**The uses of relevance: Thoughts on a Reflexive Sociology**
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# THE USES OF RELEVANCE:

# THOUGHTS ON A REFLEXIVE SOCIOLOGY

**Brian Rappert**

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'Relevance', 'accountability' and 'users' are now prominent terms in the policies of public research funding agencies. In countries such as the UK, the funding of research in social science and elsewhere has become increasingly dependent on the perception that research will contribute toward the achievement of certain national goals. Despite renewed discussions surrounding the utility of social analysis, these are rarely informed by debates in academic communities about the meaning of 'relevance' or associated debates about the status of knowledge. However divergent policy and academic discussions about relevance may appear, they intersect in concerns over the identity of researchers, the practices of research, and the claims made on behalf of research. This article draws on a case study in an attempt to show the difficulties of reconciling competing demands for relevance. Preliminary reflections are offered on a strategy for creating a productive tension between policy and academic discussions.

**Key words:** sociology, epistemology, users, relevance, policy research

## Introduction

Can sociological analysis provide a basis for human betterment? How can we carry out research that is relevant to social needs? What are the conditions that support the production of socially relevant knowledge? Such questions are of long-standing interest in sociology and the social sciences more generally. Ever since the institutionalisation of sociology, sections within it have doubted whether it can or even should try to provide analysis geared towards social agendas.

In many Western countries, the 1990s have seen a continued interest in the policy relevance of disciplines such as sociology. The contribution of publicly funded research to wealth creation and quality of life are central pillars of current UK science and technology policy, as is the orientation of research towards the needs of 'users and beneficiaries' (see, e.g. HMSO 1993). Much of the impetus for this stems from the 'crisis' in the funding of certain public services, notably higher education.

In parallel with, but (as is claimed here) distinct from, this renewed interest in the utility of research have been debates in academic circles about the meaning of research relevance and the means of achieving it. The contemporary landscape of social research is constituted by various interpretations of what counts as proper research methodologies, the status of researchers in the research process, and how researchers ought to relate to wider social groups. Ultimately, such issues tie in with the epistemological disputes over the status of knowledge claims. Posing the question of whether sociological analyses can provide a basis for human betterment raises a host of difficult questions, most fundamentally whether any analysis can provide a basis for 'progress'.

Over a decade ago, Blume (1985) called for academics to respond to requests for accountability in a way that balanced researchers' independence with social relevance and scholarly integrity with engagement. Although perhaps overly optimistic in his assessment of the future of university research (the title of his paper is 'After the darkest hour...'), Blume called attention to a recurring accountability predicament for researchers. This article attempts to provide a response to these concerns in asking how debates over accountability and the status of knowledge might inform one other. It is maintained that the incorporation of 'users and beneficiaries' into the research process raises fundamental questions about the meaning of relevance, the appropriateness of research methodologies, and the epistemological and political status of knowledge.

This argument is advanced by first detailing contemporary policy discussions over users and research. The following section presents a case study of academic-user relations and argues that concerns about users cannot be separated from academic discussions about the status of knowledge claims. Unfortunately, these two discussions remain, by and large, separated from one another. Although alternative interpretations of and problems over 'relevance' are endemic to the research process and cannot be resolved in this article, the final section asks what strategies might offer a dialogue between the public accountability of research and the status of knowledge claims.

**Crisis of accountability**

At the level of public policy, there has been long-standing attention to the users of sociological research and its dissemination. The former UK Social Science Research Council incorporated such considerations within its original mandate (Caswill 1997). Today, though, the use of sociological research takes a specific form. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) mission statement reads:

> To promote and support high quality basic, strategic and applied social science research and related post-graduate training to increase understanding of social and economic change, placing special emphasis on meeting the needs of the users of its research and training output, thereby enhancing the United Kingdom's industrial competitiveness and quality of life (HMSO 1993: 29).

Grant proposals now include sections on the dissemination of research findings to users, the funding of some conferences has become dependent on non-academic participation, and user groups are consulted in the formation of the Council's thematic priorities. In the Innovation Programme, for instance, user guidelines have been issued to researchers. These advise that users and researchers should work together in mutually defined areas of interest to derive 'testable hypotheses' so that researchers can provide 'clearly articulated conclusions.' Some suggestions are offered for avoiding tensions within collaborations:

> involve users in the research design and selection process (essential where the research is to be carried out in users' premises) and involve them on-line in the review and evaluation process, and identify brokers with clear liaison roles; make effectiveness in collaboration and dissemination as important as research quality in both the selection and evaluation process; and make greater use of staged projects to develop user interest and commitment (ESRC 1996: 13).

The ESRC is not alone among UK research councils in trying to bring users on board. The fairly recent mechanisms for incorporating users are but one set of reforms for achieving greater 'value for money', 'productivity', and 'efficiency' from publicly funded services. The rise (or imposition) of 'enterprise culture' is often evoked to characterise the complex restructuring of public bodies within the UK over the last 20 years. Enterprise discourse is itself a rather diffuse set of tendencies with a high degree of elasticity, both of which help to explain its pervasiveness (see, e.g., Keat 1991). In a manner that speaks about this 'enterprise culture', Peters (1992) maps the extensive developments in university performance and accountability measures developed in the 1980s and early 1990s. Cuts in university funding have been justified on the basis of a need to modernise and rationalise the university funding system. Here a 'crisis of performance' is tied in with a 'crisis of purpose', whereby the university system must undergo radical reform to align with changing economic developments (see, e.g., OECD 1987). While significant changes within the management of public sector organisations have taken place across many countries in recent years, UK specific dynamics exist such as the degree of centralisation of strategic management in the decentralisation of operational matters (Hoggett 1996).

Although the current policy focus on relevance and users cannot be understood merely as an outcome of 'enterprise culture', user developments are inevitably tied in with wider public service and university reform. Sociologists commenting on user developments in research councils and other public funding research bodies have suggested the current incorporation of users has embodied a limited notion of what counts as a user that could be seen to stem from this wider enterprise culture (e.g., Webster 1994; Rappert 1997). Here, while valid issues exist about the effectiveness of research, the particular operationalisation of users has been based on a managerial framework that places some concerns above others.

Critical commentaries argue that current user models are often based on unrealistic theories of the utilisation of research. There has been a long-standing interest in the academic community concerning the uses of social science in the decision-making processes of public and private organisations. Often in the past, the social sciences judged their effectiveness in relation to idealised models of the natural science, where research was oriented towards prediction and the formation of social laws. In such models researchers should aspire to discover factual knowledge which can provide the basis for the rational identification of problems and the selection between alternative courses of action. Such rational models assume at least two things: that researchers can produce knowledge that has pertinence to particular actors and that awareness of this knowledge leads to appropriate action. Even in evaluation research, perhaps the extreme case of goal-orientated research, knowledge driven models of research utilisation have been deemed inappropriate (e.g., Palumbo and Hallet 1993).

The rational, knowledge-as-authoritative model has given way to a more nuanced understanding of what 'using research' means (Lindblom and Cohen 1979; Wiess 1986; Hammersley 1995). Decision-making processes are recognised as complex, iterative, and rarely structured into easily specifiable beginnings or ends. While research can provide a basis for comparing options, other benefits are perhaps more important, such as in providing actors with concepts and analytical frameworks, justifying predetermined action or inaction, or aiding in the identification of problems hitherto marginalised. Authors such as Lindblom and Woodhouse (1993) question the extent to which policy or decisions can or should be based on analysis. Policy making is portrayed as a process of 'muddling through', where the type of knowledge derived from research exists in relation to partisan interests, tacit understanding, subjective judgement, and fundamental disagreements and uncertainties. Claims made about the effectiveness of research often rest on dubious assumptions about the rationality of action and the links between knowledge and action.

Whatever the ultimate impact of research, the claims made within it enter into intra- and inter-organisation settings where groups can have conflicting opinions of it. As Clare (1997) notes, though feedback to audiences is of vital importance in research, 'This is not just in the sense of reporting issues in a way that your audience can easily understand and make use of, where relevant. It is also about reporting issues in a way that will make the audience potentially more receptive to the issues.' In other words, 'relevance' and 'impact' require institutional and political sophistication as well as intellectual effort. At a practical level the question arises whether many academic researchers possess

the skills necessary for this translation of research, especially given the growth of short-term contract research.

**Case Study**

The previous discussion suggests that the contested functions of knowledge as well as the limitations of user definitions mean achieving relevance is problematic. As part of wider research by the author on academic-user relations, see Rappert (1997) a number of academic groups have been contacted regarding their user experiences. This section discusses the accounts of one group of academic researchers trying to reconcile the competing demands of striving for relevance. The case shows that concerns about relevance raise questions about the status of researchers' knowledge claims. As a portrayal of a particular situation, such a case cannot be said to represent the experiences of other researchers. It does, however, highlight indicative problems in researcher-user relations. The following section then asks what social science debates over relevance imply for the difficulties highlighted through the case study. It is ultimately suggested that insufficient linkage exists between contemporary discussions of accountability and academic discussions of methodology, knowledge, and relevance.

The group of sociologists at 'Russell' University, from labour studies, feminist, and consumption studies backgrounds, conducted a longitudinal project funded by a UK research council to examine the introduction of a management information system (MIS). The project sought to map the interactions of technology, management, and workers, and examine how actors conceptualised their identity and reinterpreted their organisational roles in relation to the identity of the information system. While the methodology and intent of the project were not explicitly emancipatory, the Russell researchers did want to attend to the position and troubles of shopfloor workers.

The project members recognised the importance of user collaboration in securing funding. While disparate groups in society might have used or benefited from this research, funding purposes required definite organisational sites of identifiable users. Such a recognition and an enthusiasm in seeking potential users, however, did not facilitate a straightforward collaboration process. Although forming an initial agreement with another company, Grocers World-wide, after a long period of negotiation the firm declined to take part in the research. With the project formally underway, the researchers sent out a mailshot to large retailers asking whether the firms had any difficulties in implementing information systems and if they might welcome research on them. A contact within the Head Office of Goods Inc., a well-known high street retailer, responded to the inquiry. The store had recently spent millions of pounds on the introduction of a MIS, which handled company training, email, spreadsheets, and staff planning for all their stores.

As outsiders to the company and through rigorous, qualitative in-depth interviews the Russell researchers said they could offer an unique understanding. As recognised, in addition to making a case for their skills, securing collaboration in the case of Goods necessitated pitching the potential benefits of the research to the Head Office. So, the Russell members proposed to understand the ways in which employees were using the new system and to find out the staff's reasons for what Head Office defined as the misuse of the system. The researchers felt they were clear from the beginning that the staff may have legitimate reasons for not using the information system as Head Office intended.

After some negotiation, the Head Office of Goods agreed to grant access to the "staff planner". Goods' staff planner contained detailed information about the turnover of the store, opening times, deliveries, and the skills and responsibilities of each staff member. While the researchers wanted to interview staff across all occupational hierarchies, contacts at Head Office felt that general assistants were not proper 'users' of the planner so interviewing them would be an unwise allocation of staff time. Access was instead limited to store supervisors, store managers, and higher managers within the company.

In such a large international company there are diverse perceptions of what is good for the company, variously held by shop workers who actually use the system, middle management, senior management, and the designers of the system. Research in such organisations is inevitably tied up in local politics and hierarchies. For instance, Head Office stipulated that supervisors should not work

with the computer itself, rather they should merely use the plans it produced. In most of the stores, however, store managers granted supervisors controlled access to the computers. In some cases the Russell team highlighted the arguably legitimate justifications that staff had for this sort of 'improper' interaction with the system. The Russell researchers sent a report to Head Office arguing that wider yet controlled access would have a clear benefit to the stores. The Office rejected these recommendations, on the basis that they did not fit into the overall strategy of the MIS, which was unknown to the researchers.

This type of unauthorised access was just one part of a wider manipulation of the staff planner by employees and the divisions within Goods. These manipulations placed the researchers in an ambiguous position regarding how they should report and evaluate such findings. Many store supervisors initially asserted that changes needed to be made to the MIS, and to the staff planner as part of that, so it fitted the existing practices of the stores (e.g., with regard to employees' preferences for job responsibilities). Here what counted as 'good' for the company meant making sure the system fitted the stores, whereas as far as the Russell researchers were concerned, Head Office's intention was to make the stores fit the system. As a way of handling the perceived incompatibilities of the planner and existing practices, store managers found alternative ways of using (and thus reconfiguring) the planner. Sometimes this included manipulating the system to achieve certain (bogus) performance ratings.

Because of such internal divisions, the researchers were conscientious about the way they interpreted their data and communicated with Head Office. While the researchers concluded that the implementation of MIS had significant negative effects at the local level of stores and reinforced existing hierarchies within the company, making such arguments to Head Office was seen as impractical. While not wanting to tell those at Head Office what they wanted to hear, it was also felt that critical sociological assessments of the labour process or gender dynamics would not be given serious attention. Thus it was necessary to walk a fine line if the analysis was not to be rejected outright and continued access was to be secured, while not making the research trivial. Disagreements about the use of the system and acts of reconfiguration and resistance may make 'great fodder for papers' (including this one), but the prospect of raising critical and effective sociological comments within a hierarchical and managed setting were believed to be quite limited. The researchers negotiated this by arguing that if the adoption of the MIS was seen as strictly a technical question of getting the system to work to predefined criteria, the system was guaranteed to 'fail'. They maintained that the adoption of the system was an organisational and social event in which the local context of implementation mattered. As such, the manipulations of the staff ensured that the MIS become integrated into the stores' operation by reconciling the abstract and conflicting demands of the system with local constraints and practices.

In the circumstance of contrasting interpretations on the merits of the system, what can be said about the relevance and use of the research? From Head Office's perspective, the researchers certainly provided a cheap source of labour. The position of the researchers as unpaid (and perhaps 'lofty') academics who reported back to Head Office meant the research could be ignored more easily than if it came from outside consultants or internal researchers. This suggests the 'uses' of research are distinct from questions over the users of research, a theme explored in more detail later.

The researchers thought those interviewed, such as store supervisors and managers, might have benefited from an opportunity to talk about their problems and, to a limited extent, access reactions of staff in other stores. It is unlikely that many supervisors or managers felt the research would have any significant impact on company policy, because most of the changes in the company were driven by a central, top-down plan. The possible benefits to store staff have been muted though because of the researcher's inability to circulate some of their findings legitimately. The researchers wanted to give policy suggestions to the store managers interviewed in return to those who have given their time or had staff take time off from their normal duties for the interviews. While this form of dissemination would not in itself mean that store managers could change their practices, they could gain insights into similar problems brought up in other stores and comment on the researchers' analysis. Head Office, however, failed to give permission for the dissemination of the findings to the staff interviewed. In light of past experiences, sending out research findings without permission would likely meet with protest from Head Office. Thus the researchers faced divided and competing loyalties in whether to respect the organisational authority of Head Office or to strive for some

measure of reciprocity and disseminate their insights to those who are seen as potential beneficiaries. Eventually they decided on the former course of action. The judgement made here was not restricted to considerations internal to Goods, for it is quite possible that the ability of future researchers to gain access to Goods through Head Office might be jeopardised.

This case highlights a range of problematic issues about researcher-user relations: the division within particular 'user' groups; the role of gatekeepers in controlling access; the subordination of research to partisan disputes; the difficulty of specifying users' needs; the conflicting benefits for different users of research; and the potential for hostility towards research findings. Addressing these issues requires more than overcoming a communication gap or slightly revising research methods. While these problematics do not derive directly from the requirements of the research council for user relevance, such demands have significant implications for the character of research. Calls for relevance to 'users' are aligned with calls for relevance to those in positions of authority within organisations (such as a head office) who can give the organisation's official blessing to carry out the research. Yet, if research takes place in hierarchical settings then calls for relevance are not neutral or straightforward. It is conceivable that on the basis of their experience, the Russell researchers might decide an ethnographic methodology may be more suitable. As in many sociological workplace ethnographies, there may be justifiable reasons for conducting such research with a degree of covertness rather than seeking access by approaching management and getting them on board. In terms of policy concerns about relevance to identifiable users though, the chances of such an approach being funded seem remote as the head management of the company would be circumvented. Thus, arguably key spaces for research and organisational transformation (see the next section) may be closed off.

Questions of user relevance have important implications for claims made by the researchers as well. The inability of the researchers to interview general assistants or receive feedback on their findings as they wished, raises questions about the validity of their claims. How can the relational identity of management, staff, and information systems be assessed by speaking only to those in the management? Despite the potential of the research to raise the problems of staff regarding the MIS to those in charge of administering the system (and thus presumably help to alleviate these problems), it seems just as plausible that the research contributed to the organisational relations of domination which the researchers hoped to challenge. The surveillance potential of research in a setting such as Goods is all too obvious. Whether or not the research had a detrimental effect on store staff is an open question. For the reasons specified earlier, it is problematic to make any simple judgement about the effects of research. The key point here is that the researchers resolved worries about their contribution to systems of regulation in Goods (and thus avoided asking uncomfortable questions about their research methodology) by arguing to themselves that the research process or the findings would be ineffectual. In such a situation, little thought had to be given to these rather fundamental concerns about the function of research. Whatever the merits of this argument, it shares the assumption about the impact of research made in some policy discussions: research has an impact to the extent it leads to specifiable decisions being taken up on the basis of research findings or recommendations.

**Contested knowledge claims**

To summarise the main lesson of the case study, the 'product' and 'process' of research are not separable. The case study section also illustrated the complications of bringing about change within organisations and the doubts thereby raised about researchers claims. In analysing the actions of the Russell researchers, for instance, an implicit assumption was made that research would have somehow been 'better' had it incorporated shopfloor workers or got interviewee feedback. But what are the merits of such an argument and what would such propositions mean for the character of research relevance?

The 'crisis of accountability' of research has taken place along with continuing debates about the relevance of research in academic circles. This section asks what academic debates over researcher-researched relations and the status of knowledge might mean for concerns about 'users' and the relevance of research. It examines how a number of academic traditions have conceived of relevance and what this means for the conduct of research. The aim here is not to provide a comprehensive survey of these discussions, but to gain a sense of the inter-dependence of epistemological,

methodological and relevance considerations which can then be compared to dynamics in policy-driven discussions about relevance.

What then do academic debates about relevance say about questions about research methodologies and the proper conduct of research? Criticisms of sanitised accounts of the research process that obscure or ignore conflicts over the control of research findings and design (e.g., Ram 1995) as well as relations of hierarchy between researchers and the researched (e.g., Stanley and Wise 1993) have been frequent in recent years. The traditional emphasis on maintaining distance and neutrality in research has been argued to be based on a logic of manipulation and control which leads to conservative research that has little relevance for anything other than career advancement (Maruyama 1974; Smith 1996).

Academic discussions about relevance typically derive from competing claims over the status of knowledge, though they cannot be reduced to methodological or even epistemological considerations. The contention that research can provide 'objective' or 'value-free' analysis has been thoroughly criticised. It is generally agreed that rule bounded and de-contextualised scientific frameworks cannot adequately represent social life. Whereas positivist-influenced social scientists took the natural sciences as their model for inquiry, today sociological research takes place in a setting of methodological pluralism and epistemological uncertainty. In this situation though, if claims to superior analysis of social relations by sociologists are in doubt, and if a 'rational' knowledge of society cannot be established, then pressing questions arise about what research has to offer.

Authors such as de Koning and Martin (1996), Galtung (1980), and Maruyama (1974) maintain much of conventional research takes place in a 'delusion of relevance' where research 'embalms established practices rather than interrupts, challenges, and changes them in the name of equity and justice' (Smith 1996: 73). Projects aspiring to be scientific in the classical sense of the term are typically made safe from criticism in that they are trivial. Whether explicit or acknowledged, researchers serve some purpose or end in their research. The question is whether social scientists face this and make up their own minds about the conditions and implications of their work or whether they conceal these conditions. In discussions of 'policy research', for instance, the identity of the possible clientele can be taken for granted as the state or business, though this is rarely questioned or acknowledged. Despite the intention of the researchers, the circumstance in which research is done may share the (arguably) questionable assumptions held by those that take a naive realist position. For instance, in effect, the researchers in the case undertook many methods that those striving for a neutral understanding of the world might hold, such as separating those interviewed from each other in order to avoid the contamination of interviewees' responses.

Debates within feminism exemplify a mix of methodology, epistemology, and relevance considerations. Considering claims and counter-claims made about feminist knowledge provides a useful example for mapping the character of academic debates about status of knowledge claims and thus the ultimate relevance of research. Feminists' challenges to traditional sociology have taken varied forms and offered competing bases for knowledge. Discussions of feminist methodology and methods abound (e.g., see Reinharz 1992) but generally reflect on whether feminism is outside mainstream theory or a better realisation of conventional approaches. In finding a grounding for feminist claims to knowledge, some have contended that women's or feminists' standpoint in society produces a less distorted view of social reality (see, e.g., Harding 1991).

There have been various reasons offered for doubting why starting from the lives of certain groups would necessarily lead to a more 'objective' or a less distorted understanding. These arguments cast doubt of the wisdom of seeking relevance through articulating 'marginal voices'. Post-modernism, whether in a feminist form or otherwise, questions or rejects outright the superiority of academic claims to knowledge, the liberation potential of knowledge, and the coherence of subjects. Here the possibility of blending together political and epistemological critique is highly suspect. Even accepting an ethical and political basis for privileging some knowledges over others, it is still not clear whether researchers are in a position to identify liberation strategies or at least facilitate the process (Holmwood 1995). A number of questions follow from such discussions: how can social science claims be said to identify with the oppressed, how can emancipatory strategies be realised, and how can sociologists find a way of being reflexive without falling into conservatism?

As part of addressing these research issues, feminists and others have thought about power divisions between the 'researched' and the 'researcher'. Such an approach is not only morally favourable, but can mean feminists unearth issues not otherwise addressed. Answers vary to the questions over the particulars of researcher-researched relations, as it has long been recognised that the relation cannot simply be an egalitarian one (Roberts 1981, Russo and Torres 1991). The move away from authoritative accounts of social life in order to bring a 'voice' to others (particularly groups identified as marginalised) though raises a host of questions for researchers, including: On what basis and in what manner may researchers speak for or about those they research? To what extent can researchers and the researched understand the context they both construct and are constituted by? In particular, must marginalised groups identify with the explanation offered?

In light of such questions authors working with 'critical frameworks' have characterised researchers' responsibilities in different ways, such as the cultivation of alternatives to social life by presenting controversial theories (Mills 1959), seeking to lift the veil of misrepresentation and ideology (Chomsky 1989), and the advancement of substantive democracy in the public sphere (Scambler 1996). While the notion of 'user' offered here certainly does not exclude the research sites under examination, it is much wider in breadth. There have been long-standing debates over the role of science in social changes and the integration of activism and scholarship (Divinski et al. 1994). What is clear from such discussions is that intent in itself is not enough to ensure research promotes 'positive' social change. Indeed, in pursuing emancipatory or other strategies, researchers can contribute to authoritarian relationships, as may have been the case in the research project discussed above.

Such political orientations to research have not gone without question. Hammersley (1995) has been a vocal critic of the 'politisation' of academic research, be it by 'critical' social scientists with a(n) (explicit) political agenda (i.e. an emancipatory agenda) or by government bodies attempting to set the goals of research as something other than the pursuit of knowledge. Such political agendas inevitably result in internal contradictions by pursuing both political goals and trying to further knowledge. Both threaten to undermine the conditions of the autonomy of research and therefore undermine research as a distinct activity. Hammersley and Gomm (1997) advocate that individual researchers are responsible for minimising bias which is taken to be 'systematic and culpable error; systematic error that the researcher should have been able to recognise and minimise, as judged either by the researcher him or herself (in retrospect) or by others'. The movement away from particular users is pronounced here, researchers should be accountable to collegial systems and ultimately to society in general and the advancement of knowledge rather than to particular groups.

However schematically this section has emphasised a rather distinct set of concerns about the relevance of research when contrasted with those presented in the section on policy and accountability. Intractable debates about the epistemological status of knowledge have considerable implications for the way we conceive of researchers, those they research, and wider audiences. It is sometimes maintained that different forms of empowerment are implicit in research methodologies, where some carry greater potential than others for promoting socially just outcomes. Whether or not this is the case, the meanings attached to relevance depend on the allegiance of researchers to prediction, understanding, emancipation, or deconstruction.

**Discussion**

The last three sections have painted contrasting images of the relationship between researchers, the researched, and wider communities. On the one hand, policy relevance today centres around identifiable groups in positions of authority who may use research to inform decisions. This conception favours certain types of research and thus certain types of knowledge. On the other hand, discussions within the academic realm offers multiple assessments of the status of claims made by researchers and the responsibilities of researchers to wider communities. However divergent policy and academic discussions about relevance are, they intersect in concerns over the identity of researchers, the practices of research, and the claims made on the behalf of research. The case study illustrated how the task of reconciling these concerns in practice is not always easy. While there are commonalties between these areas, it is also apparent that significant differences exist. The policy discourse is one of utilisation and users whereas discussions in social theory typically speak of ambiguity, multiplicity, and responsibilities. In practice, researchers must find some way of dealing with the concerns raised both within and between each of these areas. The role of users in policy will likely strengthen in the future, as there are discussions about incorporating relevance measures into

the Research Assessment Exercise (Caswill 1997) and making greater scope for evaluating research on the basis of its effects on non-academic users (ESRC 1997b). Academic debates over the status of knowledge show no sign of waning. As the situation is likely to be with us for a long time, it is worth taking these issues seriously and asking how sociologists can confront them.

Unfortunately, there seems little in the way of discussions that integrate policy issues and dilemmas over the status of knowledge. Publicly at least, sociologists rarely deem it worthwhile to examine the importance of the policy justifications of relevance for the conduct of research, though this is changing in part due to activities co-ordinated by the ESRC.1 As a pragmatic response to a situation where there are demands for accountability and multiplicity, of course, sociologists may just adopt various rhetorics of relevance so as to satisfy funders, while getting on with whatever research approach they have adopted in the past. Here critical user comments or discussions about competing interests within user groups would be best left to academic journals. There seems some justification in assuming this takes place on a fairly regular basis. In fact, those who speak of the need for the fragmentation of voices and the incoherence of the subject may find their approach well attuned to a situation of creating strategic stories for different actors, be they in business, government, or academia. This 'identity flexibility' need not operate on a manipulative or even conscious level, but instead could be seen as following from attempts at reconciling inconsistent expectations. Such coping responses are limited options, that fail to address the underlying reasons for calls for relevance. Perhaps more importantly though, pursuing them may mean missing an opportunity to reflect on the interrelation of debates over policy and the status of sociological research.

Woolgar (1997) offers one suggestion for responding to current calls for accountability. Whereas many academics work on the assumption that their research has inherent qualities due to the ascribed identities of academics, he suggests that researchers should negotiate their roles as producers of knowledge by proactively shaping the identities and the needs of (user)audiences. As seen in the case study though, it not clear how far negotiations over users' needs can incorporate critical analysis. Those skills that are often held to make good researchers and arguably lead to 'better' research (e.g., independence, curiosity), may not be appropriate in the context of user relevance (Lyon 1995). While for some self-reflexivity might be a hallmark of a 'good' researcher, it is not necessarily a factor that makes users good at what they do.

Given the ambiguities of users and debates within social theory over the dynamics of the researcher-researched relationship, the fruitfulness of any single suggestion is likely to be limited. The situation is one that tests any efforts to provide a response as the problems tensions involved relate to fundamental questions in sociology and policy. The ambivalence here though is perhaps a sign of something productive. The dispersal of authority in social theory opens a space for asking about the implications of the relevance of knowledge. This might extend beyond finding new way of telling stories, to include asking reflexive questions about how researcher-researched relations help constitute existing social knowledge and what this might tells us about possible revisions of research activity. Given the long-standing interest in the uses of research, the question here is not whether there is a role for non-academics in the research process, but rather what should that role be. Can we find some way of promoting a productive tension between policy and academic discussions, one that does not so much lead to a set of prescriptions but provides strategy for reflexive research? This article concludes by contemplating such a strategy.

**The situated potential of beneficiaries**

Commentaries in policy circles about the need for relevance usually talk about both the users and beneficiaries (UABs) of research. In practice, however, the beneficiaries of research have always been the poor cousins to users. Rarely are researchers asked to identify potential (non-academic) beneficiaries of research. The two concepts, however, are not identical. The discourse of users tends to be one of serving particular interests, typically connected with those in positions of authority. So, researchers secure collaboration and then feed this into the decision-making process of organisations. As has already been argued, the belief that there are those that can be identified as 'users' of research suggests a rather limited image of the utilisation of knowledge. Focusing on the concerns of those in a position to use research is not the same as asking to what uses research is put or who benefits from that.

The notion of beneficiaries is much less understood or discussed. It does seem to suggest a wider range of those for whom research may have some relevance and a wider interpretation of what relevance might mean. As such, it better aligns with definitions in academic communities of relevant populations. Asking about the beneficiaries immediately raises further questions: who are the audiences of research, what does the research process involve, what is the intent of research? The theoretical perspectives discussed earlier make assumptions about who should benefit from research (e.g., 'society', marginalised groups, the researched) and how that can be achieved (e.g., the advancement of knowledge, critical inquiry, deconstruction). The benefits of research are supposed to relate to methodological approaches and conflicting interpretations of how to make sense of actors' accounts.

In pursuing the ambivalence of relevance and the status of knowledge through attention to the beneficiaries of research, it important to ask what the incompatibilities are between users and beneficiaries, why these exist, and what these might mean for the research process. The case study provides some reason to believe that a rhetoric of users provides a quite limited framework for describing researcher-researched relationships and can hide important disagreements. These limitations are not only a matter for policy considerations, but arguably have a bearing on the legitimacy of claims made.

Such a strategy has the pragmatic appeal of informing policy debates. The ESRC, other UK research councils, and other funding bodies are in a continuous process of thinking about the meaning of 'relevance' in practice.2 Research councils actively interpret and reinterpret the meaning of user demands (Webster 1997). Developing a language or an approach for discussing relevance sensitive to their concerns could be part of the interpretation process. In paying attention to such policy considerations though, we should not completely instrumentalise researcher-beneficiaries relations. Doing so would cut off important questions about the character of such relations before they are raised.

Asking about the beneficiaries of research does not require assuming a direct link of research with action, instead it suggests being attentive to the multiple and conflicting uses of knowledge. Hammersley (1995) is quite justified in critiquing those who assume the effects of research follow on neatly from the implications of the text. Yet, instead of portraying the indeterminacy of texts and other forms of analysis as a limitation, it can be seen as an enabler in playing off the ambiguities of research discussed in this article. For instance, we might ask a few questions: Are there variable impacts of research in different organisations? Do some forms of research have more or less potential for benefit? How does the perceived status of researchers affect the uses of knowledge? In short we need to understand the contingency of knowledge and its uptake by others.

In discussing the beneficiaries of research, 'benefit' to others need not be defined as the use of research findings. The case study and academic commentaries on research utilisation both suggest that benefits of research may derive from the process itself rather than the utility of particular findings. So, how might we think about this aspect of benefit in a manner sensitive to the disputed status of knowledge? Initially, of course, it is necessary to be careful about equating 'the researched' with beneficiaries. Feminists, among others, have long contended those researched are not passive receivers of sociological wisdom, but make sense of research in a process of interpretation and reinterpretation. Many have argued that ascribing academics with a privileged access to truth perpetuates oppressive relationships (e.g., Foucault 1980). A rhetoric of beneficiaries would never be outside the nexus of knowledge/power nor the limits of our representational apparatus. As the previous section on social theory pointed out, researchers are in an ambiguous position in making authoritative claims to knowledge. Yet, few researchers, even those of a post-modern persuasion, ultimately insist their analyses are no better or merely different to those given by actors. In exploring who are the beneficiaries of research it is necessary to critically examine the role of researchers as adjudicators of reality. What might such considerations mean for the character of research? What does it mean to speak as a sociologist? If all knowledge claims are partial and contested then how do researchers justify their analysis?

In the end, this line of reflexive inquiry might undermine the very notion of beneficiary and the types of claims to knowledge made by researchers. If modern societies are characterised by the constant

reflexive altering and re-constituting of practices on the basis of new information (Giddens 1991), then this undermining should not be surprising or particularly destabilising.

With a focus on moral responsibilities, Lather (1995) argues that research should enable the researched to carry out their own investigations and to cultivate their own conceptions. Her analysis holds a good deal of potential for addressing the questions posed in this article. In a situation of epistemological uncertainty, Lather suggests research should not be an activity limited to certified scientists in accredited institutions of learning. Rather research should open opportunities for multiple interpretations. In this regard, research should not be judged solely for its ability to make statements that represent the social world, if this is taken as a 'correspondence' to the world. This perspective is very much aligned with feminist perspectives where the goal of research 'is not to discover something "about" social reality as if this can ever be appreciated independently of self-engagement, but to ensure that the process of allowing mutual encounter in the experience of being-in-the-world operates in a fair manner' (Romm 1997).

Although Lather's analysis is not advanced in relation to the policy demands for relevance discussed in this article, it has obvious implications for the way we think of the beneficiaries of research and how this might differ from the 'users' of research. In contrast to Woolgar's suggestion that researchers should learn to 'teach users what they want', this instead advocates that researchers be part of a process of opening up a space for interpretations. Researchers have responsibilities to more than the advancement of knowledge, whatever that might mean. Here, the relevance of research should be assessed in terms of the empowering attributes of research design to inform and enable change. These suggestions align with comments made about the general reflexive character of the social sciences, whereby the knowledge claims of 'experts' and 'lay' people dialectically re-constitute one another (Giddens 1990). Although Lather strives to be enabling rather than prescriptive, it is not certain whether her mode of research leads to a significant decentering of researchers. We might question, for instance, whether those researched would necessarily want to have greater space for interpretation or even be served by this. While Lather's response should not be treated as the solution to how to conduct relevant research, it does provide an example of the general strategy of finding disjunctions and contradictions between different claims for relevance.

This article has discussed and embodied the tensions of trying to advance an argument in a time of uncertainty and disagreement about what constitutes adequate knowledge. As such it makes assumptions about the purposes of knowledge and the purposefulness of knowledge. With these considerations in mind, it is argued that systematic attention to the identity and methodological of beneficiaries offers a fruitful strategy for pursuing dialogue between concerns over public accountability of research and the status of knowledge claims in the present context of UK science and technology policy. Such attention does not prescribe a particular course of action. Instead this attention is meant to evoke a reflexive and an experimental movement - both in theory 'and' practice - in many directions. In advocating paying attention to the beneficiaries of research in the conceptualisation and practice of research, this article is not simply wanting to replace one form of regulation with another in a dogmatic fashion. Any attempt to move away from current policies would struggle with many questions associated with agency, purpose, and legitimation: What do we mean by research? Who can conduct research? What do we want inquiry to do and for whom? What role does sociological research have in social change? It is through asking such questions that sociologists can engage with the conditions that constitute their claims to knowledge.

## Notes

1. In the late stages of submitting this article, the author attended an engaging conference on the link between policy and methodological discussion of relevance (ESRC 1999).

2. As seen in ESRC's (1997b) *Invitation to Tender on Assessing Research Impact on Non-Academic Audiences.*

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