Academic treadmills and the squeeze on imaginative, intellectual spaces

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Abstract:

In recent years, there has been a great deal of collective rumination within the social sciences about their role in society. In the post-1997 UK context, commitments to notions of 'evidence-based policy' and 'knowledge transfer' have further stimulated such reflections. More recently, Michael Burawoy's (2005) address to the American Sociological Association, which called for 'public sociology' has reverberated across the globe, motivating a mass of debates about the purpose of sociological research. To date, most such contributions have been based on personal experience and opinion. In contrast, this paper responds directly to Burawoy's suggestion that we should 'apply sociology to ourselves,' in order that we 'become more conscious of the global forces' driving our research (Burawoy, 2005: 285). Drawing on an empirical research project designed to explore of the relationship between health inequalities research and policy in Scotland and England in the period from May 1997 until May 2007, this paper employs data from interviews with academic researchers. The findings suggest that the growing pressure to ensure research is 'policy relevant' is diminishing the potential of academia to provide a space for developing innovative and transformative ideas and is, instead, promoting institutionalized and vehicular (chameleon-like) ideas. Such a claim relates to Ed Said's (1994) concern about the increasing 'professionalisation' of academia, suggesting creative, intellectual spaces within the academic social sciences are increasingly being squeezed. More specifically, the paper suggests we ought to pay far more attention to the role that obtaining funding plays in shaping the research we undertake and in mediating the interplay between research and policy.

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Introduction:

The past decade has seen a great deal of collective ruminating about the (actual and desirable) role of the social sciences. Much like the 1970s and 1980s, this period has been marked by a sense of disappointment with the failure of social research to significantly influence audiences beyond academia, particularly policymakers (Carlisle 2001; Dorling, et al. 2007; Martin 2001; Massey 2000; Naughton 2005). Both eras follow periods in which policymakers in the UK, the USA and elsewhere

had become increasingly interested in 'utilizing' social research, and both have facilitated insightful debates about the relationship between research and policy. The research from this first era, in the 1970s and 1980s, remains important to current debates both because some of these theories directly inform more recent ones and because, at the same time, these insights sometimes seem in danger of being forgotten, potentially enabling what Miller (1980) calls 're-inventing the broken wheel'. The most obvious illustration of the latter is the way in which UK policy documents and politicians spoke about 'evidence-based policy' in the early years of the New Labour government, evoking an image of a simple and linear relationship, in which research would either *drive* policy change or *respond directly* to the policy concerns of the day (e.g. Blunkett 2000; Cabinet Office 1999a). Such aspirations appeared blind to the academic accounts of the relationship between research and policy produced in previous decades, nearly all of which outlines a variety of factors that suggest policymakers are unlikely to ever utilize social research in any direct sense (e.g. Blume 1977; Bulmer 1982; Caplan 1979; Pahl 1977; Weiss 1977; Weiss 1979; Weiss 1982). These theorists did not tend to suggest that research had no influence policy at all but they were keen to emphasis the complexity and interactive nature of this relationship (e.g. Donnison 1972; Weiss 1977; Weiss 1979). Indeed, a 1980 review of this body of work argues that the notion of research 'utilization' or 'use' is unsatisfactory because it implies a one-way process, in which research influences policy but is not itself informed by policy (Rein 1980). As an alternative, Rein argues that it would be more helpful to think of the 'interplay' between research and policy and that, to usefully understand this interplay, we need to do more to uncover 'the latent policies which organise the empirical research carried out by social science' (Rein 1980: 367).

Similar sentiments are evident in a multitude of recent calls for social scientists to reflect more explicitly on why they do the work they do and for whom it is intended (Burawoy 2005; Dorling and Shaw 2002; Evans 2004; Martin 2001; Massey 2000; Ward 2005). Michael Burawoy's 2004 address to the American Sociological Association, reproduced in this journal the following year (Burawoy 2005), suggests a helpful starting point for better understanding these issues is to conceptualise sociology as consisting of four strands: public; professional; policy; and critical. To better understand how these different strands shape the work we do, Burawoy argues that 'We should apply our sociology to ourselves,' and 'become more conscious of the global forces that are driving our discipline.' (Burawoy, 2005: 285). To date, there has been a great deal reflection on intellectuals' role in society (e.g. Fuller 2004; Fuller 2005; Furedi 2004; Jacoby 1987; Said 1994), including specific debates about 'public' sociology (e.g. Beck 2005; Braithwaite 2005; Burawoy 2005; Calhoun 2005; Ericson 2005; Etzioni 2005; Johnson 2004) and 'policy-relevant' geography

(e.g. Dorling and Shaw 2002; Martin 2001; Massey 2000; Peck 1999; Ward 2005). There has also been a great deal of discontent expressed by those who believe an 'audit culture' is increasingly constraining intellectual possibilities in academia (Evans 2004; Ward 2005). However, Burawoy's explicit challenge has not yet been widely taken up; there has been very little recent empirical, sociological analysis of the academics involved in undertaking (or resisting) different kinds of intellectual work (McLennan, et al. 2005 is a notable exception). Indeed, social scientists have been remarkably reticent about focusing their observations on the factors shaping their own career trajectories and, in particular, on the crucial role that research funders play in shaping the work they do and in mediating the relationship between academia and its wider audiences. This article begins to address this gap by exploring the factors shaping the work of academics involved in health inequalities research.

This field of research encompasses academics in a variety of disciplinary settings, including economics, geography, social policy, politics and public health, as well as sociology. Although Burawoy's (2005) depiction of the four strands of academic activity is directed at sociology alone, the categories he identifies could just as easily be applied to other social science disciplines and are certainly all relevant to health inequalities research. Indeed, the comments made by the academics working in this field whom I interviewed support Burawoy's observation not only that there is interdependence between these four types of work, but that it can be 'antagonistic'. There is rather less evidence of the 'organic solidarity' that Burawoy identifies, in which each strand derives 'energy, meaning and imagination' from the others (Burawoy 2005: 275). Instead, the findings suggest that trying to simultaneously perform these different roles can be deeply problematic. To date, there has already been a significant amount of research exploring the relationship between academics and policymakers (e.g. Caplan 1979; Davies, et al. 2000; Eden 2005; Lavis, et al. 2003; Lomas 2000; Whitehead, et al. 2004; Wimbush, et al. 2005). This paper suggests that, in addition to focusing on the gap between these communities, it is important to explore what may be equally important tensions within them.

The case study: Health inequalities in the UK
The election of a New Labour government in 1997 heralded the promise of a new era for health inequalities in the UK. Seventeen-years after the publication of the widely cited Black Report on inequalities in health (Black, et al. 1980), New Labour was keen to emphasise that the Conservative government had failed to implement any of the report's (largely structural and socio-economic) recommendations (Department of Health 1997). In-line with the new government's general

commitment to evidence-based policy (Blunkett 2000; Cabinet Office 1999a; Cabinet Office 1999b), it commissioned a follow-up to the Black Report, the *Independent Inquiry into Inequalities in Health* (Acheson 1998), and promised that the evidence-based conclusions of this Inquiry would inform a new health strategy.   Significantly for an issue as complex and cross-cutting as health inequalities (Blackman, et al. 2006), the new government also claimed to be committed to 'joined-up' policymaking (Cabinet Office 1999a; Cabinet Office 2000).   These three commitments (reducing health inequalities and implementing evidence-based and joined-up policymaking) underpinned the rationale for the research on which this paper is based.   In summary, the aim was to explore how (if at all) academic research on health inequalities informed policy in the UK between 1997 and 2007.

To date, the combination of official commitments to basing policies on evidence with the apparent failure to effectively achieve reductions in health inequalities (Department of Health 2008; Department of Health and Community Care 2007; Shaw, et al. 2005) have resulted in a number of recent accounts of the relationship between health inequalities research and policy but few are based on comprehensive empirical data.   In fact, there has been no detailed, qualitative exploration of the mechanisms involved in the interface between health inequalities research and policy since Mel Bartley completed her PhD thesis on the debates surrounding the effects of unemployment on health twenty years ago.   Drawing on theories developed by Latour and colleagues in the context of anthropological studies of physical scientists (including Latour 1987; Latour and Woolgar 1986), Bartley's (1988; 1992) conclusion is that (micro)political (or career) interests are crucial to understanding the interplay between research and policy, and that professional networks are the fundamental mechanism via which 'knowledge claims' (Knorr-Cetina 1981) travel.   This suggests, as this article also demonstrates, that the potential for research-based ideas to influence policy is at least partially dependent on the factors driving researchers to undertake the work that they do.

Methodology:

The overall research is based on an analysis of 42 key policy statements and interviews with 61 individuals involved in the interplay between health inequalities research and policy in Scotland and England between 1997 and 2007.   Interviewees included (mostly senior) academic researchers, civil servants, ministers, journalists and research funders.   This paper focuses primarily on the insights provided by individuals with experience of working in academic contexts (27 interviewees were in academia at the time of the interview and five others had previously been; all of these had published work in the field of health inequalities between 1997 and 2007).   The interviewees share characteristics with groups frequently identified as 'elite' in much methodological literature (e.g.

Desmond 2004; Lilleker 2003). However, participants are not referred to with this label in this paper in order to avoid the implicit suggestion, explicit in some literature (e.g. Desmond 2004) that interviewing individuals who occupy positions of power necessarily requires a different approach to other types of interviewing. Rather, influenced by feminist methodological approaches (e.g. Maynard and Purvis 1994), a collaborative, non-hierarchical relationship between the interviewee and researcher was sought (Oakley 1981), although it was acknowledged that this was an aspiration rather than a consistently achievable objective (England 1994).

The majority of interviews took place in a private room where, for the duration of the interview, only the interviewee and the researcher were present (the remainder, at the preference of the interviewees, took place in less formal environments such as cafés). A semi-structured approach to interviews was taken, using a themed interview schedule which focused questions around health inequalities research, policy (post-1997) and research-policy relations. The interviews varied in length, lasting between 45-150 minutes (although most were around 60-70 minutes). All of the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by myself, before being abductively coded in the qualitative data analysis programme, *Atlas.ti*. In line with the University of [Blank's] ethical code of conduct, all the interview material has been fully anonymised before use. All interviewees were sent a copy of the transcript and provided with the chance to comment on its accuracy and level of anonymity. A reflexive account of the methodological literature which informed the approach taken to the interviewing process is available in [removed for review] and a more detailed account of the overall methodological approach is provided in [removed for review].

Tracing evidence of research-based ideas about health inequalities in policy:
Numerous assessments of the relationship between policy and research claim the governments' use of available evidence is often highly selective (e.g. Duncan 2007; Naughton 2005; Stevens 2007) and the findings from the research on which this paper is based are no less disappointing in this regard. *Not a single interviewee* claimed that post-1997 health inequalities policies had been significantly based on research evidence. Nevertheless, nearly all of the interviewees suggested that key research-based *ideas* about health inequalities had travelled into policy. In other words, the findings complement the increasing interest in the role that ideas play in promoting policy change (e.g. Béland 2005; Campbell 1998; Howorth 2004; Stevens 2007). Indeed, by analysing the relevant policy documents alongside the interviews with individuals working in policy settings, it was possible to find some evidence of all the well-known theories about health inequalities. However, they had certainly not fared equally well in terms of their influence. Some appeared to have been partially

'blocked' by institutionalised ideas that they challenged. Others appeared to have been able to move further into policy either because they overtly complemented institutionalised ideas or because they appeared to have 'vehicular' (McLennan 2004; Osborne 2004), chameleon-like qualities which facilitated their translation into policy through transformation [removed for review].

At one level, these findings could be interpreted as demonstrating the hegemony of particular ideologies, or discourses, and the underlying interests of dominant 'elites' (Coburn 2004; Navarro, et al. 2006; Navarro and Shi 2001). Indeed, several recent critiques of policy responses to health inequalities in the UK make precisely such claims (Carlisle 2001; Scott-Samuel 2004). Yet, these kinds of explanations did not seem to adequately explain why health inequalities moved onto the political agenda in the first place or why ideas which challenged what many of the interviewees perceived to be dominant ideologies had been able to travel into policy at all, albeit in partial or fractured ways. Other explanations might suggest the transformations of ideas about health inequalities as they move from research into policy are the result of a cultural or communicative 'gap' between researchers and policymakers (e.g. Caplan 1979; Lavis, et al. 2003; Lomas 2000), one which can be addressed by ensuring that research is appropriately informed by policy needs and then 'translated' for policy audiences (e.g. Petticrew, et al. 2004; Wimbush, et al. 2005). However, such accounts fail to consider that the gap between some groups may be so vast that they aspire to entirely inconsistent outcomes, a conflict which closer engagement is unlikely to resolve. Furthermore, they pay little attention to the fact that different actors *within* each 'community' may themselves have quite different agendas (Cohen, et al. 1972; Donnison 1972; Kingdon 1995) or that some epistemological and political perspectives may cut across these boundaries (e.g. Bartley 1992) Where this is the case, it might not be particularly helpful to focus solely on the boundary between research and policy.

In contrast, the research on which this paper echoes that of Bartley (1988; 1992), drawing on theories put forward by Latour and colleagues (Latour 1987; Latour and Woolgar 1986) to propose that understanding the relationship between research and policy requires us to think about the role of academics as actors who develop, construct and market particular ideas for a variety of reasons, some of which appear contradictory. It is not the intention to deny the crucial role that politics, ideologies or disciplinary contexts play in shaping the relationship between research and policy but rather to explore how these factors impinge on academic activities within a field in which a great many of the researchers are overtly orientated towards 'public' and 'policy' audiences, as well as to academic audiences.

'Cycles of credit' or 'academic treadmills'

Although this project differs considerably from that undertaken by Latour and Woolgar (1986), the ways in which interviewees discussed notions of credibility within academic spheres closely resembled Latour and Woolgar's notion of 'cycles of credit'. In this framework, 'credit' is perhaps better understood as 'credibility'; an attribute which persuades others to believe and invest in researchers and their ideas. Latour and Woolgar (1986) suggest that, in this cycle, scientists are rarely distinguishable from their ideas, so it is the credibility of a scientist's ideas, and their ability to communicate these ideas (e.g. by publishing them in reputable journals), which improves their own credibility as a scientist. The more credible a scientist is deemed by his/her peers, the better access s/he is likely to have to resources (such as funding), which, in turn, influences the ability of the scientist to undertake more research and come up with further ideas. In this sense, the authors liken 'cycles of credit' to capital investment; there is no ultimate objective, rather the success of investments is measured by the extent to which they facilitate the conversion of credibility, allowing scientists to progress through the cycle.

As Latour and Woolgar (1986) demonstrate, a key part of researchers' ability to pursue particular ideas relates to their ability to secure the resources to be able to do so (whether this is through a salaried research position or the acquirement of research funding) and the findings from this research project suggest that funding opportunities were rarely far from researchers' minds. In particular, the data reveal a frequent concern about the potential damage caused to researchers' credibility amongst potential funders by appearing to be 'too political' or 'radical':

> Academic: *'Politics is everywhere… and it's influencing research too. If you think about grants, for example, we are funded by grants and grants are funded by institutions and these institutions decide which studies should be funded, based on certain assumptions. […] Our job security, our status… can be threatened the moment we… try to address hot issues instead of… coincidental research questions that nobody cares about.'*

> Academic: *'By being a contract researcher, I have to be really careful what I get involved with in terms of politics - I can't afford to take chances.'*

Yet, at the same time, a substantial number of the academic interviewees also suggested that their interest in health inequalities was itself intensely political and very publicly and/or policy orientated, with many describing initially becoming involved in this area of research as a result of a belief that

health inequalities were the embodiment of underlying and unjust societal differences. The above quotations therefore highlight what appeared to be a significant tension for many interviewees; the ideas they wanted to explore in their research were often not quite the same as the ideas they felt *able* to pursue from a career point of view[1]. In other words, as Burawoy reflects, many of the interviewees described a situation in which their original 'passion for social justice' had been channelled into 'the pursuit of academic credentials.' (Burawoy 2005: 260):

> Academic: *'When I was doing my research in the eighties [blanked for anonymity], I thought, you know, you do this, then you get a job a bit like the people who taught you who are lecturers and senior lecturers or whatever… and… unless you have a burning desire to run a department, you carry on doing your teaching and when the spirit takes you, you write things. Now that's… not remotely viable anymore. […] Now you've got to go straight for the top - don't hang about, you finish your PhD, you get your first few papers, you get onto a research team as co-applicant, then you go for your own money, and after that you go for [bangs table] one after [bang] the other, [bang] after the other, [bang] after the other… It's a bloody treadmill! And it doesn't matter whether you've got a university contract or not because university contracts are not worth the paper they're written on. So, basically, that's what you do. […] You always have to have at least three or four applications in at any one time [sighs] because the average hit rate is about twenty percent… so that's just the way you do it. And you get to the stage where you no longer can remember what you were ever interested in because you're just making applications for the sake of it. Now once you've got the money, then you've got to produce something, so you just go through the motions. And you think, 'Jesus, it's amazing to think I once was interested in all this, you know, once…"*

Crucially, interviewees suggested that the need to manage one's image, with potential sources of funding in mind, not only informed proposals for new research but also shaped the presentation research outputs. Given, the cyclical nature of the research process captured in Latour and Woolgar's (1986) notion of 'cycles of credit', this is perhaps not surprising. After all, the arguments and articles produced by academics directly feed into others' perceptions of them (and, hence, their credibility as researchers), a relationship which all interviewees seemed acutely aware of. Indeed, it was here that many interviewees suggested the most significant tension within health inequalities research lay. Many interviewees reflected that concerns about managing their reputation with potential funders in mind sometimes led them to be less explicit in the knowledge claims they

promoted than they might otherwise have been. The following interviewee, for example, reflected on his/her general perception that researchers within the field of health inequalities tended, as a result of their fear of losing credibility with funders, to be consciously less explicit about what they believed the political implications of their research to be:

> Academic: *'An awful lot [of researchers] may feel inhibited from actually putting things as openly and assertively and sort of nakedly as I'm putting them and, I mean, it's only as I get nearer and nearer retirement that I'm increasingly explicit about… how I see things. [...] So that's one problem, I think, people not seeing, identifying the problem in that way and, to some extent, self-censorship.'*

Overall, accounts of what the above interviewee termed 'self-censorship' occurred far more regularly in the data than I had anticipated, particularly as the period on which the research focuses is one in which health inequalities researchers have frequently celebrated the opportunity to openly discuss health inequalities (Bartley, et al. 1998; Berridge and Blume 2003). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the sense of feeling constrained about what it was appropriate to say often appeared to be most acute when researchers had received, or were receiving, funding from policy-based sources. For example, the following interviewee said s/he felt that research bids from policy-related sources were sometimes highly suggestive about the kinds of conclusions that were desired:

> Academic: *'I think one of the difficulties is often when there are bids for research funding [from policy related sources], it's almost if the findings or, you know, the messages that are required are stated from the start almost. […] When one looks at research bids, it's, there are strong steers in terms of what they're looking for, what kinds of conclusions one's being steered towards, what kinds of policy messages they want…'*

It is, of course, nevertheless possible for researchers who are awarded such contracts to undertake the required research and present conclusions other than those they perceive the funders' desire (indeed, several interviewees reported that they had done precisely this). However, as we have seen, the data also suggest that most researchers are continually aware of the importance of maintaining credibility amongst research funders. It is for this reason that some researchers reflected they framed their findings in ways which presented less of a challenge to policy than they believed was warranted by the research. It is important to highlight that there are no instances within the data of interviewees suggesting that they (or anyone else whom they knew) had

misrepresented data or significantly altered findings. Nor were there any claims of having been put under direct pressure from research funders to do so. Rather, the pressures that researchers described experiencing, and sometimes submitting to, were far more subtle. One interviewee likened the situation to the process of gift-giving, whereby the act of receiving a gift (or, in this case, funding) serves to instil a sense of loyalty and indebtedness in the receiver with the effect that they begin to feel obliged to act supportively. The subtlety of this process is captured in the following extract, taken from an interview with another researcher:

> Academic: *'When I was at [Blank – government funded organisation] I could have been much more… critical. Actually […] it isn't simply that I feel the funding source wouldn't like me to say those things, I actually feel, would feel it would be a betrayal of the trust that the people who gave me the opportunity to spend my time doing that had in me… and I think, in a way, when I was working at [this organisation] and they are actually funded through [government department], I think… they would have looked at me and said, 'how can you not have read what is appropriate to say?' So I think the censoring is actually self-imposed. […] It isn't that I think they would come the heavy on me, it's… there's an unwritten understanding that I won't rock the boat when I'm writing in that guise. So… at an academic event, I feel I'm me, you know, I can say, I can be much more pointed in the points I want to make… but… I think when I'm writing through a funding source, which is government… and I do out of, and maybe I shouldn't, I do out of a sense of loyalty to… the people who are trusting me not to say things that would make them feel uncomfortable… and cast into doubt the judgement that they had in saying I was the right person to do the job.'*

This extract illustrates how personal and professional relationships can become entangled in the process of research, with the consequence that feelings of loyalty towards individuals merge with a sense of loyalty towards the organisations within which those individuals are based (or associated with). In Latour and Woolgar's (1986) study of biologists, the concept of 'credibility' is largely discussed in relation to the scientists themselves, so the emphasis is on the importance of maintaining credibility amongst one's peers. However, the above extract is illustrative of a more general trend in the data collected for this project, in which interviewees frequently made distinctions between the images of themselves and their work that they projected to their academic peers and those which they constructed for policy and funding audiences. In the above extract, this distinction is particularly explicit; the speaker describes being in a certain 'guise' when working closely with

policy-based individuals and only feeling able to be his/her 'real' self when interacting with academic audiences. Indeed, an ability to juggle more than one image of oneself appeared to be a crucial asset of researchers who succeeded in moving effectively between policy and research.

Other academic interviewees who had received direct funding from policy sources described feeling under pressure to produce *policy-relevant* research. This is a related but slightly different kind of pressure to that discussed above. Whilst it is possible to produce work that is relevant to policy yet also politically critical, interviewees often varied starkly in how they constructed work they considered to be 'critical' from that they considered 'policy relevant'. As the following quotation illustrates, the academics who saw health inequalities research as a political or moral cause were often extremely critical of researchers who they felt were *too* closely associated with policymakers, on the basis that this compromised their 'autonomy' as researchers:

> Academic: *'Let's problematise [Blank – academic] who, as you know, is a Professor at [Blank], and a well-known [researcher who has worked within the field of health inequalities]… who supports the Blair line… and who has recently occupied [an advisory role within government]. And clearly when an academic becomes an official policy advisor, they rather lose their academic credibility, and also it perhaps calls into question the work that they've been doing… for a period before… they occupied that post. And it is in fact the case that quite a bit of the work that [Blank], in recent years, has been doing work about generating evidence to support… the market policies that Blair and his current Secretary of State in England, Patricia Hewitt, are pursuing.'*

In contrast, other interviewees seemed to feel that to be truly committed to reducing health inequalities involved being prepared to work closely with policymakers and, rather than being overtly critical, producing work which took account of the policy realities in which they operated:

> Academic: *'Some people make policy orientated contributions to the health inequalities literature that are pretty naïve really, like just saying […] you just willy-nilly deal with income inequality, or whatever. Whereas… people like [Blank – professor], for example, who's always been much more interested in the policy process, I think, would take a view of health inequalities policy that was more informed by… the practical constraints on politicians in representative democracies.'*

The desire for this kind of policy-relevant (or 'realistic') research was openly articulated by many of the policy-based interviewees in this research and has been commented upon elsewhere (e.g. Petticrew, et al. 2004). Both researchers who positioned themselves as producing critical work and those who saw their prime concern to be producing policy-relevant work made claims to objectivity; for the former, working independently from policy constraints was crucial, whilst for the latter, not allowing a particular political outlook to shape one's work was key. Hence, what served to increase credibility amongst researchers who were sympathetic to one of these viewpoints often seemed to actively damage credibility amongst researchers more sympathetic to the other. All of this underlines the difficulties facing academic researchers who are attempting to maintain credibility amongst both policy and academic audiences. Often, it seems, through the very decision to undertake 'policy-relevant' (usually, though not always, policy-funded) research, a researcher's credibility as an academic may already be in decline. For even if the research that is undertaken might otherwise have been perceived to have high academic worth, other academics can *claim* that its worth is less on the basis of its practicality, 'to reinforce the expertise (and legitimacy) differential between the grey and the gold' (Eden 2005: 283).

This division maps onto the distinction that Hammersley (2005) makes between 'academic' and 'practical' research, in which, whilst 'practical' research may produce more 'relevant' information, it is also potentially less 'valid' and, therefore, less credible than what he terms 'scientific' or 'academic' research. Interviewees who drew this kind of distinction similarly implied that there was the potential for 'policy-relevant' research to be less credible than 'scientific' research. For example:

> Academic: *'A lot of people would say… the integrity of research is best maintained by being independent to policy so… I adhere very strongly to the idea that the kind of basic research, fundamental research, is informed by, is driven by some sort of scientific agenda, which doesn't mean that it's kind of context indifferent… but that scientific questions have credibility in scientific terms [coughs]. I mean, namely, they are raising issues that require explanation. But I also think that there, there is this sort of middle tier of research or middle field of research, which I know people like to call applied research or strategic research or policy-informed research, and to me that's the place where there has to be a kind of mutual interchange between policy and research… for that field to flourish. […] But I think… one of the difficulties at the moment is […] the people in this middle territory are… their time is so absorbed now with policy agenda that it's very difficult for them to maintain their links with the scientific stream of work, which actually ensures the quality of what they do for policy.'*

This can be understood as a process Gieryn (1983; 1999) has termed 'boundary work', which involves the construction perceived boundaries by scientists to distinguish between what is considered 'scientific' and what is not, the purpose being to increase one's own credibility (in relation to other's) and thereby influence and access to resources. Yet, the boundary between 'policy' orientated work and 'scientific' or 'academic' work often appeared to be far fuzzier than Hammersley (2005) or the above extract indicate. Most of the interviewees involved in academic work relating to health inequalities thought research should inform policy and many had made conscious efforts to promote their findings to policy audiences. Yet, at the same time, most interviewees (such as the individual quoted on p11) also wanted some time to undertake less constrained academic work and some space in which to think more imaginatively and critically. Hence, for many of the interviewees, the divide between 'policy', 'professional' and 'critical' work was not a clear distinction between different types of research/researcher but a fluid boundary between the different types of work that they were often involved in simultaneously.

The problem with this situation is the extent to which interviewees suggested the constraints of producing 'policy' orientated work could extend to work produced for other audiences owing to interviewees' constant awareness of the 'cycle of credit'; the way in which their knowledge claims contributed to their credibility in the eyes of potential funders as well as their peers. Crucially, the findings do not necessarily suggest that more freedom was always available to researchers who concentrated on applying funding from sources not directly linked to policy, such as the UK Research Councils; a number of interviewees expressed a belief that the Councils were more likely to fund research that they felt was of relevance to policy. One example that several interviewees mentioned was the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funding of the *Health Variations* project, which occurred shortly before New Labour came to power; the timing of which, one interviewee claimed, 'couldn't just be a coincidence' and was more likely to be the result of civil servants encouraging Research Councils to fund projects that they believed might be of use to the next government (New Labour having already made it clear that health inequalities would be on its agenda, if elected). This is important because it suggests that even researchers who are not orientated towards policy audiences may feel compelled to consider the factors shaping the credibility of ideas within policy audiences. It is not the purpose of this article to assess the extent to which funding decisions actually *are* related to policy preferences (although there are, in fact, plenty of data in the project which show that the academic interviewees' perceptions of the preferences of potential funders significantly overlapped with what interviewees based in these organisations

themselves claimed to be the case). The point here is that *if*, as the data suggest, a significant number health inequalities researchers have acted on the basis that they *believe* research funding, including that from Research Councils, is constrained or shaped by political and policy preferences, and if they then frame their applications and outputs accordingly, then research agendas are shaped by these beliefs regardless of whether or not such decisions actually influence the funders of research.

The squeeze on imaginative spaces

The findings discussed in the previous section suggest there are important tensions between the work many health inequalities researchers would like to do and the work they feel they have to do in order to sustain an academic career. In part, these tensions can be understood with reference to the four strands of social research that Burawoy (2005) identifies: public; professional; policy; and critical. Nearly all of the academic researchers I interviewed suggested their research was publicly orientated in some way in that they wanted their research to contribute to addressing the vastly unequal life experiences of different groups of people. Many were actively involved in disseminating their work to public audiences, through 'action research', working with local communities and/or promoting their messages through the mass media. At the same time, all of the academic interviewees seemed conscious of the need to draw on, and contribute to, disciplinary debates and knowledge (which disciplines depended on what they considered to be their academic 'home'). Undertaking both professional and public work therefore seemed common to most of the interviewees and these two strands of their work were rarely depicted as being in conflict (other than in terms of time pressures). However, the other two strands, 'policy' and 'critical' work, contributed to a vastly more complex situation. There were clear and often antagonistic tensions between interviewees who considered that academic research on health inequalities ought to be orientated towards providing policy audiences with constructive and usable ideas and those who felt not only that academic research needed to be able to function independently of policy needs but that a core function of academia should be the possibility of thinking in radical and critical ways. Many interviewees seemed to believe academia should provide the space for both activities but few suggested they felt it currently did.

The context of the past decade, with the increasing pressure on researchers to disseminate their work and to consider the needs of 'researcher users', compliments the first conception of academic research. In contrast, many of the interviewees appeared to feel that academic spaces in which to think critically and imaginatively were being increasingly squeezed:

Academic: *'I think there is a real, there's a real problem about where the headspace comes to, to think critically in ways that don't require empirical research. [...] When I first got my lectureship, some academics wrote and some academics didn't. I mean it's extraordinary; it wasn't seen as something that you had to do, and [...] there was time within the job to write, so that... it's almost an intellectual space, that kind of thinking space; it was built into an academic post, into a lectureship - that doesn't exist now.'*

As a result, instead of contributing to ideas with innovative and transformative qualities, with the potential to significantly change policy and practice, researchers either appeared to be contributing to ideas that fitted with those already institutionalised within policy (i.e. producing work which complemented existing 'policy realities') or trying to respond to quite divergent drives, attempting to satisfy a desire to work critically whilst simultaneously addressing a perceived necessity to be 'policy relevant'. It is in responding to these diverging pressures that the chameleon-like ideas Osborne (2004) terms 'vehicular' seem most likely to emerge. The key qualities of this genre of ideas, as McLennan (2004: 485) describes, is their 'ineliminable vagueness and 'mobility'', which allows them to transform with relative ease as they move between actors and across contexts. In other words, they are *transformable* rather than *transforming*. These, then, are ideas which may be presented in quite critical ways to academic audiences but transformed (or provided with a vagueness that facilitates their transformation) into less radical and challenging versions of themselves in policy contexts. This allows researchers such as the one quoted on p11 to 'be themselves' in academic arenas, whilst not 'rocking the boat' in policy contexts, thereby protecting both their academic credibility and their credibility amongst potential funders. Such an account helps explain why ideas that many of those interviewed believed had the potential to pose direct challenges to existing ways of thinking about societal inequalities within policy had nevertheless travelled into policy without leading to any significant policy change.

Burawoy (2005) remains confident that the 'originating moral impetus is rarely vanquished' as a result of career and institutional pressures but the research presented here paints a more disturbing picture. The findings suggest that the pressure on researchers to focus on exploring issues in ways that are likely to be applicable to current 'policy realities' could be perceived as a pressure to produce 'policy-informed evidence'. Such a phrase foregrounds the extent to which existing, institutionalised ideas work to shape and inform the research from which new ideas emerge. All this suggests that academia is now a long way from nurturing the kind of 'intelligensia' that Weber

(Weber 1995 [1906]; Weber 1995 [1917]) described as uniquely free-thinking, or the kind of 'intellectuals' that Edward Said described in his 1993 Reith Lectures:

'There is no question in my mind that the intellectual belongs on the same side with the weak and unrepresented. Robin Hood, some are likely to say. Yet it's not that simple a role, and therefore cannot be so easily dismissed as just so much romantic idealism. At bottom, the intellectual in my sense of the word, is neither a pacifier nor a consensus-builder, but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do. Not just passively unwilling, but actively unwilling to say so in public.' (Said 1994: 17)

The findings discussed in this paper suggest Said's (1994) concerns that academia was increasingly rewarding intellectual conformity were not misplaced and the promotion of 'evidence-based policy' in the UK since 1997 may, if anything, have exacerbated the trends Said was reflecting upon, much as Hammersley (2003; 2005) and others (e.g. Cohen 2000) feared. For the flip-side of this approach to policy has been a pressure on researchers to become more attuned to, and informed by, 'policy needs' and 'policy realities'. This is not to say that the notion of 'evidence-based policy' or 'policy relevant research' are itself innately restrictive but rather that the way in which these concepts have been promoted and employed needs to be further explored and unpacked. As Ward (2005) points out, there is a great deal of disagreement about what constitutes being publicly or policy relevant; academic work that contributes to changing how society thinks about itself is surely relevant to policy, just not in an immediately obvious sense.

More broadly, the findings suggest that further discussion about both the desirability of different kinds of academic (intellectual) spaces and the role that research funding (and those involved in funding decisions) play in shaping social research is much needed. So far, researchers have largely only given this issue much attention when clear conflicts of interest are apparent such as when corporations providing funds for research stand to financially benefit from particular results (e.g. Bekelman, et al. 2003; Gruning, et al. 2005). This has led to some concerns about the growing interconnections between academia, government and private interests (Guston 2006). However, there appears to have been little interest in exploring the relationship between more conventional research funders and the research produced by its recipients. Indeed, those who have reflected on this relationship have tended to conclude that research funders ought to be *more* involved in

shaping the work researchers do (e.g. Chalkidou, et al. 2008; Marsh, et al. 2008). The reticence at exploring the more problematic aspects of this relationship may have to do with the mutual benefits arising from an ongoing relationship between policy and research:

'[P]oliticians can capitalise on the endless ingenuity displayed by scientists – both natural and social – in adapting their research agendas to suit the needs of potential clients, so as to feed their own endless needs for funds. Moreover, the natural tendency of scientists to want to examine things more comprehensively, in greater detail and, of course, with an eye towards a renewal of their contract, nicely plays into politicians own propensity to temporize, whenever possible. Never have the worst character traits of two groups worked to such mutual advantage.' (Fuller 2005: 136)

Yet if we continue to ignore the tensions arising from the requirement to obtain research funds, we are likely to facilitate a situation in which ideas that fit with existing ways of thinking can be continually (re)circulated and in which, therefore, there is a failure to encourage, and engage with, alternative and more imaginative ways of thinking.

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[1] It is worth noting that neither of the above interviewees were, at the time of the interviews, in tenured positions; some (although not all) of the interviewees suggested that a permanent academic positions afforded some level of protection (and, therefore, creative thinking space) to individuals. Nevertheless, over half of the research-based interviewees said something to suggest that they carefully managed the image they projected to audiences who represented potential sources of future funding and many of these interviewees held tenured academic Chairs.