OXFORD

RETURN TO MEANING

a social science with something to say

MATS ALVESSON, YIANNIS GABRIEL, & ROLAND PAULSEN

Copyrighted material

Return to Meaning

A Social Science with Something to Say

Mats Alvesson, Yiannis Gabriel, and Roland Paulsen

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Copyrighted material

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

© Mats Alvesson, Yiannis Gabriel, and Roland Paulsen 2017

The moral rights of the authors have been asserted

First Edition published in 2017

Impression: 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted
by law, by licence or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics
rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the
above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the
address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016959791

ISBN 978–0–19–878709–9

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Links to third party websites are provided by Oxford in good faith and
for information only. Oxford disclaims any responsibility for the materials
contained in any third party website referenced in this work.

Copyrighted material

Contents

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

Part I
Loss of Meaning

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

1

The Problem

So Much Noise, So Little to Say

In 1965, John Williams published the novel *Stoner* which follows the life of William Stoner, a remarkably unremarkable professor at a Midwestern university. The book received good reviews and sold around 2,000 copies before it went out of print a year later. In 2011, it received an unexpected renaissance and within a couple of years it sold more than 200,000 copies in the UK alone while being rapidly translated into twenty-one languages. Apparently, something about the farm boy from Missouri who, after 'falling in love' with Shakespeare's *Sonnet 73*, goes on to become an assistant professor, struck a chord with readers in the 2010s. It is hard to explain why. The central character leads a quite uneventful life. At least on the surface, there is not that much to celebrate. He lives through most of his life with a sadistic and manipulative wife who he cannot leave. For decades he has to subordinate himself to an even more sadistic dean who spares no effort to destroy his career. He has a daughter who momentarily lights up his life only to slowly fade away into alcoholism. He has a brief affair—and then he dies of cancer.

Perhaps these commonplace sorrows still live up to the public image of what it means to be an academic. Perhaps the public enjoys reading about the forgotten lives circulating in those lofty university buildings. Yet, there is one point at which the life of Stoner strongly differs from the life of today's academics. Although he sometimes ponders whether he should write something new, a book perhaps, the totality of his academic production amounts to one single item: his PhD thesis. While spending the entirety of his adult life in academia, he never writes anything more than that. At the end of the novel, while lying on his deathbed, he finds the thesis at his bedside table. Letting his fingers riffle through the pages, he feels 'a tingling, as if those pages were alive', and with the sense of having left more to the world than an estranged wife, daughter, and mistress, he dies in sublime reconciliation with his life while the book slips out of his hands and falls to the floor (Williams, 1965, p. 227).

Copyrighted material

If contentment with having written a thesis and nothing else was mysterious in the 1960s, it would appear almost inconceivable to present-day academics. Today, 'publish or perish' is but a euphemism of academic life; in James Hynes' (1998) words, 'publish *and* perish' appears closer to reality. When Williams (who was also assistant professor at the University of Denver) wrote *Stoner* in the 1960s, 40 per cent of those working in American four-year higher educational colleges had had no publications over their entire careers. Thirty years later, that proportion had shrunk to 18 per cent (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2008, p. 474). Likewise, in the 1960s, only 20 per cent of this professional group agreed that 'tenure is difficult to attain without research/publications'. Thirty years later, 64 per cent agreed (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2008, p. 490).

Since the 1990s, the amount of academic publishing has grown immensely, even allowing for the rapid increase in the number of academics. According to UNESCO's Institute for Statistics, the number of tertiary education teachers in the USA rose from just under one million in 1999 to nearly 1.6 million in 2013. Similar rises have been taking place elsewhere, as higher education has become a global industry. What has outpaced even the rise of academics has been the rise in academic publications. It is estimated that in 1996 over one million academic articles were published, whereas in 2009 the number had increased to a million and a half (about one new article every twenty-two seconds). Between 200 and 300 new scientific journals are published each year, amounting to a total of more than 12,000 (Campbell & Meadows, 2011; STM, 2010) without including countless e-journals and other online publications.

Given this explosion of research 'outputs', it comes as no surprise that many scholars have begun to question its purpose and its consequences. Some have suggested that the current overproduction of academic papers is straining the peer-review system and leading to a decline in standards (e.g. Harley & Acord, 2011). Others question why it is now seen as necessary for those who teach in universities to publish everything they think or say in the classroom (e.g. Parker, 2013). This critique is concerned with intrinsic issues regarding the value and meaning of scientific research per se as well as extrinsic issues regarding its value and meaning to society at large. Our book develops this critique before trying to propose some constructive ways forward. We argue that we are currently witnessing not merely a decline in the quality of scientific research, but a proliferation of meaningless research of no value to society and of only modest value to its authors—apart from in the context of securing employment and promotion. The explosion of published outputs, at least in social science, creates a noisy, cluttered environment which makes meaningful research difficult to identify and develop as well as rare, as different voices compete to capture the limelight even briefly. More impressive contributions

Copyrighted material

from some years ago are easily neglected, as the premium now is to write and publish, not to read and learn. The result is a widespread cynicism among academics on the merits of academic research, sometimes including their own. Publishing comes to be seen as a game of hit and miss, of targets and rankings, crucial for the fashioning of academic careers and institutional prestige but devoid of intrinsic meaning and value, and of no wider social uses whatsoever. This is what we view as the rise of nonsense in academic research. We believe that this represents a serious social *problem*. It undermines the very point of social science—the target of this book, even though most of what we are saying is probably relevant for all areas of science.

Throughout this book, we unashamedly use the word 'problem' to denote the extensive failure of social science to address the burning issues of our time, the anxiety and frustration engendered by the proliferation of esoteric and meaningless texts, and the resulting instrumental and cynical attitudes about academic work both inside and outside universities. The problem is far from 'academic'. It affects many areas of social and political life, entailing extensive waste of resources and inflated student fees as well as costs to taxpayers. Resources allocated to social research often are at the expense of teaching. Instead of providing support for teaching, a strong emphasis on research may easily encourage academics to narrowly focus on their sub-specialities and to concentrate on reading recently published articles rather than more significant but older books—which are more valuable for genuine scholarship. Most seriously, however, the problem results in an enduring disconnection between the generation and dissemination of knowledge in social science and the pressing needs of a society facing major challenges.

Although this book focusses on social science, and to some extent our own specialities of organization studies and the sociology of work, we see many connections to other areas and believe that much of what we say is relevant across academia. Critiques similar to ours are increasingly heard in other disciplines than the social sciences (for example, Edwards & Siddharta, 2016).

The Problem with Nonsense

Nothing illustrates better the rise of nonsense research than three publishing experiments that revealed how easy it is for literal nonsense to appear in reputable academic publications. The first experiment was performed by the physicist Alan Sokal who in 1996 wrote an article describing how he had managed to publish a paper in the journal *Social Text*. *Social Text* was no run-of-the-mill journal. It boasted well-known academics on its editorial staff and was widely read in the field of cultural studies. Sokal had submitted an article in which he used quantum physics and obscure mathematical formulae to

Copyrighted material

express support for the rationales of, among others, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. The article was well written and made a serious impression. There was only one problem: it contained no substantial argument. Sokal had submitted it to see if a journal respected in its field would accept the text if it sounded good and was in line with the political convictions of the editors. The answer was an unequivocal yes (Sokal, 1996).

The Sokal affair gave rise to a debate on whether postmodern social science could be considered scientific. Instead of discussing its wider ramifications for every discipline, the debate centred on a specific discipline. In 2013, however, the biologist John Bohannon did a similar experiment in biology, submitting an essay of poorly concealed nonsense. According to Bohannon, '[a]ny reviewer with more than a high-school knowledge of chemistry and the ability to understand a basic data plot should have spotted the paper's short-comings immediately. Its experiments are so hopelessly flawed that the results are meaningless' (Bohannon, 2013, p. 66). More than half of the 304 scientific journals to which he sent the essay agreed to publish it, including several journals published by Sage, Elsevier, Wolter Kluwer, and other publishing giants. Now natural science was also being questioned.

Things would become even more spectacular when three postgraduate students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology decided to expose their colleagues. The postgraduate students developed a program called SCIgen which generated so-called 'gobbledegook articles' containing graphs and diagrams as well as barely readable sentences randomly generated by the program and thus devoid of meaning. An article produced in this way, 'Rooter: a methodology for the typical unification of access points and redundancy' was accepted for a scientific conference on systems science, cybernetics, and informatics and the hoax was later revealed in *Nature* (Ball, 2005). Almost ten years after that, a new discovery was made giving the SCIgen-experiment new relevance. In 2005, SCIgen had become generally accessible on the Internet, allowing anyone to create nonsensical articles. In 2013, a French programmer developed a software program to discover SCIgen-genererated articles. After scanning articles on computer science published between 2008 and 2013, he found that over 120 were pure gobbledegook. Sixteen of these had been published by Springer and had to be hastily withdrawn (Noorden, 2014).

These affairs confirm a feeling that has now become difficult for researchers to avoid: the feeling that at least a substantial part of what is written and published in the name of science is nonsense, meaningless, or in other ways deeply problematic. Human nonsense usually has a syntax that is more or less comprehensible and sometimes also contains grains of non-nonsense. But what was now being revealed was that the scientific community had developed a major inability to expose *utter* nonsense—nonsense which would never be tolerated in a daily newspaper, a gossip magazine, or even in a

Copyrighted material

poorly-written children's book. It could quite simply not see that the emperor's new clothes were fake.

As social scientists, we often get a strong feeling of 'semi-nonsense' in what we read. Behind abstract and pretentious academic jargon and the use of signifiers indicating that the author is dealing with important topics—strategic leadership, knowledge management, sociomateriality, intertextuality—complicated statistical materials or a profusion of interview statements (frequently removed from their social context), we regularly feel that there is not much of substance in what we read. Alternatively, we have the feeling of reading pretentious articles where commonsense is camouflaged, or variations on long-standing or even long-discredited themes. Claiming an original and unique 'contribution' is currently de rigueur in every research publication, yet, this usually amounts to trivial additions to small outposts of literature only meaningful to tiny research microtribes. One may rightly ask whether there is any value in the average additional article on topics like neo-institutional theory, postfeminist discourse, or managerial leadership, after thousands of studies in these areas. An expert in a specific sub-subfield may find the details and incremental 'contributions' of such articles meaningful, but scholars with a broader range of interests and a non-nerdish mentality may have trouble appreciating their value or originality. The proliferation of texts within sub- or sub-sub-specialisms has led to the fragmentation of scholarly communities into microtribes with highly parochial interests and concerns, safeguarding these interests from the attention of other microtribes, carefully controlling entry into their domains only to those who master its conventions, rituals, and jargons. Some microtribes are more successful than others, but the boundaries between them result not only in alienation and frustration, but in missed opportunities for original and creative work.

One of the indicators of scientific merit that has gained in popularity is citability—this is especially so in the last twenty years when the references of each and every publication are meticulously recorded and counted by agencies like Scopus or World of Science. This led to a mushrooming of citations (and self-citations), often of articles whose authors act as manuscript reviewers or editors. Citability by itself is an unreliable measure, given that some valuable articles may lie unnoticed and uncited in the noisy environment they inhabit. Yet, even by this criterion, the human sciences are not doing particularly well with some 90 per cent of all published articles remaining uncited within a two-year window. Within a five-year citation window, 84 per cent stay uncited in Thomson Reuters' Web of Science. In the social science as a whole, around half of all published articles remain uncited in a two-year citation window that determines a journal's impact factor. Within a five-year window, 32 per cent go uncited. This compares with no more than 12 per cent uncited articles in

Copyrighted material

medicine (Larivière, Gingras, & Archambault, 2009). Even 'high-impact' journals in social science can suffer from a crowd of 'lonely papers' (Prichard, 2013).

'Qualitative' indicators reinforce this rather gloomy picture. A common response when reviewing papers is a deep sigh and the reflection: what is the point of all this? 'It is easy to become cynical' is a repeated remark in social science conferences, one that captures the prevailing mood of pointlessness, lack of social relevance, and dearth of interesting presentations that make a difference to scholarship outside the tribe or to society at large (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). Even the editors of prestigious journals, rejecting 95 per cent or so of all submissions, are now regularly complaining about their inability to publish studies that go beyond the incremental. Reflecting back on the years since launching what quickly turned out to be a high-impact journal, *Organization Science*, Daft and Lewin (2008, p. 177) conceded that their original mission to reorient organizational 'research away from incremental, footnote-on-footnote research as the norm for the field' (Daft & Lewin, 1990, p. 1) had not been realized. They re-emphasized the need not to prioritize incremental research but, instead, 'new theories and ways of thinking about organizations' (Daft & Lewin, 2008, p. 182). Similarly, the outgoing editors of another leading journal—based on a review of more than 3,000 manuscripts during their six years in office (2003–08)—noted in their concluding editorial that while submissions had increased heavily 'it is hard to conclude that this has been accompanied by a corresponding increase in papers that add significantly to the discipline. More is being produced but the big impact papers remain elusive . . . ' (Clark & Wright, 2009, p. 6). Equally, as the editors of *Academy of Management Journal* (*AMJ*), another high-profiled journal, Bartunek et al. (2006, p. 9) argued that while the journal is publishing 'technically competent research that simultaneously contributes to theory . . . [it is] desirable to raise the proportion of articles published in *AMJ* that are regarded as important, competently executed, and *really interesting*'. A later editor of the same journal complained that 'like black cats in coal cellars, published studies are increasingly indistinguishable from previous ones, and the contexts in which these theories are tested or developed tend to fade into irrelevance' (George, 2014, p. 1).

These testimonies reinforce the impression that the explosion of research publications very seldom results in something original and profoundly insightful. This is confirmed by the views of many academics themselves, typified by a lecturer interviewed by Knights and Clarke:

> Our research exists in a very selfish domain . . . half the crap that you read in some of the four-star journals has absolutely no benefit or carries no significance for virtually anything, anywhere for anybody other than the author. (Lecturer, cited in Knights & Clarke, 2014, p. 345)

Copyrighted material

Given the huge rise of researchers and research papers in recent decades, one may justifiably say that 'never before in the history of humanity have so many written so much while having so little to say to so few'. When one of us used this expression at a conference, the audience of some 400 people applauded spontaneously, apparently confirming the impression.

'Nonsense' may be a strong word. We use it broadly to denote theoretical knowledge that fulfils all the formal criteria for 'good, publishable research' and is thus dressed in academic respectability, without offering any new insights or empirical findings that have a wider social relevance or meaning, or are capable of adding positively to society. The writing, reviewing, editing, and publishing of such nonsense accounts for the view of academics retreating into ingrown sectarianisms (Burawoy, 2005, p. 17) becoming 'models of moral indifference and examples of what it means to disconnect themselves from public life' and 'making almost no connections to audiences outside of the academy' (Giroux, 2006, p. 64).

This brings us to the extrinsic part of the critique and more precisely to the question of what science can offer to society. As researchers, often on the watch for funding and eager to jump on fashionable topics of inquiry, we tend to ask the opposite question: what can society offer to science? Too often the relevance of our work is but merely concocted in hindsight. Or worse; thinking about it risks instrumentalizing science and restricting its autonomy. As scientists, we vehemently defend our right to decide what areas of knowledge we pursue, concerned that science should not be subordinated to the interests of governments, businesses, or social movements. The argument we put forward in this book, however, is that as researchers we have a responsibility to establish the meaning of what we do and demonstrate its social value beyond our narrow self- or tribal-interests. This is an area in which natural scientists and social scientists find themselves facing different challenges. Much research in natural science (including engineering and medicine) may be unintelligible to the laity but can be shown to have value to society. Most people would agree that medical, scientific, and technological breakthroughs engender at least the potential for enhancing human life, widening the horizons of knowledge, and reducing unnecessary pain and suffering. Even small advances in natural science can cross-fertilize with others to generate innovations and products with significant social and economic consequences.

The consequences of social science research, however, are not so straightforward. The object of social science—people and society—is a contingent entity; it is in constant change, a change in which ideas and practices resulting from social science itself play a part. From the cognitive workings of the human psyche to the fluctuations of the global economy, few would be ready to formulate general laws of the same universal character and predictive

Copyrighted material

power of natural laws. Therefore, social science is not cumulative even in the limited sense that natural science is. There is great cultural variation and historical change. We may of course aim to add to our knowledge of psychological, organizational, or cultural processes for instance, but although some social scientists would argue otherwise (most notoriously August Comte, see Marcuse, 1955; Turner, 2007 for critique) we cannot reach confident generalizations that apply in every context and every situation. It is not possible, for example, to figure out how all the parts constituting a workplace should behave in order to work optimally in the same way as we can say how the parts of the human knee or wetland ecosystems should behave. A workplace is immensely complicated and will change over time, with endless contingencies and a variety of internal dynamics, all related to the social constructions of goals, technologies, internal and external relations, rules, authority beliefs, gender, class, age, ethnicity issues, management structures, changing work ideologies, mass media coverage, etc. And social science knowledge will be an intrinsic part of workplace functioning, affected by social technologies partly emerging from psychological, economical, sociological, and management theories on work and organization.

Unlike natural phenomena, human institutions, practices, and actions are imbued with meaning, their subjects sentient beings with motives, emotions, and aspirations that can be surprising, mysterious, or perverse. Understanding human actions calls for different types of explanation and interpretation than that from the behaviours of molecules, magnets, or machines. Social science is, as Giddens (1982) phrased it, about double hermeneutics; interpreting researchers study interpreting subjects. In carrying out social research, we are potentially capable of changing the object of our investigation, for better or worse. We can, for example, enable a poorly performing hospital to improve the service it offers to its community, or a dormant innovation to be put into effect in enhancing the lives of different people. Conversely, we can seriously mislead or muddle policy-makers with ill thought out theories, buzzwords, and faddish practices that cause unnecessary upheaval and suffering. Or we can seduce managers into believing that they can be fantastic leaders and change uncertain, lazy, anxious, and incompetent subordinates into enthusiastic, engaged, self-conscious, and skilled followers. Unfortunately, the current profusion of research publications makes it increasingly difficult to tell the wheat from the chaff, to identify any potential uses and abuses of social science, and to evaluate the merits of different claims.

Social science also strikes a different relation with its readership. Most texts in the natural sciences address a narrow circle of scientific experts able to judge their merits and applications. The wider public and policy-makers are not in a position to assess the scientific claims of this research but can debate and implement its applications. A new medical treatment or a new type of security

Copyrighted material

camera may be based on scientific innovations only comprehensible to a small group of scientists—whether the treatment or the security camera should be used in particular situations on grounds of costs, ethics, side effects, or whatever, can then be debated by the public and their representatives. The situation with social science is different. Without a broader readership, social science can rarely have an effect, in particular if there is no policy implication that can be directly implemented. Policy-makers and politicians but also consultants, journalists, social commentators, and other opinion-shapers are unlikely to pick up and debate findings from a social science that is buried in obscure journals that very few people can access and even fewer read. The public itself is often potentially in a position to judge many of the insights generated by social science research but cannot do so without the ability to access it. This calls for social research to be widely read and for the texts to have something new and meaningful to say—to appeal to and do something with the reader. In other words, social science texts need to be performative to be 'fully' meaningful. Published research findings should be written, and expressed, in ways that make them inviting to read.

In light of this, it is not surprising that largely meaningless and esoteric texts of social research languish unread, unloved, and unappreciated, constituting little more than noise for researchers. As we shall see, this has extensive practical implications. Meaningless and esoteric texts have the ability to clutter out and silence valuable research that might usefully guide policy or avert different instances of malpractice and mismanagement. Social scientists have often found themselves acting as Cassandras—calling attention to serious social problems (obesity, bullying, racism, discrimination, etc.) and malpractices in different institutions (patient neglect, ineffective restructurings, cost-cutting practices that endanger the public, etc.) and failing to be heard. In the UK-based 'Campaign for Social Science', this argument formed the basis of a report called 'The Business of People: The significance of Social Science over the Next Decade' (2015, p. xi), whose authors claim:

> The challenges facing the UK—its prosperity and functioning as a place for trade, creativity, exchange, equity, and opportunity—will be met only if we deploy social science knowledge, skills and methods of inquiry ever more intensively. To thrive we must innovate. In innovation, we must marry progress in technology and the physical and life sciences with insights from studying behaviour, place, economy and society.

The report puts forward the view that many of today's problems and challenges can only be addressed by scientists acting across disciplinary boundaries and capable of influencing politicians and other power-holders through the force of their arguments, a view widely shared across social science. But if social science harbours such great ambitions, how come it has not solved the

Copyrighted material

problem of its own irrelevance? Is there anything social scientists could do differently to make their work more meaningful to people outside academia? We believe there is, and as a first step towards this goal, we argue that social scientists have to become better at questioning the meaning of what they (we) do.

This, then, is the core argument of our book. The current proliferation of academic publications in social science, far from enhancing human knowledge, is creating a vacuum of meaning. We are not claiming that all publications are meaningless or nonsensical, but we do claim that a substantial part of them are, with only rare examples offering a rich empirical study or an insight that impresses the well-informed reader. Materials that scholars prepare as part of their academic apprenticeship which in the past would have been consigned to the filing cabinet of 'Juvenilia' are currently being published in ostensibly respectable journals; other publications, following the rigours of academic reviews and numerous revisions, are virtually emptied of any originality or substance. Academic publishing has turned into a game where careers are forged and departmental reputations are manufactured on the back of 'hits'. These are formulaic and hollow publications in journals themselves engaged in the game of impact factors which further enhances formulaic and meaningless publications. The game certainly makes sense to the players and the stakes are quite high but its consequences are in many ways negative. Meaningless papers do not merely fail to have any impact with the social challenges that urgently confront us, but they spread cynicism and fatalism among the participants and reinforce instrumentalism. They also clutter the sphere of knowledge with noise so that truly original and meaningful publications have less chance of being developed, noticed, discussed, and acted upon. They intensify disciplinary boundaries and enhance the existence of academic microtribes which carefully monitor access to publications, exercising a conservative effect on new ideas and new methods as well as on cross-tribe collaborations. The result is a sphere of largely meaningless and purposeless knowledge. We claim that the production of such knowledge is far from without cost. It prevents academics from dedicating more time and care to their students, it stops them from reading those works that have something original and meaningful to say, it raises the costs of higher education to students and taxpayers, and it even encourages meaningless competition and endless self-promotion among academics themselves.

According to many academics 'the spread of proxy metrics, the target culture, competition between institutions, the erosion of the autonomy of academic research and professional priorities and imported productivity mechanisms such as performance management regimes' lead to the proletarianization of contemporary academics. The author, a professor in geography, continues:

Copyrighted material

> The encroachment of the managerial logic and mode of evaluation (proxy metrics) into all areas leads to the erosion of fundamental features that escape audit: professional integrity and collegiality. Instead, patterns of instrumental behaviour aimed at absorbing bureaucratic pressure proliferate, along with cynicism and even contempt towards management imperatives. (Brandist, *THE*, 5 May, 2016)

Other authors go so far to talk about academic zombies (e.g. Ryan, 2012), the living dead, claiming that strict regimes make people respond rather mindlessly to demands and stimuli rather than themselves being full agents and carriers of meaning. These are somewhat extreme views, and may be outbursts of frustrations rather than nuanced descriptions, and there are definitively many that experience things differently (Clarke et al., 2012) or only partly agree (Knights & Clarke, 2014; Kallio et al., 2016), but the harsh statements and efforts to wake up both over-adaptive academics and insensitive and technocratric policy-makers are worth noting.

We recognize that the causes of this situation are many and diverse. They include the rise of new technologies that make the composition, circulation, and dissemination of texts infinitely easier than they have ever been in the past; the increasing consumerism and credentialism that suffuses higher education; the practices of academic journals, publishers, research institutions, accrediting and ranking bodies, universities, and governments. We can also note the expansion of administration to such a level that the majority of UK universities now employ more administrators than teachers and researchers (Jump, 2015). A key cause is the vast expansion of higher education in recent decades, the resulting lowering of quality and the falling status of academics and institutions—something that intensifies competition for status and reputation within the academic circles. It also fuels a focus on quantitative indicators—number of publications in ranked journals and citations—as no one has an overview and qualitative judgement gets lost outside small micro-tribes of specialized researchers. Research, especially quantifiable outputs and publications in the right journals, has emerged as the key to enhanced individual and institutional status and reputations—hence, in a desperate attempt to improve their standing and prospects, academics, encouraged by their institutions as much as by their individual ambitions, are blindly producing volumes of research publications with very little concern for its social meaning or value.

Against this background, it would be naïve if we claimed that this little book by itself will enable social researchers to reclaim meaning for the work that they do and will reconnect social science with the pressing needs of our societies. We do, however, believe that the book opens certain possibilities and makes certain concrete proposals which will at least enhance the reader's ability, whether as editor, reviewer, academic, publisher, or citizen to raise the profile of meaningfulness as a key aim of academic research. In making these

Copyrighted material

proposals, it should not be thought that we are exempting ourselves from responsibility for meaningless work. Far from it. As academics, we are very aware in our daily practices of the pressures to publish no matter what the substance of the publication is and we have, like most others—bar Stoner—to deal with these pressures, including internalized pressures to demonstrate for ourselves how smart and effective we are. We are confident, however, that many in social science share our concerns and that the proposals we put forward in the second part of this book will make a contribution to ongoing efforts to recover meaning and value for social science.

What we Mean by 'Meaning'

In recognizing some of our own failings, we acknowledge that the recovery of meaning presents us, as social scientists, with some special challenges. In our professional, just as in our personal lives, we all too often are engaged in activities that 'make sense' to us within a narrow framework. We invest a lot of time and effort reading the works of others, analysing, drawing distinctions, observing paradoxes and inconsistencies, distilling arguments and counterarguments, and absorbing large amounts of information. We also sometimes agonize in writing our own texts, we critique, we juxtapose, we infer, and we dismiss. We respond to criticisms and comments by other scholars and, undoubtedly, seek to enhance our own positions and reputations. In all these ways we are engaged, as Weick (1995) has rightly argued, in a constant process of sensemaking of our own and other people's actions and works. Yet, a fundamental premise of this book is that sensemaking is not the same as doing something meaningful. Many things make sense; for example, a lot of bureaucratic routines, even if they have little or no meaning. Much research output makes perfect sense in terms of career aspirations and institutional pressures, even if it produces little of lasting meaning or substance for ourselves or for others.

Critical scholars approaching the question of meaning start from the premise that meaning, especially the meaning of work, cannot be separated from prevailing power relations in society. In his early work on alienated labour, Marx (1844/1972) proposed that under capitalist conditions of production, a large part of human labour becomes alienated. The meaning of work becomes systematically distorted as a part of alienated consciousness that inevitably results from capitalist production. Alienated consciousness consistently misreads the meaning of commodities as well as the meaning of human actions, relations, and of work itself. Material and symbolic commodities and the labour that goes in producing them—they all make a lot of sense to the alienated being, even if their meaning is systematically distorted. Scholars,

Copyrighted material

following Marx and other critical traditions, claim for themselves the special privilege of being able to see beyond the effects of alienation, to demystify taken-for-granted meanings, to denaturalize what appear as commonsensical or inevitable, and to probe into meanings that are systematically distorted or concealed. Psychoanalytic scholarship has amplified the view that meanings are systematically distorted by proposing that the conscious meanings of our beliefs, our actions, and our creations (e.g. Freud, 1930) frequently conceal deeper, unconscious meanings that, were they to reach consciousness, would result in anxiety, guilt, shame, and other unbearable emotions. A key element for many academics is the narcissism involved in doing and publishing research. The self is invested in the work and research publications function as reinforcers and stabilizers of a sense of self susceptible to the insecurities and vulnerabilities of a profession consistently exposed to assessment and a level of competition where failures greatly outscore successes for most people—as efforts to publish in highly-ranked journals and with prestigious publishing houses often lead to 90 per cent rejections. The bitterness and aggression most academics experience against journals, editors, and reviewers demonstrates a profound sense of unfairness associated with the narcissistic injuries of the academic, with grand contributions to humankind, facing the pettiness of a non-gratifying world. The recovery of meaning, therefore, is not a simple matter—it involves working against formidable social and psychological forces that seek to normalize comforting illusions and wish-fulfilling rationalizations.

Phenomenologists use the term ‘meaning’ in a more detached sense as ‘reflected experience’. In a ‘stream of consciousness’, many things (‘phenomena’) pass us by without reflection or thought, like images captured in a security camera. These are, by definition, devoid of meaning. As Schutz puts it, ‘the problem of meaning is a time problem’ (Schutz, 1967, p. 12). Meaning must be created either before or after we become conscious of an experience or perform an action. The ego thus actively *constructs* meaning out of the stream of consciousness, but meaning itself cannot be constructed independently of the phenomena—it is a part of consciousness in which all phenomena register. Nor does each individual create meaning in a vacuum. *Social* meaning is constructed inter-subjectively through pre-phenomenal fusions of horizons that we build in social interaction (Schutz, 1967, pp. 133–4). In this latter sense, meaning may be studied as a detached phenomenon of its own, especially as it appears in signs, in a way that comes close to semiotics.

One of the central issues that has concerned phenomenologists has been the increasing difficulty that humans have in creating meaning in modern society. The decline of religion and politics as great unifying cultural forces leads to a proliferation and fragmentation of meaning systems. Technology, mass travel and tourism, and the mass media constantly undermine traditional value and belief systems. The same goes for consumerism—where

Copyrighted material

post-affluence leads to material objects assuming restless, fleeting, and superficial meanings, and where the seductive powers of 'the brand' reign supreme. Constant contact with other cultures has made us keenly aware of the relativity of meaning systems—the heroes of one culture are the social outcasts of another, practices praised and honoured in one culture are severely condemned and punished in another. Also within a culture there are highly contested and fluctuating meanings. People are expected to act in line with norms for gender-appropriate behaviour while avoiding stereotyping themselves or others. Whistleblowers are admired at a distance, but seen as traitors to be condemned within the organization or occupation exposed. The relativity of meaning, argued Becker (1962), threatens humans with the death of meaning, a terrifying prospect of having nothing to live for or nothing firm to hold on to. In such a universe, Frankl writes, each individual is called upon to create his/her own individual meaning system, a formidable challenge. The quest for meaning becomes, for Frankl (Frankl, 1984 [1956], p. 121), the 'primary motivational force in man [*sic*]' against the terrifying threat of *meaninglessness*, when individuals 'are haunted by the experience of their inner emptiness, a void within themselves; they are caught in that situation which I have called the "existential vacuum" ' (Frankl, 1984 [1956], p. 128). Similarly, for Arendt, 'meaningless' represents the 'devaluation of all values' (Arendt, 1958, p. 236).

In putting forward our own vision of meaningful research, we take from Marxism the idea that meaning systems are linked to power relations in society; we take from psychoanalysis a fundamental questioning on the innocence of meanings and the ease with which we may deceive ourselves; and we take from phenomenology the important insight that the quest for meaning strives for something of purpose and value, that is more than *comprehensible*. A piece of research can be based upon rigorous methods, it can make a clear 'contribution to the field', it can be published in a respectable journal and be cited—and yet it can be quite meaningless. It may fail in offering genuine understanding and insights, a genuine experience of wonder and surprise or in providing any guide for action. To understand the concept of meaningful research, we propose to draw two fundamental distinctions: first, the distinction between meaningful work and meaningful product and, second, meaningful to the ego versus meaningful to a specific group or to wider society.

A significant part of research activity by an individual or a group may be meaningful without generating anything of wider meaning or value. Many meaningful activities lead to meaningless products. This is especially true when an activity has the quality of 'practice'—students do a lot of sketches as a means to attaining mastery but most of these sketches have little meaning for the wider society beyond enabling an individual to 'discover his/her voice' or to develop his/her skill. In this way, many confused, formulaic, unoriginal, and mundane texts can be the product of meaningful activity on the part of

Copyrighted material

their authors, part of their training to become better researchers, without achieving any higher purpose or meaning. Moreover, many efforts by seasoned researchers may not lead to anything of higher purpose or meaning. This is in the nature of research itself—the quest for knowledge all too frequently leads to dead ends, trivial discoveries, mundane realizations, or simply confirmations of what is already widely known and accepted. The quest may have been meaningful—guided by the best of intentions—but the end product has been of little significance. As Cavafy concludes in his poem 'Ithaca', the meaning of many journeys lies in the journey itself rather than the discovery once we reach our destination. It takes courage and self-awareness to be able to acknowledge that such quests, meaningful in themselves, have not generated anything of wider meaning and purpose.

The second distinction we draw is between three spheres of meaningfulness:

Meaningful to the ego. Just as the activity of research itself, a piece of research—an article, a monograph, a seminar paper including the process that yields these products—can be meaningful to the researchers individually in the sense that they feel their study makes their lives worth living. Curiosity, hedonism, challenge, and even simple careerism can act as powerful—and positive—individual motivators. (These will be examined in detail in Chapter 4.) Researchers may also have the sense of contributing something to other people or to some higher principle. This, however, can all too easily be shown to be the product of wishfull thinking or self-deception.

Meaningful to a specific group. A way of validating if one's research contributes to other people is to see whether it is meaningful to a particular group. This group can be an employer, a union, a client, but most frequently it is a research microtribe with which the researcher identifies. Presenting papers at gatherings of a microtribe, writing and reviewing for its journals, and so on, has a ceremonial quality, sometimes deeply meaningful to the participants. The meaning of such work is quite *esoteric*, limited to those who have been initiated into a particular way of thinking, jargon-mastery, and acting, which makes little sense or has no significance to outsiders. Most academic writings in journals have the character of addressing themselves only to members of particular microtribes, caring little about reaching wider audiences, even people generally interested in the subject matter.

Meaningful to the wider society, i.e. research that reaches out beyond the interests of specific groups. Here the idea is to go beyond a specific, narrow target group of academic or professional specialists and generate knowledge of value to society as a whole. Parts of the educated or in other ways interested public are then addressed and reached. This does not imply popularization, but the work with ideas, empirical material and texts, and publication formats that reaches beyond the narrow concerns of specialists.

Copyrighted material