

Does impact have gender?

Gendered definitions and framings of impact in social sciences and humanities

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Conceptualization of impact

Research has various outputs, some of which can be considered as impact or any effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia (REF, 2014:6). Impact is not easy to create and to communicate to the larger public, it needs a sequence of activities in order to achieve it. The processes/activities that lead towards impact are commonly referred to as ‘pathways’ (Research Councils UK, 2014) although generating impact has also been linked to concepts such as knowledge transfer (Finne et al., 2011), knowledge utilization (effects) and knowledge exploitation (revenues) (Leiden protocol for research assessments, 2015), valorization or valuation, and productive interactions (Morton, 2015; Spaapen & Van Drooge, 2011; Wilson, Lavis, Travers, & Rourke, 2010). Impact has to be inevitably linked to the notion of accountability, as society is expecting from those who are engaged in scientific practice are indeed “doing science” in terms of an accepted model (Room, 2001:18). In addition, all accounts of the world reflect the social, ethnic, gendered, etc. position of the people who produced them (Hammersley & Gomm, 1997). Gender differences are continuously emerging in research, differentiating male and female researchers in different ways: through the segregation in scientific fields (Petó, 2018), fewer female PhD holders (Fassa, 2015), differences in academic hierarchical positions (Benschop & Brouns, 2003) etc. In the Advisory Group for Gender’s report states that there is a need for research which will have genuine impact in reducing discrimination, both explicit and implicit; improving societal cohesion; and creating opportunities for all European citizens (European Commission Advisory Group for Gender, 2016). Considering the above-mentioned, impact should not be gender blind and has to justify the usage of societies resources.

Method

This article is based on the Careers and Research Evaluation Systems for Societal Impact (CARES) survey, which was distributed in 29 European countries. It focused on investigating the attitudes of Early Career Investigators (ECI) toward societal impact. One hundred and six questionnaires were filled in by ECI’s across Europe who were either still preparing or already completed their PhD’s in the field of social sciences and humanities (SSH). The questionnaire consisted of 14 close-ended and 14 open-ended questions, which aimed to make sense of the complex environment within which ECIs are doing their research and creating societal impact. The questions were focusing on the following topics: definition of impact, pathways to impact, creation of impact, difficulties during the creation of impact and motivation for creating impact. For this study we focused on two specific topics: gendered difference between the definition of impact among ECIs’ and their attitude towards impact. The preliminary results are based on the sample of 30 analysed questionnaires.

Preliminary findings

Respondents of the pilot phase of the CARES study define and frame the notion of SSH impact in various ways, notably in relation to the policy, epistemic and local contexts in which they are doing research. Gender differences emerged in the statements of female and male respondents, when defining the notion of impact. Female respondents linked impact with positive changes, e.g. raise awareness about various inequalities, dismantling stereotypes and, as well as responding to societal challenges. Female ECI’s referred more to the social justice which, in their statements, impact can achieve. Therefore, they were connecting impact’s power to contribute to a more equal society, gender equality, but also as a research “product” which can induce behavioural changes and raise critical awareness. Male respondents defined in their statements impact as a connection between research and society. Men made a

correlation between impact and pure academic research, as a “justification” for the research to be done or making sense of research. Impact was defined as an advancement of knowledge and a trust in co-creation of research, but also it meant helping solving problems and creating opportunities. When it comes to ECI’s attitudes towards impact, female and male respondents shared a common concern about the focus on impact creating tensions between the invested time and valorization. We identified a gender difference when it comes to what should be their primary focus in their academic career, instead of creating societal impact within their research and non-research activities. Statements of women emphasised the importance of publishing, while acknowledging that through impactful SSH studies social equality could be achieved (this aspect of their academic career they value intensely). Whereas men were very determined when it came to why impact should have an important role in research cycle: it is their obligation towards society and its citizens who are funding it. Men in their statements consider, that through societal impact creation they are reciprocating for public funding, but also setting role models for future researchers.

Discussion

The preliminary findings accounted for a binary division between ECI men and women regarding definition and attitudes towards impact. While women were in their statements defining impact as a “tool” for achieving social justice, men were connecting impact mainly to academic research. In their attitudes towards impact, men and women agreed on how creating impact means a great investment of time, which should be spent on building up their academic careers (i.e. writing publications). When it comes to gender differences in attitudes: women were emphasising the importance of social equality, while men were giving importance to the notion of accountability, as researchers have to act responsibly towards society. Our result urges us to further explore gendered aspects in the framing/definition of “impact”, as gender will remain to be in focus in the next big funding period Horizon Europe (2021-2027) and in order to engage in societal impact creation efficiently, we need to understand how it is gendered.

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