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A *helping hand* or a *servant discipline*?

Interpreting non-academic perspectives on the roles of social science in participatory policy-making

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Abstract

In the UK, a diverse network of actors has emerged around the delivery of government-sponsored processes of public participation in science and technology. Although this network includes social scientists, the relationship between social science and participatory policy-making remains an ambiguous one. My objective in this paper is to reflect in an exploratory manner on non-academic perspectives of the roles of social science in public participation. In particular, I draw attention to the contrasting conceptions of the policy relevant roles of social science that appear to prevail among academic social scientists (a discipline in which the analysis and critique of modes of thought and action are valued highly) and the non-academic actors (a discipline that is valued for its instrumental, problem-oriented potential). Further, I explore the ways in which the non-academic conception of social science as an instrumental discipline might be interpreted; for example, as merely providing a *helping hand* or, more pointedly, as a *servant discipline* to the objectives and interests of others. I conclude with an exploratory discussion of the challenges and opportunities that this contrast presents for social scientists. Further, I make the case that social scientists should clearly advocate the policy relevance and value of analysis and critique.[1]

[1] I would like to thank the Higher Education Funding Council for England (which funded the London workshop), Kathrin Braun, Victoria Dyas, Sabrina Fernandez, Karen Folkes, Sarah Franklin, Priska Gisler, Kerry Holden, Silke Schicktanz, Johannes Weyer, the two anonymous reviewers, and all those who contributed to the exploratory case study or attended the Zurich and London workshops.

1 Introduction

In recent years, social scientists working in science and technology studies (STS) and associated disciplines have (re)turned their attention to the relationships between social science itself and the governance of science, technology and innovation.[2]

Within the context of an emerging institutional 'participatory turn' in science and technology policy making in Europe and elsewhere, as well as the role that social scientists have played in advocating and practicing public participation, it is not surprising that scholars in STS are also turning their attention to the potentially multiple and diverse roles of social scientists in these participatory developments.[3]

My objective in this paper is to reflect on the roles of scholars working in and around STS in public participation in science and technology. In particular, I focus on this issue from the perspectives of the non-academic actors who also work on public participation in science and technology in the UK.

To frame my analysis, I first describe some of the specificities of the UK 'participatory turn' in science and technology policy-making, and I comment on the network that has emerged around this activity (section 2).

Thereafter, I discuss the conceptions of the role of social science in participatory policy-making that appear to prevail among the non-academic actors in the UK public participation network. To do this I discuss some of the key themes that emerged from an exploratory case study among this group that I conducted in the UK, as well as from the London workshop itself (section 3).

In addition, I draw upon other recent analyses of the roles that are defined for social science by institutional actors, particularly with respect to science and technology policy. My analysis suggests that, for these non-academic actors, social science is valued as an instrumental, problem-solving or problem-oriented discipline (section 4).

Thereafter I note that social scientists themselves – or, at least, those who attended the two workshops described earlier – identify contrasting relevance for social science based upon the analysis and possibly critique of institutional modes of action and thought. Within this context, I then explore the ways in which the non-academic conception of social science as an instrumental discipline might be interpreted. For example, I discuss the ways in which this constitutes social science, perhaps benignly, as providing a helping hand or, perhaps more pointedly and malignly, as a discipline that is servant to the objectives and interests of others (section 5).

I conclude with an exploratory discussion of the research opportunities that are presented by these conditions, and I make the case that social scientists should clearly advocate the policy relevance and value of analysis and cri-

[2] For example, Andrew Webster (2007a/b), Helga Nowotny (2007) and Brian Wynne (2007) have exchanged views on the desirability, challenges and limitations of policy engagement. Using nanotechnology as an example, Phil Macnaghten et al.(2005) have presented a modest blueprint for the role of social science in the development of novel technologies. Jane Calvert and Paul Martin (2009) have offered similar reflections in the context of synthetic biology. At the same time, Claire Donovan (2005), Macnaghten et al.(2005), and Laurent and Fisher (2009) have concentrated on the contrasting ways in which the relationship between social science and scientific governance is constituted by the institutions of science and of scientific (including social scientific) governance.

[3] This was the topic of two workshops in the summer of 2008, on which I concentrate in this paper; these were the *Ironists, reformers or rebels? The role of the social sciences in participatory policy making* workshop in Zurich (cf. Gisler and Schicktanz, this volume) and the *Roles of social science in public dialogue on science and technology* stakeholder workshop in London which I organised (cf. Burchell and Holden 2009). In addition, this was the topic of a conference paper by Parry and Faulkner (2006) and a session at a conference of the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Genomics Network in October 2008 (ESRC 2008). Most recently, in April 2009, this was a recurring theme at the opening seminar in the new ESRC-funded *Critical studies of public engagement in science and the environment* seminar series (ESRC 2009a).

tique (as well as instrumental problem-solving, section 6).

2 The UK 'participatory turn' and the public participation network

Although it is true to suggest that the 'participatory turn' in science and technology has relevance in many parts of the world, there are important distinctions between individual country cases (Hagendijk and Irwin 2006). With this in mind, I now provide some specific details about the UK 'participatory turn' and the network that has emerged around UK government-funded public participation in science and technology policy-making.

The UK is *similar* to many other countries in the extent to which public participation activity has been driven by academics, NGOs, think tanks, citizens' groups and so on. However, the UK is perhaps *unique* in the extent to which the public participation agenda – or, at least, a particular form of it – is currently becoming institutionalised across government departments and public policy areas.[4] At these governmental sites, public participation is advocated as an integral component of contemporary governance and policy-making, and is variously cited as a route to better policy decisions, democratic renewal, citizen empowerment, and greater citizen trust in the institutions of governance and policy.

At the forefront of the UK government's public participation agenda, and specifically focussing on science and technology, is Sciencewise (2009). Indeed, based upon its emerging ambitions to institutionalise and professionalise public participation in science and technology policy-making across government departments and intermediary bodies, Sciencewise appears to also be at the vanguard of the emerging international public participation agenda. Sciencewise conducts a specific form of public participation, which it calls public dialogue. This is defined on the Sciencewise website as follows:

"*Public dialogue is a way of giving people in the UK the opportunity to have their views on future and emerging science and technologies heard, and listened to, by those who make policy decisions. The aim is to help politicians and policy makers make better decisions on which areas of scientific research should be pursued and how advances in science can be best used to benefit everyone in society – not just the few. Public dialogue is a 'two-way' conversation between decision makers and experts on the one hand, and the public on the other.*" <www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/public-dialogue-3>

Although it varies from project to project, the format of public dialogue appears to be increasingly oriented around focus group-type discussions among public participants, with the participation also of experts of various kinds and in a variety of formats. In general, the STS response to these developments has focussed on discourses of possibilities and limitations. Public participation is said to be a potentially significant component in the delivery of more democratically accountable, and socially and technically robust forms of scientific governance. However, doubts linger about the extent to which institutional public participation has more to do with smoothing the path of institutionally-desired innovation strategies and technologies (Irwin 2006; Wynne 2006; Felt and Wynne 2007).

A particularly notable outcome of the emphasis on public dialogue within Sciencewise is the emergence, or at least the evolution, of a diverse network of actors in what is now a multi million pound 'veritable extractive industry' (Lezaun and Soneryd 2007). In this paper, I focus specifically on the perspectives of what I refer to as the non-

[4] For instance, see *Sciencewise* (2009) (funded by the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills), *People and Participation* (2009) (funded by the Department of Communities and Local Government, The Ministry of Justice and the Sustainable Development Commission), and the Ministry of Justice (2008) national framework for greater citizen engagement.

academic actors within this network. These actors are drawn from:

- government departments (here we can distinguish between individuals who work on policy for dialogue and those who use dialogue in policy);
- government intermediary bodies (such as the research councils, the Human Genetics Commission and the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority);
- commercial organisations and freelancers (from a diverse range of backgrounds from PR, market research, corporate affairs and project management, to conflict resolution, environmental consultancy, public policy research, stakeholder engagement, and community-based research);
- and, a range of not-for-profit organisations (such as bodies that promote science, think tanks, and learned academies).

These actors variously perform a range of emerging and evolving functions, such as: funders, users, commissioners, practitioners, programme managers, participation experts, evaluators, expert participants, disseminators and analysts. Some of these actors are commissioned by *Sciencewise* on an ongoing basis to advise government departments on public dialogue and to develop knowledge on specific practical issues. Others are contracted to implement and deliver individual public dialogue projects on specified topics. Others still provide invited, yet informal, guidance and advice. In addition to these non-academic actors, social scientists working in STS and associated disciplines also perform some of these functions and act as 'experts' within dialogue processes.

The emergence of this network raises a range of fascinating questions. In this paper, I am particularly interested in questions concerning the relationships between this non-academic network and the social scientists who study and practice public participation. In addition, we can ask:

- how might we understand the ways in which this network operates (through practices of project initiation, tendering, design, management, reporting, and evaluation, as well as the development of longer term strategies);
- how might we understand the contrasting and potentially contradictory norms, assumptions, objectives, interests, practices and commitments that are at play in different parts of the network and the ways in which they interact, circulate, align and misalign;
- and, what is the political and democratic significance of this network and the agenda which it serves?[5]

3 The exploratory case study and the workshops

The exploratory case study that I conducted in the spring of 2008 was designed to illuminate just one aspect of the network that I have outlined here: as indicated earlier, the perspectives of the non-academic actors in the network on the roles of social science in public dialogue. Rather than providing any definitive answers, my intention was to employ the results to raise issues and questions, and to prompt discussion, at the Zurich and London workshops. In addition, my objective was to begin to foster greater mutual understanding among the diverse groups described above.

With these objectives in mind, I conducted a highly exploratory, and rather rapidly executed, qualitative and interpretative study with the intention of deriving a dataset that is *indicative* (rather than *representative*) of the general perspectives among these groups. To investigate this issue, I drafted six questions on the following topics:

1. Examples of the actual roles of social science in public dialogue.
2. What questions should social scientists address?

[5] A more detailed analysis of this network, funded by Sciencewise, is currently in preparation by Jason Chilvers.

3. What is the success of social science in this regard?
4. What are the normative roles and purposes of social scientists?
5. What are the challenges of working with social scientists?
6. Other comments?

These questions were emailed to approximately sixty individuals in around forty five institutions in the non-academic parts of the UK public dialogue network described above, along with an invitation to attend the London workshop. The response to the research questions was disappointing; eight responses were received, representing the views of twelve individuals (some responses were joint responses). Respondents included:

- a group of four from the British Science Association (formerly the BA), a largely government-funded body that 'advances the public understanding, accessibility and accountability of the sciences and engineering',
- a joint response from representatives of the Science and Society teams at the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, the UK government funder of social science) and Research Councils UK (RCUK, which provides strategy and oversight for the seven UK research councils),
- two commercial practitioners (both of whom have social science PhDs),
- a senior evaluator,
- a commissioning expert,
- a high profile public engagement practitioner and policy actor,
- and a representative from the Academy of Social Sciences.

With this sample size in mind, we must obviously be cautious about the extent to which the results are indicative of more general views and perspectives among the population of interest. Nonetheless, the data was highly successful in terms of raising issues and questions, and prompting debate at the two workshops.[6]

[6] The London workshop was attended by thirty one members of the UK public dialogue network, including social scientists, policy actors, commissioners, practitioners and representatives from think tanks, learned societies and organisations that promote science.

4 Non-academic perspectives on the roles of social science in participatory policy-making

In this section, I focus on the ways in which social science relating to the governance of science and technology appears to be conceived by non-academic actors in the UK.

First, I comment on the ways in which the relationships between social science and policy-making are constituted by the ESRC, the main UK government sponsor of social science, with particular reference to science and technology (section 3.1). Thereafter, I focus on these issues in the context of my own exploratory case study (section 3.2).

In each of these contexts, I wish to highlight two key themes. The first is the ways in which social science is constituted by UK non-academic actors as an instrumental, problem-solving discipline. The second is the extent to which the problems that social science is expected to solve are identified by actors that are external to social science itself.

4.1 Perspectives of the ESRC

The objective of the ESRC is described on its website homepage as follows: "*We aim to provide high quality research on issues of importance to business, the public sector and government.*" <www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/index_voluntary.aspx>.

Tellingly, in this comment the ESRC states that the issues which social scientists are to investigate should be defined "by business, the public sector and government", rather than by social science itself.

ESRC-funded social science is further concentrated around these externally-defined issues through the increased reliance of the ESRC on specifically-themed funding programmes (Donovan

2005) and, more recently, networks. As Donovan also suggests, a significant number of these programmes (and networks) are related to science and technology issues. Donovan notes the ways in which, within these programmes, social science is cast as an instrumental discipline tasked with solving the anticipated problems associated with the so-called social impacts or implications of novel technologies.

For instance, social science is variously expected to:

- envision the societal needs that science and technology might meet,
- anticipate risks and ethical concerns relating to novel technologies,
- give voice to public opinion concerning these issues (perhaps through public participation),
- and advise institutions on communication on issues that are held to have a scientific or technological relevance.

In the period since Donovan's analysis, this conception of social science was publicly reflected by Ian Diamond and Frances Cairncross, the current and previous Chief Executives of the ESRC respectively. In their introductory remarks at events related to the ESRC Genomics Network and the earlier ESRC Science and Society Programme, respectively, both of these senior officials construed these initiatives almost entirely in terms of, not only, understanding, but also, obviating the social challenges created by emerging technologies and scientific practices (Diamond 2007; Cairncross 2007).

In recent years, this ESRC attention to science and technology issues can be seen as part of a broader movement in which social science is cited by policy and scientific actors as a discipline that is central to novel approaches to the governance of science. In particular in the UK, as Macnaghten et al.(2005) have pointed out, nanotechnology has been institutionally cited as the test bed for this new governance (see also Laurent and Fisher (2009) on the U.S.). In these cases, tasks have been identified for social science that are very similar to those identified above. Thus, in the context of the ESRC's programmes and networks on science and technology and the scientific and policy discourses on the governance of nanotechnology we see the evocation of social science as an instrumental, problem-solving or problem-oriented discipline. Further, we see the evocation of social science as a discipline that can be enrolled in the solution of problems that are identified and framed outside of social science itself.

4.2 The exploratory case study

I want to move on now to a more focussed discussion of the roles of social science from the perspective of the non-academic actors within the UK public dialogue network, as reflected in the exploratory case study. It seems sensible to start with the observation that the issue of the roles of social science in public dialogue is a cause of a degree of discomfort and frustration for some of the non-academic actors. For example, the group from the British Science Association asked:

"*Can social scientists please apply their skills to this question of their own relationship with the practitioner community . . . to what extent do social scientists see themselves as passive observers and commentators as opposed to co-participants and actors?*"

Similarly, the respondents from RCUK and the ESRC asked:

"*Do social scientists regard themselves as scientists and therefore part of the science and society equation or as third party observers/researchers?*"

These comments acknowledge that social scientists might perform a number of quite distinct roles in public participation:

- they might be observer/researchers,
- they might be participants of some description,
- or they might be scientists whose own work might be subject to the

logics and assumptions that underpin institutional public participation in the UK.

However, what's notable here is the sense of discomfort that this role uncertainty causes among some non-academic actors. Indeed, at the London workshop, a commercial practitioner challenged me to state which type of social scientist I am.

Having noted this discomfort concerning the multiple roles of social scientists, the case study respondents and most of the non-academic London workshop attendees were very clear about the role that they wished social science to play. They referred on the 'vital' or 'valuable' role of social science in public dialogue in terms of an instrumental development of practice and strategy.

The data revealed a number of ways in which social science does, might or should assist in the practice of public dialogue, including:

- the introduction of new and innovative methodologies;
- the framing of issues and questions;
- the development of models for measuring outcomes;
- and the interpretation and representation of public views.

Social science was also seen to perform a valued role in strategic thinking about public dialogue mainly by mapping the context in which it was sought and what its long term impacts might be. There were also a number of comments concerning the contextualisation of public concerns and the articulation of different viewpoints. Within this context, the British Science Association suggested that social scientists can act as 'critical friends' to the public dialogue network. It should be noted that there was just one response – notably, perhaps, from a commercial practitioner with a social science PhD – suggesting that social scientists might break out of this role to ask challenging questions about the broader political contexts and interests that frame and inform the objectives of institutional public dialogue. In the next section I will discuss how this dominant non-academic conception of the role of social science in public dialogue might be interpreted.

In addition to the identification of a specifically instrumental role for social science, respondents also expressed frustration and disappointment about the extent to which social scientists often fail to perform this role. For example,

"*I think practitioners … find a lot of the work that is published by social scientists on science and society issues to be largely irrelevant to their work. The ESRC's Science and Society programme has not yielded findings that seem relevant.*" (prominent public engagement practitioner)

"*Social scientists, on the whole, are not making themselves relevant to the practitioner community. For example, most of the summary reports in the wide-ranging ESRC Science and Society booklets are about the ´areas explored' rather than practically useful findings, or are so general that they are of limited use to practitioners in the field.*" (the group from the British Science Association)

These two comments are particularly interesting because they create a link between the pre-framed theme of roles and an emergent theme of relevance. More specifically, these comments draw a direct link between the performance of a particular role and relevance on the one hand, and, perhaps more importantly, the non-performance of that role and irrelevance on the other.

These comments can also be seen as evidence of a lack of awareness of any other forms of relevance that might be present in social science research. The ESRC Science and Society Programme, to which both of these comments refer, produced a wide range of social science projects oriented around the new conditions that are felt to prevail in the relationship between science and society (ESRC Science and Society 2009). As indicated in the comment by the group from the British Science Association, these projects were often oriented

around analysis, and in some cases problematisation and critique, of the narratives and discourses that characterise contemporary trajectories in science and technology (referred to by the British Science Association as 'the areas explored'), as well as the ways in which science and society relationships are managed.

With this thought in mind, these comments could be interpreted as a rejection as irrelevant of the analysis and problematisation of the official narratives of science, and science and society. Although there is insufficient space to explore these issues in detail, the exploratory case study revealed that policy and practitioner actors also feel that social scientists compromise their relevance through the use of obscure language, the lengthy time scales of academic work, and methodological purism with respect to public participation (Burchell and Holden 2009).

In this section I have drawn on a variety of materials to illustrate the ways in which the role of social science is constituted by non-academic actors. This analysis suggests that, in the case of both science and technology policy and public participation in science and technology, social science is often constituted by non-academic actors as an instrumental, problem-solving discipline. Furthermore, form the point of view of these actors, the problems that social science is to solve are to be determined and framed outside of social science itself.

5 Interpreting instrumentalism

This section focuses on two contrasting ways in which this perceived instrumentalism might be interpreted: as a *helping hand* or as a *servant* discipline. However, to provide the context for this, I comment – very briefly – on the conceptions of social science that is common among the academic social scientists:[7]

1. First the internal scholarly and disciplinary relevance or the role of social science research is always advocated.
2. Second, although some social scientists are involved in somewhat instrumental research, the instrumental, problem-solving conception of social science is eschewed and problematised by many of the social scientists.
3. Further, the preferred conceptions of social science are oriented around notions of – crucial – independence, as well as description, analysis, reflecting back, contextualising, developing questions through research, critique and problematisation (Burchell and Holden 2009; Gisler and Schicktanz, this volume).
4. Finally, although some social scientists try to remain outside of policy debates, the majority maintains the policy relevance of such roles and activities (cf. section 6).[8]

With respect to the *topics* of such policy-oriented descriptions, analyses and critiques, Wynne (2007) reminds us of the ongoing need to examine the implicit and tacit modes of thinking, norms and assumptions that prevail within policy-making institutions as well as the more readily-observable policy-oriented actions and behaviours. Wynne's own deficit model heuristic might be a suitable and relevant example of such an analytical extension (Wynne 2006).

5.1 Helping hand?

With these thoughts in mind, how might the instrumental manner in which social science is constituted by non-social science actors be interpreted. As indicated in the title of this paper, the instrumental conception of social science might be interpreted in relatively benign terms as a 'helping hand'. Similarly, noting that the performance of this role might involve a certain amount

[7] Data sources are the workshops at Zurich and London.

[8] This form of policy relevance – quite different to that espoused by the non-academic actors – is also reflected in Webster (2007a/b), Nowotny (2007) and Wynne (2007), as well as in Macnaghten et al.(2005).

of critique of practice or strategy, this conception might be interpreted as social science as a 'critical friend' (as the British Science Association group put it), or perhaps even as a 'reformer' (cf. Gisler and Schicktanz, this volume).

Crucially, these conceptions seem to imply a rather equal relationship between a range of actors, including social scientists, who work together, and pool their various resources and specialities, in pursuit of a specific goal. Certainly, critique of practice and implementation might be possible within this conception. However, the goal itself and its underpinning assumptions are pre-given and taken-for-granted, and are assumed to be agreed, shared, and largely unproblematic. This interpretation of an instrumental social science also suggests that there should be no particular concerns about social scientists engaging with policy and practitioner actors in this way.

5.2 Servant discipline?

As I suggested earlier, while some STS social scientists perform this kind of role in their research projects, many also emphasise the importance of independent analysis and critique. However this latter emphasis contradicts the assumptions of a taken-for-granted, agreed, shared and unproblematic goal that were evoked earlier. Indeed, many social scientists explicitly problematise this interpretation of an instrumental social science.

With this in mind, it is perhaps necessary to interpret this instrumental conception of social science a little more sharply. For instance, this interpretation may cast social science in a role of a servant, handmaid, 'midwife' (Webster 2007a: 462) or even 'slave' (Donovan 2005: 597) to the aims and interests of the public dialogue network and the government and scientific interests that drive it. These expressions are notable because they evoke highly unequal power relations. More specifically, they deny agency and independence to social science, and they speak of a social science that is required to subjugate its own interests and actions to those of others.

Finally, since many social scientists themselves claim an independent, analytical and potentially critical role, these interpretations of an instrumental social science provoke concern for social scientists with respect to policy engagement. For instance, social scientists must carefully guard their 'reflexive and critical edge' in order to avoid 'cooption or capture' by institutional sponsors (Webster 2007a: 462). To put this in another way, they must preserve their more radical objectives while engaging in pragmatic ways (Wynne 2007). They must take care to not become 'dazzled by the mirage of influence', must be prepared to be instrumentally reinterpreted or ignored, must be aware that reflexivity is not a natural or easy condition within policy institutions, and must not allow policy engagement to become the sole criteria by which their work is judged (Wynne 2007: 491).

Finally, in extreme cases, they run the risk of bullying and vilification by institutional actors. Simon Davies and Gus Hosein (2006) were part of the LSE Identity Project, which was critical of the UK government's identity card plan. Following publication of their report, the research team was vilified in Parliament and in the media by a succession of government ministers.

6 Discussion

The objective of this paper has been to contribute to debates about the roles of social science in participatory policymaking with respect to science and technology. In particular, the objective has been to explore and draw attention to the roles of social science in these issues, in particular as they are understood by the relevant non-academic actors in the UK. In this discussion, I summarise the key themes of the paper and I suggest a number of avenues of potential enquiry and activity by social scientists working in STS.

Of course, relationships between social science and policy worlds vary over

time, from country to country, from social science discipline to social science discipline, from policy area to policy area, and even from individual to individual. Further, we should not underestimate the plurality of roles that STS scholars and academic social scientists more generally can and do play in policy arenas. In addition, the materials that have been discussed in this paper are exploratory in nature and should not be casually generalised. With this in mind, we should not homogenise or essentialise the perspectives of social scientists or non-academic actors and institutions that are presented in this paper: policy actors do not always constitute social science in instrumental terms, and social scientists do not always eschew instrumental or problem-oriented policy relevance in favour of a range of more analytical and potentially critical intents.

However, the materials that have been discussed here might be summarised in terms of the following working assumptions. Social scientists in STS and associated disciplines, and non-academic actors and institutions in the realms of science and technology policy (including public participation in science and technology policy) appear to be generally committed to a role for social science in these policy areas. However, there are fundamental differences in the ways in which these roles – or forms of relevance – are conceived:

- Non-academic actors are most comfortable with a conception of social science as an instrumental problem-solving discipline, whose objectives are defined elsewhere. From this perspective, social science might be interpreted as providing a *helping hand* or as a 'critical friend'.
- By contrast, academic social scientists appear to be most comfortable with a conception of social science as intellectually independent, and oriented towards description, analysis, critique, reflecting back, producing questions as outputs, and so on (though, certainly with the possibility of instrumental research of the kind described above in some cases). From this perspective, an instrumental, problem-oriented social science might be interpreted as having some of the characteristics of a *servant discipline*.

It is clear that, while they may not be universal or essential, these differences of understanding and expectation are relevant.

In addition, far from shunning policy relevant research, many social scientists as well as STS scholars, such as Macnaghten et al.(2005), Alan Irwin (2006), Wynne (2006; 2007), Webster (2007a/b), and Nowotny (2007), implicitly and explicitly advocate the use of description, analysis and critique as elements of a social science that is highly policy relevant.

As suggested earlier, this is perhaps a form of policy relevance in which social science helps institutions and individuals to reflect upon and better understand their established behaviours and ways of thinking. However, this conception of social science and its relevance and value to policy-makers seems to be little known, appreciated or understood by non-academic actors. Thus the work of social scientists can be judged by policy and practitioner actors on criteria that are very different. To paraphrase Donovan (2005), social science is not judged as social science. As a result, social scientific research can be readily dismissed as irrelevant by actors who are more instrumentally oriented.

I am not keen to present a set of programmatic proposals on the basis of these exploratory comments. However, to conclude I would cautiously raise three areas of enquiry and activity – with respect to relationships between STS and participatory policy-making – that may be fruitful for social scientists working in this area.

Scholarly significance

Firstly, there is no doubt that the 'participatory turn' in the governance of science and technology (as well as other

public policy issues), particularly the increasingly institutionalised and professionalised forms in which it is emerging in the UK and perhaps elsewhere, is of contemporary scholarly significance (Irwin 2006).

These developments clearly raise a whole raft of questions about: the nature of institutions, democracy, politics, governance, policy and expertise in contemporary liberal democracies; the visions of science, technology, medicine, progress, the public and society that are produced through processes of institutionalised public participation; and, the characteristics and practices of the networks that emerge around practices of public participation. With these thoughts in mind, and despite the challenges highlighted in this paper, there are very obvious reasons for social scientists to continuously engage in these policy developments.

In particular, drawing on Wynne's (2007) reflections on the importance of understanding the implicit and tacit modes of thinking, norms and assumptions that prevail within policy-making institutions (as well as behaviours and actions), this perhaps demands continued and enhanced efforts towards institutional ethnography by STS scholars.

Working assumptions and questions

Secondly social science might or should also contribute to these policy developments in a more direct way than via purely scholarly contributions. This notion appears to be taken-for-granted by many among the network of academic and non-academic actors that has emerged around public participation in the UK. However, significant variations in conceptions of the nature and objectives of such contributions emerge as soon as the surface of the issue is scratched.

This raises a range of questions that might be more comprehensively explored through research (perhaps including ethnographic work such as that described above). For instance, the working assumptions that I described above bear much closer examination, especially within the context of actual social science research projects relating to public participation.

In addition, these working assumptions raise questions concerning:

- the ways in which social scientists manage potentially competing roles, imperatives and responsibilities that such circumstances might give rise to;
- the extent to which social scientists also instrumentalise the work of policy and practitioner actors for their own scholarly purposes?;
- when social scientists are invited in as critical friends, the range of issues that are and are not open to criticism;
- and, the circumstances and means through which formal and informal networks of 'helping hands' or 'critical friends' – social scientific or otherwise – become constituted.

The policy relevance of critique

Finally, social scientists might more firmly advocate – in interactions with policy and practitioner actors – the value of specific forms of policy relevance that lie outside of the instrumental, problem-oriented policy relevance that appears to be envisaged by non-academic actors. In particular, while non-academic actors quite reasonably appear to expect social scientists to tell them something about society or 'public views', social scientists might also advocate the value of telling policy-makers and practitioners something about themselves.

For instance, social scientists might advocate forms of analysis which would assist non-academic actors to examine, understand and reflect in novel ways upon: their own assumptions and practices, the broader historical and geographical contexts in which these emerge, and alternative sets of assumptions.

In his comments on the relationships between STS and policy worlds, Wynne laments that, "once started, the agony

continues" (2007: 501). We should remember that Wynne has been working on these issues for more than twenty years. There may be much – hopefully, highly productive – agony ahead for both social scientists, and policy and practitioner actors as efforts towards mutual understanding, shared expectations and agreed objectives continue.

7 References

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