UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIETAL IMPACT OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIE

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Annotation

Societal impact is an increasingly important evaluation paradigm in science governance. This trend can be seen in the implementation of large-scale impact agendas in various research and innovation systems over the past decade. Examples include the Research Excellence Framework in the United Kingdom, the Standard Evaluation Protocol in Netherlands, or the Excellence in Research framework in Australia. Consequently, research is no longer assessed according to its scientific relevance alone but also according to the value it appears to generate for society. In Germany, where the present study was conducted, the societal impact of research is also at the top of the agenda of policymakers and research funders, although under a variety of terms.

Keywords: Social, humanity, response, discipline, collaborative, arrangements

The Role of Social Sciences and Humanities Disciplines in Response to Societal Problems

There is some controversy about the role that SSH research can play in tackling societal problems: While some scholars argue that these fields should augment and emphasize their transformative potential, others attribute a rather passive role to them, suggesting that they should create system knowledge. One could furthermore argue that the public value of SSH research is not necessarily captured by their usefulness in solving problems but rather by their capacity to critically reflect on the problem itself and its potential solutions. In this regard, the societal impact of SSH research may also be counterintuitive if one expects clear-cut solutions to problems formulated in advance. Critics of an overly narrow conception of impact as research utilization have also pointed out how social science knowledge tends to be used in diverse ways, many of which are implicit for example, observes that expertise can "creep in" as conceptual knowledge that influences ideas and decisions. Compared to the natural and technical sciences, the impact of the SSH is thought to be more indirect and less visible. While utilization of SSH might be discreet, it can also be symbolic to the extent that it is used to justify political decisions that are already made.

In summary, it is possible to identify quite different (often normative) perceptions of the societal role of SSH. Accordingly, the notion of socially relevant knowledge attributed to SSH disciplines varies: from more transformative and instrumental knowledge, to more indirect conceptual knowledge, to more counterintuitive critical knowledge. The different kinds of knowledge evoke quite different understandings of the role that the SSH should play in addressing societal challenges, which motivates our first research question (RQ1): What role is attributed to the SSH in addressing societal challenges?

Challenges for Collaborative Arrangements Involving the SSH and Societal Actors

In the sociology of science, the shift from deficit to dialogue is associated with concepts like "Mode 2," "post-normal science," or "triple helix". These concepts all describe knowledge production as a mode of collaboration between scientific and societal stakeholders. According to a concept of trans disciplinarity, the main challenge for such collaborative arrangements is the integration of differences between actors on an epistemic, social-organizational, and communicative level. As already observed above, at the epistemic level, boundaries between subjects, investigators, and audiences have a tendency to become blurred in SSH research. In collaborative arrangements that involve SSH researchers, questions of boundary work might

therefore be of particular relevance. Furthermore, within the diverse SSH disciplines, there is little consensus on research questions and suitable methods, which poses challenges to the robustness of findings. Regarding the socio-organizational level, the structures that support societal exchange in universities are mostly centrally organized and focused on broad public communication. Questions arise as to how adequate these might be for anticipating the complexities of science in general and of the SSH in particular. Furthermore, the focus on economic indicators as a means of measuring societal impact in the past might have led to structural discrimination against SSH disciplines in organizational efforts to promote societal engagement suggest implementing an array of organizational measures that are believed to be more suitable for SSH disciplines, from increasing resources to fostering the skills of individual researchers. Regarding the communicative level, SSH researchers have frequently been accused of using overly specialized and obscure terms. At the same time, because the social sciences—and to a lesser degree, the humanities—investigate social life, they must deal with the everyday observations and ad hoc assumptions of the individuals with whom they engage.

Some researchers argue that a consensus on values is not the only necessary condition for facilitating cooperation between heterogeneous actors; more importantly the conditions and structures for cooperation must be created. For SSH disciplines, this might come with particular challenges that are not yet well understood. This motivates our second research question (RQ2): What hinders interaction between SSH researchers and societal stakeholders?

Quality Expectations Regarding the Interaction Process

If our aim is to grasp the collaborative settings of knowledge production, we will likely need to go beyond criteria that are either purely academic or targeted towards science communication through the media. The term "socially robust," meaning that knowledge should be scientifically robust and socially useful, is now used frequently to describe quality in these settings. Rather than bridging a cognitive gap (as purely academic projects would do), these new modes of knowledge creation aim to bridge social gaps, i.e., they are geared towards potential users, political decision makers, and entrepreneurs. The authors argue that in these settings, actors must develop social accountability procedures collaboratively. This undertaking produces social demands that differ from those made in disciplinary research because the researchers need to work outside the set of scientific norms that would otherwise guide their practice. This creates new requirements vis-à-vis the outcome. These outcomes are not easily located on a disciplinary map but instead suit the context of application. This will most likely be accompanied by processual requirements to bridge the above-mentioned gaps and to deal with the specific contexts that are addressed by these arrangements.

There are general preconceptions about how collaborative modes of knowledge production might consolidate the quality conceptions of all parties involved. Still, these often remain at an abstract level, which motivates our third research question (RQ3): What do scientific and societal stakeholders perceive as the conditions for good interaction?

Data and Methods

The study is exploratory in that it aims to better understand the societal impact of SSH disciplines by an empirical examination of the role ascribed to SSH research in addressing societal challenges, as well the quality expectations arising in collaborative processes involving SSH researchers. Our findings are based on an online consultation of SSH researchers, societal stakeholders, and intermediaries. We subsequently discussed the results of the consultation with SSH and science researchers in two workshops, where we further scrutinized their implications for assessing the societal impact of SSH.

The selection of participants in the consultation process was deliberate and targeted a) researchers from different SSH disciplines who had experience of knowledge transfer and b) societal stakeholders from politics, media, business, culture, civil society, and public administration who had experience in collaborating with SSH scholars. In order to ascertain that participants did indeed have experience of collaboration, we conducted preliminary interviews, researched specific collaboration projects, and, in the case of researchers, asked learned societies

for nominations. The deliberate selection of participants was necessary in order to ensure that respondents could legitimately provide answers to the partly normative questions. Our final sample consists of 125 responses, of which 36 are SSH scholars, 71 societal stakeholders, and 18 intermediaries. Of the SSH scholars, four participants came from core humanities disciplines (philosophy, legal studies, history), four from economics, thirteen from other social sciences, and one each from pedagogy, linguistics, and design research. Twelve of the researchers did not indicate their disciplinary background. Further, our sample includes a group we describe as "intermediaries." These are individuals that are involved in managing and enabling collaborations between SSH researchers, for example communications officers at universities or independent science communication consultants. We chose to include this group in the consultation because we assumed that they would be uniquely positioned to observe and thus reflect on the conditions of these interactions.

In the scholarly debate, dialogue between representatives from both science and society is understood as a condition for "socially robust" knowledge, i.e., knowledge that is both scientifically robust and socially useful. Consequently, we conceptualize interaction as a prerequisite for societal impact. This motivated us to interrogate challenges in interactive and problem-oriented settings involving SSH disciplines. The challenges we identify can be categorized as translational, institutional, epistemic, and uptake challenges, and they thus correspond roughly to the framework suggested by Jahn et al. (2012). While many of the challenges we identified point to contingent issues, some results stand out.

When it comes to translation, reducing linguistic complexity without being accused of triviality and commonplace hypotheses is a core challenge for SSH disciplines. Some of the societal stakeholders in the consultation describe SSH disciplines as self-referential and the language used as unnecessarily complicated at times. Bridging the "social gap" between science and society thus means that SSH scholars must adapt their language (e.g., their use of terms), although at the risk of compromising their epistemic authority. A problem-oriented interaction with societal stakeholders, however, might contribute to increased "methodological efficiency" as a form of continuous external validation. Regarding institutional challenges, we find initial evidence for a structural disadvantage of SSH disciplines. This might be explained with reference to the fact that the established entrepreneurial heuristic of societal impact carries little significance for SSH disciplines. Epistemic challenges mostly concern the heterogeneity of SSH disciplines and their approaches, intermittently conflicting paradigms, and the dynamic object of study, i.e., society as a moving target. It follows that SSH disciplines produce knowledge that is highly context-dependent, situated, and dynamic. Hence, there are serious limitations regarding the extent to which objective, stable, and context-independent knowledge can be expected from SSH disciplines. This finding is consistent with the self-conception of many SSH disciplines as critical, reflective, and contextual. When it comes to the uptake of SSH knowledge, the consulted representatives note how SSH expertise is not always fully appreciated and may explain to a certain extent the lack of appreciation for SSH research. For example, in the consultation, SSH research is often contrasted with natural science and technical disciplines, whose results are not only perceived as more stable but often as more exciting, too. This resonates with Knudsen, who found a deficit framing for the humanities in Danish print media. explains this lack of appreciation with the close relationship of SSH disciplines to everyday life: "Unlike most natural sciences, where the specialist training, knowledge and equipment of scientists grants them largely uncontested expertise, social scientists' expertise is often about matters of everyday experience and common-sense knowledge".

Taken together, these challenges suggest a twofold implication: The calls for more resources and recognition are on the one hand contingent issues that can give impulses to the governance of science. On the other hand, our results illustrate how the position of the SSH in society is a matter of ongoing negotiations. The identified challenges show how the SSH are caught up in boundary work in their interactions with extra-academic fields. They speak of troubles of SSH researchers to claim their authority, which is linked to epistemic dynamics, that find

expression in language usage, specific temporalities and context-specific results. How the SSH position themselves towards their moving target, the society, becomes even more of a challenge in collaborative formats.

Contextual Quality Configurations

Our empirical findings indicate a three-dimensional framework for ensuring quality in collaborative arrangements involving SSH researchers and societal stakeholders. The first is process-related and describes the expectations of the exchange itself. The second is person-related and describes the expectations towards the people involved. The third is outcome-oriented and includes the expectations of the outcome. In collaborative settings, there will most likely be contradictory expectations of what entitles persons to participate, how interacting partners should behave, and what constitutes relevant knowledge. This leads to conflicts between different expectations of quality that are difficult to avoid, for instance between disinterestedness and empathy, but also within categories, for instance, regarding different understandings of relevance scientific demands for relevance be reconciled with demands for utility?). At times, the participants in the consultation offer solutions to these conflicts between quality expectations, for instance when they say that there are conditions for participation in the interaction such as having a basic understanding of the other interaction partner. This is in line with Bromme's concept of "informed trust," according to which it needs not only trust in public scientific statements but also knowledge on the system of science to make an informed judgement. Our findings add a nuance to this hypothesis by suggesting that informed trust must be reciprocal, i.e., researchers participating in a dialogue must also understand the societal stakeholders they engage with.

Generally, we can safely assume that the more diverse and complex the setting for a dialogue is, the more difficult it may be to document expertise and to establish transparency. If being affected by an issue legitimizes participation in a dialogue, then it may be more difficult to enforce pertinence as a premise. If expertise legitimizes participation, there is also a risk of exceeding the level of fact. It follows that there must be legitimate reasons for trade-offs between different quality expectations. These should depend on the aim of the interaction, the individuals involved, and the chosen interaction format. It follows that quality expectations in collaborative settings should not be understood universally, unilaterally, and statically. Instead, they should be considered within their specific context, reciprocally, and dynamically. Hence, we propose that quality itself must be an object of these interactions, i.e., there should ideally be deliberation about the appropriate quality configuration for the problem at hand. This could be particularly relevant for SSH disciplines, which, as discussed above, have to engage in continuous boundary work due to their position in society. The outline of a quality framework as proposed here can be a basis for deliberating on the quality of these arrangements. That said, for particularly established forms of interaction (e.g., scientific policy advice), there may already be recognized default settings from which it is possible to extrapolate.

Conclusion

Our results show, that the societal impact of SSH disciplines can be counterintuitive and precisely not aimed at solving a problem. Instead, they often seek to challenge both the problem and its solution. Nor does SSH research necessarily strive for transformation but instead seeks an understanding and a moderation of social change. Therefore, the impact of the SSH is often discreet, indirect, and conceptual. Thus, the quality of the societal impact of SSH disciplines can only be understood in relation to their specific context, in the sense that it is person-, problem-, and time-dependent and must take into account different field logics as it takes place in a "space between fields" (Williams, 2020). For these reasons, a rigid, purely quantitative assessment of societal impact of SSH disciplines should generally be avoided, especially with regard to how assessment shapes and stabilizes underlying values (Espeland and Sauder, 2007; Williams, 2020).

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