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doi:10.1111/josi.12042

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: [Riggs, D.W. (2013). Impact validity: A politics of possibilities. *Journal of Social Issues*, 69, 797-803.], which has been published in final form at DOI:10.1111/josi.12042. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with [Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving](#).

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Impact Validity: A Politics of Possibilities

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This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Citizenship Journal of Social Issues*, 169, 797-803, Copyright Wiley, DOI: [10.1111/josi.12042](https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12042)

Abstract

This commentary reflects upon the possibilities opened up by the concept of ‘impact validity’. Particular attention is paid to three key issues that appear across the entire issue, namely: 1) the role of understandings of politics in research that aims to achieve impact validity, 2) the intersections of career and real world impact, and 3) how researchers who aim for impact validity manage the needs of the differing audiences of their work. Overall, the commentary suggests that the concept of impact validity holds great potential to contribute to how we think about the ways we do research, and the role that researchers can play in the public sphere in terms of creating the space for new ways of knowing about the world, in addition to encouraging those in positions of power to think about how they may usefully be influenced by academic knowledge.

Key Words: impact validity, politics, research, policy, power

Impact Validity: A Politics of Possibilities

The papers presented in this special issue of the *Journal of Social Issues* provide a powerful provocation to researchers in terms of how we ensure that our research has real world impact. Whilst, as Massey and Barreras note in their editorial, it has increasingly become standard for many applied journals to require authors to include a section on the implications of their research for practice, there is a difference between claiming applicability post hoc, and actually designing research projects that incorporate into their design ways of increasing the likelihood of the uptake of findings. This special issue is thus important for the many and varied voices that contribute to the argument that researchers must consider the impact of our work from the onset. Importantly, the papers included in the issue are both incredibly diverse, whilst at the same time there are echoes across all of the papers in regards to what are the key issues facing the uptake of impact validity itself as a concept. In this commentary I explore what in my reading were the key issues that predominate across the papers, and offer reflections about how some of these issues might be addressed. In so doing, and as the title of this paper reflects, this commentary suggests that the concept of impact validity opens up a politics of possibilities, where research has the potential to open up new possibilities that are only limited by the tools we use to influence and shape the world around us.

The Politics of Impact Validity

In their editorial, Massey and Barreras suggest that whilst the desire to achieve impact validity must shape both the development of a research project and the reporting of its findings, the methodology itself must be apolitical. Whilst there is undoubtedly some merit to claiming an apolitical methodology, the papers included in the special issue repeatedly demonstrate that methodology, as much as research

design and data analysis, is political (in many differing senses). In the final paper of the issue by Marquez et al, for example, people who had spent long periods of time in prison for violent crimes were involved not simply as community consultants, but as actively involved in data collection and the design of the project. This is what we might think of as a politicised methodology, one founded upon the belief that part of the work of achieving impact validity is to involve those with direct knowledge of the field of study, people who have previously been treated as objects of power. The politics of methodology, however, is not limited to methodologies that we might think of as 'politicised'. Other papers in this special issue report upon, for example, a particular politics of representation employed in the methodology (e.g., Hagger-Johnson, Hegarty, Barker and Richards), or a research methodology aimed at making a direct impact upon a particular government (e.g., Barreras & Torruella). Thinking about what it means to be 'apolitical', then, requires us to consider what we call 'politics'. By definition, 'politics' refers to the art or science of influencing people. In this sense, any research aiming to achieve impact validity must be political throughout all aspects of the project, and this includes choosing and implementing a methodology that whilst rigorous, is nonetheless the methodology most likely to influence the target audience.

What I am suggesting here, then, and following research on the sociology of scientific knowledge (e.g., Latour & Woolgar, 1986), is not simply that all research is political in the sense that it is undertaken by individuals who have political beliefs (which in many instances drive research), nor simply that there are political histories to the development of all research methodologies (see chapters in Harding, 1987). Rather, my point is that all research is driven by a desire to influence others. In this sense, we can think about not how impact validity might require an apolitical

methodology, but rather that it might require the explicit voicing of the politics that drive any research. Indeed, Massey and Barreras suggest this in their editorial, where they propose that there may be instances where what is required to ensure impact validity is not yet more research on the issue being investigated, but rather research on why those in positions of power refuse to take heed of the research evidence that exists on the topic. As Kitzinger (1990, p. 196) suggests, “ignorance is something in which many people have vested interests, and consequently take care to maintain”. Understanding the particular type of politics that guides the refusal to listen may thus well be shaped by a focus on how those in positions of power seek both to influence and be influenced.

One answer to this question of what influences those in positions of power is provided in many papers in this special issue, perhaps most clearly in the papers by Barreras and Torruella, Chaudhry, and also in the paper by Marquez et al. These papers especially highlight the emotional aspect of impact validity, where readers may be influenced not simply by the rigour of the methodology or the clarity of the findings, but also by how the findings evoke emotions for the reader. Of course along with the indictment to be apolitical, researchers are often encouraged to be emotionally removed from our research and our participants. Yet the papers in this issue suggest that perhaps emotion may be one way of ensuring impact validity. Whilst there is of course a difference between evoking emotions in others and being emotional oneself, the former is likely to fail if the latter does not occur. My point here is not that a rhetorical performance of emotion is required to influence others. Rather, my point is that emotion more often than not drives politics – why else would we bother to try and influence someone if we didn’t care in some way about doing so?

Impact validity in some sense, then, might rest upon being able to tell the reader *why* they should care, an issue I return to in the conclusion of this commentary.

Career Impact

Following on from the role of politics in impact validity, a second key issue that arose for me as I read the special issue was the ways in which caring about the influence of one's research can impact upon one's career. Speer and Christens highlight this issue in their paper, as do Massey and Barreras in their editorial. At stake in terms of the implementation of impact validity as a concept is the distinction between real world impact and career impact. Of course the two are not easily separable, but I think it is worth teasing the two apart a little. It is increasingly the case that academics are required to demonstrate how our research has impact upon the world. Certainly in the case of my university, promotions and grants are at least in part determined upon one's ability to demonstrate impact upon, for example, direct practice, public policy, or individual attitudes. What counts as impact in this regard is debatable, but as a general principle it is measured in terms of the uptake of one's research by those in positions of power. Of course many researchers who conduct research under consultancy with community organisations will know that there is a significant difference between the reports produced and provided to the organization themselves, and the publication of peer-reviewed journal articles. Whilst the former is often much more likely to influence or be acted upon by those we seek to impact, the latter is more readily taken as evidence of research output by universities. Time and time again I hear of colleagues refused a promotion due to the fact that they have not published enough in leading academic journals. Yet these are often the same colleagues who undertake extensive community projects and provide clear outcomes to communities that create real world impact.

In many and varied ways, the papers in this issue indicate that what is required is a two pronged approach to the vexed issue of impact in terms of careers. The first prong is to acknowledge the fact of competing interests, namely that a career can be built upon grant funding and academic output, but that this should not come at the expense of actually creating change in the world. The second prong is to recognize that there is little point, as I outlined above, in solely undertaking community engagement, if that does not lead to job security or grant funding for researchers. This may sound mercenary, but the reality is that academics cannot undertake research that will be institutionally endorsed and widely promoted if they do not have a job and if their research is not funded. Whilst there are many problems inherent with this model of research (i.e., that it is primarily research associated with universities that is accorded value, and that funding is increasingly granted by bodies with an investment in particular outcomes), it is likely the model that will remain for the foreseeable future. As researchers we must thus find ways to ensure not only that we are viable as researchers (so that we can do the work of producing research that has impact validity), but that we are responsible for our privileged position as researchers (which means factoring impact validity into our research from the onset).

Another issue requiring consideration in terms of academic careers is the potential impact of any individual academic. In his paper on harm reduction drug policies, Drucker suggests that there is a significant gap between changing public attitudes and changing public policy. Yet we might think about this gap in terms of the public profile of academics. In an ever-expanding era of celebrity influence, it is not unrealistic to contemplate how academics may influence people in positions of power not simply by presenting their findings to them, but also by influencing public debate and opinion. People often vote on the basis of their identification with key

issues within the platform of a candidate, and academics can play a role in creating awareness or changing opinions about how key issues should be understood. In part this may be about putting a public face to the personal stories that often circulate about key issues, but in part it might also be about engendering trust with the public in terms of providing evidence about key issues. ‘Academic celebrity’ will of course be an oxymoron for many researchers, yet if our aim is to ensure impact validity it may be necessary for researchers to consider our public profile and engagement to be a key aspect of our careers if we see to make the most of all avenues available to use our research to influence others.

Cultural Relativism

In their paper on impact validity in regards to issues facing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals, Hagger-Johnson, Hegarty, Barker and Richards draw attention to what they see as the issues associated with social constructionism as a theoretical framework for research that aims to ensure impact validity. Emphasising the claims to cultural relativism that are seen by some as the hallmark of social constructionism, Hagger-Johnson and his colleagues suggest that such notions of all truths being equal can lead to either inaction, or the inappropriate privileging of lay knowledges over professional knowledges. This, however, may itself be seen as making something of a straw figure of social constructionism, which is a heterogenous approach to understanding how things in the world are made to matter: how they are made to appear as though they are outside the social. In terms of impact validity, social constructionist approaches, rather than eschewing any commitment to one particular position, may instead be seen as allowing for the identification of how any given position is produced, and how this production occurs within networks of power relations in which privilege always comes at the expense of disadvantage. As

such, rather than simply advocating for an ‘all players are equal’ assessment of the world, social constructionism seeks to identify how the game itself is produced, and how within any given game particular identities are made possible or impossible.

Chaudhry’s excellent paper on experiences and representations of the ‘war on terror’ as it played out in the Swat Valley in Northern Pakistan highlights precisely how a social constructionist approach can be deployed not only to ensure impact validity, but also to navigate the needs of different audiences. As Chaudhry notes:

For Pakistani audiences I have continued to emphasize the complicitous of the Pakistani state and its repressive apparatus as well as the average Pakistani in perpetuating violence at discursive and material levels for those in the North Western region of the country including Swat. For US audiences a chief goal is to help them understand how their taxpayers’ money is being used to fund violence, even as I bring in photographs, peoples’ stories and voices, and my analysis from a part of the world that has been dubbed terrorist, thereby highlighting our shared humanity in the face of contemporary and historical global othering processes.

In the account provided here by Chaudhry of how she navigates the competing demands of different audiences, what resonates is not that anything goes, but rather that if the overarching agenda is to challenge power as it is exerted over the lives of people in Swat, then this requires not only examining the complicity of those of us living in the global west with the funding of war, but also the complicity of those closer to Swat in ongoing violence. The narratives that Chaudhry collected from her Swati participants highlight both complicities and resistances, thus troubling negative media portrayals of Pakistani people, whilst also encouraging Swati people to examine how they may at times be invested in the very enactments of power that

regiment their lives. Social constructionism, it could be argued, thus opens up the possibility for impact validity precisely by allowing for the generation of multiple forms of impact by the voicing of multiple perspectives that challenge not only each other, but also themselves.

Conclusion

In reflecting upon this issue of *Journal of Social Issues* as a whole, it struck me that much of what all of the authors spoke about was story telling. Certainly it is the case that all research tells a story, though for the most part the normative approach to reporting research (i.e., rules for writing, the construction of methodologies that suture over any points of contestations, analyses that hide the messiness of data) makes the story seem natural, rather than a construction of the researcher. By contrast, the call by authors in this special issue to enact impact validity is a call for a more explicit form of story telling. The authors variously encourage us as researchers to spell out who we want to listen to our research, how they should listen to our research, and what those who listen should hear. This I think is an important idea, and one that fits well with the idea that data don't speak for themselves. If we expect that our findings will simply tell the truth to those in positions of power, then we are in many ways naively affirming that those in positions of power not only know, but that they know how to know. By contrast, a focus upon impact validity instructs us to recognize that part of the work of ensuring impact is to ensure that people know how to take up our work: that they have the arguments to justify listening, that they have the language to interpret our findings, and that they are able to respond to our research at all levels.

This idea of impact validity as an explicit form of research story telling may thus provide some inroads into the issue of 'narrative fit' raised by Massey and

Barreras in their editorial. They suggest that when social scientific research is recognized by policy makers, it is only research that conforms to what policy makers want to hear. Part of story telling, then, might be about telling policy makers *why* they don't want to hear alternate stories, and what the implications of this might be. And of course part of story telling aimed at impact validity might be about giving policy makers new ways of talking about research findings, ways that, yes, are all about political argumentation and justification, but which might potentially be about arguing for or justifying something other than the status quo. If we treat research findings as an important building block in how we come to create knowledge about the world, then a vital component of this is to also create new ways of knowing about the world. Impact validity, I would hope, is thus not simply about ensuring that people listen, but it is also about opening upon a politics of possibilities in which influencing others rests upon recognition of the need to be open to being influenced ourselves.

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