical investigation and how to highlight alternative agendas as potential European futures (Levidow and Oreszczyn, 2012).

After our project, I was invited to join the expert advisory group of Technology Platform Organics, just before the European Commission launched its consultations on the European bioeconomy and Horizon 2020 priorities. Through discussions in the group, I found myself ghost-writing passages of the Platform's responses to the consultations, towards influencing future research agendas. Likewise I helped to write the CSOs' alliance proposals for shaping Horizon 2020 (Levidow and Neubauer, 2012). Thus I found various ways to combine critical research inside policy networks and advocacy roles inside a policy coalition. Any influence resulted indirectly from my engagement with multi-stakeholder interactions – not simply from 'uptake' of our report by policymakers.

To conclude, we invite colleagues inhabiting both the social sciences and policy worlds to engage with and advance debate about these issues, including more nuanced discussion about whether (and if so, how) different areas of the social sciences have varying experiences and/or theories of interactions with public policy. The interest of the workshop organisers (Parry and Murphy) in this area was prompted by the reflections of individual social science scholars on their careers (see Burgess, 2005; Owens, 2005) but also a funded project aiming to further examine the relationship between social science and environmental policy (see Parry and Murphy, 2013). The latter suggests an element of greater critical thinking is entering the social sciences about their activities and goals as they interact with public policy in diverse ways. We want to take this critical thinking seriously and create further space for debate about our current and future relationships with those outside of the Academy but also what such interactions mean for the social sciences themselves.

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