



**Massey University**

What Social Science Needs  
Now is Imagination

**Remarks to the BRCSS Research Conference 2009**

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**Thank you for the invitation to contribute to the BRCSS Research Conference with the theme of “celebrating social science research”.**

**A little while ago (March last year to be exact), in what will become known by social sciences as the “good old days”, I spoke to a BRCSS/SPEAR meeting at Prof. Bedford’s request about some of the things social science might consider doing.**

**In a climate of support for social science, I encouraged social scientists to make a greater contribution to the country. In particular, I pointed out that the main problems facing New Zealand were social issues, but social science had to convince sceptical decision makers of their relevance. I argued for graduates to be better prepared, for the barriers between disciplines to be broken down, for social scientists to tell us more about our own society, to make links to the natural sciences, work with Government to address issues of importance, maintain a record of independence, talk a language non-social scientists can understand and listen more. I ended my list of things to do by suggesting that better use needed to be made of IT to gather handle large amounts of data.**

**Prof. Bedford suggested I make similar comments at this conference – so I have.**

**And these points all remain valid. They are issues I would urge social science to take seriously and address because they represent the “to do” list for disciplines that seek to make an impact in the contemporary world.**

**But I want to talk today about the sense of unease that I feel about what I see as a cautious, perhaps inward looking, trend in social science. My concerns are heightened by the very demanding and difficult circumstances our country and the world is in: circumstances that require our attention.**

**My comments are pertinent also because the BRCSS initiative is coming to an end and you will be wondering what comes next.**

**As you may know I had a little to do with the setting up of BRCSS. It came from the concern that social science did not appear to have the capability to make the contribution required of it. The money was given to the social sciences with the hope that it would be invested in building this capability.**

**I will leave it for the inevitable evaluation to find out just what difference was made.**

**The point I want to make is that the end of BRCSS cannot be the end of the drive to lift capability. Indeed the need to lift capability is more urgent than before. And we may need to reconsider the capability we are seeking to build.**

**This conference is taking place at a time of major change. The convergence of economic and ecological crises, to take what is perhaps the main example, is not some short term cycle, it is structural. The sheer scale of change, the interconnections, the urgency makes huge demands on the social sciences. The world cannot look forward to going back to business as usual. Unless we understand the nature of the changes we face, and alter our structures in response, the future could be increasingly problematic, if not disastrous.**

**Social science must step up to this challenge. It needs to provide the necessary understanding of our situation and the implications for change. And this will require capacity and imagination.**

**Thinking this way has led to me reread some of the sociology that influenced me many years ago and ask what it is that the disciplines within the social sciences have to contribute.**

**That contribution is described, at least in part, by the “sociological imagination” as C. Wright Mills called it – although he was talking about all social sciences.**

**Mills as you will recall is known for his statement on the sociological imagination which begins: “Nowadays men (sic) often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling they are often quite correct:”.**

**For those unfamiliar with Mills’ work let me explain that he wrote these words at the outset of a book designed to “define the meaning of social sciences for the cultural tasks of our times”.**

**He noted that most people live their lives unaware of the social structures around them.**

**The promise of social science, he argued was that it gave people the “quality of mind” to place their lives in the larger historical scene and thereby explain what was happening to them.**

**He coined the terms “personal troubles”, referring to the events that we experience as individuals, and “public issues”, referring to the matters that go beyond an individual life.**

**In 1959 Mills applied his thinking to what he saw as the inability of people in a time of “uneasiness” and “indifference” to see that their lives were shaped by social structures. He wanted social scientists to make these structures clear.**

**Mills hoped that the social science imagination might supplant the other ways of explaining the world (like socio-biology or personal self improvement) and believed this was happening.**

**But Mills did have a concern about the way many social scientists conceived of their role.**

**He saw them as preoccupied with bureaucratic and methodological issues, concepts and trivial issues of concern to no-one.**

**Mills wanted social scientists to focus on what he called the “historical social structures that were relevant to the public issues and insistent human troubles” he saw around him. He urged that social scientists undertook the social analysis need to understand large questions and make their work available to those people who “feel that their private lives are a series of traps”.**

**But he saw many who did not and lamented the reluctance of the social scientists to be involved with the intellectual and political task of social analysis either because they did not want to or because they were not up to it.**

**Looking back on Mills’ work from our vantage point in 2009, I remain convinced by his conception of the role of social science - with an exception I will come to in a moment.**

**He was right to promote the importance of the sociological imagination. So right that nowadays, to use his word, people do see a connection between their personal lives and social structures. Whole areas of thought, like feminism, are based on making this connection clear. Commentators routinely situate what they have to say in a social context; it is common sense to do so.**

**In the midst of the kinds of changes I raised earlier, the sociological imagination is a vital capability in the tool kit we will need to find our way forward.**

**But there is a weakness in what Mills had to say – partly because of when he said it. Mills was making the case for a profession to pass onto people the “quality of mind” he saw as essential if people were to understand the issues they faced and do something about them. In other words he was making a case for the privileged position of the professional social scientist.**

**Mills view inevitably creates a conception of social science as inward looking; creating capabilities that will allow social scientists to do things for people.**

**This makes me uneasy because I am not sure it fits what Mills would call the tasks of our time, as opposed to his time.**

**Today the sociological imagination is widely shared, as it needs to be.**

**Equipped with this knowledge, people, at least a good number of them, are capable of reaching out to social scientists.**

**These people and social scientists can now help each other rather than social scientists thinking it is one-way traffic. We need to ask what people can do for us as much as what we can do for them. We need to conceive of a process of mutual education. That is the capability we need to build.**

**This is an outward looking interactive capability that understands the sociological imagination to be not only social in its content but social in its construction.**

**I realise this is a very risky process to be involved in. It does mean giving up on building the capabilities that mean the social sciences see themselves as telling people what to do.**

**Many social scientists will be unwilling to undermine what they see as their professional position (by which they mean power).**

**By doing this they risk being marginalised.**

**I mentioned in my remarks last March that one of the challenges social scientists face is to make a case for their work. The spread of the sociological imagination has made most people sceptical about the social sciences. They feel they already know what they are being told. They see jargon as just a way of making the obvious obscure.**

**It is only by building the social sciences capability to be worldly – to construct a sociological imagination with people - that relevance will be re-established.**

**The world needs a sociological imagination and social scientists need a worldly imagination.**

**I do see examples of this new sense of what social science is all around me. I am massively encouraged by the work of Te Waka Tangata and the Oxygen Group. The Running Hot Conference (organised by the two groups) is interactive, engaging and premised on the assumption that science is a partnership.**

**These young to mid-career scientists are moving “upstream” to discuss their work with people at an early stage. This allows them to form a partnership that leads to better research.**

**I see people like Prof Robyn Munford and Dr Jackie Saunders undertaking research on youth transitions embedded in the community of Highbury in Palmerston North. The community are as much a part of the research as the social scientists.**

**But I also see the tendency to be inward looking, perhaps reinforced by the awareness that social sciences always struggle for funding and that situation is about to get worse.**

**In the context of tougher times for social science one way to cope might be to just get quietly on with the work as one academic put it. Keep your head down and assert the importance of social science to anyone who will listen.**

**This will not assist social science and it will not assist an understanding of the challenges we face and how to address them.**

**If there was ever a time in history for social science to be relevant, this is it. We have to imagine nothing less than a new way to live. Social scientists cannot do this by themselves. The future has to be constructed in partnership with those who have to live in it. That is the capability we need.**

**I wish you well with your deliberations.**