

# The Impact Agenda and Its Impact on Early Career Researchers

## A Discussion with Marilyn Strathern

### *Samantha Page, in conversation with Marilyn Strathern*

#### Introduction

As part of my 'impact editor' role for *Anthropology in Action* I approached Professor Marilyn Strathern to seek her personal reflections on the impact agenda related to her own experiences working as head of department, at Manchester and Cambridge Universities, as member and then chair of two Research Assessment Exercise panels, her anthropological research in Papua New Guinea and her work on audit culture. I wanted to find out how Professor Strathern's work has been engaged with policy and practice or has influenced it. I also discussed my own PhD research with Professor Strathern, including the challenges of being an early career researcher, as well as seeking advice about the best way to disseminate research findings to inform policy and to have 'impact'.

The backdrop to the discussion was the U.K.'s 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF), which included for the first time assessment of the impact of research beyond academia. The REF defines impact as 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia' (REF 2014: 48). The criteria for assessing impact were 'reach' and 'significance'.

Professor Dame Marilyn Strathern is a social anthropologist. Her wide international acclaim is founded on her extensive field research that began in Papua New Guinea on, among other topics, issues of gender and exchange. In the U.K., she has focused her studies on kinship, reproductive technologies, biomedical ethics, audit culture and on cross-cultural concepts of intellectual property. While her ethnographic focus is divided between the Pacific and the U.K. and Europe, her theoretical interests comprise a body of ideas that challenge a number of the most fun-

damental concepts in popular and analytical discourse: for example, the concepts of individual and society, of the person, and of the social relation, the method of comparison, and the notions of nature and culture, male and female. She was William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge from 1993 to 2008, and Mistress of Girton College, Cambridge from 1998 to 2009.

#### The Discussion

**Samantha:** What is your view on the concept and agenda of 'impact' in academic work?

**Marilyn:** On the face of it, it seems very reasonable insofar as education is funded by the taxpayer. There is always the question of responsibility for the way funding proceeds. We live in a context of justifying means by ends, and one can see how money is a driver of that kind of logic – I think it's [a matter of] being very financially self-conscious in terms of cost-benefit and what drives the budget. If something costs [e.g. the taxpayer] you share the benefit [with them], which of course is a commercial-financial model of spending money. That I understand entirely. The problem is that the benefits of higher education as a whole are very often long term, diffuse and cannot be easily specified or quantified. And in fact the benefits of higher education are very much like the benefits in the arts: look at some of the discussions about interdisciplinarity for example that were going on some years ago, with people trying to show the added value of disciplines coming together, and in that context trying to show the added value of disciplines such as the arts and the creative arts and humanities whose effects are in terms of increasing people's general creative potential or educating people and enabling this



country to have an arts culture and so on and so forth, which all seem very remote and far removed when talking about costs and benefits.

There is a real question of how you measure the qualitative output of institutions and how you measure the qualitative output of higher education. That's all very obvious. Well it's in that context that for years, ever since I was born so to speak, I think anthropologists have always felt that there should be concrete outputs to what they do as well as a general contribution to education. But that for many, many years was a set of aspirations for anthropology. It didn't get translated into institutions the way it has recently.

It was really Thatcher who started the ball rolling in terms of requiring universities to be much more accountable, who began re-making the institutions within which academics work. And anthropology is largely an academic discipline, despite your own very interesting career. The notion of there being specific outcomes, which you can point to, becomes part of the argument. It is about how are you going to fund education. It's the institutions then which become responsible, hence the inspection system that was set up particularly to monitor research.

In that context the early Research Assessment Exercises as they got off the ground in the early 1980s gradually morphed into the system we saw in the last round. Of course it has become a rather different kind of practice, in which there is a very specific notion that you have to demonstrate the impact of what has been done. So you are no longer talking about ways in which anthropology may contribute [generally] to society, sometimes academically or sometimes [otherwise]; you are no longer talking about how anthropologists' findings can be taken up by other people and become useful [in the long term]. You are now talking about the academic of the here and now having to demonstrate how his or her recent work can be shown to have an impact.

Ok so what is impact? And then we get into what I find is a very funny situation. Impact is anything that you can show has an effect on a third party. In other words it's no good anthropologists having impact on other anthropologists. That doesn't count, so improvement of your discipline isn't the issue.

But if you can show – this is why I mentioned the word interdisciplinarity before – if you can show that anthropology has an impact for example in the way geographers have somehow used and taken up an anthropologist's idea I think that would count as impact. But even more definitely what would count as impact is if you can show a direct link to some public body and some policy. And even more if you can show a direct link with some financial spin off such as patents

for scientists or whatever. So impact is a social configuration. In other words it involves players and social actors in particular roles. Thus there is the researcher and the person on whom or the policy [direction] of the work on which impact [can be shown]. But there must be a social distance between them. It's no good me having impact [on colleagues]. In that sense influencing a student isn't impact.

**Samantha:** I suppose I'm finding that you can't really measure your own impact either. So who is measuring the impact? How do you measure impact? And do you have the right to measure your own impact because in a way that's quite subjective isn't it?

**Marilyn:** Absolutely and you could as well argue we've not yet solved the problem of how you demonstrate the effectiveness of research through the notion of impact. In the early days, people recognised that it [such effectiveness] was a rather diffusive, indirect process, because the way in which things happen in society are very often indirect. You can be author of something in one place and it may have an effect somewhere else. You can't trace the connection. There is another issue: the assumption that impact is benign. Our acts have all kinds of consequences. There is no guarantee that we will have a good influence or a bad influence. But that doesn't seem to bother people.

In order to demonstrate an impact you have to produce a paper trail showing the steps by which an idea or results actually landed up changing something. I would say [that last time] quite a lot of people had a problem writing a persuasive narrative. I'm sure everybody was absolutely putting in things that they had very genuinely done, but the narrative bit means that you are always trying to make a story. Well, the other thing is that I think you'll find universities where central departments took over the process, so it was an administrator who took over the process as opposed to an academic.

**Samantha:** I think it's really tough on someone like myself as well who is making the transition to academia. I've submitted an article to a peer-reviewed journal recently, I have a chapter coming out in a book and I have an article published with one of my supervisors. I think there is a real pressure on me especially as an early career researcher to already start getting my work published so then I will be eligible for the next REF in 2020.

**Marilyn:** Well this is where I would say it [the process] is deeply corrupting. I think that these demands actually pervert organic development (if I say organic I mean organic in the sense that the kind of

growth that requires time, requires nutrition, like the growth of a plant or whatever). Not everything can be squeezed into the assessment model. I think it has to lead to short-termism. It doesn't matter if the interval is four years or seven years, you are still talking about relatively short-term results. I was [corrupted in this way] when I was head of department and [later] when I was leading the final RAE submission in my department there.

One has to act in terms of that being on the horizon. It's not necessarily in the best interests either of staff and certainly not people like yourself starting out, or in terms of the discipline's contribution to society in the larger sense. It is corrupting because there is this financial edge to it. Literally money does roll out of it, but that is not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the fact that people see they have to compete for certain benefits and those benefits then come to define what departments think they are about.

That having been said, in the very early days [of the RAE] when I was on to this, [I recall] talking to a group at the School of Oriental and African Studies, giving some spiel about it being corrupt, and someone put their hand up at the back and said 'But as academics you examine us all the time', and that then led me to think about the relationship between the student and the academic, and the things that we do in the university system and the kind of examination that comes through the audit route. They're not quite the same.

The student was absolutely right. We do of course scrutinise and we do of course require students to show that they've learnt – and we do require outputs and you do have to meet deadlines, you have to write your essays and you do need to finish your dissertation. But that is also a discipline in the sense of self-discipline. You're learning how to be productive in the academic mode. Whereas requiring departments to demonstrate their outputs is not necessarily developing a department. You are not growing it or encouraging it, except to have better and better outputs that can be counted. It's different in that way.

**Samantha:** It's like a trend. I wonder how long it will go on for?

**Marilyn:** Well people claim it's over and they are not going to do the same as those early years of the RAE, but there is no sign of it going away.

**Samantha:** How would you read the concept of impact in the work you have done?

**Marilyn:** I will answer that in terms of whether impact is a good thing. I did my first work in Papua New Guinea.

**Samantha:** How did you end up going there? Why Papua New Guinea?

**Marilyn:** Well the department here in Cambridge was full of Africanists and I thought I'd go somewhere else.

**Samantha:** That's funny, like me with my first degree in French Studies. You have to complete a year abroad and everyone wanted to go to France to learn French and then there was this option of Senegal and I was the only one on my course who wanted to go there.

**Marilyn:** Brilliant. That was very clever of you.

**Samantha:** It's good to do things that are not the norm.

**Marilyn:** Well done you. So after the first period of fieldwork and being back here a bit, we – I was married at that point – went out to Canberra and then up to Papua New Guinea. We actually lived in Port Moresby for some years, just pre-independence. Independence was in '75-76. During that time, I did a study of local 'courts' and these were the judicial forums that people themselves set up. When they saw the magistrates' courts that the Australian administration had established, they imitated them. It was a very interesting process. I thought I would do a study of that and of the way in which local people were trying to enact the law that had come with the administration. They were imitating it and thinking they were being modern and lawful. But the administration of course saw these 'courts' as unlawful. They saw them as outside the system, not inside.

Anyway it was an interesting situation to study. And it happened to be about the time when, with independence imminent, the Australians set up a law reform commission to implement proper magistrates' courts at a local level and drew on my study to inform them. So that had a direct effect. My study was fine and I don't apologise for it, but it was very partial. That is, I had taken some things into account but I hadn't taken everything into account. And what I hadn't taken into account was the problem. The people who ran these 'courts' were members of local government councils. They complained that the administration didn't back them. They wanted the colonial officers to recognise them and back them. So when the idea for the law reform commission came along and the administration wanted to set up official magistrates' courts I thought this was exactly what people wanted. They would now have official backing and they would carry on with their work.

What I hadn't realised was that once they had official backing the people who were now recognised by

the administration actually saw this as a source of power and would dish out quite vindictive judgments, high fines, horrible punishments. They turned into quite a different kind of person from the one I had recognised whilst they [the 'courts'] were still informal and really only held because people wanted them to be held. Now they were official, the magistrates had moved into a different arena, and summoned people to their courts, fined them and punished them and did all kinds of things. I had just not foreseen this. My work may have had an influence but how is one to judge it?

**Samantha:** Did you go back to Papua New Guinea to share your findings with the people that worked in the courts?

**Marilyn:** No, I wasn't in a position to.

**Samantha:** Because I would like to go back to Malawi to share my research findings. I think it's really important. What I found was that policies on HIV and sexual cultural practices are being developed to eradicate what are called 'harmful cultural practices' but there is no evidence to support these policy-making decisions. So therefore it is a complete waste of donor money, which should be channelled into more effective programming. So there is a misconception around this link with HIV and a particular sexual cultural practice that I was studying.

What I found was what was really going on was that men used this sexual cultural practice in the name of 'culture' as an excuse to have sex with young girls. But no one wants to talk about that. So they link it with HIV and argue oh we need to change these practices because they are spreading HIV. So for me it is really important for my results to be shared with the Government of Malawi and donors. They should take on board what I have found. So it's trying to find a way to do that. I've just written an article for a Malawian newspaper, which has been published and which criticises the elites and says the elites in Malawi have constructed this narrative for their own gain.

**Marilyn:** That is very interesting and I think if I were doing that kind of work now hopefully I would be in a position to share things directly.

**Samantha:** How would you do that? Would you go back? Would you write articles hoping people in Papua New Guinea would read them? Or would you go to conferences and present your findings?

**Marilyn:** It is difficult because you are dealing with people with all kinds of different interests. You don't know whom you might help. You don't know whom

you might hurt. This is the problem: that actually you have imperfect information. Better than nothing but it's not itself perfect. You have to be quite careful.

In a much later study that I was involved in, which was to do with intellectual property rights and cultural property – we are now talking about the end of the 1990s–2000s – I had a small team of people, and there were some on that team who made a very deliberate policy of sharing their anthropological analysis with local people. In that context I felt we did the best job not coming in as consultants or as bodies who felt they wanted [to give] advice or had collected material but by engaging in critical, informed discussions with one or two scholars from the national university who themselves would make the political choices about what to do with that information. So we didn't set ourselves up as some kind of advisory research entity that could advise on policy. We tried to engage with local people. There was a local lawyer who was on our team and there was also a [Papua New Guinean] anthropologist who was very interested in these issues, and we felt the best thing we could do was to give them some conceptual tools, some ideas, some terms through which they could think through the issues, but it was for them, not us, to make the connection with policy. It's just another way of doing it.

**Samantha:** So for example some of the people that I interviewed whilst in Malawi were civil servants, MPs, heads of bilateral agencies and Malawian academics.

**Marilyn:** Yes they would also be the kinds of people to discuss with. And then they can take it or leave it. You are not forcing them to your viewpoint. But the interesting thing about that is it would leave no paper trail. In other words, it would never look like impact. It would be quite a nice example to work up as evidence of where actually you have had a real effect in the real world but simply does not fit the [assessment] criteria.

**Samantha:** Have you written a paper on this?

**Marilyn:** Yes we published a book of essays in 2004 (*Transactions and Creations*). Of course we didn't spell out what we had done. That would have been very patronising. But what I am telling you is that it [the research] did have an effect and it did reverberate through the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) who set up a model law. A model law entails getting together countries who might have an interest in a particular kind of legislation, in this case in cultural property, and drawing up ideal legislation that countries can adopt or not adopt. It's not anybody's

particular law but it's there as a model for whoever wants to create their own legislation.

So WIPO created this model law for cultural property and that is where certainly these two colleagues I have mentioned, where the lawyer and the anthropologist had impact. So I could trace connections through people – but I'm not going to make that claim. It is what they did. It was their creativity and their efforts. So there is a kind of effacement that goes on in a way, which is totally counter to everything that impact is about, where you are supposed to paint in letters twelve feet high what you have done. And I'm sure these two people I am referring to would have long forgotten that particular link too. It became work that they did and that's how it should be. No more than you would expect students to be eternally grateful for your words of wisdom. They run off with them and turn them into things you would never dream of.

**Samantha:** Given your work on audit culture do you think it is helpful for academics to be monitored in this way?

**Marilyn:** Well I think it would be very interesting for someone to do a study of different kinds of monitoring. As I said when I referred to this question about academics ('we're examined and monitored by you all the time, why are you complaining about audit?'). I think those kinds of examinations have a very different job to do from auditing. So answering the question what is helpful and not helpful really does depend on the kind of measuring that's going on. And if we were to restrict ourselves to higher education and the RAE and the REF, I've already said they have real other consequences that are not good. There is something else that happens in the British style of auditing where the unit of accountability is the department or faculty.

One way in which it [the exercise] is made effective is that everybody is seen to be striving towards contributing to the department. It also means a department can't carry dead wood as far as research is concerned. Now the notion that all institutions have piles of dead wood in the corner and that cleaning out the dead wood is a good thing – it's an urban myth. First of all any institution ought to have corners where mavericks live because there are times when you need mavericks. There are times when you need people who can think round corners. And you don't know when they are going to be useful and maybe your own maverick will never do that but the maverick next door will. So there needs to be a little bit of tolerance and leeway for things that do not look productive on the surface.

The second thing is there is another kind of 'dead wood' and that is the person who throws heart and

soul into looking after students, taking care of things, taking care of the admin staff, maybe also devoted to teaching, is doing a huge amount for the life of the department, but of course is not going to get any credit or marks for research. None of this is straightforward; it is all ambiguous. One is glad that research is recognised as a vital part of academic departments because that really does distinguish university life from other kinds of training. But departments are both research entities and teaching entities, and although there are pure research institutions the health of teaching comes from that combination of teaching and research and the health of research comes from that combination of teaching and research, and to value one more than the other is problematic.

**Samantha:** It goes back to the point you are making about ethics. How do other people feel in the department who aren't contributing to the research agenda or the impact agenda?

**Marilyn:** It's solved administratively because departments don't have to put everybody in. They put in their research active staff. But the consequences slur on those that aren't researchers, so you create two kinds of staff member. One's positive and one's negative.

**Samantha:** How do you feel the academic and research culture has changed?

**Marilyn:** There has been greater professionalisation of all kinds of activities. You wouldn't recognise the old department where there was no word processing and where you had typists who typed up people's work, and so on. And in that context the overview that senior staff would have was of just a completely different tenor. Things have become highly professionalised in the way that courses have become highly professionalised, so that you have to complete proper research training before you can go off and do your research. In that context there are numerous points at which people's work has to be scrutinised. So it's no longer the case of waiting for a book to come out, when it would gradually find its market, get reviews and some years later you would know if it's important or not. These days it's entered into the REF and has to be given a star or a number.

But there are numerous points at which people are scrutinised. So for example [there are] various stages which students have to go through in anthropology before they can go to the field, and once they are in the field or out of the field they become much more scrutinised – there are many more reports to make, paper trails to make and so forth. That is all then wrapped under the rubric of good governance. And

good governance of course is infinitely expandable, as for example in the allocation of different tasks amongst staff members, how that is done and the point system by which you allocate these tasks. Instead of roughly saying you do X and you'll do Y, it's how many points do I get for doing X and how many points do I get for doing Y?

The result is a whole proliferation of [activities because of] the need to show what you are doing, and needing to show what are you doing simply means less time and less thought to do what you are actually doing. Teachers overburden students with [requesting] comments on the courses they have taken – not 'go away and think about it and learn and read something else', but 'please tell us how well we've done', like a student appraisal for every course that they take.

## Acknowledgement

With thanks to Professor Strathern for giving up her time. However she has asked me to add that this is a record of a conversation; now she is no longer an active (liable, responsible) member of an academic institution she would not herself publish critical views of audit and impact in the abstract. They are best coming from the inside, and in the context of concrete issues.

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