Academics may not be celebrities, but their careful research is improving public policy

blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/06/18/the-big-idea/

Last week Phillip Blond proposed a simplistic solution to the problem of why academics are failing to make policy impacts: less evidence, more "big ideas". **Robert Ford** *and* **Matthew Goodwin** *find substantial flaws in this reasoning. Academics are in fact, already impacting policy. While rigorous analysis is not as glamorous as the sweeping grand narrative, it is essential to determine which ideas should impact policy and politics.*

Henry Mencken once noted that there is always an easy solution to every human problem: neat, plausible and wrong. Last week, think-tanker Phillip Blond outlined his own easy solution to the 'problem' of academics not impacting on policy. Blond called on British academics to start supplying 'the big ideas' that are apparently oozing out of their American counterparts. 'British academics', he writes, 'rarely seem to make an impact'. Academically they may be world leaders. But in terms of policy 'they rarely supply the big idea'. Where is the British Malcolm Gladwell, Nassim Taleb, Richard Thaler or Cass Sunstein? Blond says he cannot think of a single British academic who has had a "serious, sustained or systematic" impact on public policy.

The message for academics- argues Blond – is clear. They need to think bigger. They need to think about ideas first, and evidence second. And they should stop relying on large, 'value free' studies. Naturally, it was not long until conservatives seized on the essay to demand that we 'stop wasting money' on social science research, which they associated with 'centre left preconceptions you'd expect from people who work for the BBC'. While we sympathise with Blond's general call for academics to think more ambitiously, and for better institutional channels for translating ideas into policy, we believe he is mistaken in many of the points he seeks to make.

First, Blond's essay seems curiously outdated. He has arrived late to a debate that has already been raging within British social science for several years, stimulated in part by an explicit demand from Britain's research councils that academics demonstrate precisely the kind of "serious, sustained, systematic" impact he calls for. How to impact policy is a question that academics are actively debating in many forums, including this blog. Research councils are actively supporting this debate, through things like knowledge exchange grants. If Blond wants to inform this debate, he should at least research it properly.

Second, the public intellectuals praised by Blond all employ the data-driven, evidence-led approach that he argues is problematic. Thaler and Sunstein's "Nudge" popularises decades of research in behavioural economics and psychology. Jacob Hacker's careful and empirically grounded research draws on an impressive body of "big data" studies that American social scientists have compiled over decades. Taleb and Gladwell also fill their narratives with evidence from long running academic research agendas. All of these authors rely on precisely the kind of research that Blond claims is holding their British cousins back.

Third, the claim that academic evidence only has impact when it is accompanied by the big and transformative idea is simply flawed. Blond struggles 'to think of any serious, sustained or systematic impact by British academics on public policy'. Well, here are a few (and excluding economists whose impact is even more obvious).

- On inequality, academics like Sir Michael Marmot, Richard Wilkinson, Kate Pickett and Danny Dorling have built big ideas rooted in analysis of large data to shape international policy agendas.

- On social cohesion, academics like Ted Cantle and Harris Beidar reframed our integration policy, while social psychologist Miles Hewstone has used the insights of contact theory to help rebuild community relations.

- [The Oxford Migration Observatory](#) draws on large data to bring objective and informed analysis to the contentious immigration debate.

- And the task of applying the 'Nudge' idea, which Blond cites approvingly, has fallen to a British academic, [David Halpern](#), at the centre of government.

- We could go on: academics who have shaped debates over the [voting age](#), [political apathy](#), [the political representation of minorities](#), [the effect of austerity on women](#), [inequalities in university admissions](#), [extremism](#)…

Fourth, Blond's call for 'big ideas' ignores the reality of how this research gains traction in the public square. He mistakes the packaging for the product. Public academics don't gain influence simply because they came up with a catchy idea (although this helps). Their public authority often flows from decades of research, vetted by their (non-celebrity) peers. Behind every big idea is an army of academics who test that idea. And rightly so, given that the big ideas that are loved by Blond have often been wrong. Take the 'big idea' of American academic Robert Putnam: that rising ethnic diversity [undermines social trust](#). This big idea had a huge impact on [British public debate](#) and policy, but has since [been called into question by a series of careful academic studies](#) (although these academics don't tend to get invited into government). Or how about the influential big idea by Rogoff and Reinhart: that countries enter a ["danger zone"](#) if their public debt rises too high, a big idea used widely and enthusiastically by proponents of austerity. This one was undermined by a graduate student, who pointed to [an error on their excel spreadsheet](#). Careful testing is not as glamorous as the sweeping argument. But it is essential if we want the right ideas to impact on policy and politics.

Malcolm Gladwell. Image Credit: Thomas Bonte (CC-BY)

This brings us to our final point. The simple reality is that better policy comes less from the big ideas, than from clear theory that is tested with good data. The great revolution in the social sciences has not been the commercialisation of academic research, but the [application of experimental methods](#) to help apply the rigor of "hard" science to test ideas in the social sciences. Blond seems unaware of this revolution, which is transforming how we think about a plethora of issues, from [identifying discrimination](#) to [fighting poverty](#) to [increasing political engagement](#). This research agenda is (thankfully) the complete opposite of the arm-waving grand narrative that Blond admires: modest but clear theories about how people behave are developed; we test them in the field; and then we use the results to improve policy and, ultimately, society.

British academics are already providing "serious, sustained, systematic" input into the policy process, but the kind of negative stereotypes Blond advances in his essay – of narrow minded, ideologically driven, incurious and disengaged dons – are widespread and do harm, hampering the kind of policy impact he is calling for. In America, politicians making [similar arguments](#) to Blond – that large data driven research projects are irrelevant – recently voted to cut off all federal funding for political science research. Some UK commentators have already seized on Blond's thesis to [call for the same](#). Blond therefore risks damaging the very kind of research he wants to promote. The likes of Jacob Hacker will have a much harder time writing their next big idea book, when the data they need to develop it is no longer available. This data loss is already happening in the UK, and [undermining the ability of academics to test ideas](#). We hope that Blond, and those who sympathise with him, will give these ideas some serious thought, even though we present no grand narrative and neither of us are celebrities.

A shorter version of this piece can be found on the [Guardian's Higher Education Network](#) and is republished with permission.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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