

# The Coming Crisis? Some Questions for the Future of Empirical Sociology in the UK

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*Working in commercial research, it was interesting to note that many researchers had little grounding in academic social research methods or social theory. Organizations dealing with research often took for granted that to get at 'the truth' involved either simply 'talking to people' and looking at an aggregation of opinions, or carrying out a mix of 'pre' and 'post' (usually online) surveys and 'ad-hoc' pieces which privilege Likert scales as the primary tool of 'measurement'.*

*As Mike Savage and Roger Burrows (2007) note, such industries have challenged the public legitimacy of empirical sociological inquiry. Such a challenge arguably hinges on political rhetoric around demonstrable 'impact' and 'maximising efficiency'. However a lack of attention to research design poses significant problems for the authority that these industries lay claim to. Noting sociology's ethical value and personal experience of commercial, 'client led' research, this paper seeks to outline a case for the continued importance of rigorous, ethical social research in contemporary society and against narrow conceptions of impact.*

*Keywords: Impact, Ethical research, 'Coming Crisis', Mixed methods, Empirical Sociology.*

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## **Introduction**

The current drive toward measurement and 'impact assessment' (IA) seems increasingly concerned with 'instrumental' research, based on commercial sector models. Because much sociological research is simply not reducible to quantifiable metrics of impact and causality, a move toward measuring 'impact' seeks to marginalise the discipline's ethical value and the quality of research, as well as fur-

ther damaging perceptions of sociology as 'useless'. Moves toward aping commercial sector research places more emphasis on speed and efficiency at the expense of considering how research comes to be used. This article outlines some key issues for consideration in securing a future of empirical sociology in the UK.

This article makes the case that there are three general trends which have led to the public devaluation of

sociological research. Firstly, sociology's relationship to institutional politics, which stands at odds with discursive emphasis on 'individuality' and New Labour's rhetoric around 'policy based evidence'. Secondly, it explains how methodological questions and challenges within the discipline, related to epistemological shifts, have led to a so-called 'crisis' (Savage and Burrows 2007). Thirdly, it points to the challenge from the private sector dependent on ideas around demonstrable 'impact'.

Zygmunt Bauman's (2000b) critique is then applied to illustrate the dangers of reducing empirical sociological research to what Michael Burawoy (2005) refers to as 'policy sociology', before detailing some practical, methodological considerations. These include increased use of online research and a broader engagement with 'mixed methods', as well as fundamental ethical questions around the uses of research. The contribution that sociological research still has to make cannot be made reducible simply to pre-specified 'outcomes' and this piece aims to demonstrate how client-led initiatives may undermine the initial spirit of the 'sociological imagination' (Wright Mills 1959).

### **The Political Problem of Sociology**

In the midst of last year's unrest in London, Boris Johnson tellingly declared that "it is time that people who are engaged in looting and violence stopped hearing economic

and social justification for what happened" (Independent.co.uk 2011); these justifications (rather than explanations) give people excuses for bad behaviour. His accusation focused on the fact that sociologists were publicly explaining the violence with reference to the material and social inequalities engendered by a neoliberal system of governance. As Burawoy (2005, 6) has argued, sociology as a discipline is perceived to have moved 'to the left' and Johnson's comments seem to support this perception; sociology is dangerous for individuals because it provides an excuse for, if not an impetus toward, accepting that social location shapes behaviour.

This is sociology's fundamental insight, that it is the societies in which we live which give rise to belief in the importance and illusion of individualism as the perception of unrestrained thought and action independent of others (Wright Mills 1959; Elias 1991; 1994) The idea of being an individual is seemingly undone by social influence, because it suggests that we alone are not responsible for our circumstances. As C. Wright Mills (1959) succinctly notes in his division of 'issues and problems':

When in a city of 100,000, only one man [sic] is unemployed, that is his personal trouble...but when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue and we may not hope to find its solution

within the range of opportunities of one individual (Wright Mills 1959, 9).

Contemporary neoliberal rhetoric advocates precisely the opposite; the paramount importance of taking 'individual responsibility', tying 'freedom' to the perpetual 'freedoms' of market choice (Bauman 2000a; Harvey 2005; Davis 2008a; Bauman 2011).

Sociology, therefore, represents a particularly difficult case for contemporary politicians. On the one hand, it assumes a historically privileged authority to speak about societies (whom politicians allegedly serve) and on the other, it is frequently critical of the impact that governments have on those societies. It is unsurprising then that politicians are increasingly attempting to define the agenda of what academic sociologists should be studying; evident last year in the allocation of sizeable chunks of Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funding into investigating the 'Big Society' (Boffey 2011). This disregard for the 'Haldane principle'<sup>1</sup>, which in this country has never been truly autonomous from interest-led funding (Shore 2010, 22), indicates empirical sociology's common use as a footnote in a media appearance, political spin or commons debate; to back up what politicians wanted to say, rather than to question the assumptions behind what they are saying.

Political mobilisation against the 'sociological imagination' certainly intensified during the Thatcher years in the UK, manifest in concerted attempts to undermine the public role of the social sciences. For example the Social Science Research Council, initially established in 1965 to provide government support for a semi-autonomous social sciences (Bulmer, Coates and Dominian 2007, 91), was threatened with closure (Cornish and Clarke 1987, 191). It was eventually kept open but funding subsidies were severely cut and its namesake changed to the Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC) in 1982. No doubt Thatcher's public denunciation of society as fictional<sup>2</sup> also did the discipline a good deal of harm and whilst she subsequently argued that the abridged version of her full quote 'there is no such thing as society' was a deliberate distortion of her intentions (Thatcher 1993, 626), as Gerald R. Steele (2009) notes, this was something sociologists were all too happy to perpetuate. He has a point; a lazy demonization of Thatcher on the grounds of one 'out of context' sound-bite is not nearly enough.

Not that contempt for sociology is necessarily the preserve of Conservative or the current Coalition government (who also slashed ESRC funding by just under thirty percent last year). Despite common perceptions, sociology is not de facto 'left wing' (Holmwood 2007,

53) any more than it is completely ignored by policy makers, as the legacy of Parsonian functionalism in the U.S. attests (Bauman 2000b). Whilst Anthony Giddens' sociologically grounded, 'Third Way'<sup>3</sup> (see Giddens 2000) famously provided the rationale for New Labour's populist shift from 'left to centre left right' (McRobbie 2000), sociological work is increasingly considered of use only if it spells out, in direct 'actionable' terms, exactly what government policy should do.

To this end, as Katherine Smith (2011) notes, David Blunkett's particular disdain for sociological research led him to ask:

Can the social science community help to improve government or is it destined to be largely irrelevant to the real debates that affect people's life chances? [...] often in practice we have felt frustrated by a tendency for research either to address issues other than those directly relevant to the political and policy debate or, in a seemingly perverse way, to set out to collect evidence that will prove a policy wrong rather than genuinely seeking to evaluate or interpret its impact (Blunkett 2000).

New Labour's particular problem with sociology hinged on the rhetoric of 'policy-based evidence'. As Alan Finlayson remarks, according to 'Third Way theory', 'policy is legitimated not by ethical principles, but the truth of certain social facts'

(Finlayson 1999, 271); sociological research however is not often amenable to easy, direct, policy implications (Bulmer, Coates and Dominian 2007; Monaghan 2008a; 2008b) or providing 'facts'. Therefore sociological research came to be challenged not only on the grounds that it was antagonistic toward governmental policy, but also difficult to implement.

Conversely, policy-based-evidence meant that it was too easy to construct a bricolage of multiple pieces of 'evidence' (Dwyer and Ellison 2009; Monaghan 2011), which may be mutually incompatible in many ways, to push a singular policy. Refraining from a fuller discussion around the problems of loaded terms such as objective 'social' or 'natural' scientific research (Papineau 1979; Fay 1984; Harding 1986; Longino 1987; Kemp and Holmwood 2003; Tebes 2005), it should be noted that the cautionary conclusions of empirical sociology are often deliberate attempts to stress the impossibility of providing singular, definitive 'answers'. Societies as dynamic processes are infinitely more complex than 'cause and effect' models that underwrite the assumptions of the 'natural' sciences (Holmwood 2001). Thus empirical sociology often requires appropriately complex interpretations.

As a concept, the 'Third Way' was adopted, not because it was particularly radical, but because it reflected a particular ideological stance which

mirrored that of New Labour's leaders (themselves a by-product of discourses which emphasised the free market and the abject failure of Keynesianism), whilst appearing to transgress old class divisions. It heralded the death of both left and right yet what this kind of rhetoric actually did was to further entrench inequalities in both material and cultural terms (Harvey 2005), operating itself as an ideological driving force; what others have termed 'post-political' (Žižek 2000; 2005).

### **The Problem with Sociological Objectivity**

The knowledge generated through sociological research also occupies a liminal space between 'proper science' and 'arty subjects'. Crucially, an ideological separation of art and science as polar opposites (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997 [1947], 18), rests on the perception of the extent to which the type of knowledge generated may be seen as 'objective'. 'Objective' knowledge, supposedly achieved through 'rational', detached experimentation, often carries greater political freight over 'subjective' types of knowledge, achieved through individual involvement, feelings, thoughts and interpretation. As Victor J. Seidler (1994, 24) notes, the devaluation of 'subjective' knowledge, rests on a particularly gendered conception of knowledge as distorted through embodied experience (see also Bartky 1990; Shildrick 1997).

Sociology's Comptean legacy of 'social physics', and later development through Durkheimian positivism (Durkheim 1970 [1897]) have often coloured attempts to make it more like the 'natural' sciences (Fay and Moon 1977). Such appeals are made on the grounds that in remaining 'objective', sociological research becomes 'more valid' and therefore 'more legitimate'. What is important to note here is that sociology is often perceived as subjective interpretation, precisely because it is a discipline where the researcher or student is inseparable from the 'object' of study; it is a discipline *sui generis* (Kilminster 1998).

With this in mind, much of sociology's political devaluation can also be explained by shifts in methodological epistemologies. This partially explains a decentring of sociological authority as the discipline has moved toward more 'post-structuralist' methods of 'subjective interpretation'. What the 'phenomenological turn' (Husserl 1967) highlighted was that what constitutes 'A' singular population can and should be contested. As Clark E. Moustakas (1994) notes, "Husserl's phenomenology...emphasises subjectivity and discovery of the essences of experience...Husserl's approach is called 'phenomenology' because it utilises only the data available to the consciousness – the appearance of objects" (Moustakas 1994, 45, original italics).

It depends then on how the per-

ception is shaped by social experience; if sociological research reveals truths, whose truths are they? How do respondents understand questions compared to those who write them? What are the ethical implications of speaking for people that researchers have never spoken to? Such questions facilitated broader methodological shifts, leading to greater use of qualitative methodologies and recognising the position of the researcher in social research. However the popular equation of interpretivist methods of knowing, which often explicitly involve direct, 'unobjective' discussion with those engaged in society, with subjective and therefore 'partial' truths, has rendered sociology, in popular and political consciousness at least, less comparable to the 'natural sciences' and therefore less valid.

The impact of feminist critiques of positivism (see Oakley 1981a;1981b; Longino 1987; Bartky 1990; Harding 1996; Oakley 1998) has also shaped sociological empiricism. The influence of feminist theories and methodologies exposed both the claims to universality that sociology had made (universal assumptions didn't speak for women) and also built on criticisms that 'objective' accounts of experience were themselves shaped by 'malestream' agendas (Hearn 2004, 49). In light of this, sociologists have themselves been keen to caveat the partiality of claims that can be derived from 'populations', thus steer-

ing clear of accusations of class, age and gender bias and ethno- and hetero-centricity. This is, again, a particular problem for policy makers who demand easy, direct solutions to seemingly universal problems.

At both national and supranational levels, the problems of making claims to 'full' representation have therefore been exposed as more and more difficult, thus narrowing the focus of some sociological projects for justifiably pragmatic reasons. Alongside this, recognising the researcher's own biases and incorporating reflexivity into the process of enquiry (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) refutes any claim to scientific 'objectivity'. Empirical sociological research then is a double bind; it cannot be removed from its object of enquiry but conversely, if it gets too close then it loses claims to providing evidence and representation rather than opinion. However sociological researchers cannot speak for interstices of every single variable in complex societies nor can sociological enquiry, in good conscience, make generalised claims without reflecting on the limitations of its scope.

### **The Coming Crisis to Empirical Sociology**

There is a common public perception then that if data generated by qualitative methodologies are less 'scientifically objective' they are therefore less valid. This perhaps strengthens the case for develop-

ing quantitative methodologies in the social sciences in order to provide a more rigorous comprehensive analysis of multiple, complex trends where some qualitative research designs are lacking (see Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2005; Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007). However there are particular problems surrounding quantitative research which have also led to the erosion of sociological authority. On this point, as Savage and Burrows (2007) note:

The sample survey, it is claimed, and so we tell our students, allows us to generalize and predict through revealing enduring regularities by the use of inferential statistics...[however] one difficulty is that in an intensely researched environment, response rates have been steadily falling, and it is proving more difficult to obtain response rates of 80 per cent or more, which were once thought normal. People no longer treat it as an honour to be asked their opinion, but instead see it as a nuisance, or even an intrusion (Savage and Burrows 2007, 889).

Key to the positivist method, commonly linked to Emile Durkheim's positivist sensibilities in *Suicide* (1970 [1897]), was access to large numbers of those who represent 'a population'. The equation of 'large robust datasets' with statistically sound 'scientific', and thus 'better' conclusions, or what Stephen

Gorard calls the 'numbers are fab' villain (Gorard 2004, 7), still has discursively popular undertones, both within and outside sociology. This is a hangover no doubt of positivism as the Enlightenment method of generation of 'facts', par excellence (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997 [1947]).

In addition to steadily falling survey completion rates amongst populations (Cook, Heath and Thompson 2000, 823), the internet now theoretically provides the ability for anyone to conduct 'social research' regardless of the assumptions that social research courses have taught us to be aware of. The growth in survey sites and free survey software enables greater ease of data collection, potentially democratising the types of knowledge production that sociology itself has invested in. This carries a potential cost however because as Couper (2005) argues, 'the internet gives the lone researcher the power to survey large numbers of potential respondents cheaply and quickly. However, in doing so, the profession may be losing control over the quality of the work being done' (Couper 2005, 494).

Savage and Burrows (2007) also point out that the unequivocal access to transactional data, which the internet affords large companies who 'routinely collect' this information (Amazon, eBay, iTunes to name a few), presents empirical sociology with a problem; can sociologists make claims to specialist knowl-

edge, when non-academic entities actually have greater access to 'accurate' data on demographic profiles, spending habits, tastes and behaviour? With regards to inductive method (see Blaikie 2010, 84), companies such as Amazon, eBay, Facebook and Twitter are far more able to identify underlying trends (and develop successful marketing strategies from these trends) than academic surveys, in order to infer not just what people are buying, but why they are buying in certain ways. These companies are able to demonstrate direct singular outcomes by multiple demographic factors.

This is Weber's critical distinction of sociology's core aims. Typically, the main limitation of most forms of quantitative research has arguably been its stress on the 'what' (erklären) over the 'why' (verstehen). Using sophisticated data mining techniques in order to map trends and target advertising, companies like Facebook almost fully collapse a fiercely retained, yet occasionally arbitrary (Howe 1988; Blaikie 2010) distinction, between the 'qualitative' and the 'quantitative'. In many ways Facebook's almost unparalleled access to personal information makes it a much more effective tool for understanding the attitudes and motivations of different groups than many national and transnational surveys. Given that status updates are commonly taken as indicative of 'authentic' or 'honest' attitudes, an aggregation of Facebook 'rants'

represent a considerable threat to carefully constructed sociological surveys designed to elicit precisely these types of response.

Of course what constitutes an 'authentic' or 'honest' thought firstly requires greater interrogation of the researcher's philosophical dispositions (Mason 1996). That companies such as Facebook cannot set directly the terms of research, and have limited application when it comes to exploring anything beyond purchasing habits, still guarantees a special place for the 'sociological imagination' – especially with regards to critical, social research. Nevertheless, what Savage and Burrows demonstrate is that perception around the usefulness of empirical sociology has shifted significantly. The staples of positivist method especially have been largely rejected by sociology and colonised by commercial research.

### **Impact and Accountability**

The 'coming crisis' to 'academic' sociology rests on perceptions of, and political rhetoric around sociology's 'use value'. Increasingly, government funded research with the intention of feeding directly into public policy has been put out to tender to private research agencies and university departments as if they are the same, whilst simultaneously politicians stress the 'accountability' of universities for the type of research they conduct (Willettts 2011). As outlined above, looking to commercial



organisations as well as universities may be justified by the notion that increasingly sophisticated techniques of sociological analysis are not the preserve of sociology departments. The question then is to whom sociological research is made accountable.

The cornerstone of what is labelled academic 'accountability' is the idea of measuring 'impact', encouraging a visible quantification of costs over benefits. Integral to this in universities is the now outmoded Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the incoming Research Excellence Framework (REF) which as Taylor (2008, 336) notes, 'marks the push towards 100 per cent metrics-driven evaluation of research for science-based subjects and part-metrics, part 'light-touch' peer review for the social sciences and humanities'. Journals now come with an 'impact factor' rating on which to measure 'good' and 'bad' publications and the assumption is that the 'best' journals have the highest impact and receive more submissions so that academics may improve their 'REFability'. This is entrenched within a neoliberal framework of market creation and ideologically legitimated by appeals to 'driving-up' research standards (Gillespe, Pusey, Russell and Sealey-Huggins 2011).

The ESRC have developed a deliberately broad definition of what constitutes research 'with impact' in order to allocate funding to universi-

ties. In essence this equates to what types of research are considered worthy of funding and which are not, on the ostensible premise that social research should be beneficial to certain aspects of society. Of particular concern for a sociological audience however is who 'worthwhile' research appears to be beneficial for:

A key aspect of this definition of research impact is that impact must be demonstrable. It is not enough just to focus on activities and outputs that promote research impact, such as staging a conference or publishing a report. You must be able to provide evidence of research impact, for example, that it has been taken up and used by policy makers, and practitioners, has led to improvements in services or business... you can't have impact without excellence (ESRC 2012).

There is however a troubling conflation of the ESRC's conception of 'use value' with economic or instrumental outcomes, indicating that the value of social research should be conceived of only in terms of how it helps policy makers or profiteering. This raises three key concerns with regard to empirical sociology. First, that the outcomes can be specified in advance so as to be measured; this is problematic because it fails to consider the ethical impact of research in the long term. Secondly, cost and time constraints feed into

bad research design, actually damaging the quality of the research being conducted. Thirdly, and perhaps more troublingly, the idea that impact can be measured rests on the classic ‘test’ and ‘control’ model of metric ‘measurement’, discounted by sociologists but so frequently used in testing the ‘impact’ of advertising campaigns, which denies the subjectivity of ‘objective’ research and attempts to ‘predict’ if not control populations (Bauman 1994; Bauman 2000b).

### Questions of Ethics

What are noticeably absent from the ESRC’s conception of impact as ‘research which is used by policy makers, and practitioners [or] has led to improvements in services or business’, are fundamental philosophical and sociological questions of ethics; particularly whom the social research taken up by policy makers or businesses benefits. Whilst the ESRC recognises that ‘determining the impact of social science research is not a straightforward task’ (ESRC 2012), there is a significant danger that measuring impact becomes a euphemism for ‘value for money’, reduced to a simplistic cost-benefit equation. This may either favour those approaches which can quantify observations (i.e. quantitative approaches) or those which provide economic benefit. Again, a justifiable concern around impact is how and who empirical sociology will be accountable to and impacts

on. Popular opinion would undoubtedly be the imaginary figure of the (singular) ‘tax payer’, yet the most vocal tax payers seldom reflect the interests of a diverse society.

Private research agencies may be interested in doing government work for ‘philanthropic’ or ethical reasons, but their *raison d’être* is hardly the pursuit of genuine understanding of social phenomena. ‘Costing’ projects, (uncoincidentally much like current academic workload models), involve breaking every aspect of a project into quantifiable ‘chunks’; essentially reducing projects to equations of cost vs. quality. Secondly, in order to secure future investment from government bodies, and therefore profit, agencies need to produce results which are going to be favourable to those allocating the funding. Providing an insightful piece of research which goes against the funders is unlikely to make for a good working relationship. Local governments must certainly also know, even without research, that in economically deprived areas, people are likely to say that they want more police, or more investment. What they really want are sound bites to show this.

In breaking research down in such a way so as to maximise the efficiency of costs, to deliver an ‘end product’, to make research accountable to the funding body, the longer term impact of this kind of research on communities, people or populations is ignored. This is another

of the key side effects in reducing 'impact' to quantifiable metric assessments (De Angelis and Harvie 2009) as if they are merely objective reflections of quality. As Bauman (2000b) highlights, 'the humanities may (conceivably) rise to a scientific status in a world in which their speaking/interpreting human subjects descend (or are pushed down) to the status of speechless objects; in a world remade after the likeness of concentration camps' (Bauman 2000b, 74). A narrowly instrumental, empirical sociology modelled on commercial, private sector research, like a positivist objective sociology, is precariously balanced to do more harm than good, as it acts in the interests of those who define the limits of the research, rather than those who the research is actually supposed to benefit.

This is exactly what Burawoy warned of in his 2004 address. From a position in the American academy, he was well placed to document the withering of ethical questions when sociology departments formed economic alliances with private sector institutions or, I would suggest, tried to ape their mechanisms. Empirical sociology should be wary of what he calls 'policy sociology' or 'sociology in the service of a goal defined by a client' (Burawoy 2005, 9). As he goes on to argue, 'if market research had dominated the funding of policy sociology, as [C. Wright] Mills feared it would, then we could all be held to ransom' (Burawoy 2005, 17). The

contention here is that empirical sociology is being held to ransom. Not only by the direct funding of projects by multinationals or conglomerates, but also by the dictates of neoliberalism; rationalised efficiency, competition, instrumental value, speed, the commodification of thought through 'knowledge economics' (Harvie 2006; De Angelis and Harvie 2009) and the 'increased marketability of scientific knowledge with concomitant commercial investment in its production' (Holmwood 2007, 48).

A notion of ethical, empirical, sociology should also not be confused with the idea of formalised ethics committees as being the sole determinant of sociological research's ethical validity. In fact, as Martyn Hammersley (2009) argues, such ethics committees may actually work against sociology's ethical contributions. Empirical sociology cannot be subject to rigid quantifiable metrics of impacts and outcomes or ethical approval forms which standardise means / ends approaches (any more than it already has historically), because attempts to calculate and order social life, which 'orthodox' sociology presumed (Bauman 1994; Bauman 2000b), dehumanises the object of sociological enquiry, rendering the purposes of sociology redundant at best and sinister at worst.

### **Bad Research Design**

The staple of projects in private sector media research, where I

worked, usually included ascertaining how many people recognised an advert on TV before and after an ad campaign and whether this meant (often on a five point Likert scale) that they were more or less willing or likely to buy a product; thus demonstrating impact. Average turnaround time for a project was about two months, including analysis. Generally the sex and age of the product's 'target market', or the potential to buy or watch something, were ascertained and then data were generated in line essentially with what would give clients a positive outcome.

Advertising departments for example wanted to see that advertising on a particular medium 'worked', or have quotes to back up that their advertising was going to work. Many of the decisions had already been made by the time research was conducted, so there was very little to gain by subsequently critiquing those decisions. Research often involved quota sampling (for problems associated with quota sampling see Gorard 2004, 72-73) and online surveys were the primary method of data collection here because they were cheap and quick. There was huge emphasis on getting the 'best CPI' (cost per interview), though depending on the use of the research, sample sizes varied considerably.

'Accountability' and 'impact' also place undue stress on the design process. Let me provide a few brief examples of how this may happen, in

the same agency in which I worked. The company was asked to conduct research on the effectiveness of a campaign which aimed at trying to reduce binge drinking behaviour amongst young people, funded jointly by a central government body and a public service broadcaster. Adverts were run on a TV show, popular amongst 16-24 year olds, in tandem with storylines on the same show, highlighting the dangers of binge drinking. There were also anti-binge storylines in an online series consisting of ten minute episodes, in an effort to 'de-glamorise' binge drinking. Conducting an online survey with regular viewers and non-regular viewers, before, during and after the storylines and online episodes were aired, behaviour related to binge drinking was found to have gone up at odd intervals. This was especially amongst those who were regular viewers of the show and had seen the online episodes.

There were four plausible explanations. Firstly, those regular viewers were more likely to be engaged in binge drinking than non-regular viewers. This didn't explain overall binge drinking going up amongst both groups. Secondly, that the anti-binge drinking storylines actually glamorised binge drinking (definitely possible). Thirdly, that the respondents at one of the stages had completely different attitudes to drinking, despite being from similar backgrounds (again, fully plausible). Fourthly, in order to price the work

'competitively', preparation time had been cut and other potential influences on 'binge drinking' had not been isolated. The 'post' stage of research took place after 16-24 year olds were likely to have completed GCSEs, AS Levels, A-Levels and University exams and thus were more likely to be drinking heavily during those periods. Luckily quantitative data is often amenable to selective distortion in order to 'paint a positive picture'.

This was not necessarily due to a series of bad individual decisions, but the demands placed on 'time' and 'value for money' leading to some major oversights on both the part of the client and research agency. The questions in the survey were also mainly derived from personal experiences of binge drinking amongst agency colleagues and the client's own ideas (both parties' average ages were often far greater than 24). In addition, virtually no consideration was given as to the explanations as to why young people seem to drink more in the first place. This was treated as common sense.

Similarly, on commission from regional Primary Care Trusts (PCTs), the agency looked at the causes of male obesity in the North of England. The interviews conducted with respondents had a narrow focus on individual circumstance rather than socio-economic or cultural factors, which would have taken much longer to investigate. Research design

generally assumed a linear causal link between what people said as indicative of their 'honest' opinions, marketing and behaviour change; precisely the same simplistic assumptions that have shifted sociological research away from instrumental behaviourism. Presenting interviewees with a series of posters designed to shock and produce instant change, failed to accurately determine why certain areas have higher levels of alcohol consumption contributing to obesity in the first instance. In addition, sending someone weighing ten and a half stone to interview people about which advertisements would make them lose the equivalent of their entire body mass, was on at least one occasion, met with an unsurprising 'I'm not being funny mate, but you just wouldn't understand'.

This will more often than not be the case in private, market-oriented, outcome driven research. Where there is a lack of autonomy, with the focus on consistent turnover of projects and profits, questioning the quality, scope and use of the research will always be secondary. This is the irrationality of the conveyor belt approach to empirical enquiry and an increasingly narrow, instrumental, empirical sociology, which attempts to ape commercial sector models. This is the main concern in the reduction of relatively autonomous, governmental funding for the social sciences, greater emphasis on impact and measure-

ment (the rhetoric of accountability), and advocating ‘partnerships’ between private enterprise and universities. Good empirical sociological research asks not only about the wider social context in which behaviours are formulated, but broader ethical questions about how the research will be used and what difference empirical research will make to discursive shifts in understanding. Such questions are lacking in private research precisely because they put up barriers to outcome led research; barriers that are time consuming and costly, but mostly unproductive to consider.

### **Some Suggestions for Sociological Empiricism**

It is necessary to make value judgments about good and bad pieces of social research, by understanding the conditions in which that research is formulated. Social research conducted by either universities or private sector agencies is self-defeating on its own terms if it simply provides the aggregation of opinions designed to tell a (singular) ‘story’. In this case ‘researchers’ become merely narrators (not to be confused with the serious endeavours of interpretivism).

What the opening up of universities to market-oriented logic has the potential to further entrench is the same conveyor belt approach to empirical sociology as that of the private sector; staple methods for predetermined situations and repeti-

tious ‘insights’ that lead to observing symptoms rather than understanding their origination. Unreflexive and unquestioning use of the staples of empirical sociology, surveys, questionnaires and interviews for example, which fail to engage with the broader issues of phenomenology, positivism, experience, ‘truth’ and researcher ‘position’, are not the practical application of academic theory but a different endeavour entirely.

This is not to say that empirical sociology should be directed to crudely behaviourist and instrumental policy ends, nor that individual sociologists necessarily should be considered as solely dictating the terms of their research from their ‘ivory towers’ (as is a popular narrative). What sociology as a discipline develops is awareness that sociological research is not undertaken because of the acts of ‘unique’ individual thinkers (Bayatrizi 2009). There is no option to conduct research in an individualist, ethical vacuum because the agenda has already been shaped by the methodological, ideological or institutional boundaries.

As Ben Watson (2011) in a characteristic polemic against ‘pop sociology’, states; ‘designed to inform government and commercial bodies, empirical sociology must perforce concentrate on ‘business as usual’, rather than on the capitalist society that produced them. The normative, quantifying approach

inevitably promotes reaction, since it is concerned with what is, not what might be' (Watson 2011, 108). Given that quantitative empirical sociology tends toward retroactive categorisation, how far can it describe and critique social process when, at the moment of analysis, its object of study (trends, tastes, behaviours) may have already eluded it, rendering its critique regressive?

Whilst this is a deliberately caricatured reading of sociology by Watson, it raises key issues which question the relativist nature of sociology as just a collection of opinions. Even in abstraction, quantitative data can help to lay bare the material effects of social processes, leading to critique and feeding back in to empirical research, though not to the point of ever closing that critique down. The relationship between 'critique' and 'evidence' need not necessarily be a linear or even cyclical one. Instead it must be more discursive in form; less easily ordered and less constrained by the dictates of instrumental economics.

Empirical sociology cannot be separated from a theoretical grounding. Yet sociology cannot start from a rejection of empiricism either. By constantly challenging our own assumptions as sociologists about the ways in which society works, reflexively questioning our position at every stage (Bourdieu 1989; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), through theory and experience, sociology can foster rather than close down dia-

logue. As Rogers Brubaker (1993) notes, social theory is itself a form of constantly 'becoming' which shapes our expectations as sociologists. Therefore we must be conscious of the ways in which identification with the discipline informs how we approach research and come to imagine what our research will yield. As with practical critiques of positivism, the generation of universal claims about society made solely from the point of theory is in danger of doing precisely what Bauman rightly fears about empiricism; the reduction of humans to objects.

Perhaps unpopularly, it should also be suggested that the future of empirical sociological research must engage more with, but not adopt wholesale, some of the methods of commercial research. There is a great deal of potential for refining some of the cruder research methods employed by private sector organisations, not to mention the co-creation of research by democratic means. Whilst there are still major considerations with using online methods (see Weible and Wallace 1998; Cook, Heath and Thompson 2000; Crawford, Couper and Lamais 2001; Vehovar, Manfreda and Batagelj 2001; Kwak and Radler 2002; Shih and Fan 2008), of which coverage is still one of the most pressing issues (Couper 2000, 467), new techniques of conducting quantitative or qualitative research can be a practical means of generating data particularly on sensitive,

personal and hard to discuss topics (Duffy, Smith, Terhanian and Bremer 2005; DiNitto, Busch-Armendariz, Bender, Woo et al. 2008).

Similarly the rejection of some methods or approaches outright because they don't necessarily fit with an epistemological tradition, is problematic (Howe 1988; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004, 15). Beginning from the premise that different methodologies are only useful for distinct and separate reasons, the exploratory nature of social research becomes limited. To see only respondents' interpretations as important diminishes the researcher's ability to locate these interpretations in a wider, relational context. Clearly regularities in behaviour based on similar social location still exist, despite the mutability of language. On the other hand, to assume knowledge a priori of the respondents' interpretations, therefore conducting a standardised set of quantitative interviews on the assumption that questions will be understood in exactly the same way, reduces the researcher's ability to understand subjectivities.

Private agencies do not necessarily have the same moral or philosophical impasses restricting the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, and whilst failing to interrogate such assumptions is clearly a problem, this is not something restricted to commercial research. Engaging with quantitative methods does not necessarily mean

subscribing to an objective positivism and qualitative methods do not necessarily undermine the ability to generalise or capture the experience of a wide range of different people. To deny knowledge of anything outside of the researcher's individual experience is to commit to an 'extreme Protagorean relativism' (Winch 1964, 308), which renders empirical sociology comparable to the neoliberal frameworks which have undermined sociology's ethical contributions.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989; 1991) concept of 'intersectionality' made the 'situatedness of all forms of knowledge' clear (Haraway 1988; Davis 2008b). This is a significantly important concept for sociological empiricism, as it makes demands for a more ethical conception of equality, through the recognition of difference. However, just as the universal 'truths' provided by positivism erased certain groups' experiences, thus marginalising them, increasingly microcosmic approaches to sociological method have conversely led to increasingly parochial research projects. In this respect, all approaches to social research are equally valid, regardless of their quality. As already argued above, this should not be considered the case.

Whilst the problems of 'meaning imposition' (Pawson 1989) exist more tangibly in quantitative research strategies, as Anthony Onwuegbuzie and Nancy L. Leech



(2005) note:

[I]nterpretivists also are not safe from criticism. In particular, their claim that multiple, contradictory, but valid accounts of the same phenomenon always exist is extremely misleading, inasmuch as it leads many qualitative researchers to adopt an 'anything goes' relativist attitude, thereby not paying due attention to providing an adequate rationale for interpretations of their data (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2005, 378).

The tendency toward arbitrary sample selection is as equally at fault in qualitative empirical accounts as in quantitative generalisations. The idea that quantitative strategies fail to be of use if they include subjective interpretation of the question is as naive as thinking that interviews necessarily counteract the problem of 'imposing meaning'. Seeking to reduce foisting the researcher's own assumptions on respondents (through the inclusion of lengthy open ended responses, whereby respondents can write if they do not understand what is expected of them), can be a practical use of carefully designed online survey; in other words 'the conduct of the fully objective and value free research is a myth, even though the regulatory ideal of objectivity can be a useful one' (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004, 15-16 my emphasis).

Mixed methods research emerged as a distinct paradigm in re-

sponse to bipartisan conflicts, within the social sciences, over methodologies (Collins, Onwuegbuzie and Jiao 2007; Tashakkori and Creswell 2007; Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009). Whilst 'mixed methods', and more frequently 'triangulation', become terms thrown into research proposals or methodology chapters without sufficient consideration, mixed methods research combines both philosophical (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner 2007) and pragmatic elements (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2005; Creswell and Plano Clark 2007) of empirical research in its own right.

There is no firm consensus as to what form a mixed methods design must take, however it is generally agreed that it involves adopting a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Collins, Onwuegbuzie and Jiao 2007, 267), as opposed to the combining of one or more qualitative or quantitative methods (for example including face-to-face life histories, structured interviews and online surveys).

John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark (2007) advocate that '[B]y mixing the datasets, the researcher provides a better understanding than if either dataset has been used alone' (Creswell and Clark 2007, 7). They go on to note however that 'it is not simply enough to collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data; they need to

be 'mixed' in some way so that together they form a more complete picture of the problem than they do when standing alone' (Creswell and Clark 2007, 7). This raises both the question of what mixed methods research can add (thus what the purpose is of employing both methods over using one) and also how to integrate different forms of data.

Both questions are inevitably dependent on the methodological and epistemological persuasions of the researcher. If the data generated are seen as antagonistic rather than complementary, then both questions are difficult to answer. What a mixed methods strategy offers is the elucidation of key trends, framed in terms of respondents' interpretations, whilst offering a much broader picture of differences and similarities in attitudes between demographic groups. Individual respondents' motivations, attitudes and feelings can therefore be explained in their own terms, whilst linking this to both individual responses, specifically in relation to the open ended questions, and the broader trends evident in the various demographic categories to which they identified.

### **Summary**

The future of empirical sociological research is not just about better, 'more innovative' methods, more time spent on thinking about how to phrase questions or how to ensure outcomes. It is about a contribution to ongoing dialogue or again, as

Bauman (2000b) puts it '...the kind of enlightenment which sociology is capable of delivering is directed to such freely choosing individuals; sociology is a service to a democratic society insofar as it enhances and reinforces that freedom of choice, re-opens rather than closes the work of signification' (Bauman 2000b, 79-80). The kind of means/ends instrumental approach that commercially sponsored sociological and commercial research adopts attempts to close down this debate, by providing facile explanation. Empirical sociological research needs to retain the idea of not attempting to provide a definitive answer, but better understanding of the ways in which different ideas are constructed.

What is clear is that empirical sociology needs to develop autonomy from the dictates of commercial interests and 'laissez faire' knowledge economics. Whilst the new privatised university system in Britain aims to further engender 'accountability' as a rhetorical device, especially with regards to the allocation of research funding, it should be noted that very few sociologists reject the idea of accountability to the 'object' of their enquiry. This 'object' should be toward people and societies however, with a view to expanding the opportunities and possibilities of the disenfranchised groups; not to increasing control of marginalised populations. This was the ordering potential of moral statistics (Bauman 1994; Bayatrizi 2009)

and orthodox sociology (Bauman 2000b), geared precariously toward social engineering.

Governments cannot and should not put funding for social research out to competitive tender. There is no absolutist way of knowing how empirical research will be used or received; thus, directing it to an instrumentally singular 'end', as is the fear with the new 'impact assessment' criteria, will inevitably be a futile, costly and dangerous exercise. This is the broader ethical challenge that empirical sociology needs to address which should be placed over and beyond the dictates of impact, outcome, or more troublingly, profit.

At the heart of this system is a shift in accountability from 'publics' to 'funders', contributing directly to the perception that if it doesn't feed directly into social policy, individual earning potential or economic interest, then empirical sociological research is useless. It is far more useless however, to feed directly into a policy where the parameters have already been pre-determined. The coming crisis to empirical sociology consists not just in a case of companies having access to more data than academies, but also in resisting the temptation to engage with the kind of instrumentality that undermines the point of sociological research and reduces it to a mouth-piece for commercially selective interests.

Research geared toward 'client satisfaction' often produces ill-

thought out designs. This should not be the aim of academic, empirical sociology; to bolster the reputation, or the profiteering potential of the university. Aside from undermining the ethical commitment to which empirical sociology should be directed, a focus on conveyor belt approaches to research grants undermines the quality of the work done. On a practical level, empirical sociology must seek to reengage with the methods, but not the ethos of, some aspects of commercial sector research. The bipartisan conflicts which emerged as a reaction to positivism are justified, yet a continuing conflation of method with epistemology has the potential to reproduce some of the worst aspects of these conveyor belt approaches. On the other hand, as Savage and Burrows (2007) note, it is not enough to simply reject research done by commercial sector enterprises on the basis of greater expertise within universities. What empirical sociology has to offer should extend far beyond 'better' methods; it should look to fundamentally question the uses of research and the value of any empirical work directed toward instrumental ends.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This was established as a result of the 'Haldane report', published in 1918, which advocated that 'decisions about what to spend research funds on should be made by researchers rather than politicians' (see <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/>

[cmselect/cmdius/168/16807.htm](http://cmselect/cmdius/168/16807.htm))

<sup>2</sup> ‘There is no such thing as society. There is living tapestry of men and women and people and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and each of us prepared to turn round and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate’ (Thatcher 1993, 626).

<sup>3</sup> This essentially purports to be a non-ideological economic and moral position reflecting a ‘middle ground’ between Keynesian capitalism and communitarian socialism and, between cultural segregation and cultural homogeneity.

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