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## Audit culture, the enterprise university and public engagement

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## **Audit Culture, the Enterprise University and Public Engagement: Sociologists Doing Enterprise and Knowledge Transfer Work**

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In the age of impact and public engagement, demonstrating that we are engaged in activities outside of, or alongside, research has become an increasingly important metric of academic performance and value. Badged under the auspices of enterprise, knowledge transfer and/or impact, engagement with external stakeholders and the creation of outputs which are of economic, social and political value is now a part of the job description of the academic in the neo-liberal entrepreneurial university. However, the problems faced by sociologists in their role as public intellectuals is nothing new, and instead is part of a continuing series of dilemmas that social scientists have had to face throughout modern history (Gattone 2006).

The vast changes which have occurred in the higher education landscape in past decades in the United Kingdom and other Western countries have been widely debated and critiqued by social scientists commenting on the transfer of new managerialism and ‘audit culture’ to higher education in the neo-liberal context (Strathern 2000; Power 1997). This ‘panopticism of the university’ (Amit 2000) leaves academics subject to the recording, monitoring and measuring of performance and output in relation to research impact. The notion of the ‘entrepreneurial funded researcher’ (Taylor and Addison 2011) highlights the pressure to draw in research grants and be willing to engage with publics, ensuring impactful research. Sociologists face particular challenges when attempting to engage in enterprise work. There is not always a clear ‘off the shelf product’ to be transferred or supplied. There are barriers to transferring social and cultural activities with external partners into a financial

or economic outcome for the corporate income-focused ‘enterprise university’ (Marginson and Considine 2000). There are further barriers to overcome in relation to what users consider to be legitimate knowledge, how critical we can be when engaged in its (co)production, and also in models of transferring knowledge into practice.

I wish to briefly draw on my experiences as a sociologist (of crime and policing) conducting an enterprise and knowledge transfer project to build partnerships with police forces in England in order to illuminate some of the challenges faced. This work was conducted in the wider context of increased emphasis on evidence-based policing, related to the move to professionalise police forces (for instance via the establishment of the College of Policing in 2012 and various ‘What Works’ Centres). The focus and shift to an evidence-based approach and the related privileging of gold-standard methodologies such as randomised control trials (RCTs) and systematic reviews has clear implications for sociologists conducting research with police, and the utilisation (and acceptance or legitimisation) of alternative methodologies such as qualitative and ethnographic approaches, the latter of which has been crucial for the development of policing studies from the 1970s.

Social scientists unfamiliar with enterprise have to navigate unfamiliar terrain in terms of how universities typically define and separate ‘research’ as opposed to ‘enterprise’. This separation does not transfer easily to a social science context and in relation to the types of organizations and settings, which social scientists will generally engage with. There is also a lack of clarity about the meanings of enterprise, engagement and impact in the sense that these are not well-articulated or differentiated *in practice* by universities themselves. For instance, individuals tended to use the terms enterprise and impact interchangeably. Enterprise has been experienced and understood as a means of *generating* impact from

research (and for universities with income generation as the end goal). Enterprise becomes a process of impact generation. However the lack of articulation and clarity on the part of universities means that enterprise, impact and engagement occupy semantically and discursively shifting ground – which may enhance their power to operate as a disciplinary mechanism in the Foucauldian sense as academics struggle to understand and meet their requirements.

Understandings of how stakeholders defined, constructed and engaged in contestation regarding what was legitimate knowledge in relation to evidence-based policing became central points for observation and analysis. Boundary-work, which can be understood as a ‘stylistic resource for ideologies of a profession or occupation’ (Gieryn 1983: 791), was a crucial part of the engagement process. We were attempting to expand our authority and expertise as sociologists into the domain of policing which was gradually becoming claimed by the evidence-based policing movement, in addition to engaging in boundary creation between practitioner-based working theories and social scientific knowledge. There is a danger that knowledge transfer (whether via consultancy or academia) becomes a means of reaffirming organizational decisions. Our activities and engagement with stakeholders could ‘end up reinscribing the very power geometries’ that sociology should ‘set out to problematise’ (Browne and Bakshi 2014: 56).

The experience of police-academic partnerships also made evident the often-unsettling compromises which sociologists might be required to consider and/or make in order to maintain positive relationships with stakeholders. However, engagement such as this is vital if we are to ensure that critical sociological knowledge and research is accessible to publics such as the police, and that monolithic ideologies and research practices such as those

encompassed in the evidence-based policing movement do not become the status quo, thus silencing and/or overshadowing critical sociological (and other) knowledge and research. The idea of evidence-based practice discredits any opposition, which became evident and required tactful negotiation. Under the auspices of new managerialism and the extensive cuts to public spending experienced by the police and other public sector areas post-2008 recession, an environment has been created for a paradox in police and academic partnerships, in that both police forces and academics are under pressure to engage with external partners as the evidence-base becomes entangled with public management.

Although there are undoubtedly benefits to be had from engagement or enterprise, it is important to be aware of the ways in which this can be co-opted into merely serving the interests of users or consumers of research. The contribution that sociology can make to research in areas such as policing, crime and justice is of value and is crucial for informing police and governmental responses. But, despite universities' calls for enterprise work by social scientists (and academics more generally), and research funding council calls for impactful research, there is a unique position faced by (some) sociologists who wish to engage publicly in these activities, if they also wish to challenge the relations of power and structures of organizational power. Therefore while public engagement is undoubtedly a vital part of the sociological and academic division of labour (Burawoy 2005), greater critical reflection is needed from sociologists regarding the practice, politics, and ethics of this engagement. Caution is required regarding the ways in which it can be co-opted into the call for impactful and user-focused research in the wider context of the entrepreneurial university and new public managerialism.

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