Research, policy and funding – academic treadmills and the squeeze on intellectual spaces

Katherine Smith

Abstract:
In recent years, there has been a great deal of collective rumination about social scientists’ role in society. In the post-1997 UK context, public policy commitments to ‘evidence-based policy’ and ‘knowledge transfer’ have further stimulated such reflections. More recently, Michael Burawoy’s 2004 address to the American Sociological Association, which called for greater engagement with ‘public sociology’ has reverberated throughout the discipline, motivating a series of debates about the purpose of sociological research. To date, most such contributions have been based on personal experience and anecdotal evidence. 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 1997 until 2007, this paper discusses data from interviews with academic researchers. The findings suggest that the growing pressure to produce ‘policy relevant’ research is diminishing the capacity of academia to provide a space in which innovative and transformative ideas can be developed, and is instead promoting the construction of institutionalized and vehicular (chameleon-like) ideas. Such a claim supports Edward Said’s (1994) insistence that creative, intellectual spaces within the social sciences are increasingly being squeezed. More specifically, the paper argues we ought to pay far greater attention to how the process of seeking research funding shapes academic research and mediates the interplay between research and policy.

Keywords: Public sociology; research funding; evidence-based policy; knowledge transfer; health inequalities; UK

Introduction
The past decade has witnessed much collective rumination about the (actual and desirable) role of the social sciences, particularly in the UK and USA.
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; Martin 2001; Massey 2000; Naughton 2005). Both periods also follow a time in which policymakers had become increasingly interested in ‘utilizing’ research, and both have facilitated insightful debates about the relationship between research and policy. In other ways, however, the academic context of the two periods is very different. The neoliberal reforms that have taken place in many universities over the past two decades (Larner and Le Heron 2003), including the introduction of new auditing regimes such as the Research Assessment Exercise (see Evans 2004; Shore 2008), have changed the expectations placed on individuals working in this sector, reducing the financial security of many research staff (Collinson 2004) and increasing the pressure to secure research funding (Nixon et al. 2001). The compulsion to respond to the demands of potential funders, including policymakers, may therefore be far greater in this more recent period.

Furthermore, the way in which the post-1997 UK Labour government championed linear concepts of ‘evidence-based policy’ (e.g. Blunkett 2000; Cabinet Office 1999), appeared blind to the key lessons of this earlier literature, which consistently claims policymakers are unlikely to utilize social research in any direct sense (e.g. Blume 1977; Caplan 1979; Weiss 1979, 1982). Previous suggestions that it is more helpful to discuss the ‘interplay’ between research and policy than ‘research utilization’ were ignored, as was the suggestion that we need to do more to uncover ‘the latent policies which organise the empirical research carried out by social science’ (Rein 1980: 367). It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that there have been 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; Martin 2001; Massey 2000; Ward 2005).

Michael Burawoy’s 2004 address to the American Sociological Association, reproduced in this Journal the following year, identifies a helpful starting point for such reflections within sociology, arguing that we need to think about each of the following four strands of the field: 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). Yet, whilst there has been a great deal reflection on intellectuals’ role in society (e.g. Fuller 2005; Jacoby 1987; Meer 2006; Said 1994), including specific debates about ‘public’ sociology (e.g. Braithwaite 2005; Burawoy 2005; Calhoun 2005; Johnson 2004) and ‘policy-relevant’ geography (e.g. Dorling and Shaw 2002; Martin 2001; Massey 2000; Ward 2005), Burawoy’s explicit challenge has not yet been widely taken up. There has been very little recent empirical, sociological analysis of the social scientists
involved in undertaking (or resisting) different kinds of intellectual work (McLennan, Osborne and Vaux 2005 is a notable exception). Indeed, aside from reflecting on the impacts of the increasing ‘audit culture’ within academia (e.g. Ward 2005; Shore 2008), social scientists have been remarkably reticent in discussing the factors shaping their own career trajectories. This is particularly true of the role research funding plays in shaping research agendas and 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, a subject which encompasses academics in a variety of disciplinary settings, including economics, geography, social policy, public health and sociology. The comments made by interviewees not only suggest that Burawoy’s (2005) four strands of sociology have broader relevance within academia, they also support his observation that there is interdependence between the four strands, which 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.

The case study: health inequalities in the UK

The election of a 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 (Black et al. 1980), the new government was keen to emphasize the previous administration’s failure to implement any of its (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 1999), it commissioned a follow-up to the Black Report (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, the new government also claimed to be committed to ‘joined-up’ policymaking (Cabinet Office 1999; Cabinet Office 2000).

Despite the above three commitments, health inequalities have not reduced (Department of Health 2008; Shaw, Davey Smith and Dorling 2005), prompting numerous reflections on the relationship between health inequalities research and policy (e.g. Whitehead et al. 2004; Petticrew et al. 2004; Exworthy, Berney and Powell 2002). However, few are based on comprehensive empirical data and those that are tend to focus on how research is received and understood by policymakers, rather than considering how research-based ideas are constructed and promoted by researchers. In fact, there has been no detailed,
qualitative exploration of the interface between health inequalities research and policy since Mel Bartley completed a doctoral thesis on the debates surrounding the effects of unemployment on health twenty years ago. Drawing on theories developed by Latour and colleagues in their anthropological studies of scientists (e.g. 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 paper further demonstrates, that to understand the relationship between research and policy, we need to reflect on the factors that shape academic careers.

Methodology

The overall research is based on an analysis of 42 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 academic researchers, civil servants, ministers, journalists and research funders. This paper focuses on the insights provided by individuals with experience of working in academic contexts (27 interviewees were based in academia at the time of the interview and five others had been during the study period). When selecting academic interviewees, my main intention was to engage with a range of different academic perspectives on health inequalities so I constructed a matrix to help ensure I spoke to researchers interested in different types of health inequality (e.g. gender, class, area based, etc) and who supported different causal explanations (e.g. lifestyle-behavioural, psychosocial, neo-materialist, etc). The final sample of 32 academic interviewees was made up of twelve women and twenty men who, between them, represented seven relatively junior academics (researchers or lecturers), seven more senior/experienced academics (senior lecturers, senior researchers and readers) and seventeen professors. Twenty-two of the interviewees were based in Russell Group universities and none were in new universities. Hence, the sample was biased towards senior academics (most of whom, though not all, were working at relatively prestigious institutions). This reflected my aim of focusing on widely-cited, research-orientated academics who had been working in the field of health inequalities for over a decade (so that they could compare the pre- and post-1997 contexts) and who were associated with particular positions within the health inequalities field. As such, the interviewees shared characteristics with the ‘elites’ described in some methodological literature (see Smith 2006). However, participants are not referred to as such within 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. 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 this was often aspirational (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 was taken, using a themed interview schedule which focused questions around health inequalities research, policy and research-policy relations. The interviews varied in length, lasting between 45–150 minutes (although most were around 60–70 minutes). All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by myself, before being coded in the qualitative data analysis programme, Atlas.ti, with a coding framework which was developed iteratively through an analysis of the interview data but which was also informed by the interview schedule. In line with the University of Edinburgh’s ethical code of conduct, all the interview material has been fully anonymized 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 elsewhere (Smith 2006) and a more detailed account of the overall methodological approach is provided in (Smith 2008).

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. Naughton 2005; Stevens 2007; Duncan 2007) and my findings were 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 policy development (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 institutionalized ideas that they challenged. Others appeared to have been able to move further into policy either because they overtly complemented institutionalized ideas or because they had
‘vehicular’ (McLennan 2004; Osborne 2004), chameleon-like qualities which facilitated their translation into policy (see Smith 2007).

At one level, these findings could be interpreted as demonstrating the hegemony of particular ideologies or discourses within policy (Coburn 2004; 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 do 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 findings can be explained by the existence of a cultural or communicative ‘gap’ between researchers and policymakers (e.g. Caplan 1979; Lomas 2000), one which it has been suggested can be addressed through ensuring research is appropriately informed by policy needs and then effectively ‘translated’ for policy audiences (e.g. Wimbush et al. 2005; Petticrew et al. 2004). However, such accounts do not adequately consider what happens when the gaps between actors are so vast that they aspire to entirely inconsistent outcomes, a tension 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 (Kingdon 1995; Cohen, March and Olsen 1972) 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 helpful to focus solely on the boundary between research and policy. It is not the intention of this paper to deny the importance of research/policy boundaries or to disregard the crucial role that politics, ideologies and disciplinary allegiances play in shaping this relationship. However, the intention is to explore how these factors impinge on academic activities in a field of research in which most academics are overtly orientated towards ‘public’ and ‘policy’ audiences, as well as other academics.

‘Cycles of credit’ or ‘academic treadmills’

By virtue of their concern with scientific practice, there are at least three influential theoretical frameworks which could usefully be employed to discuss the findings within this paper. First, one could employ the work of Bourdieu (1975, 2004) and hone in on academics’ fundamental investment in the illusio (the rules and stakes of the field of scientific practice within which they are working). Second, one could follow what has been labelled the ‘strong programme’ and explore how academics’ socio-political interests and their academic sub-culture impacts upon the work they do (e.g. Bloor 1982, 1991). Both these perspectives have something to offer this paper but neither
adequately reflects the stress that interviewees placed on the role of obtaining research funding in shaping their research activities. Nor do they capture the cyclical (and sometimes grinding) nature of academic practice that interviewees described. It is here that Latour and Woolgar’s (1986) concept of ‘cycles of credit’ seems most helpful. 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 to others (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 construct and market 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.

The interviewees’ comments indicate that the requirement to obtain funding (whether through project funding or through appointment to a permanent post) was rarely far from researchers’ minds. Indeed, 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 indicated that their interest in health inequalities was intensely political and very publicly and/or policy orientated, with many describing having initially moved into this area of research due to a belief that health inequalities were the embodiment of 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 (for a discussion of similar concerns in the context of the USA see Navarro 2004). 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 [. . .] I thought, you do this, then you get a job a bit like the people who taught you [. . .] 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 per cent [. . .] 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 research funders in mind not only informed proposals for new research but also shaped the presentation research outputs. Given, the cyclical nature of the research process described in Latour and Woolgar’s (1986) notion of ‘cycles of credit’ (or the metaphorical treadmill described above), this is perhaps unsurprising. 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. The following interviewee, for example, claimed s/he felt health inequalities researchers 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 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 one might have anticipated, given that health inequalities researchers have frequently celebrated the opportunity to openly focus on health inequalities from 1997 onwards (Bartley, Blane and Davey Smith 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 desired conclusions (see also Hillyard et al. 2004):

*Academic:* When one looks at research bids [from policy sources] 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, possible for the recipients of such grants to undertake the required research and present conclusions that differ from those they perceived the funders’ to desire (several interviewees reported that they had done precisely this). However, as a consequence of the perceived importance of maintaining credibility amongst potential funders, some described framing their findings in ways which presented less of a policy challenge than they believed was warranted. It is important to highlight that there are no instances of interviewees suggesting 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 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] I could have been much more . . . critical. It isn’t simply that I feel the funding source wouldn’t like me to say those things, I actually . . . 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 organization] 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 it 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 inform a sense of loyalty towards the organizations within which those individuals are based. 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, as should be clear from the data presented so far, the academics I spoke to were also extremely focused on maintaining credibility with potential funders. Indeed, 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.

It is widely accepted that academics often need to adapt their methods of communication for policy audiences so the notion that academics may adopt different ‘guises’ for academic and policy audiences is not, in itself, surprising. However, the data also reveal an interesting paradox; whilst nearly all of the interviewees said they believed policymakers wanted researchers to provide clear and simple messages about policy interventions, several academic interviewees described deliberately making their messages to policy audiences less clear because they feared the messages might otherwise be received as too radical, or too critical of government policy.

Other interviewees who had received direct funding from policy sources described feeling under pressure to produce policy-relevant research, a related but slightly different kind of pressure to that discussed above. Whilst it is possible to produce work that is policy-relevant yet also critical, interviewees often varied starkly in how they constructed work they considered to be ‘critical’ from that they considered ‘policy relevant’ (a split which mapped relatively neatly onto the distinction between interviewees who described themselves as ‘Old Labour’ or Marxist and those who described themselves as Centre-Left, or sympathetic to post-1997 Labour governments). As the following quotation illustrates, the former group (who tended to describe health inequalities research as a political or moral cause) were often extremely disparaging about researchers whom they felt were too closely associated with policymakers:
Academic: Let’s problematize [Blank] who, as you know, is a Professor at [Blank] and a well-known [health inequalities researcher] . . . 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 [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, interviewees who depicted themselves as Centre-Left suggested working closely with policymakers was indicative of being truly committed to reducing health inequalities and suggested that it was necessary for health inequalities researchers to produce research that was ‘realistic’ about policy constraints (see also Petticrew et al. 2004):

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 inter-. . . e sted 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.

Individuals on both sides made claims to objectivity. For the former, independence 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 simultaneously damage their credibility amongst others. This division is captured in Hammersley’s (2005) distinction between ‘academic’ and ‘practical’ research. Like Hammersley, many of the interviewees argued that the latter is potentially less ‘valid’ and, therefore, less credible than purer or more ‘scientific’ kinds of research:

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 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. I mean, namely, they are raising issues that require explanation. But I also think that 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.

The critical comments made by interviewees falling on both sides of this division can, to some extent, be understood as examples of what Gieryn (1983, 1999) has termed ‘boundary work’. This involves the construction of boundaries between what is considered ‘scientific’ and what is not, with the purpose of increasing one’s own credibility and, thereby, access to resources. Often, it seems, through the very decision to undertake ‘policy-relevant’ research, a researcher’s credibility as an academic may already be in decline, at least amongst academics who are orientated towards maintaining some sense of ‘purity’ within the academy (Eden 2005) or who have a more critical political outlook. Likewise, researchers who undertake work that is overtly critical of government policy risk being dismissed as ‘radical’ and ‘unrealistic’ by policy-orientated colleagues. In both cases, even if research might otherwise have high academic worth, boundary workers can claim that it is worth less on the basis of this distinction.

Yet, the analysis presented in this paper is complicated by the fact that this boundary often appeared far fuzzier in interviewees’ conversations than commentators such as Hammersley (2005) suggest. Most interviewees thought research should inform policy and many had made conscious efforts to communicate their findings to policymakers. Yet, at the same time, most desired some space in which to think more imaginatively and critically. Hence, for many of the interviewees, the divide between ‘policy’ and ‘critical’ work was not a clear distinction between different types of researcher but a fluid boundary between the different types of work many attempted to undertake simultaneously. For example, in the above extract, the interviewee talks about people who undertake policy-relevant research in the third person, as if this was not something s/he did her/himself. Yet, elsewhere in the interview, this individual made it clear that a great deal of his/her time was taken up with policy-relevant research and s/he did not suggest that this work lacked scientific credibility. The situation is further complicated by the fact that many interviewees suggested the constraints associated with producing policy-orientated work could not be entirely separated from producing ‘critical’ (or ‘professional’) work because, as discussed earlier, of the necessity of securing future funding.

Crucially, the findings do not suggest that more freedom was necessarily available to researchers who concentrated on applying for funding from non-policy sources, such as the UK Research Councils; many expressed a belief that these bodies were more likely to fund policy-relevant research (a claim
supported by Hillyard et al. 2004 in the context of criminology). One example that several interviewees gave to support this assessment was the Economic and Social Research Council 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 likely to be the result of civil servants encouraging Research Councils to fund projects of potential use to the next government (Labour had 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 overtly orientated towards policy audiences may feel compelled to manage their ‘policy credibility’. It is not the purpose of this article to assess the extent to which funding decisions actually are related to policy preferences (although other data in the project demonstrate interviewees involved in research funding did often consider policy-relevance to be important). The point 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 shaped by policy preferences, and if they frame their applications and outputs accordingly, then research agendas are shaped by these beliefs, regardless of whether or not such perceptions are correct.

**Concluding discussion – the squeeze on imaginative spaces**

Overall, the findings suggest there are some important tensions between the work many health inequalities researchers would like to do and that which they believe is required 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 interviewees suggested their research was publicly orientated and hoped it would contribute to addressing the vastly unequal life experiences of different population groups. Many were actively involved in disseminating their work to public audiences through working with local communities and/or promoting their messages to the mass media. At the same time, all of the 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 (in which case, it was the public work that tended to lose out, as Burawoy (2005) suggests). However, a desire to also undertake ‘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 practical solutions and those who felt acad­emia should facilitate radical and critical thinking. Most seemed to believe academia should provide space for both but few believed it currently did:

*Academic:* [T]here’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 innovative and transformative ideas, with the potential to significantly change policy and practice, researchers either appeared to be contributing to ideas that fitted with those already institutionalized in policy organizations (i.e. producing work which complemented existing ‘policy realities’, much as Hillyard et al. 2004 describe in relation to criminology research) or trying to respond to quite divergent drives by attempting to satisfy a desire to work critically whilst maintaining a level of credibility with policy and funding audiences. In responding to these diverging pressures, chameleon-like ideas, such as those Osborne (2004) terms ‘vehicular’, seemed likely to emerge. The key qualities of such 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 imbued with a vagueness facilitating their transformation into less radical versions of themselves within policy. This allows researchers to ‘be themselves’ in academic arenas, whilst not ‘rocking the boat’ in policy contexts, as one of the academic interviewees quoted in this paper described, thereby protecting both their academic credibility and their credibility amongst potential funders. Such an account helps explain why ideas that many of the interviewees described as providing radical challenges to existing ways of thinking about health inequalities in policy had been able to travel into policy without any significant policy change.

In contrast to Burawoy’s (2005) confidence that the ‘originating moral impetus is rarely vanquished’ as a result of career and institutional pressures, the research presented here paints a more disturbing picture. It suggests that the pressure on researchers to explore issues in ways that are applicable to current ‘policy realities’ can be perceived as a pressure to produce ‘policy-informed evidence’. Such a phrase foregrounds the extent to which existing, institutionalized ideas work to inform the research from which new ideas emerge. All this suggests academia is now a long way from nurturing the kind of ‘intelligensia’ that Weber (1995 [1906]) described as ‘uniquely
free-thinking’, or encouraging the kind of ‘intellectuals’ that Said outlined in his 1993 Reith Lectures:

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 suggest Said’s (1994) concerns that academia was increasingly rewarding intellectual conformity were not misplaced and the post-1997 promotion of ‘evidence-based policy’ in the UK may well have exacerbated these trends as Hammersley (2003, 2005) feared. Whilst many researchers aspire to produce influential research, the flip-side of the impetus on ‘evidence-based policy’ has been a pressure on researchers to become more attuned to, and informed by, ‘policy realities’. This is not to say that notions of ‘evidence-based policy’ are innately restrictive but rather that the way in which this concept has been promoted and interpreted needs to be further unpacked. This seems particularly crucial in the context of the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s recent adoption of its strategic aim to ensure Higher Education actively contributes to the economy and society (it is unclear how direct such contributions must be) (HEFCE 2009). 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.

Specifically, the findings suggest that further discussion about the role that research funding (and those involved in funding decisions) play in shaping social research is required. So far, researchers have often only given this issue attention when clear conflicts of interest are apparent (e.g. Gruning, Gilmore and McKee 2005; Bekelman, Li and Gross 2003). Whilst concerns have been raised about the growing interconnections between academia, government and private interests (e.g. Guston 2006; Demeritt 2000), there appears to have been little interest in exploring the relationship between more conventional research funders and academia. Indeed, where these issues are discussed, it has been suggested that research funders ought to be more involved in shaping research agendas (e.g. Chalkidou et al. 2008; Marsh et al. 2008). The reticence in exploring the more problematic aspects of this relationship may be a consequence of the mutual benefits arising from the 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. (Fuller 2005: 136)

It is not the intention of this article to argue that policy orientated funding always constrains research or that social scientists now operate within a system which never provides imaginative, intellectual spaces. Nor do I want to suggest that there is no ultimate purpose to research activity, other than to keep moving through ‘cycles of credit’. Rather, this paper merely seeks to draw attention to some of the tensions arising from the combination of a context in which there is an increased pressure on researchers to move through these cycles rapidly and, as a result of an impetus to be policy-relevant, an increased sense that it is important to maintain credibility amongst policy audiences, who are perceived to have significant influence over research funds. In the context of health inequalities, these tensions appear to be promoting the production of vehicular rather than transformative ideas.

The sample of academic interviewees in this project is of course too small to assess whether the findings reflect broader trends within social science research or to consider any differences between disciplines. However, the increased pressure to secure research funding that many of the interviewees described experiencing correlate with assessments of the neoliberal reforms that have taken place in many universities over the past two decades (Larner and Le Heron 2003; Nixon et al. 2001) and it was noticeable that many of the interviewees described their work in relation to academic ‘markets’ (see Demeritt 2000). In light of this and the fact publications focusing on different geographical locations (e.g. Navarro 2004) and other disciplinary contexts (e.g. Demeritt 2000; Hillyard et al. 2004) raise similar concerns, it seems sensible to propose that these are issues which we ought to be examining in more depth. If academics and research funders do not address these issues, we are likely to encourage a situation in which ideas that fit (or can be made to fit) within existing ways of thinking are continually (re)circulated, whilst spaces in which to engage with alternative and more imaginative and critical ways of thinking are increasingly squeezed. In other words, we need to discuss far more openly how the process of acquiring funding affects our abilities to choose how we balance the four types of sociology that Burawoy (2005) identifies.

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Notes

1. I am extremely grateful to all of the interviewees who participated in this research and to the research supervisors, Professors Liz Bondi, Susan J. Smith and Richard Mitchell. In addition, Dr Nasar Meer and three anonymous referees...
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2. It is worth noting that neither of the above interviewees held tenured positions. Some interviewees suggested the security afforded by permanent academic posts afforded more creative thinking space and claimed academics in contract positions were under most pressure to rapidly complete ‘cycles of credit’. However, interviewees who had been in academia for over a decade, including those in senior, tenured positions, consistently claimed the pressure to obtain funding had become greater in the past decade.

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