Re-making 'Quality' within the Social Sciences
The Debate over Rigour and Relevance in the Modern Business School

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Abstract

Against the background of previous discussions over the state of academic institutions and the specific operation of research evaluation and measurement systems, this paper focuses on the relationship between academic quality and larger societal value within social scientific research. Adopting a perspective from Science and Technology Studies (STS), it specifically explores what has become known as the 'rigour - relevance' debate within business and management research and considers its larger implications. On the one hand, it is important to consider how terms such as 'rigour' and 'relevance' are specifically constructed and performed. On the other, this debate should be seen in the context of the modern business school as an 'overloaded assemblage' responsible to multiple audiences and for multiple purposes. In conclusion, it is argued that frameworks of 'rigour' and 'relevance' should be considered in terms not only of what they include but also omit – with notions of responsibility, public value, cognitive justice and public engagement providing alternative, but characteristically neglected, means of (re-)framing quality in this context.

Re-making 'quality' within the social sciences: the debate over rigour and relevance in the modern business school.

Introduction: on aliens, indicators, and making a difference

A growing stream of publications has in recent years addressed the state of scholarly institutions and the associated cultures of knowledge production. Concepts such as the audit society, new public management, academic capitalism and, even, 'the toxic university' have been employed as ways of capturing both the context and the experience of contemporary academic life (Cannizzo, 2018; Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Power, 1997; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Smyth, 2017). As the sub-title to one recent book on the modern university succinctly expresses it: 'Zombie leadership, academic rock stars and neoliberal ideology.' (Smyth, 2017) One branch of this literature has offered a solid critique of the current operation of academic institutions, and their management and career structures in particular. Relatedly, there have also been more nuanced efforts to explore the ambiguities, contradictions and paradoxes of, not least, the development of research evaluation and measurement systems.

One specific inspiration to these reflections on modern academic culture has been an early contribution by Marilyn Strathern: 'Let me repeat that we are witnessing an effect that we (practitioners in higher education) have helped produce. Auditors are not aliens: they are a version of ourselves.' (Strathern, 1997, p.319). Working broadly in this vein, a 2017 collection of articles by Science and Technology Studies (STS) scholars focused on the 'indicator game'. Introducing this discussion, Fochler and de Rijke observed that 'often we cannot avoid playing the very same game that we scrutinize in our academic work.' (Fochler and de Rijke, 2017, p.22). Alongside many commentators, Fochler and de Rijke identified an increasingly-close connection between institutional funding and performance measurement, a move which in turn puts added pressure on the definition of 'quality' in academic work: 'Higher education institutions fight for top positions in rankings, individual academics strive to be among the tiny top percentage funded by specific sources or published in selective outlets, and even scientific journals compete to be listed in the top percentage of their respective fields.' (Fochler and de Rijke, 2017, p.25). This experience of the 'indicator-filled world' can in turn be linked to a larger questioning of the role and purpose of academic institutions as previous expansion in student-driven growth in many countries has given way to a series of sharp questions about the future of university funding and the underlying purposes of higher education. What, in these times, is a university for? (Irwin, 2017a, p.66).

There are clearly many strands flowing through these debates, reflections and critical accounts: from the apparent spread of new management techniques to the everyday experience of pressured academic work, and from the precarious nature of fixed-term employment to the application of specific research metrics (Burrows, 2012; Felt et al , 2013; Huzzard, Benner & Kärreman, 2017) . The aim in this paper is to focus on one significant sub-current: the relationship between research quality and the larger societal value of research. Sticking specifically to the social sciences, and to one sub-field in particular, the intention is to explore the academic and institutional construction of both 'rigour' and 'relevance'. In a context where quality has increasingly come to be defined through the use of indicators, what is the

consequence for the external influence and societal responsibility of social science - and indeed for the nature of the academic work under production? Does the increasing emphasis on 'A' journals represent a retreat from the larger social role and purpose of research? Or is it the case that the academic pursuit of publication in key international outlets can actually increase the potential value of research to society?

Such questions are especially important at a time when there is a trend both to place increasing emphasis on the 'indicator game' but also to make the case for 'putting social science to work'. Right now, for example, the UK's Campaign for Social Science is vigorously promoting the 'relevance' of high-quality social science to the economic, political and social challenges facing that country (Campaign for Social Science, 2015). Meanwhile, a larger debate is taking place in many nations concerning how social scientists can (or should) 'make a difference'. (Bastow, Dunleavy & Tinkler, 2014)

There is of course a long tradition of discussions within sociology in particular concerning the relationship between the intellectual and 'societal' purposes of the discipline. As one prominent example we can cite C. Wright Mills' classic text on the sociological imagination: 'It is the political task of the social scientist – as of any liberal educator – continually to translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals. ' (Mills, 1959/1973, p. 207) Writing almost a decade after Mills, Herbert Kelman began his paper on the 'relevance of social research to social issues' by noting the call among graduate students 'for a social science that is responsive to the pressing issues of the day and that plays an active role in promoting social change.' (Kelman, 1968, p. 77). More recently, and explicitly echoing Mills, Michael Burawoy employed his 2004 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association to advocate a 'public sociology' which responds to the 'growing gap between the sociological ethos and the world we study':

'We have spent a century building professional knowledge, translating common sense into science, so that now, we are more than ready to embark on a systematic back-translation, taking knowledge back to those from whom it came, making public issues out of private troubles, and thus regenerating sociology's moral fiber.' (Burawoy, 2005, p. 5)

However, other approaches to this issue are possible. Taking a contrary perspective on the specific question of whether 'STS means business', Michael Lynch has 'half-seriously' advocated a negative response. In a message of warning for the social scientist seeking to engage in 'public' matters, Lynch concludes: 'the lesson is that engagements in public organizational affairs can be full of surprises or, worse, subject to unintended reversals.' (Lynch, 2009, p. 113-4; see also Gad & Jensen, 2014) The implication is that, rather than simply seeing the academic life as a 'vocation', it is also necessary to take at least a periodic 'vacation' from practical concerns and social problems.

In what follows, these discussions will be developed through analysis and reflection on one specific social scientific field: business and management research. As has already been suggested, this is certainly not the only domain within the social sciences where such questions have been to the fore. Nevertheless, and as we will explore, it is a domain where these matters have been debated with particular vigour. Admittedly, this is partly related to the professional development of the modern

business school: including a discussion of the meaning of 'professional' in this context (simply put, should the business school be <u>for</u> or <u>about</u> business?[1]). The level and volume of debate may also reflect the rather dramatic rise of business and management departments on the university campus, and the cross-disciplinary nature of much academic work in this area (with many 'renegades' from fields such as sociology and STS finding shelter there: Parker, 2015; Woolgar, Coopmans & Neyland, 2009). Alongside these organizational and institutional characteristics, several commentators have raised issues of the problematic scientific identity and what can be seen as the theoretical incoherence of this field (Starkey, Hatchuel & Tempest, 2009; Whitley, 1984). However, the primary intention in what follows is less to 'explain' the disciplinary and institutional forces that have given rise to the debate than to consider its particular form and 'framing' (Irwin, 2001). In that sense also, the following account can be read as an attempt to apply one perspective within the sociology of scientific knowledge (or STS more broadly) reflexively to a field of social science (for a discussion of the relationship between sociology and STS see Gad & Jensen, 2014; Law, 2008).

One clear lesson from many decades of STS scholarship is that what counts as 'knowledge' (or 'rigour' or 'relevance') cannot be separated from the contexts in which such judgements are shaped, made and enacted (see for example Collins, 1975; Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Shapin & Schaffer, 1985). In contrast to accounts of science as the disembodied production of objective and undisputed facts, STS research characteristically points to the 'local, messy and contingent' character of scientific work (Woolgar, 2000). Whilst STS research into the natural sciences has typically presented knowledge creation as a matter of 'co-production' (with the natural and social order being constructed alongside each other: see Jasanoff, 2004) the strong tendency in the discussion reviewed here has been to keep scholarly merit and practical application – or 'knowledge' and 'context' - firmly apart. Hence also, and as will identify, the recurrent language of gaps, divides and bridges.

Using the development of the rigour-relevance debate in one academic milieu as a focal point, the aim then is to explore the categories of 'rigour' and 'relevance' in more open and flexible terms: to present their shifting construction as itself an 'empirical phenomenon' (Kieser, Nicolai & Seidl, 2015, p. 218). In so doing, this discussion will hopefully open up what has generally been a rather internal and 'self-regarding' debate (Starkey et al., 2009) to larger social scientific, and specifically sociological, reflection and analysis.

A specific argument in what follows, and one with potentially large applicability, is that it is not simply a matter of <u>whether</u> one advocates rigour, relevance or some combination of these. It is also essential to consider <u>how</u> these terms are defined, operationalized and understood in specific settings. Going further, in this situation it becomes necessary to ask <u>what</u> - and <u>whose</u> - version of rigour/relevance should prevail. This is also a means of making the argument that research quality is not simply an intrinsic characteristic or 'given' but must instead be judged from a particular perspective and in terms of particular requirements. Many critical contributions to the current debate over the conditions of academic life point persuasively to the detrimental consequences for research quality. One significant conclusion from the following analysis is that it also necessary to address the fact that there is more

than one way in which research quality – and the societal value of research - can be defined. We will return to the implications of this in the final section.

As a starting-point, we will now move into one illustration of the larger issues in play: the rather animated response to a significant attempt at codifying quality within business and management research. The 'ABS Guide' (properly known as the 'Academic Journal Guide', but we will stick with this form of the venacular) is published by the Chartered Association of Business Schools. Since its first edition in 2010, it has been widely taken up among both university managers and academic staff. This has been especially the case in the UK where the Guide has often been utilized within institutional strategies for addressing the Research Excellence Framework (REF)[2]. However, the influence of the Guide is not limited to the UK but has become pervasive in business school recruitment, promotion and research strategies world-wide – with significant consequences for early career researchers in particular.

What's not to like about the ABS Guide?

In its 2018 edition, the 'ABS Guide' rates a total of 1,582 journals across 22 separate subject areas: from 'accounting' to 'strategy' and from 'finance' to 'social sciences' through 'business history' and both 'general' and 'organisational' psychology (CABS, 2018). Actual grades range between 4* ('journals of distinction') and 1 ('recognised, but more modest standard in their field'). The Guide draws upon citation impact factors but also the assessments of leading researchers and scholarly associations in business and management: 'there is no mechanistic metrics-based formula that will capture the published ratings' (CABS, 2018, p.4).

As the distinguished editors presented it in introducing the 2015 edition, the primary motivation behind the Guide is to 'provide a level playing field' (ABS, 2015, p.5). Emerging scholars can use the rankings to decide 'which journals to aim for' and 'where the best work in their field tends to be clustered' (ABS, 2015, p.5). For more established academics, the Guide offers a 'recognised currency on which career progress can be based.'(ABS, 2015, p.5) In a note apparently designed to strike terror into the hearts of business school deans, the editors observed: 'should personal networks deny its currency in one institution, there will be others who will recognise and welcome it.' (ABS, 2015, p.5) The editors acknowledged that '(g)ood work may of course be found anywhere'. However, it 'is a generally held view that good work is more likely to be found in some journals as compared to others.' (ABS, 2015, p.5)

As might be anticipated, the Guide is not without its critics. Following publication of the 2015 ABS Guide, one senior business school academic somewhat facetiously observed:

'The day the Association of Business Schools' most recent ranking of journals was released, I woke to find that some of my publications had been transformed, as if by academic alchemy from 3* lead to 4* gold. Although clearly "intellectually vacuous and empirically false" … my value in the academic market has gone up. What's not to like?' (Learmouth, 2015)

The 'intellectually vacuous and empirically false' epithet was attributed to Dennis Tourish who subsequently developed a larger argument that 'the ABS guide is only one symptom of a deeper malaise in business and management scholarship.' (Tourish, 2015) In further response, the British Academy of

Management (BAM) issued a press release addressing the ABS list (BAM, 2015). Whilst the main body behind the Guide, the Chartered Association of Business Schools, is open only to institutional membership, BAM operates on the basis of individual subscription and seeks to represent British management scholars as a larger community. Perhaps reflecting these organizational differences, the tone of the press release was far from positive, with the BAM Vice-Chair noting that such lists 'even if well-intentioned have problematic unintended consequences'. Reflecting the central theme of this paper, the BAM President, Cary Cooper, put his own view as follows:

'We are particularly concerned about any ranking list which devalues research with real world impact and insights, in favour of that aimed at topping league tables. Research in business and management must aspire to positive impacts on academic knowledge and on the real world.' (BAM, 2015)

In similar vein, Dennis Tourish has been sharply critical of certain US journals which are 'dominated by functionalist and positivist perspectives that take the status quo for granted, ask few critical questions of business practice, and largely ignore the most important issues facing business and society.' (Tourish, 2015) As he put it, what use are 'world elite' journals which have ignored the 2008 financial crisis and 'what use are journal ranking systems that fail to take such disgraceful neglect into account'?

Already, we can identify some of the disagreements and debates relating to this particular publication but also the larger questions in play. Accused of being 'intellectually vacuous', narrow, 'functionalist' and also of turning away from key issues of business and society, the ABS Guide clearly evokes strong reactions. At the same time, it draws upon the careful work of very well-established professors in the field, has a well-reasoned methodology, has been through more than one edition and has found its way into many job applications, departmental plans, academic reviews and research evaluations. In a complex and increasingly-globalized academic system, it can legitimately claim to offer support, guidance and greater clarity. What indeed is there not to like about that?

Business schools' 'dirty little secret'?

Discussion over the main purposes of business and management research certainly did not start with first publication of the ABS Guide (Kieser et al., 2015). Instead, a steady stream of debate over what has become known as the 'rigour-relevance' issue can be found in business and management academic journals over many years but also in a number of associated conferences (including the annual meetings of the North American-based Academy of Management and the British Academy of Management).

Taking one well-established entry-point into the discussion, Bennis and O'Toole attracted considerable attention for their 2005 article: 'How business schools lost their way'. Published in the *Harvard Business Review*, these authors argued strongly that an imbalance has developed between 'scientific rigor' and 'practical relevance' – with the former very much dominant within the business school world. As Bennis and O'Toole put it: 'The dirty little secret at most of today's best business schools is that they chiefly serve the faculty's research interests and career goals, with too little regard for the needs of other stakeholders.' (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005, p. 8) Anticipating some of the comments expressed above in reaction to the ABS Guide, Bennis and O'Toole asserted: 'some of what is published in A-list journals is excellent, imaginative and valuable. But much is not.'

Two further aspects of Bennis and O'Toole's influential argument deserve particular attention in this context. The first is their presentation of what has become the standard 'creation story' of business school development. As Bennis and O'Toole colourfully describe the typical business school in the first half of the twentieth century: 'most professors were good ole boys dispensing war stories, cracker-barrel wisdom, and the occasional practical pointer.' (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005, p. 2) But then during the late-1950s, things began to change in the business school world. Two important reports (by the Ford Foundation and Carnegie Corporation) were sharply critical of the 'wasteland of vocationalism' (Simon quoted in Augier & March, 2007) identified across US business schools.

As Khurana and Spender have put this: 'The emphasis was on moving business school research away from …. "trailing a few steps behind the operating business world" towards making business research the foundation of business schools.' (Khurana & Spender, 2012, p. 628) The swing towards 'academic distinction' then began with business schools keen to establish their intellectual credibility – so also drawing in researchers from neighbouring disciplines with little 'real world' experience or even interest. On that basis, business schools are presented by Bennis and O'Toole as having lost contact with their former roots in 'actual business practice'. Instead, business and management academics turned to 'A journals', citations and other standard measures of academic legitimacy. Reflecting broadly on these issues, Augier and March have observed:

'As business schools and their constituencies have struggled with the problems, the discussion has often been characterized more by rhetorical ripostes from contending advocates than by thoughtful engagement. Thus, a critique of business schools as intellectually shallow and academically second-rate is counterpoised to a critique of the schools as far removed from managerial reality, thus irrelevant to, or destructive of, good management practice.' (Augier & March, 2007, p.131).

For Bennis and O'Toole and many others, the challenge now is to rebalance the business school: not to turn away from rigour but also to embrace other forms of knowledge and experience. Bottom (2009) has challenged this creation story as offering a 'misleading, heavily selected understanding of the actual course of events'. Certainly, the story does largely ignore the development of business schools outside the North American context (see for example Jacobsen & Sørensen, 2017). However, the point here is neither to endorse nor contest the account offered by Bennis and O'Toole (and others) but rather to note its narrative power and influence – and the explanation it offers for the contemporary tension between rigour and relevance in this area of social science. Simply put, and seen from this critical perspective, business schools have in some sense over-compensated for their early 'vocational' roots and enthusiastically adopted a rigid model of scholarly excellence (what Thomas and Wilson have referred to as 'physics envy'; Thomas & Wilson, 2011).

The second aspect of the Bennis and O'Toole article with wider resonance for this paper's discussion concerns the underlying case that business schools should be considered as above all <u>professional</u> institutions. As Bennis and O'Toole put this: 'The scientific model, as we call it, is predicated on the faulty assumption that business is an academic discipline like chemistry or geology. In fact, business is a profession, akin to medicine and law, and business schools are professional schools – or should be.' (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005, 1)

This claim about the underlying purpose of business and management research and education was developed by (among others) Herbert Simon some 40 years previously. Simon's argument was that business schools needed both pure (or 'disciplinary') and applied ('professional') wings, but ultimately the point of a business school is to bring knowledge and practice together (Simon, 1967). Simon was especially attentive to the relationship between these two 'wings', but also to the challenges of organizing a professional school – bringing the 'world of practice' together with 'disciplinary' matters, ensuring that practical management problems 'rub against' theory and techniques, pushing against the 'natural increase of entropy' in such a system (Irwin, 2017b). As Rousseau has expressed it: 'The business school should resemble neither a trade school nor a physics department, but instead mix scientific knowledge and applied problems in a fashion that students can build on throughout their professional careers.' (Rousseau, 2012, p. 602)

Viewed in these terms, and echoing the comments from Cooper above, the danger of the approach typified by the ABS Guide is that it promotes one 'wing' of the business school over the other: heightening also the sense that academic recognition comes primarily from high-level publications rather than sustained attention to more professional, practically-oriented duties. Once again, and as expressed by the creation story of the changing institutional context of modern business schools, the point is that rigour and relevance are presented as being in tension – and even opposition – to one another.

The double debate over rigour and relevance.

Already, we can identify some of the fault–lines running through what has in effect been a discussion of the fundamental aims and purposes of business and management research. Without attempting an exhaustive review (see Kieser et al., 2015), we can highlight some of its notable features.

Firstly, a recurrent – and persistent - argument that there is a 'great divide' or 'gap' between research and practice. Some sense of this can be gathered simply from the titles of a selection of publications in business and management journals addressing this issue (including of course Bennis & O'Toole's evocative 'How business schools lost their way'):

- 'The great divide between business school research and business practice' (Dostaler & Tomberlin, 2013)
- 'Bridging the relevance gap: aligning stakeholders in the future of management research.' (Starkey & Madan, 2001)
- 'Why the rigour-relevance gap in management research is unbridgeable' (Kieser & Leiner, 2009)
- 'Bridging the rigour-relevance gap in management research: it's already happening!' (Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009)

Secondly, and as can be gathered from the titles above, the adoption of distinct perspectives on the nature and extent of this 'divide'. Thus, Kieser and Leiner have argued on the basis of systems theory that science and practice operate according to different logics. Efforts to 'bridge the gap' are therefore futile since it 'is a false hope to expect that collaborators from practice and science can jointly produce research' (2009, p. 529). However, even among those who take the view that business research and

practice can be 'bridged', a range of positions exist: from relative optimism that management research is dealing with the challenge (for example, Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009) through to those who conclude that there are deeper problems (for example, Markides, 2007). As Fincham and Clark note in their introduction to the 2009 debate in the *Journal of Management Studies*, the issue can be framed as a relatively-simple knowledge transfer or communication problem (what they call 'lost <u>in</u> translation') or as a more fundamental knowledge production problem ('lost <u>before</u> translation') (Fincham & Clark, 2009, p. 510).

Thirdly, one finds persistent criticisms of <u>the operation of elite journals and an argument that academic quality is not increasing despite the growing number of publications</u>. Thus, Alvesson and Sandberg have observed that 'at the same time as more journal articles than ever are being published, there is a broadly shared assessment of an increasing lack of more interesting and influential studies' (2013, p.129) Their analysis suggests that 'gap-spotting research' has become dominant due to institutional conditions, professional norms and researchers' identity constructions (see also Macdonald & Kam, 2007). Journal editors and reviewers are partly held to blame here – and not least for the specific kind of rigour advocated by many journals (according to Alvesson & Sandberg, a mix of 'pedantic vacuum cleaning of existing literature' and 'detailed codification procedures' which fail to ask deeper questions).

Fourthly, one can identify a series of attempts to find new ways forward in business and management research: often premised on <u>the idea that it is possible to combine rigour and relevance</u> in some way. Thus, Andrew van de Ven's notion of 'engaged scholarship' seeks to bring these elements together (van de Ven, 2007). Andrew Pettigrew's case for 'double hurdle' research (or 'scholarship with impact') similarly represents a call for work which is both innovative in scholarly terms and relevant to practical contexts of knowledge-application (Pettigrew, 2001, 2011). From this perspective, it is definitely not about <u>either</u> rigour <u>or</u> relevance, but very much about achieving <u>both</u>.

Finally at this point, and returning to the issues of contemporary academic culture introduced at the beginning of this paper, it is important to emphasize that these are not simply abstract discussions, but are often explicitly linked to <u>the changing conditions of academic employment and a critique of university managerialism in particular</u>. Thus, in a withering account of academic management at 'a European Business School' (EBS), Parker notes the 'intense focus' on measuring publications on the basis of an earlier version of the ABS Guide: 'The only publications that mattered were stated to be those in three and four star journals.… The process of getting appointments past the Dean was reduced to counting the ABS scores on publications… Despite future members of the external research audit repeatedly insisting that they would not be using the ABS list, it still continued to be the only measure used in evaluating academics by EBS management.' (Parker, 2014, pp. 285-6)

Staying with this paper's broad theme of the relationship between research quality and societal value, one way of capturing this case is to present it as a <u>double debate</u>. On the one side, discussion relates to <u>the balance between</u> rigour and relevance: does the focus on elite journal 'rigour' detract from practical applicability and relevance? How in Herbert Simon's terms should the 'world of practice' relate to 'disciplinary' matters? Business and management researchers find themselves in an especially

interesting (but not necessarily unique) position here due to the larger institutional context of the modern business school and the pressures to offer a professional as well as academic contribution.

On the other side, there is a discussion taking place about the most appropriate form of both rigour and relevance. This discussion raises questions about the very definition of 'rigour' and opens up among other matters the role of 'elite' journals in promoting certain interpretations of research excellence. Such questions are further complicated (or enriched) by the confluence of separate scholarly cultures within business and management research: prompting in turn a debate about 'narrowness vs pluralism' as different social scientific traditions and theoretical/methodological perspectives seek to impose themselves on the definition of research quality (see Parker, 2015). Meanwhile, 'relevance' is equally open to contestation and discussion. Does relevance suggest what is often referred to as a 'consultancy' approach, is it simply about dissemination and good communication, or does it involve some form of engaged scholarship, critical evaluation or more challenging interaction with external stakeholders?

The discussion of the relationship between rigour and relevance and that of the form of rigour and relevance are of course closely related. As Starkey et al have aptly observed: 'Where one stands in the rigour-relevance debate depends [on] how one defines both "rigour" and "relevance" and how one conceptualizes the relationship between them.' (Starkey et al., 2009, p. 547) Moreover, we can return to the previously-noted question of whether research in this specific field should present itself as being either for or about business and management. Is the intention to assist with organizational problem-solving and strategic practice in a manner which can be of benefit to business and management – at least in the medium term? Or is the underlying aim to reflect more deeply upon business and management as a contemporary phenomenon, including the larger social, economic and political questions raised? Once again, we can identify a contested sense of the very meaning of 'relevance' – with important consequences also for the definition of 'rigour'. These may be double debates. But they should not be seen as separate from each another.

Re-imagining quality

These contestations certainly suggest something of the underlying institutional and disciplinary setting within which this area of social science is shaped, conducted and evaluated – and especially the apparent contradictions, indeterminacies and tensions within that setting. Drawing upon a previous discussion of the notion of 'ethno-epistemic assemblage' as involving a contingent and situated inter-relationship between science and society (Irwin & Michael, 2003), the contemporary business school emerges as an overloaded assemblage: responsible to multiple audiences and for multiple purposes, with academic staff working according to different intellectual traditions, and where not all institutional and personal expectations can be satisfied. Thus, the rigour-relevance debate suggests:

- Multiple pressures within the profession (towards producing academic publications in certain designated journals but also commitment to the world of 'relevance');
- Multiple scholarly cultures and epistemologies (with one accusation regarding the ABS Guide that it encourages a functionalist and intellectually-narrow perspective);

- Multiple audiences for research (with the imagined needs of business stakeholders especially prominent but also the requirements of journal editors);
- Multiple intermediaries and gatekeepers (as a number of scholarly but also professional organizations engage with the debate and a key role is assumed by practitioner-oriented journals such as the *Harvard Business Review*);
- Multiple understandings of the value and purposes of research (accompanied by claims that 'journal list fetishism' has displaced serious scholarly inquiry);
- Multiple constructions of business school identity and purposes (although the strongest voice in the published debate may well belong to the critics of 'metricization': Kelly & Burrows, 2012);
- Multiple institutional pressures on the business school (not least as a revenue-generator for the university but also the requirement for it to perform sufficiently well in terms of academic research assessment).

In this situation, it is specifically striking that the 'overloaded' and multiple nature of the modern business school has been accompanied, not by increasing organizational diversity and variety, but by an apparent convergence and isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) in the design and operation of academic institutions – including in the judgement of research quality and relevance. Thus, Parker's critical account of a 'European Business School' may appear extreme but is also recognizable across many different business school settings and at an international level.

Journal ranking exercises can be viewed as an infringement on academic liberty and as an exercise, in Foucauldian terms, of 'disciplinary power' over a potentially heterogeneous and cross-disciplinary field. They can also be seen as contributing to the creation of a common professional and disciplinary framework, and as attempting an important form of personal and institutional 'sense-making'. However, and to return to the particular case of the ABS Guide, the problem is that such an approach to sense-making may miss out as much as it includes – and specifically fail to grasp the more diverse possibilities and opportunities within this research field (and not least towards increased interaction with larger society). To put it bluntly, what is presented as a mere matter of good guidance and helpful clarification can in practice be performed as a rigid reification, over-simplification and intellectual restriction of a much more complex (and much more interesting) set of issues, questions and relationships – with important consequences for the development of an academic specialty and for scholars in that area.

Taking note of these points, and building on the assumption that there is more to research quality than can be gauged by the journal of publication, the question then is how otherwise to conceptualize and perform the issues at stake – or, put differently, how to re-imagine relationships of rigour and relevance in contemporary social science. Here, it becomes specifically important to consider what has been neglected within this discussion. To take one prominent debate from the natural sciences, larger questions of societal responsibility – with a history over many decades, but now often referred to under the heading of 'Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI)' (Stilgoe, Owen & Macnaghten, 2013) – are largely missing here. Equally, themes of democratic participation with research policy or 'public

engagement with science (PES)' are apparently absent (see for example Stilgoe, Lock & Wilsdon, 2014). To give another example, at a time when 'citizen science' (Irwin, 1995) is gaining widespread international attention as a means of bringing scientific research and lay publics closer together, it is hard to find a parallel discussion of 'citizen business research' (or indeed a sustained reflection on 'citizen social science' more broadly). This is not to suggest that concepts such as RRI, PES or citizen science have ready-made answers to the questions under discussion (that would be misleading to say the very least). But it is to argue that, at least based on published contributions to the discussion[3], this appears as an inward debate conducted among a specific scholarly community rather than a larger attempt (in Burawoy's terms) to achieve a 'public' social science or to re-make connections with the 'world we study'.

'Relevance' is one way of constituting the relationship between social scientific research and its larger social contribution but so too are 'social usefulness' (Hodgkinson & Starkey, 2011; Willmott, 2012), 'social responsibility', 'cognitive justice', and 'participatory action' (among many other possibilities: Felt et al , 2013; Fricker, 2007; Visvanathan, 1997). At this point also, Brewer's argument for the re-framing of research 'impact' as a matter of 'public value' becomes specifically important (Brewer, 2013). Such an approach to the quality discussion suggests the need for changes within the academic world rather than only between the university and wider society. One example here is the call for post-disciplinary collaborations with a variety of academic and non-academic partners. The language of gaps, divides and bridges implies two fixed sides, rather than more fluid, open and mutually-constructed potentialities for learning, shared reflection and co-creation.

From social responsibility to public value, each of these concepts both shapes and constrains subsequent discussion in specific, but significant, ways. Equally importantly, such alternative formulations open up the matter of from which – and whose – perspective the value of research is to be judged: research funders, academic managers, business practitioners, journal editors and reviewers, societal stakeholders more broadly, socially-excluded and other groups? Whilst it is of obvious importance for social scientists themselves to debate these issues, researchers may not be the only group with a legitimate or significant voice. The implications of this across the social sciences are potentially large – but it might also (put somewhat provocatively) represent a kind of 'catching up' with related discussions within and around the natural sciences (Irwin, 1995).

In conclusion, there are three points to emphasize with regard to the (re)making of quality within contemporary social scientific research. First of all, and to return to the suggestion made by Strathern in the introduction, this has at least partly been a story of what (so to speak) we are doing to ourselves. Of course, institutions play an important role and there are varying degrees of influence and seniority within the social scientific community. But the guide produced by one British association could not have achieved such prominence without the active support of many business and management researchers working at many different levels. If social scientists wish to re-imagine questions of the quality and purpose of their research, then they should begin by considering their own assumptions and academic practices.

Secondly, critique of research metrics and related evaluation systems is necessary but certainly not sufficient. At least at times, the debate reviewed here has represented an (admittedly constrained) attempt to consider what quality means for that sub-discipline and how certain notions and issues should be re-formulated. A greater awareness of the potential multiple framings of these issues could open up a larger, and wider, sense of the meanings of quality: from quality in journal articles to quality in research-practitioner relations, from quality in 'professional knowledge' to quality in 'making public issues out of private troubles'. Rather than simply criticizing dominant approaches to the issue of research quality, the challenge is to re-make it in new ways - and to keep doing so.

Thirdly, the stories we tell about our disciplines – including what was referred to earlier as 'creation stories' – are extremely important[4]. In the case of business and management research, the narrative of 'losing our way' has been especially significant. Burawoy's case for 'taking knowledge back to those from whom it came' may have a similar power and influence. We have also heard stories of gaps, bridges and alignments. There are many stories too of those who are winning in the 'indicator game' and those who are losing. If we are to open up the question of research quality in the social sciences, rather than closing it down in the form of all-purpose metrics, then more diverse – and more compelling - stories are required. One starting-point would be the telling of divergent, powerful and provocative, but also self-critical and reflective, stories of why social science 'matters' – and should 'matter' - in ways which are not imagined by binary formulations of rigour and relevance.

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Endnote

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[1] I am extremely grateful to one of my anonymous reviewers for making this valuable point.

[2] Interestingly, this institutional move to draw upon the ABS Guide has developed despite the regular insistence from REF sub-panel chairs and others that such metrics are not the basis for specific assessments.

[3] In the author's experience, management conferences often include a much more diverse set of debates and discussions than the academic literature suggests.

[4] Once again, I express deep gratitude to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.