

Editorial note: On scientific expertise and research results

Academic researches write primarily to academic audiences. The whole idea of academia and all the procedures of scientific publishing are based on the existence of other academic scholars, or peers. Naturally, there are also occasions when popular media is interested in the research results and opinions of researchers. For instance, social scientists are regularly asked to make comments on the dysfunctions of the labour market, phenomena related to consumption and lifestyle, and the characteristics of social and economic inequalities.

Under normal circumstances media representatives contact social scientists only when the scholar in question really is an expert of a particular topic. Such occasions can take place when a labour economist is commenting on the employment fluctuation, or when a cultural sociologist is telling about the transcendent ontology of the self-reported narrations based on a single interview. Regarding these two notions, one can understand that the comments of a social scientist may be used to reinforce the expectations of the reporter or to provide an opinion as starkly as possibly in contrast with common sense reasoning. In other words, social scientists can be understood even as public jokes. This is obvious to those who are even remotely familiar with the recent comedy shows or comic books.

Good vignettes of social scientists can be taken from a popular online humour forums and discussion boards. For example, an article published at a popular news site *The Onion* in 2001 was making fun of sociologists who consider their own behaviour as indicatives of broader trends. What made readers laugh were the citations indicating that the behaviours and experiences of only one scholar could be used as sociological evidence for wider institutional and cultural characteristics. One of the research results reported was that “the average American male is unsure whether to get a chicken-parmesan sub at Luigi’s Pizza or shrimp lo mein at Hunan Garden when they go to lunch in the next 45 minutes” (*The Onion*, 2001). And of course, the character involved in the story was a typical publicity-seeking researcher who was merely interested in breaking new grounds in research.

But on a more serious note, is any publicity good publicity? Some scholars appear to be more conscious about the problems related to the bad publicity than others. For example, the former president of *The American Sociological Association*, Michael Burawoy (2005), has underlined how sociologists and other social scientists should consciously seek public dialogue. According to him, one of the key is-

ues in doing this is to make sure that one should be able to distinguish good publicity from bad, and also to ensure that the necessary requirements for the former are based on reliable and valid research. Therefore, the minimum requirement for a social scientist would be to be honest and sticking into those areas of expertise he or she really knows.

What is said above is in a steep contrast with some of the arguments put forward by the Finnish scholars. We may consider the heralded concept of *Zeitdiagnose*, proposed in Finland by Arto Noro (2000) over a decade ago, as a prime example of this. In his article, *Zeitdiagnose* was proposed as a third possible genre of sociological theory, in addition to research theory and general theory. It was presented that this *Zeitdiagnose* can be evaluated in the light of its sociological components, but it cannot be totally incorporated into the scientific debate. Thus a diagnosis (unlike the typical research theory) cannot be used as a theory for the interpretation of empirical evidence. The ideas put forward by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Zygmunt Bauman were named as examples of this genre. According to some interpretations ideas supporting “zeitdiagnostic analysis” may actually have been designed to defend the kind of social theorising that cannot be tested empirically.

Albeit often considered as a similar argument as that of Burawoy, the idea of *Zeitdiagnose* is in deep contrast with the idea of making social sciences public. In fact, it is almost the opposite – as if any idea applauded by the great authority could be considered as a valid example of good social science, despite of whether research can back it up or not.

We in RFS are not particularly enthusiastic about the many fundamental suggestions of Burawoy. We are especially critical towards his willingness to maintain disciplinary barriers between the fields of social sciences. Simultaneously, however, we do not consider that joking with sociologists’ expertise is generally very funny. Instead, we believe that good social scientific publicity should be built on cutting-edge research results. The current, fourth volume of *Research on Finnish Society*, has many examples of good research results.

Our opening article, by Pasi Moisio and Timo Kauppinen, examines intergenerational correlations of social assistance reciprocity in Finland. The authors use unique register data in which parent’s social assistance was observed in 1990 and their children’s in 2005. The second article is written by Mikko Niemelä. Using a large-scale survey data from 2008, he examines generic attributions to the causes of poverty. In

the third article, Antti Kouvo explores generalized and institutional trust across European societies. Kouvo compares the relative power of individual and country level factors when many faces of trust by utilizing cross-national survey data. The fourth article is by Tanja Hirschovits-Gertz, Kari Holma, Anja Koski-Jännes, Kirsimarja Raitasalo, Jan Blomqvist, Johan A. Cunningham, and Irina Pervova. Their article examines the question whether or not Finnish views on alcohol problems differ from those of Canada, Sweden and St. Petersburg, Russia. The article is also based on representative survey data from four sites, and it offers important findings from a comparative perspective.

The fifth article, by Teemu Turunen, focuses on employment and organizational commitment issues. He utilizes comparable survey data from five European countries in order to find out whether or not there are differences between Finland and other countries selected. This issue concludes with a review article by Henry Milner. This article is based on the annual Mauno Koivisto Lecture, which was held in Turku, Finland in April 2010.

Finally, we would like to wish relaxing summer to all of our readers. We also hope you enjoy reading this fourth issue of *Research on Finnish Society*.

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