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Sociology research in contemporary South Africa

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Research, with a capital 'R', is a subject of considerable concern within South African ruling circles. There's not enough of it, and it's not the right kind, or so the argument runs. Recognising the importance of the material conditions of the researchers and the need for a bottom-up approach to developing research priorities, this paper focuses on the state of sociology research in South Africa today. It demonstrates that, over the past twelve years, a marked increase in the output of masters and doctoral graduates has been accompanied by a decline in the level of completed research by qualified sociologists. In terms of publications, there has been a significant increase in the proportion produced by women, but a negligible change in the number by black scholars. The paper rejects pessimistic assessments of the state of South African sociology. It concludes by arguing that the discipline should place itself at the centre of an integrated and engaged social science by drawing diverse strands together at a local level.

Keywords: Sociology, research, South Africa, SASA, NEXUS.

Research is currently the subject of, to use the fashionable term, a 'conversation'. For the most part, this involves senior policy chiefs talking to each other about what we researcher natives should be doing. This paper is an 'excuse me'. Sorry to butt in, but please could we, from sociology, say something too? So far, the talking has been very general; sometimes it is about the social sciences, but very largely it concerns Research, capital 'R', a construction that provides an overwhelming emphasis on science, engineering and technology (SET) (e.g. Government 2002). This paper reflects on the extent to which South African sociology fits the bigger picture, firstly through an assessment of the discipline's trajectory since the end of apartheid, and then, more specifically, through the presentation of some data about research output. This paves the way to suggestions about how we might respond to the dialogue; both what we might say to the chiefs and what we might want to talk about in whispered exchanges among ourselves.

To date, the debate has been about two issues: quantity and quality. The first of these has been the subject of an insightful commentary by Adam Habib and Sean Morrow (2006). They begin: 'Academic, scholarly, and applied social science is in crisis'. They refer to figures for the proportion of Gross Domestic Product that goes to research and development (R&D). For South Africa, the latest figures, those for 2004, put this at 0.87 per cent, compared to 1.44 per cent in China and 2.68 per cent in the United States (Kahn 2006). Apparently, the country's share of global research output has declined from 0.8 per