Diversity in impact conceptualization and engagement: accounting for social, epistemic and local contexts within the social sciences and humanities

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Impact as a boundary object

In Star and Griesemer's perspective, boundary objects are "objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. [...] They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation" (Star and Griesemer 1989: 393). Boundary objects share thus elements of definition across social worlds – permitting working relationships between them -, while also involving community-specific conceptualizations and framings.

Applying the concept to research policies, Moore argued that Open Access can be conceived as a boundary object and should therefore beneficially be "considered and enforced as a community-led initiative" (Moore 2017: 1). In this paper we contend that the notion of research impact can also be conceived as a boundary object and would similarly benefit from being considered as such.

Method

A cross-European questionnaire has been administered in 29 European countries within the COST ENRESSH network. The research was named CARES (Careers and Research Evaluation Systems for societal impact) and seeks to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of early career investigators (ECIs) towards research impact. A total of 105 questionnaires were filled in by ECIs across Europe, who were either still doing or had completed in the last 8 years their PhD in the fields of social sciences and humanities (SSH). The questionnaire consisted of 14 open-ended and 14 closed-ended questions, focusing on the definitions of impact, pathways to impact and creation of impact, the difficulties during the creation of impact and the motivation for creating impact.

Preliminary results

Preliminary results, based on a sample of 30 questionnaires, confirm that impact can be conceived as a boundary object. There are indeed significant communalities in the ways respondents conceptualize and frame impact and engage into impact related activities, while different meanings about impact and engagement can be related to a diversity of – not only social, but also epistemic and local – intersecting communities within the SSH.

Commonalities in framing

Most respondents view impact positively as a way to translate research to non-academics, even if impact engages the researcher's responsibility, is highly time consuming and is therefore often perceived as being in tension with other academic duties (research in particular). Impact is also generally framed as a complex notion, irreducible to one definition, being not only economic, but political (impact on national regulations and policy makers), cultural (producing cultural changes) and social (contributing to community building and social well-being). Nobody disagrees either that creating impact involves other actors than the researchers.

The specificities of some SSH pathways to impact are generally acknowledged, such as in particular the transformation of research into policies or education as a pathway to impact. SSH research on researchers is deemed as fostering their critical reflexivity and as such contributing to make them more open to new paradigms, and potentially more engaged into impact driven activities.

Furthermore framing impact operates mostly by dissociation. Respondents distinguish between impact from SSH and from STEM, impact from basic research and from applied research, direct and short-term impact and indirect and long term impact, impact at collective and individual level.

There are also strong commonalities in how respondents perceive and experiment engagement in impact. Most consider that such engagement is inseparable from any meaningful research, whatever its type – fundamental, applied or strategic -, since researchers are accountable to society, being funded by public money. There is also a common recognition of the contrast between the generally high motivation of ECIs to engage into impact and the perceived lack of local support, training, funding and dedicated time, as well as the absence of career incentives, since rewards tend to focus on the publication of articles in international top journals.

Diversity of meanings

Respondents perceive a "generation gap" between more "entrepreneurial" ECIs and older researchers who would tend to favour theoretical innovation over impact. Conflicting definitions of scientific excellence – including or excluding impact - between these two social worlds are interpreted by some respondents as being motivated by the willingness of some senior academics to maintain dominance in the discipline.

The stage of the (early) career constitutes another social context that affects the engagement into impact related activities. PhD candidates may feel illegitimate because of their inexperience, while postdocs' focus on publications and geographical mobility make it difficult to build local networks of stakeholders. Tenured professors on the contrary take less risk in engaging into impact and can choose more freely their research topics.

On an epistemic level, some research objects are perceived as more attractive to a broader audience, while "desk paper writing" and theory-laden types of research engage less into impact creation than methodologies through which research is co-created together with external stakeholders. Hence two main epistemic worlds emerge, in relation to two ways of conceptualizing the relationship between research and impact: some consider impact as a potential outcome of research – although research questions are sometimes regarded as "limited" compared to the broad issues that society and policy makers raise – while others frame impact and research as belonging to the same continuum, impact being integrated in the research process as research material or as main « inspiration ». In regard to motivation, respondents are similarly divided between those who are motivated be academic inquiry first – even if considering impact as one of its potential outcomes -, and those who are firstly motivated by impact and see research merely as a tool to create it.

Finally, differences in possibilities of funding, training and support, and the existence of related policies at national or institutional level (e.g. impact required for getting the PhD) affect the definitions of impact and the modes of engagement into it, within the different local SSH communities.

Discussion

Conceiving impact as a boundary object challenges the often too general and "one size fits all" approaches towards impact in research policy making. It engages to implement the so-called "impact agenda", at European and national level, at a more granular level and take into

account the specificities – in ways of conceptualizing and framing, as well as in modes of engagement – of the various social, epistemic and local worlds that intersect within the SSH.

References

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