

How Should Sciences Relate to Public Policy

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Assumptions

- Social research largely depends on public funding and therefore should address questions relevant to the public good
- There are many existing models of the researcher-policy maker relationship (only one will be examined here)
- All these models involve the researcher in some form of political process - even if it remains 'beneath the radar'.

My position

- University academic carrying out 'policy relevant' research
- - not directly commissioned by public agencies
- -funded by bodies such as the ESRC, the EU, and the HEA
- - idea for research project originates with the researcher

Style of research

- Largely qualitative
- Sources: interviews, official documents, official statistics
- Critical

Research Topics

- Cross-border Co-operation in Ireland [CBC](HEA funded)
- Cross-border co-operation along eastern border of the EU among civil society organisations (EU FP6)
- Conflict in Cities in the Contested State: Everyday Life and Possibilities of Transformation in Belfast, Jerusalem and Other Divided Cities (ESRC) – example of policy issue – ‘urban regeneration’

Main Focus

- Cross-border co-operation (CBC) in Ireland (1990-2008)
- Focus on key actors – voluntary and community groups, local politicians, civil servants, business people, EU officials

Context of research

- Highly politicised
- Shaped by torturous path of the 'peace process'
- Period of unprecedented funding aimed at promoting socio-economic development and building cross-communal and cross-border links
- CBC shaped by two state administrations (with different cultures) overlaid with the additional bureaucratic requirements of EU funders.
- Yet, programmes of CBC were innovative in an Irish context developing earlier models of CBC in Europe

Context...continued

- Bulk of research in area carried out by private consultants rather than academics
- Their evaluation research was built into the process of applying for funds, and managing projects
- It was shaped by funders' requirements for monitoring, auditing, 'accountability', 'value for money', 'proof' of dissemination/impact
- These requirements helped shaped content and practice of cross-border co-operation.

Context...continued

- Funded CBC projects biased towards:
 - economic development as a objective in its own right and as a means of peace/reconciliation
 - ‘concrete’ or ‘hard rather than ‘soft’ outcomes

Qualitative research –focus on ‘soft’ issues

- Rhetoric of CBC – how important is it – is all ‘just talk’ ?
- Meaning of ‘peace and reconciliation’
- Connection between heavily funded ‘hard activities’ – eg improving the economic and physical environment and ‘less well funded ‘soft activities’ – eg. improving cross-communal relations – delegated to ‘Third Sector’
- Role of ‘politics’

Pervasive Themes

- Importance of 'culture' - Cultural definition of NI Conflict – driving CBC – but what culture is problematic – ie that of 'communities' or the 'states'?
- Sustainability
- Ideology of 'partnership' between 'state', business and 'third sector'

Centrality of 'Culture'

- Qualitative sociology – well placed to analyse culture – importance of 'talk', rhetoric of zero-sum conflict versus rhetoric of 'mutual benefit'; 'culture of innovation' vs 'culture of inertia'

Quotes on 'culture'

'...the conservative, short sighted, very reactionary constipated culture of so many institutions, in fact both North and South, that really inhibited any form of genuine healthy engagement, or exploration of synergy between North and South. There is a huge impediment there, ...the cultures within individual organisations within government departments, within development agencies, etc. It's culture, culture, culture...'
(Local development activist)

Policy-makers pay little attention to culture but social scientists must.

'Culture will eat "strategy" for breakfast anyday' (Brian Lucey- on reforming banks/current economic crisis etc)

Sustainability- social partnership

- Sustainability means different things to business, the state and the 'Third Sector'
 - Market competitiveness
 - Stable expenditure streams
 - Viable mix of 'core' and 'project' funding

Factors Affecting Sustainability of CBC

- Priority and financial commitment accorded to CBC in wake of declining 'external' sources
- 'Demand for co-operative projects on ground
- Experience, effectiveness, personal networks of project personnel
- Degree and nature of institutionalisation, ie mainstreaming of CBC
- Grassroots support and legitimacy

A note on urban regeneration research

Policies

- Regenerating Belfast through 'signature' capital projects – Titanic Quarter, Victoria Square, etc.
- Reconstructing Belfast as a 'Shared City'

Research engaging with diverse actors involved -
in terms of the meanings they attach to
regeneration

Some things a qualitative researcher might contribute

- Make connections between elements of a fragmented policy process
- Expose culture informing policy making – e.g., the hidden and often conflicting cultures and meanings involved in issues like CBC and urban regeneration
- In the case of innovatory initiatives recognise the inertia of existing institutions
- Analyse the unequal power resources deployed in any policy field
- Feed back findings not just to funders but to participants in the research
- Adopt a critical approach to ‘taken for granted’ terms such as ‘accountability’, ‘value for money’, ‘impact’, etc.
- Pay attention to the costs of ‘not acting’ – eg of not engaging in cross-border cooperation or in urban regeneration
- Develop a historical perspective on public policy in area
- Develop a comparative perspective

From 'Legislation' to 'Interpretation'

The social scientist should be an:

'...ethnographic archaeologist who seeks out local experiments, new institutional forms, real utopias...who places them in their context, translates them into a common language, and links them one to another across the globe'

- *Michael Burawoy, 2003*