



## **From Chicken Sheds to Random Control Trials**

**A Commentary on the “Bio-Social Methods for a Vitalist Social Science” Workshop**

**University of Birmingham, 16<sup>th</sup> July 2013**

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This workshop aimed to reaffirm the role of the social sciences in a time when insights from behavioural science such as social psychology, behavioural economics, environmental psychology, neuroeconomics and neuroscience are increasing being used to justify new policy leavers in the realm of ‘behaviour change’, new target audiences, new training schemes for civil servants and new research funding priorities. The interdisciplinary workshop was hosted by the Institute of Advanced Studies and the School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Science, chaired by a Human Geographer ([Jessica Pykett](#)) and a Political Sociologist ([Will Leggett](#)) and attended by mindfulness practitioners, sociologists, political scientists, educational sociologists, geographers, psychologists, neuroscientists and social anthropologists. The discussion began by addressing the challenges faced by the social sciences in an era of what feminist philosopher, Rosi Braidotti, has described as “bio-genetic capitalism”. Participants debated how far recent theoretical developments within the social sciences (the various ‘turns’ towards affect, embodiment, materialities), and methodological developments (from Sociologies of Scientific Knowledge, Science, Technology and Society studies, Medical Sociologies and Critical Neuroscience) might provide grounds from which social scientists can fully address contemporary bio-social, bio-political and bio-ethical problems. And we explored the (perhaps unexpected for some) role of Human Geography in understanding the importance of the spatial context in which decisions and actions are made – what Sociologist Nikolas Rose has described as the ‘vitalist milieu’ of contemporary personhood.

**Audio-recordings and presentations for the day’s proceedings are available at the [Governing Temptation](#) blog, and the following commentary provides a summary of speakers’ contributions.**

Dr. John Cromby from the School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences at Loughborough University started the presentations by outlining potential problems with using behavioural economics and psychological research methods against a backdrop of austerity and as a means of nudging people towards acceptance of the precepts of neoliberal subjectivity. His talk centred around a forthcoming paper in *Critical Social Policy* and provided a contemporary critique of the recently-published initiative to compel UK benefit claimants to undergo psychometric personality testing. The idea to use psychometric testing to assess the

personality traits of claimants was suggested by the Coalition Government's [Behavioural Insights Team](#) (BIT or Nudge Unit). The test itself was designed by the [VIA Institute on Character](#) and is based around the theory of positive psychology. The test uses a taxonomy of character strengths and virtues produced by positive psychologists and described as the scientific backbone of the approach (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Cromby provided a critique of positive psychology including its selective approach to institutions: 'there is a lot of talk about churches, but no mention of unions', as well as its endorsement of the American Dream (see Becker & Marecek, 2008) and its apparent oversight of significant power relations such as gender and ethnicity. Nonetheless, positive psychology has recently had a considerable influence on 'the happiness agenda' in the UK, which has been spearheaded by Lord Richard Layard.

The issues associated with psychometric personality testing in general also make the Job Centre's approach problematic. For example: social desirability responding, problems of introspection and self reporting, and individual value assignment have all been cited as significant drawbacks of psychometric personality tests. However, Cromby and Willis' paper goes further in their critique of specific aspects of the Job Centre's personality test. Having taken the test themselves ten times the pair found that regardless of their responses to the 48 questions, five key character traits reoccurred suggesting there were really only five types of profile – even when they left all the answers blank. Cromby argued that these five traits, which included curiosity, love of learning, critical thinking, social intelligence and originality, suggested that the test might function to influence the subjectivities of claimants in accordance with neoliberal precepts. Moreover in coercing claimants to take the test (at the risk of losing their benefits) and in subsequently encouraging participants to 'use these strengths everyday' and 'think about how you can use these strengths in your job search'

(skwalker1964, 2013), Cromby argued that the conditions of the test and its outcomes purvey the neoliberal emphasis on personal responsibility. However, it was noted in the questions that followed that not all benefit claimants would take this test seriously and those that did may not be profoundly influenced. Nonetheless, Cromby concluded that only a small minority of

**signature strengths**  
Complete below to find your strengths

## Your results!

Think about how you can use these strengths in your job search and in your life in general

Try to find a new way to use them then everyday

**Strength 1. Curiosity**  
You are curious about everything. You are always asking questions, and you find all subjects and topics fascinating. You like exploration and discovery.

**Strength 2. Love of learning**  
You love learning new things, whether in a class or on your own. You have always loved school, reading, and museums-anywhere and everywhere there is an opportunity to learn.

**Strength 3. Critical Thinking**  
Thinking things through and examining them from all sides are important aspects of who you are. You do not jump to conclusions, and you rely only on solid evidence to make your decisions. You are able to change your mind.

**Strength 4. Originality**  
Thinking of new ways to do things is a crucial part of who you are. You are never content with doing something the conventional way if a better way is possible.

**Strength 5. Social Intelligence**  
You are aware of the motives and feelings of other people. You know what to do to fit in to different social situations, and you know what to do to put others at ease.

Fill in your email address address below to have your strengths emailed to you. You may want to discuss these with your advisor at your next meeting.

**Image: An Example of the Signature Strengths on the VIA test**

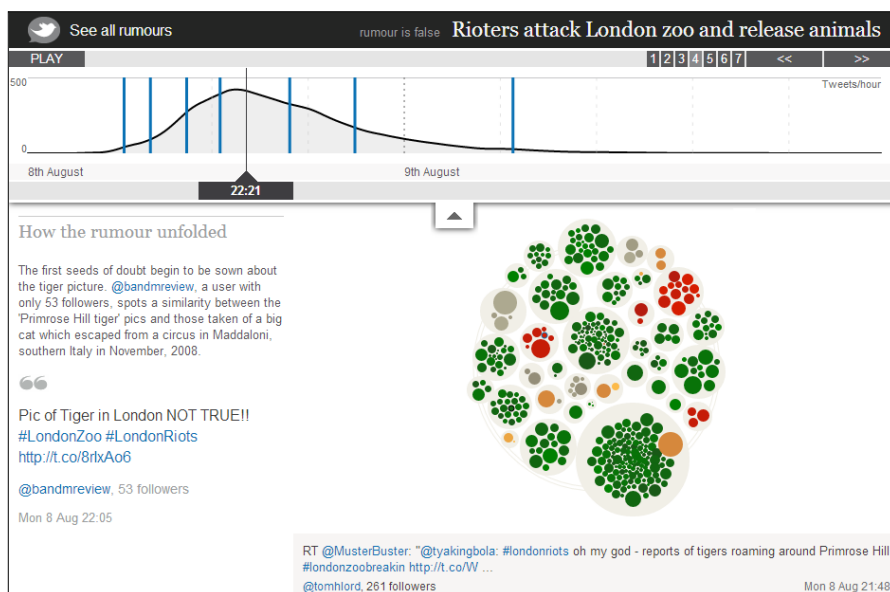
the 1.5 million people that claim Jobseekers Allowance need to be influenced for this initiative to have a far reaching affect.

Following this Professor [Stephen Hinchliffe](#) from the University of Exeter provided a fascinating talk on contagion as a means to open up conceptual and methodological debates on bio-social science. He talked about the conditions of contagion and how things spread. No doubt, we live in a contagious time – from Gangnam Style to measles – and contagion is commonly being used as a metaphor for as many social as biological phenomena. Hinchliffe talked about the notion of virality and in particular ‘viral chatter’. This idea relates to the spread of disease from animals to humans, and Hinchliffe and colleagues have explored this in chicken sheds for intensively reared chickens and the labour used to catch them before slaughter. Contagion relies on transmission through contact and is a function of frequency and proximity. The notion of chatter refers to the repeated, unsuccessful transmission which predates a zoonotic event; high rates of viral chatter increase viral diversity and the probability of a ‘viral storm’. In the chicken sheds of Hinchliffe’s research the scaling up of farming and exceeding the welfare capacity limit of poultry, coupled with the limited labour employed to catch chickens before slaughter, is creating conditions conducive to viral chatter. This is enhancing the potential for contagion and concomitantly enhancing the precarity of life. In this way the influences on viral chatter are social-economic as well as biological and chatter becomes a motor of production and consumption.

Moving on from this to explore some more ‘contagious ideas’ and with the aid of some striking images which map twitter feeds relating to specific events, Hinchliffe demonstrated how we can now monitor the swash and swirl of beliefs and desires and the contagion of thoughts through digital technology. This has been done in the joint LSE-Guardian study:

[Reading the Riots.](#)

Twitter data is particularly useful in this respect because it is time-stamped, geo-locatable and path-specific. In this way imitative rays can be mapped and intensities, as well as edges, measured. To demonstrate this point Hinchliffe also talked about the Horse meat



**Image: an example of the repetition, opposition and adaptation of rumours on Twitter**

scandal and argued

that rumours, ideas and desires spread through a process of repetition, opposition and adaptation. He went on to note that contagion is more than contact it is also about intensity and atmosphere and to understand this we require a methodology which re-invests in theoretically informed quantification and begins to measure atmospheres rather than territories.

Before we broke for lunch Dr. [Felicity Callard](#) – Senior Lecturer for Medical Humanities at Durham University – and [Dr. Des Fitzgerald](#) – a postdoctoral researcher in the Interacting Minds Centre at Aarhus University – presented their ongoing work on ‘[experimental entanglements](#)’ which they have been working on since 2011. This talk raised questions regarding the methodological, conceptual and empirical approach of interdisciplinary research, in particular between social science, neuroscience and humanities. Their presentation discussed some of their own failures and successes at interdisciplinary research and how the complex and overlapping histories, perspectives and modes of practice of these disciplines muddy the process of experimentation and collaboration. They discussed a workshop funded by the [Volkswagen Foundation](#) in which they employed innovative methods to get academics from social science, neuroscience and the humanities to answer probing questions – the aim being to question the warm glow of interdisciplinary exchange and instead elaborate conflicts between the disciplines. Other attempts to provide a more committed experimental exploration of interdisciplinary space included examining resting state brains and mind-wandering, brain imaging during lie-detection and describing Benjamin Libet’s now infamous (in Human Geography at least) half-second delay before cognition. They argued that the articulation of the interdisciplinary domain depends not on more convincing theoretical accounts but in a much deeper entanglement of those accounts with emerging spaces of biological experiment and demonstration. An additional caveat to that, suggested by one of their bio-social collaborators was that in bio-social exchange we should not presuppose that the social sciences understand the social and the neurosciences understand the biological. There followed some probing questions one of which questioned the push both by research councils and funders towards interdisciplinary research and the subsequent characterisation of ‘the lone academic’ as a strange individual that should be brought into something wider.

Fuelled by a lunch of chicken on sticks and egg sandwiches (discussions of chicken sheds and viral chatter behind us), [Kathryn Ecclestone](#) – Professor of Education at Sheffield University – began the afternoon with a talk about the rise of therapeutic culture which, she argues, has begun to permeate everyday life, politics and popular culture with increasing effect over the last 15 years. Ecclestone argued that understanding the state as only ‘nanny’ or ‘nudger’ overlooks the powerful intertwining of therapeutic ideas, assumptions and practices which have informed interventions throughout society and in particular in mainstream education. So strong is this therapeutic culture that Ecclestone terms it ‘a new therapeutic turn in education,’ influencing teachers and pupils alike. She describes how therapeutic

practices in schools have been underpinned by an image of the human subject - derived in part from the behaviour change agenda – as a Homer Simpson type character. Within education the prevailing figure of psychologically vulnerable subjects is even stronger with increasing numbers of interventions being used to help pupils, parents and teachers overcome the hurdles of education. For example, under the labour government we saw an increasing number of interventions which drew on counselling, psychology, positive psychology, mindfulness and mentoring and which were designed to help people involved in education, through activities such as youth work, parenting classes, after school clubs, circle time, emotional education, anger management classes for children and life coaching.

Ecclestone raised two important issues relating to this, the first was the unchallenged impression of the government's crisis of ill health and psycho-emotional vulnerability, and the second was the growing crisis of disaffection and disengagement. She argued that this is embellished by neuroscience which too often promotes deterministic ideas about intervening in families to off-set the crisis of ill health. Over the 15 years of this therapeutic turn, there has been a growing pessimism relating to people's emotional vulnerability. So how does this manifest in education? Ecclestone argued that we are seeing a widening spectrum of vulnerability amongst students, and in addition a larger proportion of students are appealing to issues of emotional vulnerability such as extenuating circumstances. The problem here is that if we begin to see people as inherently vulnerable we begin to view everyday life as a source of distress with people being in need of constant support to manage this. One of the questions following this talk asked how these initiatives are still getting funded even in an age of austerity. One response was that emotional wellbeing is a compelling idea, making people reluctant to criticise initiatives aimed at improving the emotional intelligence of children.

We then moved from therapy to mindfulness. Rachel Lilly has recently completed an MPhil in Geography at Aberystwyth University. She also works as a consultant, lecturer, facilitator and coach of mindfulness. She was made aware of behaviour change in her work with the Welsh Government and currently applies it through the [Ymlaen Ceredigion](#) organisation in their work on sustainability in the community. Her talk on the application of mindfulness and its use in making people think about and change their behaviour in relation to climate change provided a more applied approach, giving us the opportunity to see how this was being used in everyday life. First, Lilly examined how mindfulness became established in western spheres of thought through the work of [John Kabat-Zinn](#) and his re-packaging of the traditional eastern Buddhist approach to mindfulness as Mindfulness Based Stress Therapy (MBST). Still, mindfulness holds onto many of the key aspects of its approach and in particular the need to pay attention, and an increasing sensitivity both externally and internally through curiosity, inquiry, investigation, openness and compassion. The work by Jonathan Rowson and Jamie Young of the [RSA's Social Brain Project](#) has also examined how behaviour change through mindfulness techniques can be used to make taxi drivers drive

more fuel efficiently. In her research Lilly interviewed regular mindfulness practitioners and taught mindfulness to people who hadn't done it before. She found that through mindfulness people reported greater empathy and passion to help others, the people practicing mindfulness felt more interconnected and had more incentive to act for the good of other people. She argued that mindfulness training provides a skill which supports groups change and has the potential to be used with great affect in improving individual well-being and wider social issues.

Following this, Dr. [Megan Clinch](#) from the Open University talked about her experience working with a GP on complex health interventions to help GPs make more informed choices. She found that instead of helping them design new and more effective interventions the situation was tangled in complexity leading her to assert that complex interventions are not complicated enough. She questioned the use of Randomised Controlled Trials (RCT) in the context of design and evaluation of interventions claiming that these endeavours limited accounts of what they are trying to capture. In the case of the research she was doing she found that the existing methods did not account for relationships or the spaces in which decisions were made. As such, she argued that social scientists need to develop an alternative approach to impact and in particular a set of evidentiary standards that can communicate the value of producing knowledge that is both modest and valuable.

In the final presentation of the day Prof. [Martyn Hammersley](#) from the Open University examined the '[Test, Learn Adapt](#)' document produced by BIT in 2012. The document advocates the use of RCTs in the selection and development of government policies. In the report BIT claims that 'RCTs are the best way of determining whether a policy is working' and champions their use as a routine test of policy efficacy. Hammersley challenged this assumption from two standpoints. First, that it is problematic to rely only on evidence in policy making, there also needs to be an element of phronesis or wise judgement. Building on this he argued that research is not the only source of relevant evidence but we should also take into account the views and experiences of practitioners. Second, he challenged the rigour of RCTs in research which falls outside specific and standardised treatments. For example, there are problems of external influences and background factors. Moreover, trialling initiatives for example in counselling or education are not strictly comparable to trialling a new drug. Because the outcomes of these types of policy initiatives are likely to vary, it is more difficult to determine if the outcomes are due to the characteristics of the participants or the initiative itself. There were also questions raised about whether the BIT really can be considered as value neutral.

In the concluding part of the conference Jessica Pykett raised some key issues from the day's proceedings. First, she asked how bio-social methods make the conditions possible for government of the psyche. Second, she questioned whether we might base our political

critiques around the science behind nudging and behaviour change on the basis of its 'sketchy' nature, or whether we might want to problematize the idea that the scientific method should be grounds for shaping policy at all. Finally, what methodologies do we have as social scientists in our armoury? Should we pay attention 'close to the bench' of scientific practice and knowledge production, should we examine 'the chalkface' of everyday practice, or should we attend to 'the journey' – the mediation and contagion of scientific facts, concepts and phenomena and their translation into policy and practice? On my train home

### **Bio:**

**Dr. Bryony Enright is a Research Assistant at the University of Birmingham. She is currently working on a research project with Dr. Jessica Pykett on the influence of 'Brain Culture' in society. Her particular focus is on the use of positive psychology in the workplace. Bryony graduated with a PhD in Human Geography from the University of Birmingham earlier this year. Her doctoral research examined the impact of recruitment agencies on temporary work and local labour market functioning. She has strong research interests in labour geography, employment, precarious and temporary work and workplace psychology.**

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