

The impact of impact

John D Brewer

Impact is at one and the same time an object of derision and acclaim, anxiety and confidence. It is a troubled terrain, discussed from quite different directions, and there seems little prospect of developing a common conversation between those who traverse it. This reflective paper seeks to outline a common core of questions that define the impact of impact. While it offers no answers to them, it establishes the grounds on which the debate can at least be taken forward in the future. These questions are: What is impact? Impact for whom? What are the domains in which it is displayed? What are its indicators? How is it measured?

IMPACT IS A TERRAIN which people traverse from at least three different directions. First is the policy evaluation tradition, for which the notion of impact slips easily from the pen and in which the involvement of ‘users’ is widely accepted as part of the evaluation process. Another is the philosophy and sociology of knowledge, where a consideration of the social production of knowledge leads to matters around the impact of research, among other things.

However, most people come to impact as a consequence of the development of the audit culture in higher education and its imposition as part of utilitarian approaches to public accountability. Impact now matters and the financial costs associated with it make it appear risky. Here, impact is contentious, disputed, and hostile, rejected as part of the audit culture itself. If the policy evaluation tradition is a cosy community that treats impact as unproblematic — although this is not to say they consider its measurement easy — critics of the audit culture are jaundiced and sceptical, intensely fearful of it and all the ‘user’ engagement that comes with it. The suggestion that impact is a sheep in wolf’s clothing — that it looks more hazardous than it really is — is widely accepted within the policy evaluation tradition, who are bemused by all the fuss, while to critics of the audit culture such a metaphor seriously underplays the dangers around impact.

There is no common ground between these extremes and no shared vocabulary to facilitate a universal conversation. I suggest, however, that we can establish an agreed set of questions by which to develop the potential for common conversation about impact in order to discuss the impact of impact on the research process. They are:

- What is impact?
- Impact for whom?
- What are the domains in which it is displayed?
- What are its indicators?
- How is it measured?

This brief contribution to this special issue of *Research Evaluation* cannot develop answers but it can at least sketch the ground over which there is dispute.

Perhaps the most serious problem is that there is no consensus over what impact means. Is it the outcomes of research, outputs, ‘user’ engagement and dissemination, the benefits of the research, or changes in behaviour? All these have slightly different connotations and mean different things. And impact from whose perspective? Impact can be approached from the viewpoint of stakeholders, funders, the investigators, the respondents, government policy objectives and on *ad infinitum*. ‘Users’ are in one sense everyone and thus in another sense no one; they need specification to be meaningful. ‘Benefit’ is a value judgement and varies according to normative evaluations from a particular standpoint, whereas ‘outcomes’ are measurable if understood, for example, in terms of outputs like publications. ‘Outputs’,

John D Brewer (MRIA, FRSE, AcSS, FRSA) is Sixth-Century Professor of Sociology, University of Aberdeen, Old Aberdeen, AB24 3QY, UK; Email: j.brewer@abdn.ac.uk; Tel: +44 (0)1224 272171.

however, are often the weakest meaning of impact. What matters, paradoxically, is that broad definitions of impact are permissible in order to be inclusive, while narrower meanings should be clarified in specific instances where they are appropriate. Inclusivity of meaning, not exclusivity, is essential.

The areas in which impact can be displayed are equally broad and diverse, such as policy formation and practice, civil society, the economy, knowledge transfer, heritage and the cultural industry, mass media and so on. Some of these domains are more highly valued than others by those driving the impact agenda and more relevant to some kinds of research than others. Some can be local, others national and transnational. Whatever impact means, however, it is important to accept that it can be displayed in as broad a space as possible, so that no domain is privileged above another. This is crucial in order to avoid the accusation that utilitarian notions of impact are its only prized forms and that the economy or policy domains the only spaces that matter.

The indicators of impact differ with its meaning and domains, and the principle of inclusivity remains critical — indicators of impact need to be as broadly conceived as its definition and domains. This means that metrics are no more or less important than local and national press coverage, and ‘user’ engagement and dissemination, policy change, behaviour change, and contributions to the local economy are no more significant than, for example, contributions to public debate, civil society discourse and non-government agency and voluntary group thinking. Impact is indexed as much by the take-up of research by other researchers, by teachers, by lay members of the civil sphere and what we might call an ‘educated citizenry’. If this makes impact difficult to measure, it is because this complexity is the very nature of the process of impact. It is

very important to the sheep-like character of impact that its evaluation is not restricted only to that which can be measured easily; counting the countable because the countable can be easily counted renders impact illegitimate.

Several key problems remain, however, if impact is to have impact, the resolution of which is equally important to the legitimacy of the ‘impact agenda’. Impact varies over time and can change, positively or negatively, at the one-point snapshot whenever it is measured. Impact is conditional, even serendipitous; allocating resources to it thus remains highly problematic. Chance should play no role in allocating quality-related research funding.

There are also the problems of negative and disguised impact. Negative impact can be described as research which is rejected, not because it is wrong but for its counter-intuitiveness or its opposition to current policy, government objectives and the like. Social science research is more likely to be sensitive and the politics of social science research increases the prospect of negative impact. Disguised impact arises when research impacts are hidden and unrecognised. This may in part be a failure of researchers to declare or be aware of it but mostly it is the consequence of policy-makers, the press, civil society and the rest being ignorant of it.

Benefits have to be recognised as such if research is to have impact, but this does not mean that disguised impact is non-beneficial; its benefits have not yet been valued. The black hole that exists between research and its take-up increases the prospect of disguised impact. None of these concerns have been resolved.

If impact is a sheep in wolf’s clothing, it remains the case that it could yet be ravaged by the farmer’s ferocious dog. Social science’s critical but constructive engagement with impact necessarily makes us dog-like.

Copyright of Research Evaluation is the property of Beech Tree Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.