

Commentary

Follow the argument where it leads: some personal reflections on 'policy-relevant' research

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Introduction

The injunction 'follow the argument where it leads' is R. H. Tawney's. It was quoted approvingly by Raymond Williams in his discussion with *New Left Review* on the struggle in 1950s England between class-affiliated adult education programmes and the power of an entrenched university system which insisted 'you must improve academic standards, you must get written work, there must be no crossing of subject boundaries' (Williams 1979, 80). Williams, perhaps more than anyone of the postwar generation of socialist-marxist academics, appreciated the importance of working class adult education in political mobilization. Fast forward 50 years: class- and place-based identities have shattered just as surely as the autonomy of the University in matters of research and education has been smashed by successive governments pursuing a 'modernizing' agenda. In this context, debate about the need to forge new links between physical and human geography, and to start making more substantial contributions to public policy, reflect growing awareness of reluctance among colleagues to look outward and to engage with policy-political agendas (Massey 2001; Martin 2001; Castree 2002; Murphy 2005).

In this commentary, I want to focus on the potential for geographical research which has a political as well as a policy orientation. Gilmore (2005, 179) describes this kind of geographer as a 'scholar-activist': someone who brings 'the experimentation of academic research into relation with the experimentation of (any) political action'; someone whose work, in Massey's words,

derives from 'some passion greater than simply adding another item to your CV or to the Departmental Output Count . . . to engage outwards with a world which lies beyond our own internalised conversations' (Massey 2001, 12). Drawing on experiences over my academic career, I would like to contribute to this discussion by focusing on three inter-related issues. The first concerns motivation. Given the challenging contexts in which academics now work, why should individuals choose to devote their career, either fully or in part, to working in public policy arenas? The second issue is whether, and how, scholarship and activism can be combined effectively? Finally, I ask whether research in human geography can have an impact, given the discipline's low level of visibility in policy-political worlds?

Questions of motivation

Isaiah Berlin, in a famous essay on Tolstoy, makes a figurative distinction between two kinds of writers and thinkers: on the one hand there are the hedgehogs who 'relate everything to a single, central vision' and on the other there are foxes who 'pursue many ends . . . (who) lead lives, perform acts and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal' (Berlin 1951, 1). I am a fox, most comfortable in the territory where geography interacts with other academic disciplines and environmental policy. Occupying this space has allowed action, experimentation, challenge and, increasingly, evidence of having made a real difference in some areas of policy. But, at the same time, it can be an isolated

and rather risky place to be in terms of establishing an academic career, especially with the Research Assessment Exercise actively, if unintentionally, discouraging inter-disciplinary work.

Why choose policy-relevant research?

My motivation for choosing policy-relevant research is multistranded: a mixture of personal, professional and political reasons. I grew up in the 1950s and early 1960s on a Royal Air Force base located in rural Huntingdonshire. Beyond the high barbed-wire fences surrounding the base were fields of corn and sugar-beet. Inside the base, the Cold War was actually pretty hot: at times of international tension elsewhere in the world, flights of bomber aircraft would scream down the runways, shattering the night and any hope of sleep. Every morning, we 'camp children' would pass through the perimeter fence and face the trial of negotiating entry into the local worlds of the schools we attended. The contrasts between RAF children, with their constant comings and goings to exotic parts of the world, and the fixed lives of local children from mainly poor rural labouring families set the context for my formal education.

What I took from my military childhood was a powerful ethic of service which has found expression in my life in a passionate commitment to both formal and informal education: being able to help others discover a love of learning, and develop their critical capacity to engage with information, ideas and ideologies, underpins my research as well as my teaching. I also developed a strong antipathy towards rigid hierarchical systems where rank determines social relations and the individual's 'worth': a politics which has found expression in my determination to challenge presumptions of expertise against the knowledge and understandings of so-called 'ordinary' people. Finally, I developed an acute sensitivity towards the nuances of local culture: of how class, dialect, lived experiences shaped people's relationships in different places. I grew up wanting to understand what it meant to belong to a particular landscape, to have an unselfconscious sense of place.

When I did gain some understanding, through my PhD research and subsequent work in London (Burgess 1978a 1978b; Burgess and Wood 1988), I became very angry about the ways in which powerful forces in society, especially those unleashed through economic development, could ride roughshod over such attachments. My professional

career has been forged from attempts to understand the relationships between people, places, landscapes and nature; and the ways in which the exercise of power and knowledge can support or damage those relationships. In the early days, I often found myself speaking on behalf of those social groups who were being marginalized in decisionmaking processes – literally representing local communities in policy fora. This is a questionable place to be ethically. A major research and political challenge for me remains the development of small group processes that do empower participants. Our most recent work brings specialists and policymakers into face-to-face dialogue with local people, providing individuals with opportunities to learn and engage critically with both substantive and procedural knowledge competencies, as well as being able to explore different values and beliefs (see Davies *et al.* 2003; Burgess *et al.* 2004).

Creating discursive spaces in small groups

I was a geography student in the late 1960s and early 1970s when social science was often mobilized to provide rationalizations for decisions already made rather than to provide the full range of evidence needed to underpin decisions about land use changes that would impact materially on people's lives and landscapes. In the first attempts at public participation in the 1970s, members of the public were invited to comment on long-term structure plans. When people wrote back worrying about their back gardens or local shops, planners and politicians sniffed loudly and declared the whole exercise a waste of time. The academic challenge was to develop theoretical concepts that could account adequately for such divergences in knowledge and values, and in developing methodological strategies to enable local people to express their feelings, in whatever ways they chose, in spaces where they were heard and respected. As an activist, taking my lead from the advocacy planners and other grassroots community workers around at this time, the goal was to work with people so they could acquire the procedural knowledge necessary to challenge planning decisions which impacted on their lives.

The idea of using small groups as a social space where individuals could share their experiences, values and knowledges began to crystallize in the early 1980s (see Burgess *et al.* 1990), partly through group-based therapeutic work I was doing with

UCL's Student Counsellor, partly through projects led by Group Analysts to improve the quality of small group teaching in UCL in the early 1980s. At a time when I was preoccupied theoretically with communication, mass media and cultural politics (Burgess and Gold 1985), I began to realize how powerful group dynamics were in creating discursive spaces where individuals could share experiences and explore their different understandings of the world (Burgess 1986; Burgess *et al.* 1988a 1988b).

Over the last 20 years, we have progressed three overlapping research agendas each with small groups, theoretically and methodologically, at their core. First, we have tried to make explicit why personal contact with living nature in everyday environments is an important element of human well-being, and should be actively promoted against the claims of other land-use demands. I have brought together a diverse range of projects under the rubric of *improving accessibility to nature in urban and rural landscapes* in this account. Second, through our own research and that of some of our graduate students, we have sought to better understand the drivers behind contemporary processes of consumption and the extent to which different strategies might support more sustainable practices; lack of space precludes further discussion here¹ (Burgess *et al.* 2003). Third, we have sought to undermine the reductive processes, especially in terms of what is defined as legitimate evidence, which have dominated environmental decision-making. This has meant finding ways to challenge positivist social science not only within geography but equally, if not more importantly, in economics – then, as now, the most influential of the social science disciplines in providing the evidence base for policy-political decisions. This research, begun in the early 1990s, supports the '*deliberative turn*' in *decision-making* through experiments in environmental and science/technology governance, and represents our major ongoing research and policy-political practice.

Improving accessibility to nature in urban and rural landscapes

Harrison and Munton initiated the UCL geography department's interest in accessibility and land-use change in the early 1980s. My joint work with Harrison began in 1985 through an experimental project in which we convened four small, in-depth discussion groups with local people in Greenwich, SE London, to see whether it was possible to explore people's

environmental meanings and values discursively. The groups were recruited in different localities, engaging men and women from white working-class and white middle-class neighbourhoods and a group of, predominantly Bengali, Asian women resident in the Borough. Each group met for six consecutive sessions of an hour and a half, with the expressed intention of talking freely about open-space, nature and the countryside. Grounded theoretical analysis of the group transcripts allowed us to conceptualize 'access' as meaning much more than physical accessibility alone. Material conditions, gender and ethnicity, representational practices and lived experience co-determined whether and for whom green-spaces were accessible. In this framing, 'accessibility' is a highly charged political question about social exclusion, not least when research evidence is able to demonstrate the contributions that contact with nature and naturalistic settings make to people's sense of well-being (Harrison *et al.* 1987; Burgess *et al.* 1988c).

Through this and subsequent empirical studies, working closely with individual policymakers at local and national levels, we pursued questions of social exclusion from nature by showing how relations of class, gender, ethnicity, age and expertise constrained the use of naturalistic settings in towns, the urban fringe and the wider countryside (Burgess and Harrison 1993; Harrison and Burgess 1994; Harrison *et al.* 1995; Burgess 1995 1998). Under the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s, the research provided robust empirical evidence to support a growing political critique of the devastating effect that Conservative government policies were having on the provision and management of urban parks and green spaces. The work I did on fear of crime in naturalistic settings, first for the Community Forest Unit and then for Comedia-Demos' study of the decline of urban parks (Worpole and Greenhalgh 1995), for example, attracted considerable media coverage and led to requests to present the research to officials in the Department of Environment, and the Home Office.

With the advent of a New Labour government in 1997 and its express commitment to policies of social inclusion within and beyond its sustainable development strategies, our research contributed to the *Urban Renaissance* White Paper (DETR 2000) and the work of the Urban Parks Task Force (2001–2). At the same time, it has helped support the policy-political case for maintaining and enhancing sites for 'urban nature' (Harrison and Burgess 2003), in

the face of increasing pressure for brown-field development in urban areas, and the GLA's emerging participation strategies in their planning for a more sustainable London (Harrison *et al.* 2004). The research provides a theoretical underpinning to claims for spaces for nature in cities, and evidence for the establishment of a standard of provision for accessibility to a natural greenspace in urban areas, not inappropriately labelled the ANGst (Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards) model which has been tested and incorporated into Central Government Planning Guidance PPG17 (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2002) as part of English Nature's drive to support biodiversity in cities in 2003.

The 'deliberative turn' in environment and science-technology governance

Over the last decade, policymakers and politicians have been forced to acknowledge that the institutions of representative democracy no longer secure the unquestioning support of civil society. Command-and-control strategies of policymaking have become a high risk strategy for governments, especially when dealing with complex and fiercely contested scientific-technological innovations such as nuclear energy and genetically modified organisms, and the need to shift to more sustainable patterns of consumption and production. We have been playing a role, alongside colleagues in geography (Petts 1997 1999; Goodwin 1998; Owens 2000 2003; Munton 2003; Bulkeley and Mohr 2003; Petts *et al.* 2004) and in other academic disciplines (Irwin and Wynne 1996; O'Riordan and Ward 1997; Levidow and Marris 2001; O'Neill 2001; Kasemir *et al.* 2003; Pellizzoni 2003; Stirling 2003 2005), in making the case for more deliberative and inclusive democratic practices for two reasons: first to 'open up' problem framings to a wider range of perspectives and experiences; second to achieve more robust decisions through incorporation of values and knowledges beyond those of the normal science-policy community.

Following in the footsteps of John Adams' critique of cost-benefit analysis as the decisionmaking tool of choice in contested planning decisions (see Adams 1995), we began in the early 1990s to unstitch the logic, methodology and application of contingent valuation. This technique, used widely by environmental economists, claims to measure the monetary value of non-market environmental goods and services. Respondents to a CV questionnaire are presented with information about a hypothetical market and asked to trade in it by

expressing their 'willingness to pay' for the benefit of the good, or their 'willingness to accept' compensation for its loss. With financial support from the ESRC and buy-in from English Nature who provided us with a case study of an agri-environment scheme on the Pevensy Levels and paid for environmental economists to undertake the CV survey, the research asked a straightforward question. Do respondents to a CV survey value the environment/living nature in the way the economists assume, i.e. are they able to place an economic value on their 'preferences'? We used a hybrid methodological design which included semi-structured interviews with farmers, some of whom then participated in an in-depth discussion group; two in-depth discussion groups with respondents to the CV survey; and the quantitative results from the CV surveys.

The study produced strong empirical evidence to question the heroic assumptions environmental economists were making (Burgess *et al.* 1998; Harrison *et al.* 1998; Burgess *et al.* 2000a; Clark *et al.* 2000). For very few individuals was it possible to provide a 'true' economic value of the worth of nature to them. The transcripts of the in-depth group discussions demonstrated vividly that values for nature were incommensurable and could not be reduced to a single monetary metric. Further, they revealed a desire amongst citizens for a space where conflicting claims, different values and alternative strategies for land management could be discussed with specialists who had appropriate substantive and procedural knowledge.

A reasoned, empirically robust academic critique is necessary, but not sufficient to achieve change in policy processes, however. I remember a senior civil servant bitterly attacking critical social scientists for their failure 'to get their hands dirty' at a rather acrimonious research-policy seminar on CV in 1995. He threw down a gauntlet: 'decisions do have to be made. What is your practical alternative?' Since 1997, we and graduate students have been working on ESRC and government agency-funded projects on the theory, design, implementation and evaluation of deliberative and inclusive decisionmaking processes (see, for example, Clark *et al.* 1998; Burgess *et al.* 2000b; Bhattachary 2000; Bloomfield *et al.* 2001; Munton 2003; Chilvers 2004). In particular, we have been experimenting with group-based, multi-criteria-analytic processes which allow the claims of expert and local knowledges to be explored discursively, and for multiple and

divergent values to remain in play throughout all stages of a decision process (Burgess 2000; Clark *et al.* 2001). This work has developed rapidly since 2001, with research funding from the Wellcome Trust to develop *Deliberative Mapping* – an option appraisal process which is underpinned by an engagement with Habermas' theory of communicative rationality (Habermas 1984/1987), sociology of science studies and technology risk assessment (Davies *et al.* 2003; Davies and Burgess 2004). We are members of an emerging, multi-disciplinary 'epistemic community' of academics and practitioners whose advice and expertise in deliberative processes is now being sought by policymakers and politicians in higher profile and more difficult decision contexts, most recently in how to engage public and stakeholders in appraising options for managing the UK's intermediate and high level radioactive waste (Burgess *et al.* 2004; see Chilvers 2005).

Lessons from theory in practice

The recent literature on policy-political relevance draws attention to important issues about relations between theory, methodology and practice, many of which are taken up by my co-contributors. The lessons I draw, not surprisingly given my narrative, address different aspects of context-specific personal and professional relationships.

Putting ideas into practice

Susan Owens writes about the challenge of achieving mutual learning between academics and policymakers, and quotes Kingdon: 'the ideas themselves, far from being merely smoke screens or rationalizations, are integral parts of decision-making in and around government' (1995, 131). It is not by chance that economics has effectively dominated environmental policymaking for so long. Both ontologically and epistemologically, economics resonates strongly with the mind set of environmental policymakers. Persuading them to contemplate the idea of qualitative research and then, even more riskily from their perspectives, to use the evidence from qualitative research studies in decisionmaking, has been a real challenge.

In the early days of trying to convince the Countryside Commission of the value of the findings from the Greenwich in-depth groups, an exasperated officer demanded to know why we could not just do a questionnaire because what they wanted was a 'pale shadow' of the substantive discussions

we had held (see Burgess *et al.* 1990). *Not* providing pale shadows for policy became the credo for our ongoing engagement with the world of environmental planning. In a number of highly politically charged contexts over the last decade or so, we have strongly argued the case for the validity of qualitative research findings. This has meant finding effective ways to articulate social and cultural theoretical concepts, especially in terms of how they frame ideas of deliberative democracy so non-specialist audiences – such as natural scientists, engineers and environmental policymakers – are able to question our knowledge claims and empirical findings appropriately, i.e. with some understanding of epistemological foundations and methodological strategies.

This account supports Martin's claim that: 'to be persuasive, research has to be relevant and practical and, above all, backed up by persuasive empirical investigation and logical argument' (2001, 200). But, in my experience, we also need to challenge policymakers, in that good research can change the definition of what is 'relevant' and to whom. This a reflexive process of social learning when taken over the medium term and indicative of the significance of changing political, cultural, economic and social contexts. The rise of deliberative and inclusive processes across an ever widening field of science-in-society issues demonstrates social/policy learning in this institutional sense.

Seize the moment

In the two strands of work I have discussed, we have often found ourselves just ahead of a shift in policy-political thinking, so audiences are receptive, or at least curious enough to listen to what academics are saying. This is also an iterative process which is difficult to pin down precisely and which would benefit from more ethnographic research. Take, for example, the apparent desire for more participatory processes by governments at national and international levels, exemplified in the national *GM Nation? Public Debate* (2002–3). Deciding whether to introduce commercial GM crops in UK agriculture was the first major test of what, if any impact, deliberative approaches might be having on government policymaking. In the world of *realpolitik*, a lot and very little seems to be changing. The Debate was held and its conduct evaluated by a group of academics (Horlick-Jones *et al.* 2004). Whilst policymakers are clear that they need to refine and implement more effective deliberative processes,

politicians may be less comfortable. For example, Austin Mitchell, MP, a member of the EFRA Select Committee which took evidence from the Chairman of the GM Nation Debate Steering Board, described all the members of the public who took the trouble to participate as 'cranks' because:

[I]t is a specialist thing and you have got to go to a website, you have got to go to a meeting, you have got to put yourself out and that means you have got to be motivated. Cranks are motivated, specialists are motivated, people with opinions are motivated but the public is not. (EFRA minutes for 20 October 2002)

Keep the public 'ignorant'; have a 'debate' without any substance; marginalize and denigrate those who take their responsibilities as citizens seriously. That way it remained possible for the government to press ahead with a 'limited' introduction of GM crops in the teeth of stakeholder and public opposition. It is too soon to say whether the new approaches to decisionmaking represent a genuine movement towards deliberative democracy. But either way, there are considerable challenges facing policy-political institutions who fail to acknowledge the value of public and stakeholder engagement in their decisionmaking, not least the further erosion of public trust and confidence in government.

'Bonding' and 'bridging': good social relations are crucial to success

Understanding how social capital is productive in resolving collective action problems (Rydin and Pennington 2000; Rydin 2003; Jones and Burgess in press) is useful, too, in thinking through our experiences of policy-relevant research. In-group social processes are implied in the term 'bonding capital', while between-group processes require 'bridges' to be constructed to be effective. Increasing trust, greater confidence, deepening understanding of others' perspectives, a desire for reciprocity and increasing capacity are all important elements of effective group work. Looking inwards, our academic practice has been collaborative. Every research project has engaged a group of researchers combining different geographical and non-geographical perspectives. Every project has brought together more experienced and younger researchers, building confidence and future capacity to undertake policy-relevant research. For example, the *Deliberative Mapping* project had a core team of seven researchers combining cultural geography, medical geography, science studies, risk assessment, policy analysis

and public health. The project has developed a multi-criteria option assessment methodology which treats citizens' and specialists' judgements symmetrically; produces both quantitative and qualitative evidence to allow for an open and transparent process; and deals explicitly with issues of competence and fairness in complex decisions (Davies *et al.* 2003).

Looking outwards, every project has engaged individuals from the appropriate policy context. These people are the vital conduit between the worlds of academe and environmental decision-making. Drawing them into the research, making time to build personal relationships and being effective in understanding the political and institutional constraints under which they work are all significant in creating opportunities for shared learning. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge, especially when seeking to introduce ideas which are challenging to received wisdom and the normal routines of doing the job, that the 'ideas entrepreneurs' within the organization often need support beyond high-quality academic research. Having an academic able to deliver authoritative arguments in vivid, engaging and accessible presentations to sceptical audiences is one important tactic in promoting conditions for institutional change in policy-political contexts. As Gilmore records from her experiences: 'inter-disciplinarity and coalition-building are line recognition and redistribution, two sides of a singular capacity' (2005, 182).

Managing conflict in meeting external demands

All is not as rosy as I have portrayed it thus far; and it is within the academic institution that major conflicts over resources and capacity are being fought out. Academics undertaking research that engages directly with public policy, if they are to be effective, will probably not be reliable colleagues in terms of meeting their administrative and teaching commitments. Committees and teaching demand timetables which are fixed on a termly/yearly basis. Policymakers often expect to meet urgently and at times which suit their own agendas. More generally, time scales when doing policy-relevant research are extremely tight: the work has to be completed to time; presentations have to be made when required; revisions to draft reports have to be done immediately; major reports have to be published. As one's reputation for interesting and stimulating work grows, requests come in faster. The pressure to accept contracts is

intense, since new money must be found to keep research staff and post-docs employed to hold the research team together and not lose hard-won intellectual capital. With balance sheets dramatically in the red, our institutions also demand as much external funding as possible.

Academic staff, under duress, have to carry the extra burdens consequent on having colleagues liable to be called away at short notice or unable to fulfil routine commitments because of a sudden crisis deadline. Students get less attention than they are due. It gets harder to write for academic journals. There are not enough hours in the day, despite the goad of the RAE. It is also hard to go back to work which feels 'finished' because it has been widely discussed in the public domain and then rework it in a very different discursive style for a publication which may not appear for two years or so. Or, in trying to square the circle, the 'scholar-activist' finally has a mental and/or physical break-down through the unreasonable stress of trying to do everything well.

Envoi

There are many, many opportunities for geographers to get engaged in both responding to and shaping environmental governance, especially as the policy-political world grapples with the complexity of global climate change and sustainability (O'Riordan 2004). But at what cost to the Academy and its members, under the current institutional regime? The situation of academic geographers in other countries may be different in important respects to those currently oppressing us in the UK, but I cannot see any serious attempt at institutional levels to respond to the growing crisis of 'burn-out/drop-out/turn-off' behaviours being exhibited by over-stressed colleagues. Doreen Massey coined the phrase 'spatial fetishism' to try and shift geographical attention from spatial relations between the local and the global. 'Scale is not the issue', she wrote. 'The politics lies in the power-filled nature of social relations at all levels' (2001, 16). I could not agree more strongly, as all our studies with small groups exemplify. Following the argument through, we are now working in contexts where our capacity for creativity, for experimentation, for time to think and write is being steadily eroded by externally-imposed demands. Our internal group dynamics are creaking under the strain of too many

paradoxical injunctions. I did not expect to end here but, following the argument, perhaps it really is time to mobilize for scholarship – and activism – against government policies that do not, fundamentally, value research and education for anything other than utilitarian goals.

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Note

- 1 One consequence of this research was an invitation to join the Board of Trustees of Global Action Plan, a national UK charity working with action teams in neighbourhoods, schools and workplaces to support more sustainable consumption practices. I have been Chair of the Board of GAP since 2000 (see <http://www.globalactionplan.org>).

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