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Upon Impact
Michael Ben-Gad

Publication of the ESRC Strategic Plan 2009-2014 this summer is a good occasion to consider the 'impact' of social science research, if for no other reason than that in a document of about 11,800 words, the term 'impact' appears no less than 87 times, averaging once every 135 words.

The Strategic Plan outlines seven themes that the ESRC have designated as priorities, but is written to appeal to a very narrow audience – the ministers, cabinet secretaries and members of parliamentary committees that determine how much money funding bodies receive. Hence its language, its format, even the full-page colour photographs of people meant to represent key political constituencies interspersed between the pages of text, owe much to modern political party advertisements.

The debate over how much control the UK public should exert over the research bodies their taxes fund is at least a century old. The ESRC can only ensure funding for the researchers who rely on it if the research they produce appears useful to those paying for it – or at the very least, if this research appears to address the shifting anxieties of the taxpayers' elected representatives. The latter, the 'users', to borrow the document's own phrase, prefer the ESRC to emphasise work that can guide them when choosing between alternative policies. What this means in fact is that researchers should focus on whatever the politicians expect to appear in tomorrow's headlines – and to generate a volume of results that can be used, or at least misconstrued, to support whatever policies or initiatives they already favour. This is their understanding of the ubiquitous word 'impact' and perhaps this is the price we must pay to keep the money flowing. However, in an age where this and similar documents are more widely available to the larger public than before, social scientists must take great care not to follow the lead of politicians who have lost credibility by chasing after every headline and making promises they cannot deliver.

Take the recent recession, or global downturn as it is generally referred to in the document, which is conscripted to justify or help motivate five of the seven 'areas of strategic challenge'. It finds its way not only into 'Global Economic Performance, Policy and Management,' but also into 'Health and Wellbeing'; 'New Technology, Innovation and Skills'; 'Environment, Energy and Resilience'; and 'Security, Conflict and Justice.' Now it is easy to demonstrate that the present recession is the worst in at least fifty years – per-capita output in the UK stands at 6.4% below trend as of the second quarter of 2009. Nonetheless, recessions come and go, no-one has found a method for eliminating the business cycle, and indeed the competing models developed to explain business cycles either fail to match important observations, or are built on assumptions that are empirically inaccurate. This latter fact is important. My own field of macroeconomics has yet to achieve anything close to a consensus on the underlying mechanisms behind the generation and propagation of business cycles, not because the question has been ignored, but because it is so fiendishly difficult to answer. Progress on this front will be made, but slowly. In the meantime, the recession will end long before much of this research is even undertaken, much less published or employed. Pretending otherwise risks generating cynicism.

Consider too the manner in which the sections on 'Global Economic Performance' and 'Security, Conflict and Justice' conflate poverty with the recession, implicitly validating the common misperception that the world's poor are falling behind, not least because of globalization. In fact, during the last quarter century, standards of

living for huge numbers of people have risen very fast. For China and India, the recession does not represent a retrenchment, but merely a decline in the rate at which people are leaving the ranks of the extremely poor, and a similar decline in the rate of income growth for the still-expanding middle classes. For those poor countries that have not experienced high rates of growth, the recession changes little. Within the developed world, the effects of the recession are felt primarily by the very well-off, who have seen the value of their capital decline sharply, and – most acutely – by the growing number of people in the labour force who have lost their jobs, or will in the near future. These are not the poor, and though for many years to come many will not achieve the standards of living they enjoyed during the boom years, few will permanently join the ranks of the poor underclass. By and large, the poor had neither assets nor jobs to lose, and so are not directly affected by the recession. Their plight derives from stubborn, long-term problems that do not fluctuate with this business cycle or any other.

The social sciences do best when they generate new ideas that trickle out from academia to the larger society via the students we teach, (as they are the most likely to come into contact with the newest research) and the people with whom those students interact once they graduate and join the business world, the public sector, politics, or the media. The other function of the social sciences is to maintain the scientific tradition of positive analysis, as an alternative to demagoguery and magical thinking. These are the truest measures of the impact of social science research. Rarely will a single social science research project immediately inform important decisions no matter how solid its analysis, nor will political leaders implement results that conflict with their ideology or political expediency. Pretend otherwise and we invite politicians to misconstrue the results of our work for their own ends, or to turn on us and our funding whenever we directly contradict them. If our worth is measured in our usefulness to these same people, public opinion will not protect us.