No Impact People? Reframing research impact in the social sciences

Responding to a call for renewed thinking about how [we understand and measure social science impact](#) by Ziyad Marar, **Ron Kassimir***, outlines how the way in which impact is figured in the social sciences is often dependent on those external to its production. Returning to three fundamental questions around where social science makes a difference, the power of concepts and impact as vocation, he points to a style of impact that is intrinsic to the social sciences.*

Perhaps you have seen the documentary [No Impact Man](#), which traces the efforts of a family of New York City urbanites to approach zero (negative) impact on the environment for a year. The results were decidedly mixed, but it was clear that the attempt to have no impact garnered a good deal of attention from the press and the public.

We social scientists have the opposite problem. We are seeking ourselves – and called upon by others – to have, and to be able to demonstrate as having, a (positive) impact on our "environment." The perennial demand for social science research to justify itself in terms of impact tends to put us on the defensive. We keep having to repeat that, in fact, we are not "no impact people." And we long for the impact we do have, to gain the kind of attention that *No Impact Man* got for… well, essentially not making things worse.

Here I ask three questions about social science and offer three brief and incomplete answers to each of them.

- What environments does social science seek to impact?
- What aspects of social science research can, or should, have impact?
- Why are we worried about impact in the first place?

What are the things that social science research can (or should) have an impact upon? Anne-Wil Harzing at the Middlesex University Business School did a good job [unpacking impact](#) as part of a recent series of blogs examining these questions. As she argues, what counts as impact, and how one measures it, can look very different if the purpose is to; one, advance or create a scholarly field, or two, solve a social problem, or at least make the problem less, um, problematic.

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I would add a third arena for impact, one which echoes Marar's call for imagining impact in the long-term. Let's call this arena the public sphere, or perhaps the "public mind." From "social network" to "intersectionality" to "nudges" to "externalities" – you will have your favourites – social science concepts spill out into broader discourse and debate. We need to get better at chronicling and calling attention to these influences, and to understanding how they happen. One knock on social science is that most of our findings reflect common-sense understandings. But there are times when our work has entered public conversations in ways that shape what counts as common-sense. And that's an impact, too.

Second, let's unpack what we might mean by "social science" when we are concerned about its impact and what measuring that impact might consist of. Consider three levels of abstraction that capture the things social scientists do that, in principle, can have influence: data collection and presentation, analysis, and concept formation.

Empirical knowledge – of various kinds – is essential to identifying the extent of a public issue, what different people think or feel about, and what if anything they are doing about it. But, to actually address the problem, this information must be analysed – i.e. the meaningfulness of the data must be asserted, and that assertion should be compared with other possible interpretations and explanations. Lastly, concepts help us, and potentially others, frame the "problem," see its relationship to other issues, and even whether the "problem" may be different than we first imagined.

Third, let's step back for a moment and ask why we are so tied in knots about having, demonstrating and measuring impact. Here again, there are (at least) three answers to this question – related but distinct. First, we care about impact because it enhances the status and reputations of social scientists, and sometimes their institutions. This is especially important regarding impact on a broader field of scholarship, as Marar points out. But, as attention to broader social impact becomes greater, other reputational economies may be emerging within segments of the social science community.

Next, and let's be honest here, we worry about impact because that is increasingly, if not only, what the funders of social science research expect. And impact here almost always means impact outside the world of scholarship. In the academy and elsewhere, to some degree who pays the piper calls the tune. And the pipers' patrons often see research support as valuable principally as a means to some other end – social justice, addressing climate change, etc.

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But lastly, and relatively autonomous from career ambitions and funder expectations, many social scientists see "impact" as an ethical imperative. And I would argue, based solely on observation and anecdotes, that this is especially the case among younger social scientists, some of whom are challenging the trade-off presented to them between career progress and having impact (of different kinds, in different ways) in "the world." The prospect of having a "both-and" rather than an "either-or" relationship between impact on the academic field and on matters of public importance is unclear. (The team at HuMetricsHSS, which describes itself as ' a group engaged in rethinking institutional practices of scholarly assessment,' has made a [solid attempt](#), for example.)

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However, that turns out, one reason that many social scientists care about impact – and how they know whether their work affects the world (ideally in positive ways) – is that they see in social science the promise of, and a path for knowledge – data, analysis, concepts – shaping the world they want to make.

This post was first published on Social Science Space as [Unpacking Impact](#) and forms part of a larger series of publications on [Measuring Social Science Impact](#).

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