**Interactive agenda Setting in the Social Sciences**

# Disciplines Workshop Report

**Abingdon, 18 and 19th November 2004**

## Introduction

This report captures and elaborates on themes and issues discussed at the first of six ESRC funded workshops on Interactive agenda Setting in the Social Sciences. These events examine the relation between academic and non-academic priorities in shaping social science research agendas. The first workshop took 'the discipline' as its point of reference.

Whilst there is an established literature on the institutional contexts of academic work and on the history of ideas, less has been written about exactly how non-academic concerns filter into scholarly research. The workshop explored this interface from different angles. The first step was to consider a selection of relevant moments and trends illustrating some of the many ways in which disciplinary concerns connect to events and priorities in the 'outside' world. The second was to see how these examples related, if at all, to models, theories and arguments put forward in the texts reviewed in the background paper and in the workshop presentations themselves. We concluded by reflecting on individual careers to get yet another perspective on the relation between non-academic and academic research agendas. This method allowed us to address the aims of the workshop which were to:

- Review and compare the trends and content of the specific disciplines represented.
- Reflect on the development of individual research agendas in this context - how do ideas evolve through successive projects and how do personal priorities and intellectual aspirations shift as a result?
- Compare these accounts of specific disciplines and individual careers with literature on the development and structure of academic disciplines.

.. always with reference to the interaction between academic and non-academic priorities.

In the event, the workshop highlighted three central issues.

1. Substance matters. It does so on two counts. At first sight, topics and fields of enquiry appear more strongly connected to events in the wider world than underlying theories and methods. Second, disciplines differ in their orientation to non-academic concerns. Some seek to be of immediate and practical use. Others do not.

2. Institutional environments and moments in a discipline's career - and in the careers of individual practitioners - are important but we don't know much about how these two features interact, or how they shape specific research agendas.

3. We considered a number of plausible theories about how disciplines develop through networks and through division and convergence. Though interesting, these provide only partial insight into the dynamics of non-academic influence.

The rest of the report is in three sections. The first describes and compares examples of disciplinary change and non academic influence. The second revisits theories of disciplinary development. The third comments briefly on individual research careers.

## 1. Trends and developments: examples from different disciplines

The following snippets and examples illustrate features or trends relevant to the workshop's central themes. They are based on participants' experience, not on systematic enquiry or careful study of intellectual history.

### Anthropology

*Internal dynamics:* Rick Wilk identified what he described as 'zombie' theories, these being ideas and concepts that seem impervious to disproof or repudiation. Having been discredited by one generation they have a knack of reappearing and worming their way back into disciplinary agendas.

*Hybridisation.* Anthropologists frequently engage with ideas and debates initiated in other fields, thereby making new alliances, or example, between anthropology and geography, or creating new sub-disciplines like medical anthropology. There are two relevant tensions here. One is that 'applied' branches are consistently viewed as being of lower status than 'pure' anthropology. The second is that some cross-boundary moves align anthropology with more 'respectable' - or better paid - disciplines like economics.

*Engagement and non-academic interaction*. Rick suggested that anthropology's status as a 'field science' meant that researchers were always in contact with the 'outside' world. On the other hand, this does not mean that anthropologists necessarily pick up and pursue emerging topics of global significance. We speculated about why geographers initially latched on to questions of global environmental change faster than anthropologists or sociologists. One possible explanation was that at the time anthropology journals were particularly preoccupied with other debates, specifically about postmodernism and its implications for the field. Whatever the detail, the more general point is that external events catch disciplines and debates at different moments of development.

Although we mostly talked about how non-academic concerns influenced substantive topics of enquiry, Rick introduced an analysis of successive explanations for the decline of Mayan civilisation. This work showed a correlation between favoured explanations and contemporary global political and economic events. By implication, theories are themselves subject to processes of fashion such that popular ways of thinking about the past are those which also seem to make sense of the present.

### Psychology

Vicki Bruce explained that psychology is united by its subject matter, the individual, rather than by methodological or theoretical consensus. The discipline has, for example, experienced major paradigm shifts towards and then away from behaviourism as a dominant perspective. While some psychologists hope to reveal universal processes, others deal with difference and variation, and so the divisions run on. However, one critical and also common feature is that the history and development of psychology reflects its status as an unashamedly 'useful' discipline.

Psychology is about helping, whether through understanding problems or finding ways of improving performance, hence the development of specialist fields like child psychology, sports psychology or occupational psychology and hence the discipline's strong links with industry. Much research is commissioned and used by manufacturers or by public sector organisations and this has undoubtedly influenced the flow of research topics and related developments in theory and method. Student demand is another relevant consideration and one that makes a real difference to the rise and decline of different sub-disciplinary fields. The fact that courses in forensic psychology are currently over-subscribed is, for instance, contributing to the 'visibility' of this area within psychology as a whole.

One further observation was that psychology has been changed, if not transformed, by dramatic increases in computing power over the last few decades. This has opened up new lines of enquiry made possible by new techniques of modelling and experimentation. In the field of cognitive neuroscience – a major growth area within psychology – the development of brain scanning technology and the ability to map mental processes has generated novel research questions and methodological approaches.

**Politics**

In Bob McKinlay's view, the core concerns and organising questions of politics are pretty stable. That said, there have been significant changes in how the political is studied. Analysing the works of key political thinkers is not as popular as it once was. To give another example, the discipline has turned away from traditional concerns regarding the nation state, national politics and diplomacy and now deals with a much more internationalised and global menu of topics and issues. International relations has become a central theme yet the study of international diplomacy, its predecessor, had never been more than a topic of specialist interest. This might be because people (including students) experience the world around them in more global terms or because politics, as a discipline, has absorbed concepts and concerns initially developed elsewhere. On which point, Bob suggested that intellectual trends tend to be reactive rather than driven from within. Even then, it takes time for momentum and critical mass to build up such that political scientists notice and engage with themes preoccupying other social scientists.

Meanwhile, political events generate a steady stream of new issues. Until a few years ago, questions of security and terrorism were of interest to a handful of experts working at the margins of the discipline. External events have been such that these people are now much in demand within the discipline and the wider world.

As represented at the workshop, politics figured as a theoretically conservative discipline but one in which sub-fields emerge and disappear in response to things that happen in the real world.

**Sociology of Education**

Two decades ago British sociology departments would have probably included someone who specialised in education. Developments within the 'home' discipline have changed the way in which departments are organised and, as Rosemary Deem observed, few are now structured around recognised social problems like those of education, crime or poverty. This has been particularly disorienting for the sociology of education, a field that has been developed within teacher training colleges, that is located somewhere between practice and academia and in which research agendas are strongly connected to national and international policy. Despite, or perhaps

because of increasing interest in evidence based policy and a growing practical and political role for the sociology of education, institutional and intellectual priorities within sociology have edged this field out.

This raised the more general question of how and why disciplines come together to form new sub-disciplinary areas; for instance, why is there a sociology but not a politics of education? We went on to talk about processes of edging in and edging out with reference to women's studies. Themes that were of marginal interest to other disciplines, but central for women's studies, have become so important - partly because of women's studies - that they have been re-absorbed back into more established disciplines. A victim of its own success, the need for separate departments of women's studies is increasingly unclear.

**Higher Education**

Higher education research is new: so new that there are only three generations of researchers, all of whom borrow concepts and ideas from other fields. Malcolm Tight talked about the 406 higher education research articles he had analysed. He found that the majority had little or no engagement with theory or method, a feature that led him to conclude that higher education research is more like a community of practice than an intellectual field of enquiry. The substance of higher education research is strongly influenced by policy and by the institutional location of its practitioners, many of whom work in centres of teaching and learning rather than in mainstream academic departments.

**Economics**

In discussing economics, we relied heavily on recent work by Ben Fine. Ben describes two modes of economics imperialism. He suggests that at certain points in its history, economics has advanced by stripping out the social, for example by assuming perfect markets and so generating pure, 'scientific' or at least mathematical models. At other points it has advanced by bringing the social back in, for example, recognising market imperfections and showing how these might be dealt with.

These moves relate to policy in interesting ways. Consumers, users and funders of economics sometimes favour purified formalistic and in a sense unreal models because such unrealism renders (or appears to render) the messy social world more tractable. At other times the gap between abstract models and the real world constitutes a problem, hence growing policy interest in what Fine describes as 'information theoretic' economics - i.e. that which recognises and studies market imperfection. The critical point, or at least critical for a discussion of non-academic interaction, is that policy preferences and priorities are themselves shaped by developments within economics.

Fine explains that the reappropriation of the social has resulted in 'the creation or renewal of a range of '*new*' fields within and around economics [such as] the new institutional economics, the new economic sociology, the new political economy, the new growth theory, the new economic geography' and so on. While economics might appear to be engaging with a wider range of ideas than before, Fine argues that this is an illusion. It is so because economics selectively appropriates only those materials and concepts that are consistent with a particular form of methodological individualism. These observations inspired a more general discussion about how disciplines interact and how processes of colonisation and resistance work out in practice.

**Summary and comment**

The table below groups together comments and observations made about each discipline with reference to a) internal dynamics b) methodology and c) external influences.

Table 1. Observations made about different disciplines

| | **Internal dynamics** | **Methodology** | **External influences** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Anthropology** | Internally pure core but with possible paradigm disputes | Field based or engaged | Applied is seen as lower status |
| **Psychology** | Differences of method, but united around individual | Both methods and problems transformed through various occurrences such as technology | There to 'help', so grow around others problems; applied is normal |
| **Politics** | Same core concerns, different and changing expression of them | From key thinkers and 'great man' to key issues | Respond thematically to events in the wider world (globalisation, security etc.) |
| **Sociology of education** | Caught between existing disciplines. Taking over unoccupied territory | Empirical of central importance; field based. | Educational dimension, at least, is policy oriented, externally funded and evidence based |
| **Higher education research** | Not exactly a discipline - contexts of employment matter (including survival) Effort to build a core. | Method and theory 'parasitic' | Also policy oriented. |
| **Economics** | Same core concerns, different modes of advance (imperialism) - through removing or adding the social | Methodological individualism unwavering - some formalistic, some relatively contextualised | Pressure from 'external' consumers - formalism failing so policy requires reappropriation of 'the social' - ***but*** policy preferences are influenced by economics. |

As the table illustrates, workshop participants identified a range of direct and indirect avenues and routes through which non-academic concerns touched academic priorities. The table also shows that substance matters - politics can't but be engaged with real-world events; psychology is organised around a commitment to being useful; problem-oriented subjects like education are tied into public policy, anthropologists do field work, and so on. These differences have some bearing upon what we might think of as a discipline's non-academic orientation. In some cases being 'applied' is normal, valued and high status. In others it is quite the reverse. In the workshop participants' experience, student numbers and interests sometimes influence research priorities. In this respect scale is undoubtedly important - total student numbers are, for instance, much greater in psychology than in anthropology.

In the next section we turn from workshop participants' experience to a review of theories and ideas about how disciplines develop. What might we learn from this about *interactive* agenda setting?

## 2. How do disciplines develop? Comparing theories

In preparation for the workshop we produced a background paper which included a summary and brief discussion of Abbott, (2001), *The Chaos of Disciplines*, Becher and Trowler (2001), *Academic Tribes and Territories Intellectual Enquiry and the Culture of Disciplines,* and Whitley (1984). *The Intellectual and Social Organization of the Sciences*. The paper can be found at: http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/research/projects/iass/discpline%20discussion%20paper.pdf

In the workshop discussion itself we talked about what each of these books, and the arguments, models and theories presented within them, might mean for *interactive* agenda setting. We also introduced further ideas - some drawn from a review of the 'Finalisation thesis' (Chris Caswill's note on finalisation theory is included as an appendix to this report), some from Randall Collins' (1998) book on the development of philosophy.

Rather than going over the central arguments again, the next few paragraphs consider their relevance for an understanding of the relation between academic and non-academic priorities.

We begin by commenting on the institutional analyses of Becher and Trowler, Whitley and their relation to 'Finalisation Theory' as outlined by Chris Caswill. Becher and Trowler and Whitley describe and analyse two intersecting institutions: disciplines and the universities in which they exist. They have much to say about the properties and characteristics of different disciplines at different stages of development. For example, Becher and Trowler present an evolutionary model in which pre-paradigmatic confusion and diversity turns into paradigmatic clarity resulting in disciplines organised around recognised intentions, goals and practices.

Where they occur at all, questions about non-academic influence are typically discussed with reference to a discipline's ability or otherwise to resist unwanted interference. Whitley, for instance, writes about the shifting balance of control and what the management of uncertainty means for the relative influence of academics, funders and university administrators.

Workshop participants recognised and echoed many of these points, but also suggested that these representations of academic life over state the opposition between academic and non-academic interests (after all, psychology *wants* to be useful!), and under state the range of ways in which research agendas are shaped. Most obviously, non-academic interests are not simply expressed by university administrations or via commissioned research. There is, for instance, more than this at stake in the internationalisation of politics.

The idea that disciplines go through different stages of development is important for Becher and Trowler, for Whitley and for Finalisation theory but not for the immediate experience of individual academics. Someone mentioned that competition for jobs is fiercer in established fields than in new or emerging sub-disciplines. Someone else noticed that disciplines did not always progress towards greater coherence (see for example processes of fragmentation rather than consolidation within anthropology),

but that was about it. This is no doubt a matter of perspective. Disciplines look different to those who are within them than to those who track long term developments from the outside.

The notion that that cycles of deliberate retreat and active non-academic engagement are important for theoretical advance remains interesting (Finalisation theory and Collins). Closeness to or distance from non-academic concerns was generally taken to be an enduring characteristic of an entire field, not a moment in its development. Perhaps because of this we did not spot instances in which disciplines actively sought non-academic interaction in order to stimulate and inspire theoretical development (in the policy-related cases we examined (e.g. education) theories were routinely borrowed from elsewhere) - which is not to say that such moments do not exist.

Interdisciplinary borrowing, for instance between sociology and higher education research, maybe supports a cross-disciplinary version of the cyclical model - i.e. some disciplines specialise in non-academic engagement, others in theoretical development. A number of workshop participants represented their disciplines in terms of a 'core' (traditional, unified) and a peripheral 'margin', this being the more experimental location of non-academic interaction and associated forms of theoretical innovation. Resulting concepts and concerns either fizzle out in the safety of the margin, or gradually become important for the core. Either way, what matters is the circulation of problems and of ideas between 'cores' and 'peripheries' or between different disciplines, or between one moment of disciplinary development and another.

More abstractly it is clear that Finalisation theory provides a somewhat more positive way of thinking about cognitive phases and hence about the momentary importance and momentary irrelevance of non-academic engagement than either Becher and Trowler or Whitley.

Inspired by Andrew Abbott's work, we also talked about basic processes of disciplinary development and about the relevance of his fractal model for a discussion of non-academic interaction. As noted in the background paper, *The Chaos of Disciplines* deals with the internal dynamics of American sociology in particular. By way of a very brief reminder, Abbott's main argument is that disciplines develop through a process of fractal division and (sometimes) convergence. Contests between branches produce winners and losers. The concerns of a defeated branch are typically 're-mapped' onto another existing branch within the overall structure. The number of flourishing branches depends upon available resources, including jobs and space in journals and it is here, and only here, that non-academic considerations explicitly enter the frame.

But what if Abbott's fractal model worked as well in understanding how non-academic agendas unfold? We might then consider the *relation* between different but sometimes intersecting family trees of co-evolving preoccupations within but also beyond the academic domain. Like Abbott, Randall Collins deals with basic processes of disciplinary development. Again division and theoretical contest is a central mechanism. In also recognising the centrality of co-existing social networks and pathways of inter-generational transfer, and in seeing these as the 'carriers' of concepts Collins reminds us to pay attention to the movement of ideas (or the crossing over of branches) between academic and non-academic domains.

In writing these notes, we have sought to bring some order and coherence to a set of rather different ideas that deal with rather different aspects of disciplinary

development. We have yet to find a way of tying these elements together but in and amongst all this we have the suspicion that some aspects are more important for understanding *interactive* agenda setting than others.

**3. Careers, carriers and other questions**

In the last part of the workshop we compared career histories. We did so on the grounds that disciplines and research areas develop through the actions of those who follow them, and through their ability to attract, recruit and retain new members.

One striking feature was that individual careers were much more obviously swayed by non-academic considerations than were the histories of the disciplines we considered. Again this is likely to be an artifact of method and analytic perspective. Even so, personal trajectories were tangibly influenced not only by chance encounters but also by particularly influential timing, for instance in first securing research funding, or in getting support to establish a research network that in turn provided a lasting cohort of colleagues and sub-disciplinary compatriots. Equally the availability (or not) of jobs in particular areas came back into view.

This discussion also reminded us that academics are people who have lives and non-academic friends, and who contribute to the wider community as school governors, floorball players or whatever. These forms of everyday engagement proved useful and relevant for work-related research more commonly than we might have expected.

Picking up one of the threads introduced above, social networks were critical for (personal) disciplinary development both within the academic frame and outside it. What Abbott refers to as inter-generational cycles were also transparently relevant. This was not simply a matter of PhD students following in the footsteps of their supervisors. While this was sometimes significant, so was being part of a cohort that shared particular experiences and expectations.

We did not go out of our way to look for them, but in the course of the discussion we identified a handful of questions relating to the fact that all the disciplines considered inhabit roughly the same cultural, political and institutional environment. This made us wonder about cross-disciplinary trends. For instance how did the 'cultural turn', or the 'turn' away from postmodernism and discourse, or the 'turn' away from pure-market neo-liberal models take hold in different disciplines, and how were these 'turns' made real and reproduced through the research activities of different generations of social scientists?

Finally, we touched upon a theme surprisingly absent from the rest of our discussion. This related to the internationalisation of academic research and the flow of fashionable research topics within globally distributed sub-disciplinary groups and research communities. Are these circulating research agendas shaped by correspondingly distributed non-academic concerns? Is the situation one in which 'localised' non-academic interests rub up against rafts of academic priorities that have a trans-national momentum of their own? Most likely it is a bit of both.

As this report indicates, the workshop touched upon an impressively wide range of issues, many of which have some bearing on *interactive* agenda setting in social science disciplines. Exactly which of these really matter, when, where and under what circumstances remains something of a mystery.

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Chris Harty

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**References**

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**External influence on scientific agendas: Refreshing the 'Finalisation' debate**
Chris Caswill

Draft summary report of a presentation given at the Interactive Agenda Setting Workshop, Coseners' House, Abingdon, 18-19 November 2004

Few systematic attempts have been made to study the circumstances in which societal requirements, interests and priorities exert influence on the development of scientific disciplines. One notable exception was work of the Max Planck "Alternatives in Science" Group based in Starnberg, Germany, in the 1970s. Members included Gernot Boehme, Wolfgang van den Daele, Wolfgang Krohn and Wolf Schaefer. Their programme became known in English as "Finalisation", translated from the German "Finalisierung". In their words, "Finalisation is a process through which through which external goals for science become the guidelines of the development of the scientific theory itself." (Boehme et al, 1976). They produced a chronological account of scientific development, whereby science advances in three phases of theoretical development. These can be described as:

- Exploratory
- Paradigmatic, moving to maturity
- Post-paradigmatic, after maturity

The first phase is characterised by inadequate theorisation, nicely described by Boehme et al (op. cit., 1976) as "(resembling) the experimenting of amateur inventors at the beginning of the modern era". The subsequent period of maturity is driven by the need to develop fundamental theory. Theoretical problems dictate the agenda and the boundaries – these "self-regulatives" in effect render the discipline or field immune from effective outside influence. In the third phase, the fundamental theory has been developed and now begins to be specialised and differentiated. External agendas begin to influence those processes, and the point is reached where interesting progress comes to depend on tackling practical problems. This, in very brief summary, is finalisation.

To this analysis, the Starnberg Group added an interesting coda about "functionalisation". They identified some fields where enquiry into functional relationships in effect led to the abandonment of what they called theoretical enquiry, namely the search for causality. The pursuit of functionalised enquiry was seen as being closely related to the complexity of the object(s) of study. One of its main characteristics was said to be the loss of any scientific "self-regulative" and hence it was susceptible to policy influence.

Though apparently theoretical and historical in its approach, the Finalisation programme became deeply controversial in Germany. A number of contentious and highly publicised conferences were followed by a review of the Group, which was closed down in 1981. The researchers had made no secret of their radical interest in the shaping of science for social benefit. This seems to have provoked a strong hostile reaction in a Germany where independence of science from the state and social influence was a cornerstone of the post-war democratic settlement. The programme of work came to an end though one or two publications emerged in the 1980s. We can speculate also that the search for meta-explanations of scientific change fell out of favour in a field of science and technology studies where the beliefs, behaviours and networks of individual actors became the dominant paradigm.

Yet we can look back today on the Finalisation debates and find much of relevance for 21st Century science and science policy. This remains one of the few serious attempts to discuss external effects on scientific disciplines in terms of science. The Finalisation phase of their three-phase model seems a more useful and interesting basis for assessing science policy interventions than, for example Kuhn's more cataclysmic idea of breaking out of the scientific paradigm (Kuhn, 1962). And it appears, prima facie, to resonate with some developments in those social sciences where causality remains central, such as economics and psychology. Other social sciences can perhaps be seen as exemplars of the Starnberg concept of "functionalisation", and thereby susceptible to external intervention in other ways. In the 1970s, the Starnberg Group observed that study of science policy was theoretically weak and criticised it for failing to take account of the conditions for scientific growth (Boehme et al, 1976). It could be argued that little has changed. In any event few if any research funding agencies seem to have grasped the central cognitive phases point, that there are times in the development of fields and disciplines when they are more (and less) susceptible to policy intervention.

Last but not least the Starnberg programme laid down a very topical challenge for science. There will be stages of scientific development where external agendas will become influential. At such times will science adopt the agendas of power? Or look to other agendas, exporting it's own communal ethos into the external world? The actual social relations of "finalised research" are surely central to today's debates on shaping scientific and technological activity and outcomes.

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Kuhn, T. (1962) "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions", University of Chicago Press, Chicago