

**Ways in which government-sponsored research contributes to the generation of
misinformation.**

An Appendix

to

“Closing the Gap”: Problems with its philosophy and research.

(Non RPM conference papers: BPS Ed Sec 2019 SHORT.doc)

and

Some Abuses of “Science”, Logic, and Authority)

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This Appendix consists of material, deleted from the main versions of the above articles, of ways in which government-sponsored research contributes to the generation of misinformation. It overlaps with points made in the “abuses of authority” sections of those articles.

As was shown in the main articles, this research domain is permeated by unscientific and misleading studies, many of which have destructive consequences, and a widespread failure to behave in a professional manner. One is therefore left with the question of how all this has come about: How have well-intentioned scientists and other professionals become so widely embroiled in the process without an explosion of concern?

As mentioned in the main paper, when I think about this question I find that I flip between “psychological” explanations grounded in personal failures to act professionally – failures associated with failure to think about what it *means* to be a professional¹ – and explanations grounded in situational constraints (networks of social forces).

Nevertheless, many of the scientific failures seem to arise mainly, although by no means entirely, from researchers’ willingness to (i) work only on projects funded via their responses to government agencies’ “calls for proposals” to undertake specific studies related to government agencies’ framing of the problem and methods and (ii) accept the contractual constraints through which the customer-contractor principle is deemed to permit governments to imposed when accepting such funds.

Other reasons include the fact that minutia-focussed studies are not only more do-able with limited resources and the constraints of university PhD programmes, they are also more often regarded as “scientific”; they are more easily progressed through the publication process, thereby securing more brownie-points for their authors and they are less likely to threaten the views of politicians and others whose belief systems have been challenged

These things may be considered merely a failure to exercise professional integrity and the constraints of having to earn a living somehow.

But hear this: I have not come across a single case in which the researchers' concerned have underlined the gross scientific failure that this way of working implies in the discussions of the limitations of their work that they are nominally obliged to include in their reports.

Given that, as mentioned above, the result is that these studies do enormous damage to many, if not all, pupils and society, they must not only be considered unscientific, unprofessional, and unethical but also seen to constitute what are, in effect, criminal misapplications of science.

Under these circumstances it seems important to spell out the way the relevant network of social forces operates in a little more detail than was done when discussing the mis-applications of authority in the main article.

As we have seen, most researchers are now² obliged to seek funding for the research they find it necessary to carry out to secure their jobs and their advancement through a process whereby they respond to government "Calls for Proposals".

These "calls" specify the issues to be investigated, the methods to be used to investigate them, and the way the questions to be investigated are framed.

This enables government agencies to select the research to be funded and enables them to avoid funding research to investigate things that politicians do not want to know.

And the terms of the contracts frequently explicitly forbid the researchers from pursuing issues other than those laid down in the Call for Proposals.

Beyond that, these contracts often give the funding agency the right to actually alter the figures (numbers) to be reported as outcomes of the research (and have in practice been known to do just this).

A few glaring examples of these processes have surfaced in the press, but the process is much more widespread than might be assumed ... with researchers justifying their behaviour on the grounds that it is not only their own but also their collaborators' careers which would be jeopardised if they protested.

Many contracts also require the researchers to get government approval for anything they wish to say, never mind publish.

The process thus results in research which may be said to have been "designed" to get results which support policy-makers perceptions and policies rather than the kinds of open-ended research which might offer a basis for alternative policies.

Although the results of such research are presented as contributing to evidence-based policy, they are thus best characterised as contributing to policy-based evidence.

The effects are further exacerbated via publication processes which require researchers to submit their proposed publications for peer review.

The reviewers who are chosen are often reluctant to agree to publications which challenge conclusions they have, perhaps under duress, drawn from their own research ... and upon which their careers depend.

Although the most notorious examples of these processes in operation are to be found in the U-tube videos posted by Nutt³, their effects are also evident from the way in which studies and discussion of the wider goals of education have virtually disappeared from the educational research literature since the early 1980s ... which coincides with the introduction of the national curriculum and continuous testing via standardised tests. School effectiveness (and its assessment) has come to mean success in these terms and nothing else.

The way in which these two processes combine to exert a stranglehold on research is further amplified by the increasing government-mandated pressure to “publish or perish”.

This offers yet another example of the imposition of Social Darwinism in the guise of (neo) liberalism.

In the name of promoting efficiency and accountability in Higher Education the Government has imposed a series of attempts to improve “Quality” through what were first called Research Assessment Exercises and later a Research Excellence Framework.

These not only require staff to raise funds (largely through the processes described above) but also to, for example, publish 7 papers a year in “high impact” journals ... ie those which are widely cited ... ie those which serve the “generate papers which will least challenge the peer-evaluation process and get cited by those peers” process – thus forming a self-reinforcing cycle.

Behind all these things lies what can only be described as inappropriate arrangements for the funding of the universities. Weerts⁴ has captured the problem by saying that the funding needs to return to funding by covenant ... funding via an understanding that the universities will perform particular kinds of functions for society ... rather than contract⁵.

But why “return”. Why was it that Mrs. Thatcher explicitly sought to bring the universities, like the so-called “educational” system itself, under government control?

Unless we understand that we are unlikely to get very far.

And it is too easy to dismiss it as a concern with power.

*Is a basic **systems** process involved in the corruption of science and practice?*

Let me first ask these questions:

How come that concern with human dignity and well-being has, over the centuries, been so widely corrupted into mandatory requirements to do certain things regardless of what the individual in question might choose to do in the circumstances in which he or she finds him or herself?

How does it come about that the desirability of everyone having access to some form of education (a term which implies nothing more than participation in some programme which

will “draw out”, or nurture, the individual’s particular talents) gets transmuted into compulsory⁶ attendance (enforced by an army of heavy-handed school attendance officers) at schools which are required to follow a narrow, centrally specified, curriculum and regardless of how unsatisfactory and damaging that schooling may be for the individual concerned?

How does it come about that a right to a happy home life has been corrupted into a duty, enforced by state-appointed guardians, for parents to conform to a long list of bureaucratic specifications relating to “well-being” embedded in 36 pages of tightly-printed tick-box questions⁷ covering everything from the nature of the children’s home environments, the criminal and financial status and lifestyles of the parents, through to the children’s own values and behaviour?

How does it come about that a right to life has been corrupted into a mandatory requirement to stay alive however unsatisfactory that life may be?

How does it come about that a right to “care” has been corrupted into a duty to submit to “care regimes” which are often anything but caring⁸?

How does it come about that many mandatory, state-wide, policies – so-called “benefits” systems, “educational” systems, community safety systems – end up forcing those involved (civil servants, teachers, police, social workers) to behave in ways which can only be regarded as criminal?

How does it come about that so many words – “education”, “defence”, “freedom” – come to mean their opposites⁹?

I do not have an answer to these questions ... but I am sure that a quest for answers is fundamental to the survival of our species.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Flynn (2000), Raven (2011), Schon (2001)

² This has not always been the case. For example the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) was set up by none other than the teachers' union – the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) - in 1932 with a view to conducting research which would contribute to educational improvement.

The EIS provided free space and secretarial assistance to the researchers working on its projects.

But gradually the Scottish Government engineered more and more control over its research until, at last, it was subjected to being (under)funded on a project-by-project basis according to the customer-contractor philosopher. The customer (government) sets out what is to be done, the contractor does it if he can, and the government pays. This means that the government controlled the topics that could be researched. And the Council was eventually closed when it emerged that some of the researchers were unwilling to comply in the processes whereby such results as were obtained were falsified until they appeared to confirm what the government wanted it to say.

It is important to note that, while the forces which led to centralisation were achieved by stealth, not by central decree.

³ e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRLXt1oIsqI&t=2741s>

⁴ Weerts (2016)

⁵ One problem with this formulation is that the universities are no longer primarily concerned with performing their manifest function – to advance understanding – but are trapped into the latent function of generating and finding ways of justifying vast amounts of senseless work to keep people occupied. (This is an illustration of the operation of Bookchin's law ... an extension of Parkinson's law to the effect that work expands to fill the time allotted to it.)

⁶ Prior to the introduction of Margaret Thatcher's GERBIL, education was explicitly the responsibility of parents who could choose whether that responsibility would be fulfilled by sending their children to school "or otherwise". Nevertheless many of those who chose the second option were confronted by inspectors who had very limited notions of what education was about. The current situation is much more ambiguous and much more loaded toward the National Curriculum, but the option nominally still exists.

⁷ Known as SHANARI and GIRFEC. The former stands for Getting it Right for Every Child. (And would be better termed "Getting it Wrong for Every Child"). The second is an acronym for the eight wellbeing domains indexed in the CfE Health and Wellbeing curriculum. It stands for Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible, Included. (Scottish Government, 2014).

⁸ McKnight (1995)

⁹ For a fuller discussion see Raven (1997)