

Evaluation of the ESRC Identities and Social Action Programme

By Professor James Côté, University of Western Ontario

Executive summary

Dr. James Côté, a Professor of Sociology at the University of Western Ontario, Canada, carried out the evaluation of the Identities and Social Action (ISA) Programme. The evaluation was conducted in part on the basis of material provided to the consultant by the ESRC and the Programme Director documenting programme development, oversight, and dissemination activities. In addition, specifically designed questionnaires were sent by the consultant to principal Award Holders and Advisory Committee members as well as members of the national and international academic Identity Studies community and non-academic research users.

The ISA Programme was developed in the early 2000s to gather social scientific evidence concerning intergroup tensions in the UK. The Programme grew out of extensive consultation among the Identity Studies community in the UK, leading to the development of an extensive Brief calling for a number of topics to be addressed that would answer questions of academic and practical interest as well as fill gaps in the identity literature. The Programme Director, Prof. Margaret Wetherell, was appointed in 2003 and the Programme ran through 2008.

A large number of outline proposals ($n = 336$) were submitted in response to a Call, and the Commissioning Panel short-listed 58 of these outlines, inviting full proposals, from which 25 were selected for funding. The Programme produced an extensive research output and dissemination of findings. Numerous live events were held (workshops among Award Holders, public conferences, and site visits of Award Holders by the Programme Director). Upon completion, all 25 projects were judged by the ESRC Board to be either Good or Outstanding, based End of Award Rapporteur Reports.

The evaluation carried out by the consultant found that the majority of those interviewed in person and surveyed by questionnaire held very positive views of the Programme and the work of the Programme Director in managing it. The Programme Director effectively dealt with problems as they arose, many of which are typical in these types of large Programmes, with the assistance of personnel from the ESRC assigned to support and advise her. Indeed, the Programme Director appears to have been exemplary in resolving these problems, and was widely acclaimed for her management skills and leadership skills.

The evaluation focused on several specific areas: academic and scientific quality of the research product, dissemination to end users, impact on academic and non-academic users,

added value of the Programme organisation to the 25 projects, and the management and leadership skills of the Programme Director.

With respect to academic and scientific quality, based on several sources of evidence, the consultant rated the research output of the twenty five projects as ranging from satisfactory to good, with several noted as outstanding. Some methodological innovations appear to have been made in terms of qualitative approaches to social identity.

Dissemination of research findings was a particularly strong aspect of the Programme, especially at the local level, with a variety of events organised by the Programme Director and her Administrative Officer as well as by the Principal Award Holders of individual projects. Some activities were particularly high profile, such as the launch of the Programme at the Royal Society of Arts in London, hosted by Baroness Amos (then Leader of the House of Lords), during which Lord Anthony Giddens (a world-renowned expert on social identity) spoke to an audience of 210 people, and the meeting at No.10 Downing Street between the Programme Director and Prime Minister Blair during which she briefed him on the relevance of the Programme findings for multicultural policies in the UK.

The impact of the Programme on non-academic users varied across projects, with some individual projects stronger than others individually and in their contribution to the Programme impact. The impact of academic research outside of the academy is notoriously difficult to assess, even among policy makers and practitioners, who were the prime targets here. The Programme was strong in its **attempts** to provide usable information for specific groups, organisations, and branches of the government, but these groups do not consume information like academics (ie, carefully storing sources of information for later retrieval and attribution) and they do not necessarily appreciate how academic information is packaged in its technical jargon and myriad implicit underlying assumptions. It seemed that the more concrete projects that involved end users in their data collection were most successful with practitioners.

With respect to academic impact, the output of this Programme was extensive and several of the projects reported an unusually large number of publications, with one reporting 14 journal articles from this single source of funding. Together, depending on how the count is taken, the 25 projects collectively produced between 17 and 23 books, 137 to 164 journal articles, and 78 to 112 book chapters. The Programme Director herself produced three edited books and one handbook based on the output of these projects, as well as two policy reports.

This impressive research output was in good part due the Programme organisation adding value to the 25 projects through the coordinating efforts of the Programme Director, who lent the Programme an internal integrity during its lifetime. Supported by an Administrative Officer working out of the Programme Office at the Open University, dozens of workshops, meetings, and conferences were organised: 18 workshops among Award Holders, three annual Programme meetings (in 2005, 2006, and 2007), and over 30 events for users (with an additional 13 events organised by individual projects). In addition, the Programme Director conducted 89 site visits of the 25 projects between 2004 and 2008 during which she

reviewed progress, advised on managing problems, and made recommendations for maintaining or improving the research quality.

By virtually all accounts the Programme Director was strong in her management and leadership roles in adding value to the 25 projects, and she evidently engaged in a tireless effort of coordinating activities for, and among, the projects, in an effort to extend the reach of the Programme.

In the consultant's view, the evidence indicates that the ISA Programme was successfully conceived, launched, and carried out.