

# Social Scientists: Knowledge Brokers for the Natural Sciences?

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## Introduction and Background

The need for a greater engagement with social science has been highlighted by key UK-based organisations such as the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Academy of Social Sciences (Benyon and David, 2008). Funded by the British Academy (SG-54670) this research project aimed to explore issues of identity, role and boundary work when social scientists participate in public engagement with science and technology, with a view to exploring implications for greater public engagement with social science.

In 2004, Michael Burawoy made the statement on the right in his presidential address to the American Sociological Association. The idea that social scientists should incorporate principles asked of other academics in their work generated debate and some apprehension amongst the social science community, largely with regards to detail rather than ethos (Martinelli, 2008). However, parallels may be drawn between the theses that Burawoy raises and the roles in which some social scientists operate, both practically and academically, within a public engagement with science and technology (PEST) setting. In the UK, as Burchell and Holden (2009:4) describe, an 'extensive and diverse network – consisting of policy, practitioner, academic actors... has emerged... around the practice of a particular form of public participation in science and technology', networks 'searching for shared languages, understandings, objectives and even timeframes'. This poster highlights results from one objective of this project, reporting on interviews with key stakeholders in the field.

*'Responding to the growing gap between the sociological ethos and the world we study, the challenge of public sociology is to engage the public in multiple ways. These public sociologies should not be left out in the cold, but brought into the framework of our discipline.'* (Burawoy, 2005:4)

## Methods

The research carried out for this project involved a small-scale exploratory study, predominantly using qualitative interview techniques. Interviews were carried out with a sample (n=20) of UK-based social scientists, working in and around the PEST field. We generated a pool of social scientists via the following means;

- social scientists working at relevant institutions (for example ESRC Genomics Network)
- attendees at relevant events with appropriate backgrounds (for example The Roles of Social Science in Public Dialogue on Science and Technology)
- recommendations from key contacts in the field and advisory group members
- social scientists that had published relevant work on PEST and social science engagement.

Interviews predominantly occurred via the telephone, between June and September 2010. All interview data were digitally recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were coded by theme (see figure 1) and analysed using the qualitative software programme NVivo and a coding frame was developed. Ethical approval was granted by the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, UWE, Bristol.

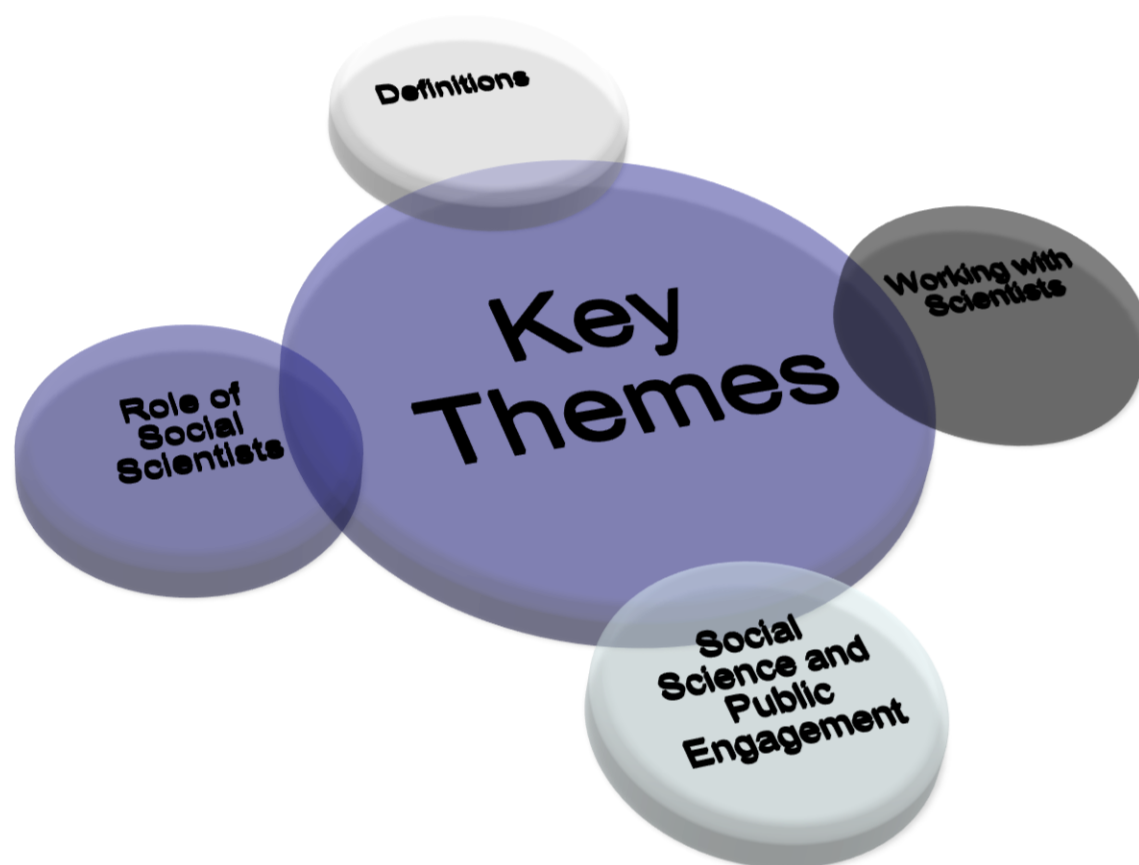


Figure 1. Interview Themes

*'I think what gets underplayed is the role the social scientists can play in interpreting the results. And if there is one critique I would made of the field as it stands at the moment, it is that critical capacity that the social scientists have to interpret the results of a public engagement process in the context of broader social insight, is often underplayed.'* (Interviewee 6)

*'I mean there are different types of translation and I think that if it's seen as a very simple way of, so the scientists say this "let's get the social scientist to say it in a slightly more friendly way", I disagree with that.'* (Interviewee 4)

*'Socials scientists have been quite good at giving examples of different methods and what they mean, perhaps there's a role that's not really called on to kind of provide them so much, I don't know, I don't know about that. I mean, I think methods are crucial but I think they often don't translate very well, because it's a skill isn't it? It's a whole craft to understanding the social, you can't just pass it around.'* (Interviewee 12)

*'The social sciences had a formative role in setting out the requirement for decision-makers to involve different kinds, more plural kinds of knowledge. I think that the current kind of fashion towards public engagement can be traced to critical involvements from social scientists in saying that.'* (Interviewee 7)

## Summary of Results

Social scientists, particularly those with experience of working in public engagement with science and technology, have an interesting perspective where engagement with the social sciences is concerned. With a shift to multi and interdisciplinary working for some key organisations in the field, this provides one answer to an agenda to demonstrate the worth (and economic value) of the social sciences but there are also dangers via such an approach. There are clear expectations regarding the role that the social scientist does or could take, be it from policymakers or scientists when working in such a setting, which can become typified by a perception that they should 'provide' answers, recommendations or methods the language of which at times can suggest a subservient rather than mutual experience. However, the social scientists we spoke with also discussed the very positive experiences they have noted in recent years, regarding the willingness and openness of many scientists to engage with their agendas.

Where engagement with the social sciences is concerned, the barriers for social scientists seeking to engage are similar to those in any other field; language use, time, finance and perceived value remain prominent. However it is also important that organisations seek to reflect and recognise the considerable engagement the social sciences undertake within their research processes, which might not always be appreciated in more traditional, scientific framings of the engagement agenda. In this regard the social scientists we spoke with here were often keen to stress, appropriately so, that they could not speak for social scientists more widely. This suggests that further research on this element of the project would be highly beneficial in the future.

## Key References

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