Adversarial Collaboration: Snake Oil or Cure-all?

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All sciences, and especially the social and behavioural sciences, have had to deal with serious crises, criticisms, and calamities in recent decades. Far too many research results do not replicate; far too often do social and behavioural scientists fail to predict events of massive reach; far too many ‘evidence-based’ policies have failed to bring about the desirable changes taxpayers were promised; and far too many disciplines within the social and behavioural sciences have been charged with ideological bias, which comes, or so argue the critics, at the expense of scientific standards.

Adversarial collaboration (AdColl) is a relatively new research strategy that is hoped to help with a range of methodological problems the social and behavioural sciences face and restore trust in the field. Proponents of AdColl predict that the practice will lead to numerous desirable outcomes, among which to increase accountability and minimise bias among scholars, lead to more moderate, nuanced, and therefore more likely true claims, promote tolerance of genuine academic freedom and weed out scholarship with an agenda (Clark and Tetlock 2022).

The goal of this paper is to take a philosophical look at AdColl in the context of the social and behavioural sciences, to evaluate the strong claims that have been made in its support, and, more constructively, to develop practical roles for philosophers of social science as potential participants in AdColls. One major conclusion is that AdColl seems to work best when research opponents share many (theoretical, methodological, and normative) background assumptions so they can agree on experimental strategies. In Kuhnian terms, AdColls are a powerful tool for the progress of normal science within a single paradigm but less useful for deciding between paradigms. Thus, in cases where value judgements have wide ranging implications for how social phenomena are conceptualised, measured, and accepted as genuine, AdColls are unlikely to provide much support. I use the Cambridge Capital Controversy to illustrate this point. However, AdColl is a highly commendable research practice in many areas fields within the social sciences and should receive the attention they deserve, both from social and behavioural scientists themselves as well as philosophers of science.