

*Future Priorities for the
Economic and Social
Research Council*

Recommendations and
Observations of the Members
of the Academy of Social
Sciences

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Contents

Executive Summary	page 3
Preamble	page 4
What is Cutting Edge Research?	page 4
The Investigation	page 5
The Findings	page 6
Observations and Suggestions	page 16
Appendices	

Executive Summary

- Most respondents reported that up to 20% of new research could be described as ‘cutting edge’.
- Advances in methodology are numerous and various. Methodological developments and the increasing use of methodological innovations are seen as important and are taking place across the social sciences. Specific mention was made of over 20 separate advances. One common theme was the enhanced capacity to deal with large and even global data sets.
- Quantitative methods that were noted by several respondents in different disciplines included modelling and longitudinal methods, game theory and exploiting richer data sets, including panel data.
- Qualitative methods also noted by several respondents in different disciplines included performative practice and network approaches. The emergence of the study of emotional geographies and sonorous geographies (‘soundscapes’) has resonance in other responses highlighting interest in visual and performance-oriented studies across a number of disciplines.
- Integrating methodologies, and in developing the internet as a research tool were among exciting methodological innovations.
- Globalisation has resonance and can drive cutting edge research in some but by no means all disciplines. It has potential to have an impact on new work, eg on drugs and crime and drug supply. In some areas, globalisation has evolved into work on transnational connections.
- Gender is established as a mainstream research issue in some disciplines, but it still has the potential for contributing to cutting edge research and for setting new agendas for research in a small number of disciplines.
- Postmodernism prompts much critical reaction, but there are still areas in which it is regarded as capable of producing good research. For some, postmodernism has given way to post-colonial studies.
- Emerging themes that are large and that cross disciplinary boundaries are identity, the environment, and science and technology/biotechnology.
- New themes and approaches: modelling, embodiment and performance; sustainability; identity, nature, science and technology/biotechnology; governance, governmentality and globalisation; complexity.
- Cutting edge research is characterised in varied and fruitful ways.
- Calls for encouragement of blue skies research, research training support and specific areas of cutting edge research.

Preamble

This review was conducted from April 16-30, 2002. The report was submitted on May 1. The specification of the review called for input to assist the Research Priorities Board to reach decisions about priorities for research funding. The underlying assumptions are that editors of leading social science journals will be well-informed about research developments, and that their views can effectively be garnered and transmitted in a usable form. The methods laid down in the specification call for an initial identification of up to three of the higher rated journals in each discipline represented by the mission of the ESRC. Editors or their nominees are then to be contacted and interviewed about current and evolving research. Specifically, they are to be asked to identify the following:

- significant innovative developments to advanced methodologies
- work which is shifting paradigms and exciting leading researchers

These questions were also put in more impressionistic terms, asking for information on ‘what these editors consider to be ‘cutting edge’ and has excited their interest and worthy of funding’.

The investigation carried out by the research team sought to meet both the formal and tacit requirements of the specification. The potential impact on resource allocation decisions suggested that the best possible representation within each discipline was important, and that all participants needed to know the purposes of the data collection exercise. At the same time, the likely coverage of any and all social science disciplines were under three constraints. First, the nature of the request asks for opinions and impressions. Second, the time available for the investigation inevitably resulted in patchy responses. These factors are magnified by the third element. Since the maximum number of respondents (three) in any discipline is very small, non-response reduces dramatically the width of the information base, with severe effects on what representativeness could be said to exist.

These comments are in the nature of health warnings about the findings of the investigation. They by no means invalidate the findings as one part of a set of inputs to the priority setting process.

What is Cutting Edge?

The RPB’s view of cutting edge research, as represented by the specification, reflects both the stated criteria and the tacit orientation of the ESRC in relation to what is ‘worthy of funding’. The rubric that the best research receives funding remains the fundamental principle. This principle has widespread acceptance at the formal level. At the same time, policy development over the last ten years has underscored certain criteria of excellence, and these have been used to steer the output of the research community. The importance of methodological development, with particular reference to quantitative sophistication, is the most notable feature, along with policy relevance. More recently, inter-, multi- and cross-disciplinary research has become more valued. In effect, ‘cutting edge’ research is not exactly the same as ‘the best’ research.

The Investigation

Stage 1: Finding Three Journals

Two principal sources were used to produce a list of up to three journals for each of the sixteen designated disciplines. The first contact was through the learned societies, using data provided by the Academy of the Learned Societies for the Social Sciences. Each representative was sent an email, explaining the purposes of the request. Follow up was by phone and email. The second source was the Chairs of relevant RAE panels, with whom the same method was employed. This part of the process took longer than anticipated. Responses were slow to arrive, partly due to the need for consultation within learned societies. However, the main reason was due to the absence of contacts from their offices during University vacations. Not surprisingly, a high proportion of people contacted were attending conferences in the UK and overseas. It was not uncommon to receive explanations and apologies relating to work pressures and time away from the office. In most cases, this was followed by the information that was requested.

Stage 2: The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was completed and the process of sending it out with a covering explanatory email began as soon as the three journals for a discipline had been decided. The questionnaire was sent to 50 journal editors. It was also sent to eleven RAE Panel Chairs. These contacts were included for two reasons. First, RAE 2001 is recent enough for Panel Chairs to have a current and broad view of contemporary developments across the whole of the discipline. Second, these responses offer the possibility of offsetting low rates of return from editors.

The explanatory email stated that all the answers would be aggregated, and that no journal or respondent would be identified or identifiable in the results of this survey.

Recipients of the questionnaire were given several email reminders. In disciplines with low response rates, follow-up calls were made. Although the facility was offered, no one was prepared to complete the questionnaire over the phone.

About half of the non-respondents explained that they did not have the time to complete the questionnaire before the deadline. Some did not reply at all and were not contactable by phone. A very small number refused to co-operate with the exercise in any way, on the grounds that they did not accept the justification for the investigation, or the way that it was being conducted.

By April 29, 28 replies to the 61 questionnaires sent out had been received. No replies were received in one discipline.

The Findings

Judgements on Journals

Some respondents were very cautious about naming journals, for a number of reasons. Among these were:

- suspicion about or antagonism to the ESRC, either in general or in terms of this investigation
- concern that their view was personal and should not be regarded as representative
- concern that a list of just three journals could not hope to cover the output of the discipline
- concern that UK journals did not belong among the higher rated journals for the discipline

The learned society contacts were the most cautious about providing a list. Many took the time to consult with others and thus ensured that their view was more than a personal one. Several did stress that their view was personal, and not intended to be representative of the organisation or the discipline. Contacting the RAE Chairs proved to be a success. They exhibited a clear grasp of the main journals in their discipline, a result no doubt of discussions prior to and during the deliberations of their panel.

Most of the concerns that were raised were addressed either by lending a sympathetic ear, giving further details or by accepting the points made. Impressively if inconveniently, every person contacted in one discipline flatly refused to co-operate, citing an agreement made within the discipline not to engage in any exercise involving comparative judgements about research or research outputs.

As a result, a list of three journals was compiled for thirteen disciplines, four for two disciplines, with two for the remaining discipline. An indication of the main international journal was also recorded, but none of the editors of these journals was approached. In every case, the final list was compiled using the views of at least two contacts. For most of the disciplines, there was a high level of agreement about the top three. However, large and methodologically diverse disciplines tended to produce long and varied lists, and a selection of just three was in some sense unsatisfactory. The coverage for portmanteau groupings such as F9 (Planning, Environmental Studies and Housing Studies) and F13 (Social Policy, Social Work and Health Studies) effectively meant choosing just one journal per sub-area.

Designing the Survey

The survey was based on an email questionnaire, prepared during the compilation of the lists. It was designed to elicit some direct answers about current research, then encourage reflection about the evolution of research in the discipline, after which there is a return to the main issues.

The questionnaire asks eight questions. First, it asks the editor to make a judgement about the percentage of cutting edge research he or she sees. Question 2 asks three direct questions, using the terminology employed in the specification, about:

- advances in methodology
- paradigm shifting work
- work that is exciting leading researchers

Another two questions ask about:

- developments of new sub-areas
- inter- or multi-disciplinary work

This question ends with an invitation to include ‘other’ cutting edge research.

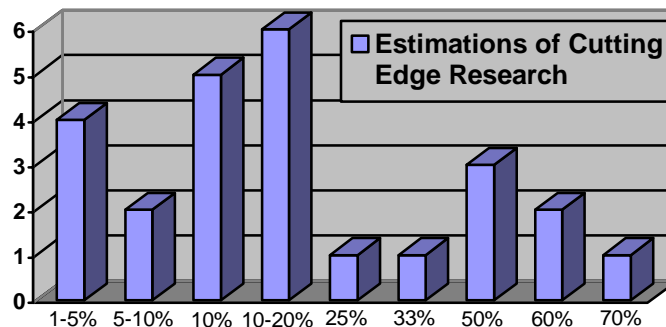
The next set of questions is preceded by a short statement pointing to three broad headings – *globalisation*, *gender* and *postmodernism* – under which much cutting edge research has been done in the past ten years or so. Respondents were then asked to specify how much and what research is still done under these headings. Returning to the major concerns of the investigation, the questionnaire then asks what new themes and approaches are emerging, and what are the exciting methodological innovations.

The questionnaire concludes with an invitation to list the characteristics of cutting edge research, and an opportunity to identify areas of cutting edge research that needs special encouragement. This chance to enter some special pleading is followed by an invitation to make any further comments.

Cutting Edge Findings

- 1) How much cutting edge research do editors see? Most respondents felt able to put a percentage figure to the amount of such research that crossed their desk. Just one editor ‘liked to think’ that all research published in the journal was cutting edge. Although this suggested that the range was between zero and 100, figure 1 shows that, for the bulk of editors and RAE Chairs, less than 25% of research output is cutting edge. However, about a third incline to the view that at least half is cutting edge.

Figure 1: Estimations of Cutting Edge Research, expressed as a percentage (n=25)



- 2) Question 2 asked about work that is, in one of five ways, ‘exciting and valuable’. Appendices 2a-2f provide the full responses. Below are digests of the responses, bringing together overlaps.

a) *Significant innovation in advanced methodologies*

All but one discipline reported advances in methodologies. There were overlaps of just two disciplines in relation to **longitudinal methods, performative practice and network approaches**. Table 1 digests individual instances of advances.

Table 1: Advances in Methodologies

▪ game theoretic modelling of institutions in history
▪ econometric methodology generally
▪ biographical studies (life histories etc) and narrative approaches (to social memory, identity etc).
▪ The use of computers in child language research both to analyse data and model development
▪ use of innovative objective criteria, cognitive mapping techniques, experimental methods, questionnaires and interview techniques; video related action methods
▪ new methods and models of urban systems
▪ automaticity; eye-tracking technology and measures of brain function, particularly when used in conjunction with more conventional measures based on habituation-novelty
▪ linguistic analysis; mitochondrial tracking; consensus theory (and related statistical techniques); ethnobiology.
▪ evidence based policy and practice; service user involvement; networks; Comparative Hypothesis Assessment and Quasi Triangulation as Process Knowledge Assessment Strategies; simulation model work
▪ detailed area analysis of crime and victimisation levels, sometimes involving the use of GSI
▪ eg ethno-mimesis as performative practice; visual methodology/anthropology; visual methodologies; longitudinal methods; focus group methodology
▪ multi-level modelling

b) Paradigm-shifting work

Some respondents expressed disquiet about the term ‘paradigm’, either on the basis that it has been abused, or that a paradigm shift is a rare event – ‘if this happens a couple of times a century it is a lot’.

There were multiple replies, covering five disciplines, that identified **identity** or **identities** (social, embodied, gender, disability, national and class). **Science and technology** figured in two disciplines. There were also some unspecified claims to theoretical advances. One reply noted that **strategy and organisation** was being touted as a new paradigm.

Table 2: Other Paradigm Shifting Work

▪ theorising long run development in a unified framework covering pre-transition, transition and post-transition phases
▪ cointegration
▪ cognitive and corpus-based linguistics challenging the Chomskyan tradition.
▪ international collaborative research
▪ the literary turn and postcolonial theory; work to transcend the ‘postmodernist critique of the discourse of development’; very innovative treatments of issues concerned with (a) cross-cultural arguments about the political economy of globalization/different cultural organizations of capitalism (b) ethnic and political violence (c) migration and transmigration (d) the politics and ethics of anthropological research (e) work on ‘indigenous’ peoples in relation to national identities and transnational politics (f) analyses of the social and political effects of economic downsizing and neoliberalism in ‘advanced industrial countries’.
▪ validity of Evidence-based Practice; work on new managerialism; global social policy; partnerships; discourse analysis; ways of analysing social care, in relation to gender - mostly theoretical in emphasis but with research potential
▪ various forays into gender studies, particularly regarding crime and various ‘masculinities’; gender is potentially a paradigm-shifting area within criminological research;
▪ work on relationship between nature and the social; Cancer Heroics; class identities; Female tourists sexual behaviour in the Caribbean; research which overcomes the society-nature divide, especially related to new technologies and to the environment

c) *development of a new sub-area*

Perhaps what is most striking about the responses to this question is not the proliferation of new sub-areas, but the relative lack of evidence of inter- or multi-disciplinarity, between natural science and social science or across the social sciences. The notable exception (if exception is the right term) is the identification from one editor of a journal outside political science of new sub-areas that have a strong base in the discipline of political science. These are **historical institutionalism**, and **European Union studies** (which has ‘rejuvenated the policy/political sciences’). The same respondent highlights the way that **Europeanisation** and **multi-level governance/governance** successfully bridge ‘various’ unspecified social science disciplines.

There is potential overlap in relation to new sub-areas reported in two quite separate disciplines, namely **children’s learning of languages other than English**, and **children’s knowledge of Europe/other cultures**.

Table 3: Other New Sub-Areas

▪ global economic history
▪ model selection; policy rules
▪ emotional geographies and sonorous geographies (‘soundscapes’)
▪ phonological development recently; pragmatic skills
▪ management learning
▪ Social identity research in organizations; Terror management
▪ Cognitive anthropology; Anth + social history (e.g. ethnohistory?); Material culture; the anthropology of science and technology; the anthropology of child labour
▪ cultural knowledge; critical criminology
▪ drugs and crime.
▪ sociology of the internet; sociology of the body; sociology of consumption

d) *creatively inter- or multi-disciplinary*

Opinions are divided between the minority who claim that most of the work in their discipline is ‘cross-disciplinary by its nature’ or ‘intrinsically multi-disciplinary’, and those that report that it is ‘relatively limited, but occasional’, or happens ‘very little’ or ‘not as much as I anticipated and not very creative’.

The ESRC earns praise for the ‘very good work’ that emerged from its Violence Research Programme. However, it is claimed that the **environment** offers the only example of ‘sustained interdisciplinary research’, although it is not mentioned by any other respondent. **Culture** and **cultural studies** is the only example of a research area that is mentioned by more than one respondent (3 in total).

Table 4: Other ID or MD Research

▪ culture and economic performance
▪ recent examples: between an economist and a social anthropologist; economist and an industrial relations specialist; and between econometricians and statisticians.
▪ renewed interest in work on nature/culture and the human/non-human divide.
▪ new mathematical methods to look at cities fuses social, physical and engineering sciences
▪ Evolutionary psychology; network society, sociolinguistics.
▪ child homicide; urban studies
▪ civil society, education and teachers’ views; psychoanalysis and sociology (social identity and emotion); socialising disease; countering essentialism in social science; the politics of cyber-culture; sociology of travel and mobility; violence and social life; changing nature of citizenship

e) *exciting to leading researchers*

This question elicited very general answers, with some very specific examples. The most enigmatic response thought that research was exciting ‘possibly when it involves work to understand’.

Table 5: ‘Exciting’ Research

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ interest shown in society and space by practitioners from outside our core discipline, eg, science studies and a visual artist working on issues of place-identity and attachment.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Our field is very split: one group is increasingly excited by potential of neurosciences to underpin their theories of innate syntactic capacities; the other group is excited by the possibility of marrying usage-based approaches in linguistics with a psychologically realistic approach to children’s learning of language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ International collaborators through the internet; collaboration of researchers from a range of basic disciplinary backgrounds
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ challenge received wisdom in their thematic area in one way or another and are ambitious in the academic targets they take on
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ new concepts or new applications eg applying social constructionism to environmental problems

f) *other research that is cutting edge*

This open question was answered by less than half of the respondents, but it did manage to produce an interesting collection of answers, and reference to both methodological developments and new areas of research. A strong pitch is made for **interactive social science**, on the basis that ‘it is definitely a most fascinating area which is worthy of major funding and which stands to benefit the social sciences community as a whole’. (The ESRC sponsored a two-day conference on interactive social science two years ago.)

Table 6: ‘Other’

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ empirical implementation of advanced methodology; exploiting richer data sets (e.g. panel data); non-parametric and semi-parametric methods; improving test statistics; exploring (and often resolving) puzzling empirical phenomena
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ application of ideas from one part of the discipline to another, in ways that are obvious once it is done, but not before, eg, innovative work using computational methods (especially involving corpora) in historical linguistics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ a major reflexive debate concerning the nature and purpose of management research (and social research more generally);
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Research on development of executive functions, which has the potential to lead to integration between topics.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ addressing contemporary concerns such as biotechnology or the limits of fashionable concepts such as “civil society”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ social movement research which looks at other European societies using empirical data eg the centri-social in Milan

Question 3 was preceded by the suggestion that cutting edge research in the recent past could be placed under three headings – *globalisation*, *gender*, and *postmodernism*. Respondents were asked to give an indication of how much research they saw under these headings. This section was intended to encourage reflection and elicit responses about current research, and the way that it is evolving. Figures 2, 3 and 4 show the responses.

Figure 2: Estimations of 'Globalisation' Research (n=11)

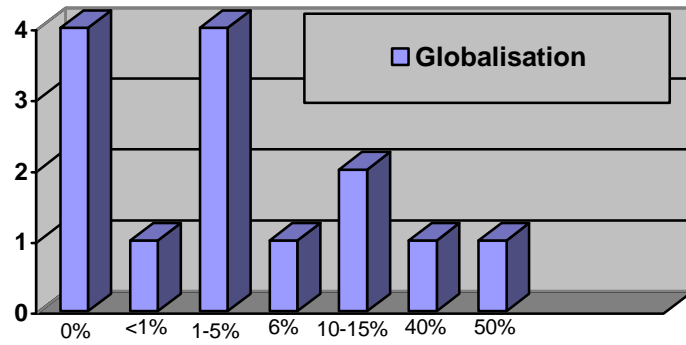


Figure 3: Estimations of 'Gender' Research (n=11)

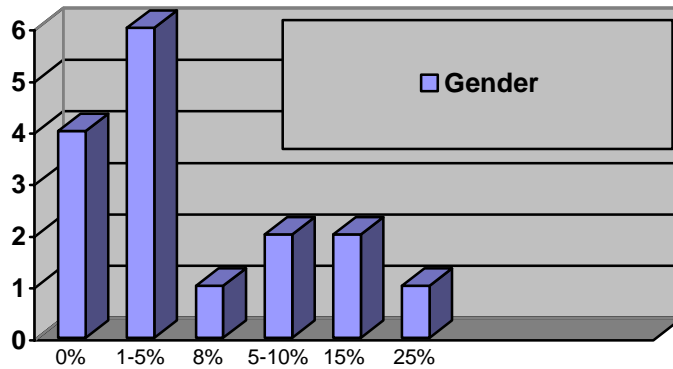
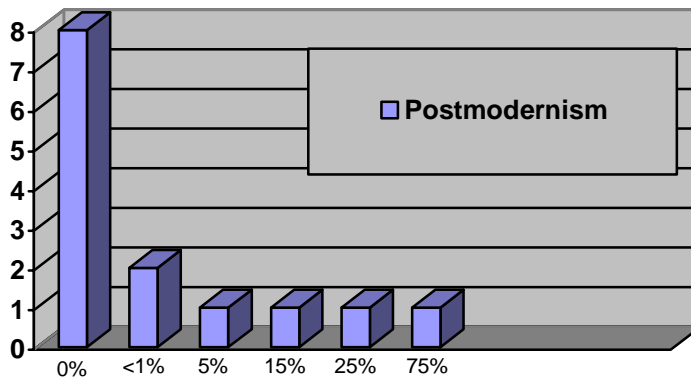


Figure 4: Estimations of 'Postmodernism' Research (n=14)



When these three questions are viewed together, the responses on globalisation and gender reveal considerable variation across the disciplines. In some areas, its salience as a feature of cutting edge research is declining, for others it is mainstream or central to the best work, while for a third set, work employing these approaches is only just beginning to emerge. One respondent was very dismissive of both globalisation and postmodernism as categories of any contemporary significance, and in a large minority of cases respondents provided commentary rather than a percentage figure.

Globalisation

Overlaps of interest did not figure highly under globalisation. Two disciplines shared an interest in the connection between the global and the local, and two mentioned globalisation in relation to children and other languages and cultures. As one would expect, cross-cultural and comparative methodologies are also mentioned, and there is mention of centres of excellence for globalisation studies. Tables 7 and 8 present comments on globalisation and research, and views about areas, people and places associated with cutting edge research. See table 4a in the appendix for all the responses.

Table 7: Comments on Globalisation and Cutting Edge Research

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A great deal of rhetoric has been written about this topic - the cutting edge pieces highlight why globalization strategies are problematic, drawing on a range of psychological and sociological works in order to derive testable hypotheses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ a focus on ways in which local and global processes articulate, and debates about whether there are any positive possibilities in contemporary processes of capitalist globalization - cutting-edge analysis does not start off from the perspectives of the supposed 'centres' of the global order
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ very few studies of globalisation per se – recent work on transnational connections has, in a sense, taken off from where the globalisation debate ended
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Research which does really detailed analyses of how local places are being made and remade through globalisation, and how the local becomes global

Table 8: Globalisation and Cutting Edge Research: Areas, People and Places

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ comparison of current globalisation with earlier episodes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ sustainability of fiscal policy in the G7; intertemporal analysis of debt and deficit ceilings; post-war growth, productivity convergence and reconstruction; mean reversion of interest rates in the eurocurrency market; cross-country panels, foreign direct investment and growth in developing countries; Korean financial crisis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Research which does really detailed analyses of how local places are being made and remade through globalisation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Developing and refining psychological and human resource measures across cultures; Cross-cultural and comparative HRM studies; process-based case study research; joint venture research
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ forms of economic organization that have been seen as alternatives to current patterns of neoliberal development/capitalist globalization
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the United Nations and international law in Christian right thought; Gender and globalisation; The political economy of knowledge industries
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ several innovative studies of the inter-relationships between 'local/global', 'against globalisation from above' and 'after globalisation'.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Attention to globalisation could have an important impact on drug supply/drugs as commodities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Globalisation has been of some concern in linguistics in connection with the loss of languages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Children's knowledge of Europe/other cultures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ an increasing realisation that most children in the world grow up speaking more than one language and in situations often far removed from those of the middle-class children in technological societies who have been the main focus of study up to now
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ work at Kent and Bath, the work of Weiss, Hardt and Negri; and Colin Hay et al at Birmingham

Gender

Of the 11 responses, only two reported that there was 'relatively little' or just 'some' gender research. Six indicated that gender was still a major concern. Specific responses on gender showed a great deal more overlap and agreement about areas of cutting edge research.

Prominent among these were:

- **masculinities, femininities or gendered subjectivities** mentioned by four disciplines
- **embodiment and performance/performativity**, mentioned by three disciplines

- **economic issues, such as income, wages, occupation structures, pay and promotion discrimination, pensions, bias in competency identification** mentioned by four disciplines
- **studies of non-western women, global economic restructuring and post-colonial studies** appeared in three responses

Table 9: Comments on Gender and Cutting Edge Research

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ continues to excite a great deal of attention - exciting new work about gendered subjectivities in relation to processes of global economic restructuring and the effects of local cultural systems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ still a great deal here going in new directions as well as more established ones eg masculinity, embodiment and nightclub bouncers, women and homelessness, masculinity and public sector management, class/*race*/gender and higher education choice; women, risk and pensions; women and devolution; the gendering of the cooker/microwave; Health studies and gender from a science studies perspective; Gender and ethnicity/post colonial studies; Gender and new methods; Gender and alternative sexualities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Relatively little -- but some looking at issues of privilege and power(e.g., in organizational settings)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ work at Southampton in collaboration with others; LeedsSchool and new ESRC initiative; hegemonic masculinity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Debate has been productive and in our journal in particular has been well represented especially in the work of people like Barbara Czaniawska and Amanda Sinclair. – and many others.

Postmodernism

In general, postmodernism gets short shrift from the majority of respondents; indeed, there were responses in only 10 disciplines. However, there is an evident research agenda in some disciplines, and evidence of differences of opinion within disciplines. Most striking is the claim that ‘a lot of the new mathematics of the social sciences is postmodern’ (a view that may be of interest to the Postgraduate Training Board).

Table 10: Postmodernism

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ an influence rather than a mainstream activity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ post-modernism has almost disappeared except for occasional papers on specific authors (eg Baudrillard); rising interest in post-colonial studies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Debates have been productive and well represented especially the work of people like Stewart Clegg and Steve Fox – and many others.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ a lot of the new mathematics of the social sciences is postmodern – complexity theory, fractals, chaos nonlinear dynamics, science of networks and so on
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Getting the culture and power back into postmodernist ideas is perhaps the most important preoccupation; critiques of: Thomas Pavel; Ian Hacking; Noam Chomsky
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ trust and confidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the nature of postmodernism and mass media; Memory and social experience

Question 5 requests feedback on new themes and approaches. This produced a good set of responses. **Embodiment** and **performance** were mentioned by two disciplines, and there were references to **identity, nature, science** and **technology/biotechnology** in three. The linked themes of **governance, governmentality, and globalisation** crop up in four disciplines. A case is made for **sustainable education**, and there is passionate advocacy for a programme on **environmental sustainability**. ‘It is an interdisciplinary problem, but the ESRC does not even have a programme on sustainability!’

New approaches included:

- **modelling: formalisation, systems, macroeconomic**
- **complexity**

- **methodological reflexivity**
- **long-run history**
- **greater attention to history/context**

Table 11: New Themes and Approaches
▪ Performance, nonrepresentational work, new notions of materiality, emotions and affect, as seen through topics like nature, technology, virtue
▪ Memory, social memory, identity, hybridity, multi-linear modernity, advocacy/NGO/development studies, new religions, citizenship; revisiting ethical issues and the practice of a more ‘engaged’ anthropology; systems of ‘global governmentality’; new debate around Hardt and Negri’s <i>Empire</i> ; legal and property systems; institutional frameworks where globalization is problematic
▪ National identities; Sociology of cyber space (ie not cultural studies but social relations); Complexity theory and the social sciences; New economy research and theorising; some research especially overlaps with cultural sociology and critical theory; genetics and bio-technology.
▪ Participatory/ emancipatory practice; social work and the meaning of welfare in contemporary Britain; regulation and the politics of enforcement; ethical research practice; managerialism; globalisation; gender
▪ narrative/ memory, emotional geographies, soundscapes and actor-network theory; new studies of sexuality and space (including gay and lesbian studies and studies of heterosexualities).
▪ A) a concern for implementation in place of theorizing; B) larger-scale studies than before; C) Conversely, very fine-grained studies, which reveal regularities previously only suspected
▪ Changing employment contracts, new models of work; greater attention to historical context/roots; Methodological reflexivity; critically orientated management research; changing dynamics to employee behaviour across the generations; interplay between cognitions and the emotions
▪ Sustainable development that meets social, economic and environmental goals requires new patterns of governance (‘joined up’); new policy tools; fresh or re-fashioned decision support mechanisms such as cost benefit analysis; new ideas about modelling social systems from the bottom up
▪ corruption, especially in the context of institutional design; work at the interface of international relations and democratisation; international justice regimes (including human rights); applied democratic theory
▪ sustainable education
Long run global economic history (i.e. cutting across traditional boundaries between medieval, early modern and modern economic history and single-country studies)
▪ Formalization of modelling; non-linear systems and complexity; merging monetary and fiscal approaches to applied macroeconomic modelling

Question 6 asks for information on exciting methodological innovations. Common interests emerge in relation to **integrating methodologies**, and in **developing the internet as a research tool**. The next two tables separate, as far as is possible, qualitative and quantitative innovations.

Table 13: Qualitative Methods
▪ performance, some forms of deliberative work, work on senses other than vision, embodied ethics, use of IT
▪ studies of practice/performance, including papers taking an actor-centred or network approach. Other new methods include biographical studies (life histories etc) and narrative approaches (to social memory, identity etc).
Application of more sophisticated theory in practical applications, for instance in clinical linguistics.
▪ Innovative use of computational techniques
▪ development of covert (e.g., sub-conscious) measures of particular constructs
▪ Methodological innovations in cognitive anthropology and evolutionary psychology, historical ecology
▪ Strategies and methods of participatory research; qualitative work with vulnerable or new groups
▪ Visual and performance oriented methodologies; Integrating qualitative, quantitative and visual methods; Development of internet as research tool; Global datasets

Table 12: Quantitative Methods

▪ genetic strings, machine vision, some kinds of data mining
▪ use of economic models where history matters (e.g. multiple equilibrium; path dependence; game theoretic models of institutions)
▪ automated modelling; understanding of economic forecasting
▪ those that integrate natural and social sciences
▪ new ways of treating the temporal dynamics of spatial and urban systems

Question 7 probes respondents for their view of the characteristics of cutting edge research. This question elicited significant observations about the notion of cutting edge research:

- *usually it is developed by long standing and eminent academics in the field who are always up to date and at the frontier or by newcomers often from fields like physics*
- *It is almost always done by established teams of researchers (often working in the same institution)*
- *It's an overused term, but I take it to mean important. Research can be important for many different reasons, and it often only becomes clear what the important research was many years after it was done.*

There were excellent descriptions of cutting edge research, notable for their clarity as well as variation across the different types of discipline. Compare the following, sharp accounts:

- *Innovative; technically advanced; computationally intensive; empirically relevant; potentially of policy importance*
- *Mould breaking; insightful; bold!*

While the first has the virtues of clarity and specificity, the second explains why cutting edge research might also be exciting.

Table 12: Characteristics of Cutting Edge Research

▪ Main one is that it is disliked by large numbers of people
▪ theoretically driven, inter-disciplinary and/or novel in its extension of ideas from one domain to another.
▪ respect for the data, a deep awareness of theory for theory; independent thinking rather than paradigm cranking; an ability to integrate findings across previously disparate disciplines
▪ work which brings together new combinations
▪ Cross-disciplinary, interactive social science
▪ Multiple sources of data (triangulation); empirical tests linked to clear theoretical issues (good tests of a null hypothesis); synthesis of different literatures to produce an additional insight; immediate relevance to practitioner audience
▪ barrier breaking
▪ challenges to conventional wisdom and conceptual ethnocentrism on the part of other social sciences
▪ New ways of thinking; over turning previous concepts or traditions; radical methodology
▪ awareness of key social changes; attempts to explain these; lateral thinking; good use of evidence linking to theoretical development

Question 8 asks respondents to identify areas of cutting edge research that need special encouragement. This question also produced the largest and most interesting set of quite detailed responses of all the questions asked. There was support for blue skies research from more than one discipline, while there were claims that individual disciplines (social

psychology and social work) as a whole were badly under-funded. Included was a critical comment on the state of approach of the RPB.

- *There is a general need to support 'blue skies' research rather than work that is driven by the immediate needs of end-users. This is hard to stimulate by specific 'programmes' and might be better encouraged through a reduction in the proportion of Research Council budgets that are driven by the research priorities board, user concerns, policy relevance etc etc.*

Beyond these few remarks, the responses for this question are not easily digestible. These responses are listed in the table below.

Table 13: Cutting Edge Research Needing Encouragement	
▪	Work at the boundaries between the social sciences, humanities and sciences
▪	Long run economic development; understanding the divergence between the rich world and underdeveloped countries
▪	synthesis of inputs from many traditionally separate sub-disciplines
▪	Formalization of modelling; non-linear systems and complexity; merging monetary and fiscal approaches to applied macroeconomic modelling; automated modelling; understanding of economic forecasting because they are technically demanding (skilled labour intensive); need to be driven by analytic solutions; are computationally demanding (often needing software development); and involve data collection and preparation.
▪	phonetics and in the description of foreign languages need special encouragement; alternative approaches to formal syntactic analyses are needed
▪	Developments in strategy and organisation need special encouragement to develop a critical mass of exemplary work. Also because they are inter/multi/cross-disciplinary there is a need to ensure funding mechanisms that transcend supporting sub-fields
▪	Intelligent and selective understanding of existing literatures, and not just, or even primarily recent literature; capacity to identify a clear and singular line of argument; often, a combination of empirical and theoretical argument/material rather than one of the other.
▪	Longitudinal case study research or longitudinal psychological outcome research (eg. Work on changes in trust and psychological contract) and cause-mapping research. Need encouragement because of the qualitative insights that they give or the refutation to phenomena shown (incorrectly) through cross-sectional survey work.
▪	much more work on cutting edge positivist methods in the social sciences.
▪	Research that investigates developmental processes directly. This is important because very little current work truly does this, largely because the work is difficult to do and takes a long time to do, involving a combination of longitudinal and cross sectional methods.
▪	Social psychology is currently burgeoning (partly as a result of successful recruitment from overseas). There are a number of key research groups that all justify high levels of financial support (e.g., at Kent, Cardiff, Cambridge, Southampton, Dundee/St Andrews, Exeter).
▪	Anthropological research overseas is of paramount importance to the ability of anthropology to fulfil its role as a critical theoretical discipline drawing its insights from cross-cultural comparison.;given the centrality of globalization as a process, there is a real need to focus more resources on understanding what is happening elsewhere and why in its local context
▪	As social work is such a badly funded, low status and low priority area of social scientific endeavour as far as 'social science funding agencies' are concerned, there are few areas of research activity that do not require encouragement. As a profession, social work is currently caught up in the positivist/ instrumentalist drive towards a certain form of 'evidence-based' practice. It would be nice to find some encouragement of more reflective, theoretical research that did not have to contribute something to some Whitehall Minister's latest league table
▪	better training in quantitative techniques would be welcome addition.
▪	In social policy work today there is a particular need to encourage comparative work.. This has been poorly supported in the UK yet is crucial to explore the key intellectual questions
▪	Since many of the key issues on the policy delivery agenda concern the factors that affect implementation there is a need for more systematic work on this topic

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ service user involvement takes time and patience; comparative studies take time, need language skills, need travel costs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ British criminology does not have sufficient research capacity, perhaps particularly in the use of sophisticated statistical techniques; British criminological research is also under-developed in terms of the use of ethnographic methods
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A lot of leading edge research is found in the work of PhD students; we try to encourage new researchers to submit work but ESRC tends to do nothing with recently completed theses submitted by those holding its studentships. Completed funded research (not just that funded by ESRC) often has potential to lead in new directions but may not be visible in early publications because of pressure to focus on what was anticipated at the outset in research objectives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The development of large datasets that are often hard to collect and which necessitate long term funding before publications emerge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The development of new areas of theory where it is difficult to get funding for blue skies thinking

Finally, respondents were given the opportunity to make any other comments. Some felt that this was not an easy survey to complete, mainly because the questions themselves are quite challenging. It did draw out some remarks about research funding.

- *Maintaining and enhancing a cosmopolitan vision of UK research funding and supporting research on ways of addressing the ethical and political implications of research in a changing world seems to me to be in the interests of both the UK scientific community internationally and the interests of the kinds of theoretical and analytical innovations that would support better policies.*
- *Innovation at the 'cutting edge' is hard to define and even harder to encourage through specific initiatives. In general, the pressure on academics to achieve externally defined goals (whether driven by the RAE, teaching quality reviews, or funding agencies' changing agendas) is likely to discourage innovation, despite the avowed emphasis on improving 'quality'*
- *I think that the areas of cutting edge research that were identified previously were very much wide of the mark ... and unduly singled out specific fields. In fact I think the whole idea of targeted research is wrong. My strategy would simply be to seek out the best research teams (of which there are plenty) and fund what they are doing.*

The strategy of seeking out the best research teams deserves some consideration, although it is hard to see how in practice the problems encountered in this review would be dealt with. It may involve greater difficulties, especially in specifying what is 'best' and then identifying the 'best' research teams.

Observations and Suggestions

The data gathered in this review confirms two key things. First, the RPB's view of 'cutting edge' research has been largely confirmed. Only one respondent thought that the notion embodied a view of the advancement of knowledge that was unsuitable for the social sciences. The responses showed that the term cutting edge has force, and can be applied creatively across and within disciplines. Second, there is a wealth and variety of cutting edge research in the social sciences. That said, the information gathered and digested, where possible, in this report, is not easy to interpret in the form provided, let alone be used to produce a synaptic overview. It is reasonable to assume, however, that it will provide a set of perspectives and a series of pointers not available from other sources and forms of data.

This review is the product of a wide range of individuals across many disciplines and sub-areas. However, it should be noted that in only three out of 28 cases were the replies supplied by women (2 were signed off by a woman and a man). The overwhelming predominance of men suggests that there may be a case for seeking out a set of views from a predominantly female group of academic gatekeepers and specialists.

The time constraint has had a major impact on the review. Should the exercise be undertaken in the future, a longer time frame need have no impact on the cost of the research. It would, however, ensure that the amount and quality of the information gathered would be improved, and would permit greater time for reflective analysis of the data.

The final report will be sent to the respondents. Ideally, the investigation would be continued to increase the number of replies and improve the coverage of more of the disciplines. Follow up interviews would enable answers to be clarified, to elicit more focused or more general information as required, and to garner opinion about themes and issues that arose from other respondents. Additional questions might, for example:

- ask each editor to name two other highly-rated UK outlets for researchers in their areas
- ask which journals in general publish the most cutting edge (rather than the 'best') research
- ask more about how to encourage cutting edge research
- probe in areas that the RPB, having read the report, would find useful

Finally, I would like to express thanks for the time and efforts of those who did take the trouble to provide lists of journals, other contacts, and responses to a challenging questionnaire. Thanks also to Elise Graves, whose persistence, thoroughness and patience was crucial, and to Michael Bright of the ESRC.

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