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WHY THE
SOCIAL
SCIENCES
MATTER

EDITED BY

JONATHAN MICHIE

& CARY L. COOPER



Why the Social Sciences Matter

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Edited by

Jonathan Michie

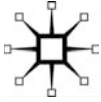
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Foreword

The post-war American social scientist, C. Wright Mills, once wrote of the obligation to turn ‘private troubles’ into ‘public issues’. He was referring specifically to the discipline of sociology, but this aphorism applies to the social sciences more generally.

It seems strange, therefore, that at the present time social science is under such virulent political attack in the United States, where federal research funding has to meet extraordinarily restrictive – and politically motivated – criteria relating to short-term utility and national security. And this is aimed at the most prestigious and influential social science research community in the world.

These things go in cycles (Wright Mills himself suffered from the McCarthyite witch hunts of the 1950s) and the counter-veiling civilising impulses of American society will doubtless see the cycle turn once more. But in the aftermath of the post-2008 global financial crisis, it is scarcely surprising that segments of American public and political opinion have fastened upon the economics discipline in particular, and the social sciences more generally, as a convenient scapegoat.

One can observe distant, and muted, echoes of this in comments in the press and media in this country – and of course we witnessed the attempt to abolish the (then) Social Science Research Council in the 1980s. But no one seriously proposes the abolition of the Economic and Social Research Council today – and if that signifies a kind of progress, it is equally the case that the public acceptance of the importance of the social sciences cannot be taken for granted.

In the UK, the history of many social science disciplines emerges out of Wright Mills’ distinction. Private troubles became public issues by virtue of detailed empirical enquiry providing both the evidence for public reform and a realisation that there were causes of private troubles which lay beyond the purview of the individual either to understand or remedy them. This was the classic Fabian agenda. Although it was never quite as simple as this, it at least provided a role for social science which remains a component of public discourse up until the present.

So it does no harm, from time to time, to reassert the importance of social science in building a civilised and civilising society. If we look at the so-called research ‘grand challenges’ of RCUK or the European

Commission – climate change, sustainable resource utilisation, food security, public health, and so on – can anyone seriously claim that they do not have a social science dimension? And neither are we referring to consequences just of scientific and technological innovation, but also of the socio-economic conditions which foster, or inhibit, such change.

Social science is about evidence, but not only this. It is also about ideas, insight, understanding and, crucially, debate when there are no simple solutions to our collective private troubles. As a community we should not be over-defensive but it behoves us to demonstrate our value. The following chapters do just that.

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Introduction

Jonathan Michie and Cary L. Cooper

Just opening a newspaper serves as a reminder of the problems with which society is beset – problems big and small. Banks are in trouble; climate change threatens; the worsening headache of caring for increasingly frail elderly parents; householders being charged for rubbish disposal; youngsters on the rampage; phone hacking; furious rows about ‘genetic engineering’; the unsayable about immigration haunting policies on unemployment; another family grieving for their dead soldier child who did not come home from an expensive war. Public issues and private troubles are as interlaced as ever. And, big or small, problems need solutions and solutions need to be based on accurate and suitable information, and on a proper understanding of the issues involved.

This volume takes a considered look at a selection of problems such as these. In the process it showcases contemporary work in the social sciences. It consists of eleven specially commissioned essays on topics of prime concern at the beginning of the twentieth century to all in the United Kingdom (UK) – and globally. All tackle difficult questions and involve problems that are complex and hard to solve. Above all, each essay in its own way illuminates why having an understanding of a social scientific ‘take’ on the topic in question provides a grasp that would not be provided by any other ‘knowledge producer’; in other words, the chapters make plain what is distinctive and thus invaluable about whichever social science is being presented, and why social science needs to be included if these issues are to be properly understood, and appropriate policies developed.

What sets this book apart from others is that all its chapters are written by experienced social scientists who work at the cutting edge of their respective research fields. Of course there is a wide array of writing on each topic by journalists or politicians, activists and self-appointed

commentators, from think-tanks and non-governmental organization's (NGOs), along with a steady stream of official documents, statistics and reports from governments and others in the UK, the EU and further afield. What sets this collection apart from those other contributions is that it presents the upshot of systematic scholarly investigation. Certainly the best of those others draw, from time to time, on this scholarship, as well as adding to it: the boundaries are permeable. Here, though, is the chance to read that scholarship first hand. Thus scholarly virtues are made apparent. So the book displays how the considerable complexity of each topic is grasped intellectually, and sets out the way research is methodically undertaken, with the results analysed and presented even-handedly. It confirms the good reasons for pursuing evidence-based policy.

The book originates in the UK – enjoying the active support of the Academy of Social Sciences. But it is not exclusively UK focused. This is partly because it recognises that problems of the sort referred to above are not exclusive to the UK. Partly too because the contemporary world and its concerns are heavily interconnected. Also, most importantly, scholarship transcends national borders. The various contributors have looked beyond the shores of the British Isles, not just to compare and contrast but also to analyse transnational consequences, and cross border effects and implications.

This volume is timely in analysing pressing problems, and is also timely in helping make the case regarding the indispensability of the social sciences. Social scientists may be forgiven for being troubled by UK trends in funding undergraduate training and the 'impact' agenda in research. It would be curious for a group not to react with alarm when a government introduces policies affecting directly – and seemingly adversely – their interests. So as a side effect, albeit a most important one, this volume helps demonstrate the value of attempting to understand social life now and into the future. It builds on and complements the series of lectures and publications launched by the Academy of Social Sciences in 2010 under the heading of 'Making the Case for the Social Sciences'.

Overview

In Chapter 1, on Social Science, Parenting and Child Development, Pasco Fearon, Chloe Campbell and Lynne Murray analyse the study of children's development, arguing that it represents a key area in which social science can make a vital contribution to scientific knowledge, clinical

practice, social policy and wider society. They give examples that serve to illustrate this kind of approach, and the ways in which child development research is enriching our understanding of the importance of parenting for children's healthy social, cognitive and emotional development. Specifically, they provide an overview of research on attachment and postnatal depression, and examine what is currently known about the effects of these on child development, the social interaction mechanisms that convey risk, and the ways in which these two areas of research have been used to develop intervention programmes and reshape social and health policy.

In Chapter 2, on Health and Wellbeing, James Campbell Quick, Robert Gatchel and Cary L. Cooper draw on the practice of preventive health management, on established learning principles, on behavioural and social sciences, and on emerging positive practices. The Chapter opens with a discussion of the major preventable health risks that can undermine health and wellbeing. By building on strengths, guarding against risks and compensating for vulnerabilities, health and wellbeing can be enhanced. The chapter next shows how established learning principles offer powerful and positive ways to advance health and wellbeing through the behavioural and social sciences. Three specific learning pathways are through: classical conditioning; operant conditioning; and observational learning, or modelling. Attention is given to the environmental context within which learning occurs, especially the work environment. The chapter concludes with a section on positive psychological and organisational wellbeing as enhanced through the behavioural and social sciences.

In Chapter 3, on Climate Change and Society, John Urry demonstrates just why society is so important in analysing the nature of climate change. And because society is important, so the social sciences need to be brought directly into examining the causes of change – and the likely ways in which climate change might be mitigated. So far the social sciences have played a minor role by comparison with the physical sciences and economics. The chapter explores the many ways in which society is central to changing climates – and the mitigation of such changes. This is not just a question of changing what individuals do, but of changing whole *systems* of economic, technological and social practice, which presuppose patterns of social life which become embedded and relatively unchanging for long periods. These high carbon systems have locked into social life – and breaking these lock-ins is particularly challenging. It is the need to understand those systems that make the social sciences key to future analysis and policy development.

In Chapter 4, on Waste, Resource Recovery and Labour: Recycling Economies in the EU, Nicky Gregson and Mike Crang show that the social sciences are critical to the challenge of turning wastes into resources via materials recovery and recycling. For wastes to become resources they have to become products, bought and sold in markets. Economics, and the economic geographies of manufacturing, matter when it comes to deciding what can be done, where, with particular wastes. The chapter draws on original research in three sectors – dry recyclables, ship recycling and textiles recovery – to show the difficulties that confront the policy goal of turning the European Union (EU) into a recycling economy. It shows that recycling in the EU is positioned in the secondary labour market; that these jobs are characterised by itinerant migrant labour, often from East and Central Europe (ECE); and that low-grade products require global recycling networks to realise value.

In Chapter 5, on Poverty and Inequality, Rod Hick argues that the problems of poverty and inequality remain important public – and political – concerns. Hick examines the literature on poverty and inequality, drawing on two cases. The first involves some of the early analysis of poverty in the UK in the nineteenth century, and Hick shows how the discussion of contemporary poverty analysis has built on this earlier tradition; the second is the recent publication, and subsequent debate surrounding *The Spirit Level*, by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett. The chapter argues that, as partially observable phenomena, there is much about poverty and inequality which is readily accessible to the ‘non-expert’. The contribution which the social sciences can make is, Hick argues, in terms of the rigour to which the social sciences can aspire in understanding the social world.

In Chapter 6, on The Economy, Financial Stability and Sustainable Growth, Jonathan Michie argues that social science has a major and important role to play in analysing the nature and functioning of the economy. Many of the major economic issues are linked inseparably to other areas of social science research and interest, such as inequality of income and wealth, and the effects of this on society. Indeed, many of the ‘classic’ texts analysing the economy – from Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, to Marx’s *Capital* and Keynes’s *General Theory* – touched on a range of issues beyond the narrowly economic. One such discussion today relates to whether measures of economic growth or progress need to take account of broader aspects than previously thought necessary, whether in welfare or sustainability. The chapter discusses these issues, including with reference to the 2007–2008 global financial crisis,

globalisation, and the need to foster a more corporately diverse economy and financial services sector. In terms of environmental sustainability, the importance of complexity is stressed; it is argued that the economy cannot be understood adequately through 'marginal' analysis, and that instead systems theory and interdisciplinary approaches are called for.

In Chapter 7, on *What Can the Social Sciences Bring to an Understanding of Food Security?*, Camilla Toulmin argues that food security and politics have been closely linked since ancient times. Today, questions of food security focus on how to increase total supply for a possible 9–10 billion people by 2050. It is the job of social scientists to ask difficult questions, place food and agricultural systems in the bigger picture, and ask why, in a world of plenty, a billion people across the world still go hungry. In the last 20 years, social science has helped turn received wisdom on its head, by putting local people, their knowledge, insights and priorities to the fore. This has shown the importance of 'how' food is produced as well as 'how much'. Social science must also offer answers to the big public policy issues of the day, alongside the natural sciences, and address issues of politics, power and interests. Many of the most interesting food security questions cross the biophysical and socio-economic disciplines, and demand a joint approach if a just and sustainable solution is to be found.

In Chapter 8, on *Family, Marriage and Divorce*, Mavis Maclean and Ceridwen Roberts applaud the contribution of accessible and high quality demographic data on the family, but argue for care in interpretation. The chapter debates the value of the contribution of expert social scientists in not only using the data to respond to the questions currently facing policy makers, but also drawing on these data to develop an understanding of emerging issues, and of the questions which policy makers will need to face in the future.

In Chapter 9, on *Crime, Policing and Compliance with the Law*, Mike Hough argues that social scientific research has made a very substantial contribution to specialist academic understanding of crime and its control. The chapter sketches out the contribution that has been made in three areas: our understanding of crime trends; our knowledge of policing and its effects of crime; and the factors that encourage people to comply with the law. The ways in which practitioners and academics think about these issues has been transformed over the last half-century, and social scientific research is a significant factor in achieving this transformation. However, the same research has achieved a much more tenuous hold on political and public discourse about crime, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of the reasons for this, and offers

some thoughts on how social science should aim to extend its reach into highly politicised issues such as ‘law and order’.

In Chapter 10, on Understanding the Arab Spring, Stuart Croft and Oz Hassan demonstrate how the social sciences have contributed to our understanding of why the Arab Spring took place. Moving beyond predominant and immediate narratives, it argues that what the social sciences teach us is a way of analysing unfolding security situations at multiple levels. The chapter demonstrates the roles that demographics, technology, pluralism, political economy, military decisions, historical contexts and global effects played in contributing to the revolutions taking place across the Middle East and North Africa.

Finally, in Chapter 11, on International Migration, Cathy McIlwaine argues that as one of the most important yet most contentious phenomena of our times, international migration has not only grown, but has become increasingly complex. With important temporal and spatial variations in the dynamics and delineations of international migration, it is appropriate to approach understandings of it from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives in order to capture the different scales of analysis, methodologies and theoretical standpoints. The multi-disciplinary nature of the social sciences makes them ideally placed to understand the complexities of international migration movements in ways that other sets of disciplines are unable. Crucially, the social sciences are also central in providing robust and independent research that can challenge the often negative public perceptions of international migration in both destination and source countries.

Conclusion

These contributions make powerful cases across an important array of pressing issues. None of the authors seek to promote the importance of social sciences as against other areas of research or enquiry – on the contrary, the clear message is that to understand the major issues of the day requires genuinely interdisciplinary approaches, and this has to apply across the whole range of academic disciplines as appropriate – certainly not just restricted to the social sciences alone. Thus, to understand climate change of course requires the natural sciences; but equally, it requires an understanding of the worlds of management and business, of consumer behaviour, and of public policy behaviour – all of which require the social sciences. Neither are the authors complacent about the state of social science itself. The need for improved interdisciplinary working applies within the social sciences as well as between social science and other

disciplines. There are thus lessons for us all to learn, in order to understand better the processes at work behind the various policy challenges that society faces, and to then build on this understanding to develop appropriate policy responses. The clear message is that deepening our understanding of many of the major issues facing us and future generations, improving the quality of public discussion, and assisting in the development of effective policy, depends crucially on the social sciences. The social sciences themselves need to rise to this challenge. The authors in their contributions to this book have certainly heeded that call.

1

Social Science, Parenting and Child Development

Pasco Fearon, Chloe Campbell and Lynne Murray

Introduction

Securing and promoting the welfare and healthy development of children should be one of the fundamental priorities, and challenges, for all societies. Despite notable progressive national initiatives, global policy statements, aid programmes and grassroots campaigns that are focused on children's health and wellbeing, many children continue to be exposed to major impediments to their optimal development, including poor parental care, outright abuse and neglect, domestic violence, poorly managed parental mental illness, displacement, poverty and lack of access to high quality educational, intellectual and creative opportunities (Walker et al., 2011). Very cogent arguments have been made that intervention in early child development can reap disproportionately higher returns in social and economic benefits than interventions focused on later periods of the lifespan (Heckman, 2008). Few would deny that the prevention of mental health problems, psychological distress, educational dropout and underachievement, unemployment and social maladjustment is better than cure. However, effective prevention requires a systematic understanding of the developmental mechanisms of maladjustment and a rigorous analysis of what interventions work, and for whom. These, in turn, hinge on critical analysis, rigorous measurement, good theory and carefully executed research.

Social science has a vital role to play in this arena: in systematically documenting the experiences and outcomes of children; in understanding the proximal (those impinging directly on the child) and distal (those contextual factors supporting or maintaining proximal effects on the child) mechanisms that affect children's development; and in

developing and evaluating interventions and policies for changing children's lives for the better.

The ways in which social science has already contributed to children's health and development are too numerous to cover in a short chapter. Instead, we focus on just two examples by way of illustration to show the rigorous, conceptually coherent and principled approaches that social scientists offer for advancing our understanding of child development and delivering new and better ways of promoting children's outcomes across the globe. Inevitably, we are not able to cover the many crucial areas of social science that have made just as much of a contribution as the examples we have chosen. Social science, for example, has produced vital research on typically developing children's language acquisition, peer relations, intellectual development, educational attainment and learning, citizenship and moral development, as well as the development and needs of children with disabilities. All of these domains of research are rich in scientific data and theory, and have been translated into effective social and educational interventions. Social scientists have also initiated some of the most important large-scale surveys that have given the public and policy-makers vital insights into the health, experiences, needs and opinions of children in our societies, such as the UK Household Longitudinal Study (Bradshaw, Keung, Rees and Goswami, 2011), the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (Golding, 1990) and the Millennium Cohort Study (e.g., Sabates and Dex, 2012) in the UK or the NICHD Study of Early Childcare and Youth Development (NICHD, 2005) and the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (e.g., Xue and Meisels, 2004) in the US. UNICEF's report on the quality of childhood, for example, employed social research methods to illustrate the poor standing of the UK on a range of indicators of quality of life for children, including relative poverty and family breakdown (Adamson, 2013). Further UNICEF findings have highlighted how children in the UK feel caught in a 'materialist trap' and do not spend enough time with their families (Ipsos-MORI and Nairn, 2011). A recent carefully conducted report by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) analysed data from a range of national databases in order to track trends in the extent and reporting of child abuse by region across the UK, with a view to developing a consistent methodology for monitoring rates of abuse annually across the country (Harker et al., 2013). Data of this nature could provide vital information for health and social care policy. Thorough scientific evidence is also critical in testing the effectiveness of intervention programmes aimed at promoting child development, and in determining how resources should be channelled

so that the best outcomes for children can be achieved. In that context, social science methodology has played a leading role in rigorously evaluating the outcomes of major child development initiatives, such as the US Head Start Programme, the UK's SureStart Programme, the UK's recent National Evaluation of the Nurse Family Partnership, and Multi-Systemic Therapy for At-Risk Teens. While many of these national projects are supported by research funding agencies, quite a number are also funded directly by government departments, a fact which in itself illustrates both the importance of social science for supporting governmental health and social care strategies, and also the importance, and fruitfulness, of close partnership between academic institutions and government.

While the emphasis in this chapter is on social science, we would want to emphasise that child development research is fundamentally interdisciplinary and the best research – past, current and future – involves the creative team-working of researchers from a broad range of disciplines including psychologists, sociologists, biomedical scientists (neuroscience, physiology, genetics, pharmacology), epidemiologists, economists and statisticians. We strongly believe that the interdisciplinary character of child development research is vital for its continuing vigour as a field.

Mindful of the very incomplete picture we are able to paint of social science's contribution to this area, in this chapter we review two inter-related topics that we have been particularly involved in for some time: 1) parent–child attachment; 2) postnatal depression, and in each case we use the findings to elucidate broader conclusions regarding parenting and its influences on development. In doing so, we hope to show how social scientific thinking and research methods tackle questions of child development and where these fields are taking us in the future.

Parent–child attachment

Attachment theory is arguably the most influential account of the role played by the parent–child relationship in child development. Developed originally by the British Psychiatrist John Bowlby (Bowlby, 1969), it represents a unique integration of thinking from developmental psychology, evolutionary psychology, cognitive science and ethology. According to this model, a primary function (in the evolutionary sense) of a child's bond with his/her primary caregivers is to ensure the child's safety and protection against threats to his/her survival during the very protracted period of juvenile immaturity that characterises human development. Through a series of mechanisms that are still not completely