

THE IMPACT OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES: HOW ACADEMICS AND THEIR RESEARCH MAKE A DIFFERENCE, by Simon Bastow, Patric Dunleavy and Jane Tinkler, Los Angeles: Sage, 2014

John Gerring's saying is used as motto for IMPACT : "no escape is possible from broader interdisciplinary standards if the enterprise of social science is to prove useful to humanity"

IMPACT, a three year team project of LSE Public Policy Group, proposes a new 'broad-front' focus to social science research. This is in lieu of the established social science approach of dealing independently with any component within the social science disciplines. IMPACT, by focusing on social science disciplines as a whole, tries to bridge the asymmetry gap between the huge volume of 'research' and its limited effect on real life, businesses and government. IMPACT claims that in spite of the colossal university social scientific achievements, their 'bit-part' roles or their narrow technical argumentation, produces very few patents and new ideas, and generally misses 'breakthrough' discoveries.

Profiting from the post war wave of specialized research, most social sciences of today are further developed, rolling emphatically toward an 'open social science entity', one that is far more interdisciplinary, more integrated with applied physical sciences, and far more accessible to, and directly interacting with, citizens and civil society organizations.

Readdressing this past neglect, the authors of IMPACT use the UK social science community as a case study, maintaining that despite the fact that the UK is not 'typical', its medium sized social science community is an appropriate agent for the following core discipline groups:

- The STEM disciplines, the (physical) Sciences, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics [Geography is a crossover discipline with STEM].
- The CAD discipline, the Creating Art and Design, including Art, Film, Drama, Media and Creative Writing.
- The Humanities along with their crossover like, inter alia, Law, Cultural Studies, Libraries, Informatics and Linguistics.
- The Social Sciences.

All the above possess the following attributes:

- they focus on contemporary human societies;
- they focus on systematically collecting data, and employ rigorous testing methodologies and modeling;
- they look for laws of social development, and
- they seek to emulate standards of good science.

The opening chapter describes the evolution of social sciences in modern research, stressing the swift growth of ‘business services’ [figure 1.11]. This is followed by four parts in which IMPACT establishes the aspired role of social sciences as an integrative field of study, research and policy making aimed at bridging the gap between the large volume of the social science research and their effect on real life, business and government. The components identified are:

- How academics achieve external impacts;
- The demand for social science research, emphasizing four sectors as potential ‘clients’ of integrated social science all-inclusive efforts. The sectors are business and corporate; government and public policy making; civil organizations and the third sector; and the media and public engagement bodies;
- Patterns of knowledge and impacts, including a mounting need for knowledge inventories and the rising role of digital tools.

IMPACT is written in candid language and is well illustrated by figures and tables enabling a wide audience to take advantage of its ideas and proposed courses of action. As a handy script IMPACT, taking advantage of the escalated recent progress in the various social science disciplines, opens new research agendas for social scientists in order to relocate to a more meaningful field of study and research among the applied sciences. As such, IMPACT is a must for those involved in our environment, society’s wellbeing, economic growth and in orderly spatial development.

Unfortunately, Geography, as a social science discipline is described as a ‘crossover with STEM [fig. 1.1]. It receives some attention throughout the pages of IMPACT but is somewhat left out of the core discussion. Most active geographers would describe Geography as having experienced a substantial ‘revolution’ since mid-20th century, advancing its research and work objectives from geography education towards applied research and to job interests in planning, government, management and business. Geography, being on its own merit an interdisciplinary science, seems to exemplify the upcoming evolution stage of the ‘open social science’ vision of IMPACT.

In their concluding remarks the authors of IMPACT warn us that the next stage in the evolution of the social science is expected to be in the arena of different efforts and struggles between influential academic interests and various alternative scenarios. Yet by revealing an optimist point of view, IMPACT identifies three main developments that would shape the ensuing stage in the social sciences:

- a broad-front joining-up of the discipline group;
- a rapid adoption of digital skills and big-data research;
- a far better integration with STEM subjects studying human-dominated or human-influenced systems.

Prof. Cary L. Cooper expressed the above contribution of IMPACT with the following statement: “at a time when governments overly concentrate on science and engineering, they fail to understand that without social sciences many of the physical science/ technological advance would have little traction”.

Notes

1. Professor of Political Science at Boston University.
2. For practical reasons we assign the manuscript the title IMPACT.

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