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From Chicken Sheds to Random Control Trials: A Commentary on the “Bio-Social Methods for a Vitalist Social Science” Workshop

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By Bryony Enright



The “Bio-Social Methods for a Vitalist Social Science” Workshop – held at the University of Birmingham on July 16, 2013 - 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 mechanisms in the realm of ‘behaviour change’, new target audiences, new training schemes for civil servants, and new research funding priorities. Hosted by the Institute of Advanced Studies and the School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Science, and chaired by a human geographer ([Jessica Pykett](#)) and a political sociologist ([Will Leggett](#)), the workshop was 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”, referring to the profit-making orientation of advancements in bio-technology and the life sciences. Participants debated how far recent theoretical and methodological developments within the social sciences might provide grounds from which social scientists can fully address contemporary bio-social, bio-political, and bio-ethical problems. Specifically, how the various ‘turns’ towards affect, embodiment and materialities may be approached or examined by methodological developments from sociologies of scientific knowledge, science, technology and society studies, medical sociologies and critical neuroscience.. We also explored the 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. The following commentary provides a summary of speakers’ contributions.

[John Cromby](#) (from the School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences at Loughborough University) started the presentations by addressing the problems associated with the [recent initiative](#) by the Coalition Government’s [Behavioural Insights Team](#) (BIT or Nudge Unit).to compel UK benefit claimants to undergo psychometric personality testing. His talk centred on a paper forthcoming by Cromby and Willis in *Critical Social Policy* (‘Nudging into Subjectification: Governmentality and Psychometrics’). Using the example of the Job Centres personality test he outlined the potential problems with using behavioural economics and psychological research methods as a means of nudging people towards acceptance of the precepts of neoliberal subjectivity. Designed by the [VIA Institute on Character](#), the test uses a taxonomy of 24 character strengths and 6 virtues including wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence (a full explanation of these is available [here](#)). This list was produced by leading positive psychologists Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson and was designed to identify what is best about human beings and how we can use those ‘best’ characteristics to build our best lives. This classification of strengths and virtues is described as the scientific backbone of positive psychology (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, referring to the policy focus on wellbeing and mental health, which has been spearheaded by Lord Richard Layard, e.g. the [Action for Happiness](#) initiative.



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.

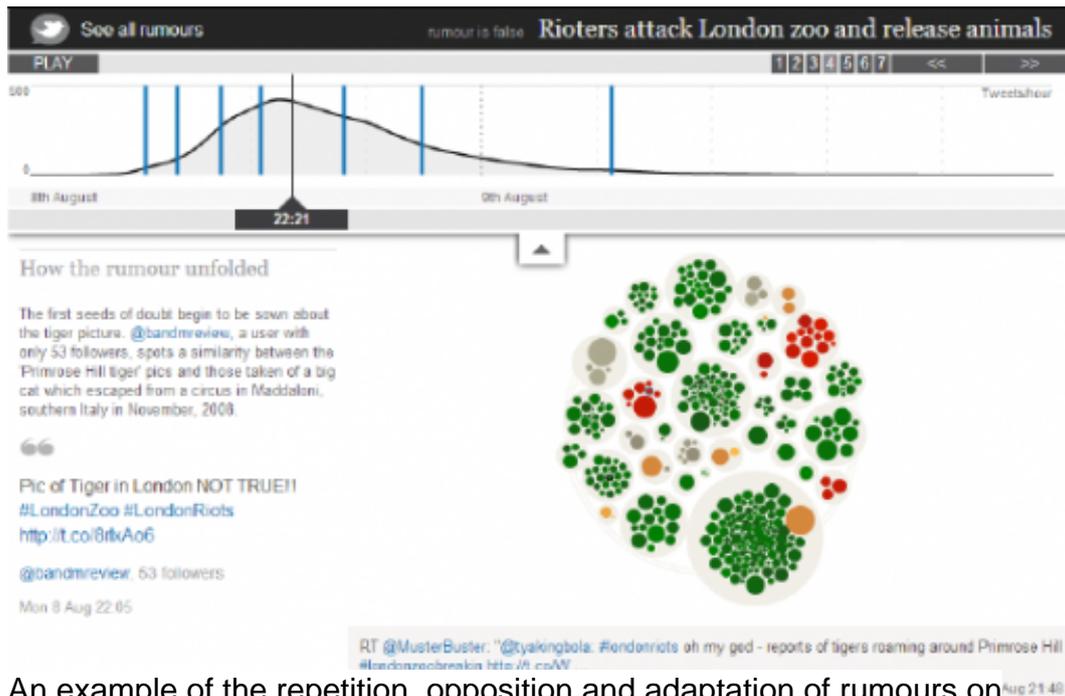
Fill in your email address below to have your strengths emailed to you. You may want to discuss these with your advisor at your next meeting.

An Example of the Signature Strengths on the VIA test

The issues associated with psychometric personality testing 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 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 the reoccurrence of 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 the 1.5 million people that claim Jobseekers Allowance need to be influenced for this initiative to have a far reaching effect.

Following this, [Stephen Hinchliffe](#) (University of Exeter) provided a fascinating talk on contagion as a means to open up conceptual and methodological debates on bio-social science. 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'. 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', or catastrophic pandemic events. 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. 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; they are impacted by intensified farming, political imperatives to keep food costs down and the downward pressure on production costs by powerful supermarkets as a result.



An example of the repetition, opposition and adaptation of rumours on ^{Aug 21 48} Twitter

Hinchliffe proceeded to discuss the joint LSE-Guardian study: [Reading the Riots](#) a data-driven study to produce evidence-based social research that would help explain why the rioting spread across England. Using some striking images mapping 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. 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 by analysing where ideas began, amongst which groups they developed and gained intensity and how they began to change or get diluted. To demonstrate this point Arguing that rumours, ideas, and desires spread through a process of repetition, opposition, and adaptation, Hinchliffe referenced the Horse Meat Scandal, in which beef products being sold in UK supermarkets were adulterated with horse meet He went on to note that contagion is more than contact—it is also about intensity and atmosphere. To understand this, argues Hinchliffe, we require a methodology which re-invests in theoretically informed quantification and begins to measure atmospheres rather than territories.

[Felicity Callard](#) – Senior Lecturer for Medical Humanities at Durham University – and [Des Fitzgerald](#) – a postdoctoral researcher in the Interacting Minds Centre at Aarhus University – presented their ongoing work on '[experimental entanglements](#)', which has investigated the methodological, conceptual, and empirical approach of interdisciplinary

research, in particular between the social sciences, neuroscience and the humanities. Their presentation addressed 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 the social sciences, neuroscience and the humanities to answer probing questions such as “if thinking is dialogic, who’s doing the talking?” and ‘will the methods of neuroscience ever be adequate to the interaction of minds?’ – the aim being to question the warm glow of interdisciplinary exchange and instead elaborate the 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 Benjamin Libet’s now infamous (in Human Geography at least) half-second delay before cognition. Callard and Fitzgerald argued that the articulation of the interdisciplinary domain depends not on developing more convincing theoretical accounts but in a much deeper entanglement of those accounts with emerging spaces of biological experimentation and demonstration.

In the discussion that followed, one participant questioned the push both by research councils and funding organisations towards interdisciplinary research and the subsequent characterisation of ‘the lone academic’ as a strange individual that should be brought into something wider. An additional caveat suggested by Callard and Fitzgerald’s was that in bio-social exchange we should not presuppose that the social sciences understand the social and the neurosciences understand the biological.

Fuelled by a lunch of chicken kebabs 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, referring to the idea that popular culture has become saturated with the vocabulary and mindset of emotional vulnerability and therapy. According to Ecclestone, this therapeutic culture 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 a ‘nanny’ or ‘nudger’ overlooks the powerful intertwining of therapeutic ideas, assumptions, and practices which have informed interventions throughout society—and mainstream education in particular. So strong is this therapeutic culture that Ecclestone termed it ‘a new therapeutic turn in education,’ influencing teachers and pupils alike. She described how therapeutic practices in schools have been underpinned by an image of the human subject – derived in part from the ‘behaviour change agenda’ predominant in UK public policy making – as a Homer Simpson type

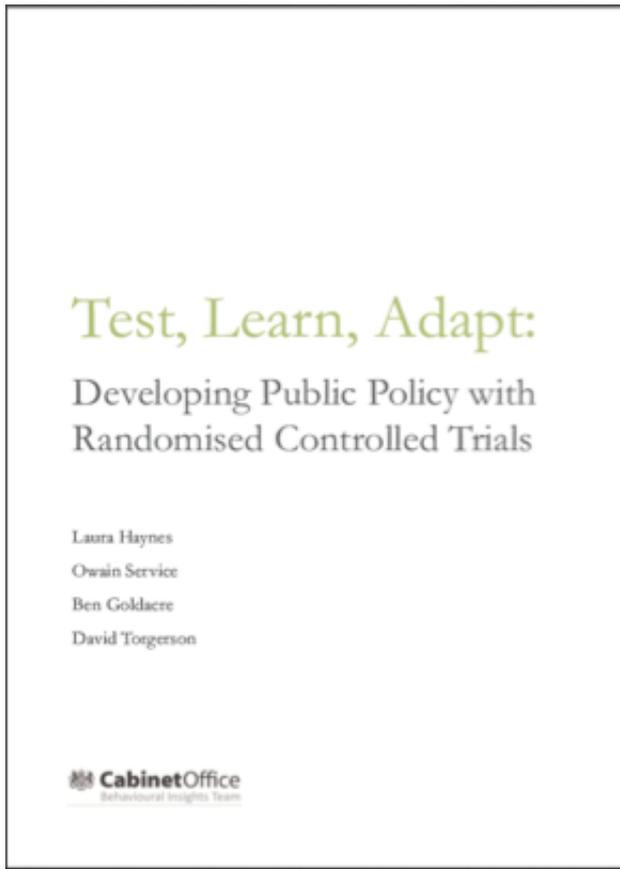
character. Within education, the figure of psychologically vulnerable subjects is even stronger, with increasing numbers of interventions being used to help pupils, parents, and teachers overcome the hurdles of education. For example, under the labour government we saw an increasing number of interventions 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 crisis of ill health and psycho-emotional vulnerability amongst the UK population, and the second was a perceived crisis of disaffection and disengagement among children and students within the education system which results from the routine use of labels such as 'vulnerable learners' or students with 'fragile identities'. 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. According to Ecclestone, we are seeing a widening spectrum of vulnerability amongst students, with a larger proportion of students appealing to issues of emotional vulnerability such as extenuating circumstances, i.e. emotional circumstances or personal matters which prevent students completing work. 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. Following the talk, one participant inquired 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.

Moving from therapy to mindfulness, Rachel Lilley, who has recently completed an MPhil in Geography at Aberystwyth University, gave a talk on the application of mindfulness and its use in making people think about and change their behaviour in relation to climate change. Working as a consultant, lecturer, facilitator, and coach of mindfulness, Lilley 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. As a result, her talk provided a more applied approach, giving participants the opportunity to see how this was being used in everyday life. First, Lilley examined how mindfulness became established in western 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). However, mindfulness holds onto many of the key aspects of its original approach, emphasizing the need to pay attention, and promoting an increased sensitivity both externally and internally through curiosity, inquiry, investigation, openness and compassion. In her research, Lilley

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. In addition, the people practicing mindfulness felt more interconnected and had more incentive to act for the good of other people. Drawing upon the results of this research, she argued that mindfulness training provides skills which support groups change and has the potential to be used with great effect in improving individual well-being and addressing wider social issues.

Following this, [Megan Clinch](#) (Open University) talked about her research on complex health interventions and the challenge of accounting the 'complex' web of biological and social variables that surround particular health issues. She noted in her presentation the increased integration of social science research into complex health interventions, but challenges the field, arguing that the over reliance on Randomised Controlled Trials (RCT) is not accounting for 'enough complexity'. For Clinch, RCTs encourage understandings of complex health issues as 'stable'. Clinch's argument is for a more fluid understanding of how different variables interact and affect health. Clinch's suggestion, based on the in-depth qualitative research she conducted within a GP's practice, is that social scientific research has an important role to play in providing health professionals with a more informed choice about how to develop complex health interventions which better account for the context in which different patients live out their health issues. Clinch, in championing the importance of social science within health care, is attempting to renew understandings of complexity and to challenge notions of complexity as an 'ever expanding number of variables or array of statistical tests'. Instead, as Clinch's research has begun to demonstrate, there is the need for approaches which capture the specific dynamics of complexity in health and illness, in this way more emphasis is put on the particular meaning that different elements from the biological to social as they emerge and change within particular contexts (see also Clinch's research paper, Cohn *et al.* 2013).



In the final presentation of the day, [Martyn Hammersley](#) (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 champions RCTs use as a routine test of policy efficacy, claiming that “RCTs are the best way of determining whether a policy is working.” Hammersley challenged this assumption from two standpoints. First, it is problematic to rely only on evidence in policy-making, there also needs to be an element of “phronesis,” or practical wisdom. According to Hammersley, research is not the only source of relevant evidence—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 which can affect the outcome and threaten the assumed integrity of the results. Moreover, trialling initiatives 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 create the conditions for government of the psyche. Second, she

questioned whether we might base our political critiques around the science behind nudging and behaviour change on 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, she questioned the methodologies we have as social scientists in our armoury. Should we remain '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?

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