



Boundary work in collaborative inquiry: Framing the contributions

Methodological Innovations

1–10

© The Author(s) 2022

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/20597991221129783

journals.sagepub.com/home/mio



Tim May

Abstract

This article situates the contributions to this special issue. It does so by examining the process of methodological justification and the relations between the content of knowledge and the context of production. Boundary work concerning these dynamics, along with issues applicability and credibility, along with the university as a core site of social research practice, are discussed. Once engagement with communities comes into the process of co-production, there is an ambivalence both among academics and universities concerning the place of such work. This leads to a set of devilish dichotomies in research practice that requires intensive boundary work in a process characterized as active intermediation between varying expectations. Framing the contributions in this way enables an enlargement of the scope of research with different communities in terms of boundaries of practice, whilst also questioning the selectivity that informs the impact and engagement agendas in universities.

Keywords

Universities, boundaries, reflexivity, co-production, active intermediation

Introduction

The scientific status of a discipline, or field of activity informed by several disciplines, is justified by the rigorous application of methods, whose interpretation is based upon theoretical canons recognised among a defined community of practitioners. Disciplines are demarcated and bounded activities. With this in place, methodological reflection then tends to focus on matters of technical refinement, the basis of legitimate comparison and issues of efficacy.

Judged against this formulation, the status of disciplines come under critical scrutiny and the field of social research is no exception. After all, to bound their practices in the above way rests upon the following assumptions: science and society are separate realms of activity; social values and scientific endeavours are distinct realms of consideration, with judgements concerning science being objective whilst matters of value are subjective and clear boundaries exist between the production and reception of knowledge, and between defined communities of practitioners and those whom they study. Such demarcations rest upon an epistemology that justifies a simple separation between scientific and non-scientific knowledge – a distinction that has been subject to critical evaluation (Putnam, 2017).

Faced with the overwhelming complexity of the world, our desires and the particularities of our own experiences, measured against these tenets of what constitutes science, have resulted in methodological innovations over the course of the history of social research. However, resulting tensions seem inevitable. These have been managed through the adoption of an empirical attitude whereby our practices adhere to clear rules and procedures. Subjectivism, with its components of Will and desire, is thereby assumed to be tempered. We can see this move in the works of those such as Schopenhauer (see Janaway, 1989). Yet there is a high price to pay for such moves and they may even undermine scientific endeavours that seek to illuminate social problems.

The ideal of scientific representation, justified by a particular epistemological viewpoint, becomes the passive observation of phenomena and processes without pre-conceived views, leaving intervention and active experimentation to one side. The ideal of the bold scientific inquisitor,

Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

Corresponding author:

Tim May, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3AT, UK.

Email: mayt1@cardiff.ac.uk



asking questions and revealing issues that prefer to remain in the shadows, becomes the passive observer: ‘The scientist *qua* experimenter reasons and conjectures; the scientist *qua* observer must forget all reasoning and only register’ (Daston and Galison, 2010 [2007]: 243. Original italics). Such accommodation, assuming fact and value to be distinct domains, comes at a cost: between the passive scientific gaze and the active post-Kantian self for whom ideas should be explored and interrogated in a confrontation with the world itself. We end up with: ‘opposition between allegedly passive observation and active experimentation and a split within the scientist’s own self’ (Daston and Galison, 2010 [2007]: 242).

These splits may be overcome through the slavish application of method to the topic of investigation. That represents a domain of the application of rationality that removes those extraneous factors that undermine the scientific method. Yet the application of method brings into being ways of seeing the world, whilst subjectivity is not about being prone to error, but ‘an essential aspect of the human condition, including the pursuit of knowledge’ (Daston and Galison, 2010 [2007]: 210). However, whilst a methodological dance is conducted between subjectivity and objectivity in social research (Letherby et al., 2013), it is further complicated by changes over time. We have seen how representation increasingly runs alongside presentation and with that, the opportunities for manipulation may increase. The fixed boundaries of an unchanging epistemology then further blur in the interactions between, for example, biotechnology and economic development (Cooper, 2008) and the promise and politics of urban growth aspirations, the place of the university in society and the generation and application of distinctive forms of knowledge (May, 2018).

Issues concerning distance and proximity and justification and engagement, along with the contexts in which research work takes place and with whom, provide the basis for this special issue. These are first explored through a consideration of boundaries, their contention and categorisation and second, through the devilish dichotomies that shape the relations between research, universities and external engagements. The articles comprising the special issue are then introduced and their collective contributions summarised.

Boundaries: Contention and categorisation

Whilst the relations between subjectivity and objectivity are important issues, scientific practices have moved the boundaries of investigations into the realms of the human body and environment and mind. Science and society have become increasingly entangled. Innovations in method provide new depictions of phenomena and with that, more possibilities not just for illumination, but intervention. Take, for instance, the role of images. We can no longer view them as lenses through which to grasp the essence of nature because we

have moved from representation to presentation in a combination of ‘tool-kit and art’: ‘Nanofabricators use them as aesthetic objects, as marketing tags, all the while reaching through them to create and manipulate a brave new world of atom-sized objects. The scientific image begins to shed its representational aspect altogether as it takes on the power to build’ (Daston and Galison, 2010 [2007]: 415).

As the spheres of scientific knowledge, the economics of growth and political aspirations blur, tensions increasingly arise in the application of rationality to method to yield control over phenomena for the purpose of measurement. The apparently exogenous terrain of ‘value’ enlarges as people become both the object and subject of investigation and even manipulation. The resulting possibilities are not lost on the economy, as ‘affect’ comes to play a greater role in the reproduction of ‘information’, as well as consumption in general (Arvidsson, 2012). Resultant increases in spheres of ambiguous meaning can lead to conflict in the self of the scientist as both observer and participant. This runs alongside the continual promise of scientific and technological intervention to improve future states as if they were divorced from social influences and the notion that we have now entered an era of post-truth (see Fuller, 2018).

The potential varies from prolonging lives to reaching states of perfection and thereby expanding the idea of what it is to be human. From the passive gaze of the scientific self who seeks knowledge in representations of the real, we move into a terrain where considerations concerning whether people are the means or ends of such work, routinely arise. It was such developments that led the physician and philosopher Canguilhem (2008 [1965]) to observe: ‘human biology does not contain within itself the answer to questions concerning its nature and meaning’ (p. 21). Supposed one-way relations between scientific and lay knowledge become replaced by interactions between the content of knowledge, the contexts of reception and the consequences for how we might live; all of which inform how we practice social research (May and Perry, 2022).

Within the field of social research, the desire to discover an epistemological theory which guarantees ideals has been placed to one side in favour of reconstruction at the level of ontological justification (see May and Williams, 1998). The absence of an epistemological under-labourer is regarded as a ‘minor loss’ (Longino, 1990: 232). Indeed, new ways of knowing have emerged in science in general, with attention being turned to the consequences of an absence of moral concern, as well as allowing issues of choice and context to become of importance in scientific understandings (Bernstein, 1987). These moves open-up factors for consideration that were once presumed to lay beyond methodological boundaries. The content of knowledge then lies in varying degrees of association with the context in which it is produced (May with Perry, 2011).

Despite these methodological transformations, it is often the case that social research practitioners refer, in their

methodological reflections, to a separation from the field of investigation to justify their findings. After all, an epistemological theory relying upon the idea of discrete areas of activity does enable forms of rationality to be exercised through invoking a separation between the context of discovery and the content of justification. Yet studies of scientific practice go beyond these forms of representation which has led some to refer not to disciplines as a basis for understanding, but ‘epistemic cultures’, as this term magnifies: ‘the space of knowledge-in-action, rather than simply observe disciplines or specialties as organizing structures’ (Knorr-Cetina, 1999: 3).

A focus on the ‘organising structures’ of sciences has the potential to uncover the construction of models of reality which can easily become confused with reality itself. Therefore, a reflexive vigilance is required between constituting reality in the name of models and an awareness of limitations which are built into the assumptions of practice. Equally, however, a focus upon epistemic cultures can collapse justification into the context of discovery. The path to relativism is then open, leaving those critical of such moves to view analysis of these contexts as: ‘relevant, if at all, only insofar as they offer some useful yet strictly second-order insight into why — for what psycho-sociologically assignable reasons — scientists may have been motivated to pursue one rather than another line of research or investigative *modus operandi*’ (Norris, 2014: 5. Original italics).

Before we take an analysis of the context of scientific production to saturate the content of the knowledge produced, and scientific cultures are deconstructed to the point of complete permeability with politics and the economy, the boundaries these practices inform enable an understanding of the shifting terrains between science and nature and society. Epistemic boundaries not only orientate practitioners but provide for how the world can be viewed as an object of investigation and its insights justified. As boundaries shift, so do these relations and that informs what has been termed degrees of ‘epistemic permeability’ over time (May with Perry, 2011). For the relations between science and society to be sufficiently different to enable one to become an object of investigation for the other, a relative stability in the boundaries of knowledge production is required.

In situations where the domain of inquiry is informed by both different disciplines and epistemic cultures, boundary work results. Within the field of social research this can be manifest through publication in journals whose distinction lies in defined topics of inquiry. Methodological discussions are another matter. These can be not only contested by those who question their applicability to their substantive area, but also by those from other affiliations, such as those within communities outside of academia. Nevertheless, before stretching the point regarding an indefensible epistemology that is bounded within disciplines too far by invoking simple separations between contexts of research and scientific justifications, it should be recalled that one reason Popper (1968

[1959]) introduced falsification was as a guard against science making simple pronouncements over reality.

For the attainment of objectivity, it must be justifiable in a manner that is independent of one individual, leading to an inter-subjective understanding within a culture of testability as a pre-condition of attaining scientific status (Popper, 1968 [1959]). Indeed, many years before these formulations, Peirce introduced modesty at a transcendental level without succumbing to the empiricism that saturates later pragmatist formulations, right through to Rorty (see Mounce, 1997). He did this by adhering to the validity of the process of inference in the longer term, thereby drawing parallels with Popper’s epistemology (see Apel, 1995 [1967]). For the purposes of this discussion and special edition, once we turn to problem-solving reformism, a major impetus for co-production, parallels become evident between Popper and Rorty. Rorty’s concern for social reform ran alongside a wish to transcend philosophy which meant he jettisoned justification. However, that could have been replaced with the idea of ‘criticism’ which is ‘congruent with Popper’s problem-solving epistemology’ (Cruikshank, 2017: 25).

Whilst issues arise in jettisoning justification and moving towards criticism, we might observe that vibrancy and progress also derive from those who are not only critical, but also not content to remain within pre-given boundaries. Their practices and reflections question procedures and conventions and in so doing, form new practices and ways of seeing the world. The result may not be a ‘paradigm shift’ (Kuhn, 1970) as tensions are manifest in different strategies within the field of endeavour. Overall, what is at stake is the conservation or subversion of its structure and with that, its boundaries. Those who are inclined towards conversation are engaged in orthodoxy, whilst newcomers may be subversive and engage in strategies of heresy.

The field itself, in terms of both forces and struggles (Bourdieu, 2020 [2015]), provides positions from which engagement takes place and in social research we find varying ways of justifying the advantages and disadvantages of methods in terms of distance and proximity from the area of investigation. Whilst this enables accepted ways of pursuing questions and issues and adding to the stock of knowledge, they should also be open to critical scrutiny and revision. Yet we find a variation in the extent to which scrutiny exists within disciplines and so boundaries vary in their permeability. Some of this variation can be understood in terms of how knowledge remains within the control of its practitioners who are socialised into these ways of seeing and that enables a discipline to constitute a boundary around the knowledge producing process itself.

These are fields of investigation that frame the world and they are involved in a struggle to maintain epistemic boundaries. Those struggles take place within the field itself, particularly with the existence of sub-fields and around the conditions that inform their relative stability when threatened. The issue of limits is constantly present but set aside at

moments in time through the dispositions of practitioners as they engage in substantive research in a manner which, by virtue of intensive, methodical immersion, excludes consideration of the conditions that inform the field itself. Within the field there are positions and in respect to those: ‘one of the properties by which we might best characterise the position occupied by an intellectual in the intellectual field will be the stance they adopt over the criteria for inclusion in the intellectual field’ (Bourdieu, 2020 [2015]: 200).

The field of social research exhibits affiliations informed not only by the intersection of such factors as class and race and gender, but place of employment, specialism in topics of investigation, adherence to varying methods, engagement in forms of methodological reflection and meta-theoretical stances and differences in terms of who researchers work with in their practices. Once these factors are part of our methodological considerations the tendency towards deconstructing epistemic boundaries requires a balance against reflexive reconstruction without which the insights of social research are in danger of becoming redundant (see May with Perry, 2011). Boundaries enable categorisation which is a fundamental part of the practice of social research. Categorisation requires a reflexive vigilance without which it can easily reproduce and reinforce dominant prejudices. Information is filtered and constituted as knowledge through the deployment of ways of seeing into which practitioners are inculcated. Professional associations are formed, hierarchies of journals are approved as accepted outlets for research results and forms of organisational appraisal then inform reward and recognition within the ranks of practitioners.

The world, its issues and how they are to be explained and understood is then demarcated through deploying accepted means of study. Knowledge is constituted in particular ways by professionals within a discipline or field of study to enable a closure around what constitutes justifiable knowledge. Hierarchies are established between professionals according to both achieved and ascribed status through the clamour for increases in citation rates. When it comes to those whose knowledge is derived from outside of these boundaries, its applicability to practice may be readily dismissed as irrelevant or born in ignorance. Despite the existence of internal differences, in situations of contention shared orientations are constructed between those who lie within the boundaries and share a common set of experiences and those who remain on the outside. That provides for how individual practitioners orientate themselves because, despite the existence of differences, it provides stabilisation for beliefs *in* practice and has the potential to be activated through the creation of solidarity in the face of what are seen as undesirable consequences that result from institutional and socio-economic and political changes.

As society changes, so boundaries move in the process of seeking to maintain credibility for scientific insights and epistemic authority over given terrains of inquiry (Gieryn,

1999); as can be seen in the relations between science and politics during the first stages of the pandemic (May, 2021). That shifting terrain enables clarification to take place and can even induce a modesty in practice in terms of resisting simple pronouncement of ‘fact’ as if matters of interpretation were superfluous. Boundary work becomes required: ‘in settings where tacit assumptions about the contents of science are forced to become explicit: where credibility is contested; where regnant assumptions about boundaries suddenly appear murky or inapplicable; and – most importantly – where allocations of epistemic authority are decided and consequentially deployed’ (Gieryn, 1999: 24). The effort required in boundary work revolves around ‘set of claims, activities, and institutional structures that define and protect knowledge practices’ (Klein, 1996: 1). To understand the process of boundary change requires replacing an epistemological viewpoint with an idea of fixity over time with a historical understanding of variation. To understand that variation in terms of the issues we have discussed so far, we can turn to the dynamics between the content and context of knowledge production.

Dancing in devilish dichotomies: Universities, engagement and active intermediation

There are different contexts from which social research is conducted, but the university remains a major site of knowledge production. Here we find variation in levels of engagement with local communities with many institutions being *in*, but not *of*, their localities and changing relations in their role in society due to larger socio-economic changes (May and Perry, 2011). Therefore, the conditions and contexts *from* and *in* which academics engage are constantly changing. *From* means being concerned with the context of the university itself, the distancing and/or proximity afforded by the university which enables subject to become the object of analysis, the dynamics of the spaces from which critical researchers engage and the implications this has for understanding the relationships between knowledge and action. *In* means recognising that a commitment and/or engagement to realising just social futures in research practice may be found in the interstices and boundaries or margins of different domains: that is, in liminal spaces between the university and its context. A focus upon the conditions and contexts from and in which academics engage is important for two reasons.

First, universities are inherently embedded in circulations of forms of knowledge, through concepts such as innovation districts, creative quarters, science parks and technopoles; this is knowledge *for* the economy (May and Perry, 2018). Seeking to produce knowledge for just urban futures takes place in varying spaces of alternatives and experiments (May and Perry, 2016). At this point, the knowledgeableability of citizens in the process of production has the potential to curtail

the power of elites and enhance the capacity for self-government (Stehr, 2008). A key challenge for those working at these boundaries is to remain reflexive over how academics and universities position themselves and others to mobilise knowledge in ways that support progressive alternatives and imaginative political spaces, rather than reinforce business as usual. In engaging with civil society and refusing to capitulate to narrow constitutions of the economic sphere, universities may develop ‘the power to project [a] moral language beyond the boundaries of separate spheres and powerfully. . . reconstruct them’ (Alexander, 2019: 116). To reflect on such possibilities does not mean embracing a naïve optimism, nor bracketing structural constraints, but seeking possibilities in the spirit of transformation.

Second, a consideration of the credibility of social research requires, under these conditions, taking in multiple factors that can easily be presumed to lay beyond given methodological boundaries as justified by narrow formulations of an epistemological under-labourer. Whilst some practitioners have adhered to scientism to justify their practice, as noted above, science and technology have also created issues in breaking down what were once thought to be impervious boundaries. The speed of information and a democratic deficit in the representation of varying voices are just some of the factors that inform a re-constitutive effort (Couldry, 2010; Davies, 2020; Fuller, 2018). At the same time, we see a growth in impact and engagement in universities with the relations between policy and science witnessing the rise of terms such as ‘risk assessment’ and ‘peer review’ as boundary-defining terms in the face of science not furnishing expectations of unequivocal outcomes (Jasanoff, 2012).

Such a combination of factors is said to have produced a new ‘idiom of co-production’ in knowledge generation (Jasanoff, 2004). This captures the proposition that the ways in which we know and represent the world – nature/society – are inseparable from the ways we choose to live in it. It thus recognises that scientific knowledge is not a simple reflection of reality, but that it ‘embeds and is embedded in social practices, identities, norms, conventions, discourses, instruments and institutions’ (Jasanoff, 2004: 3). In this sense, co-production can be viewed as re-orientating the boundaries between research and practice. In terms of working with policy makers this can mean challenging the simple relations between the conception and execution of policy and addressing the gap between knowing and doing in how knowledge is translated into action (see, e.g. May and Perry, 2017a; Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000; Schön, 1991 [1983]).

These aspirations are evident in the history of action research and participatory inquiry (Greenwood and Levin, 2007). The challenge which researchers in this broad domain are trying to address is how to act in intelligent and informed ways in what are variable contexts. As an ethos, rather than a method, it has had different variants that include the terms participatory action learning (Wood,

2020) and cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996). In the process the critical, disclosing possibilities of systematic investigation within contextual dynamics are not seen as monopolised by accounts produced at a distance. Questions of why they occur and with what consequences, along with how things may be different, occur in the dialogues produced in the process of co-investigation. For the investigator themselves, this means not adhering to a limited epistemology and instead seeing ‘oneself not as a spectator of but an agent in the world’ (Putnam, 2017: 17).

The movement from spectator to agent has the potential to increase the splits within the self of the social researcher we noted at the beginning of this article. When set against the ‘devilish dichotomies’ in social research (Perry and May, 2010) this can easily become exacerbated. These include both the changing relations in boundaries between justification and application and the pursuit of global excellence in the content of knowledge and that of relevance for different groups in context. To ignore such issues can easily lead to a wholesale embrace of the supposed realities of the new age of economic self-evidence and a loss of criticality. As the idea of ‘innovation’ so easily become the triumph of speed of change and with that forgetting over an understanding of history and with that, memory, the need for the integration of what is already known by different groups displaying varying knowledges is heightened.

In the search for the new, we must not forget the past. Disparate knowledges can be integrated, seen alongside each other and re-contextualised. Sharing understandings generates new social learning. It then becomes possible to know when and how knowledge has had outcomes which are viewed, by different parties, to produce specific benefits. In the process considerable effort is needed to learn from imaginative and effective processes and there are no quick routes towards this end. As a site of knowledge production, the University may not reward such effort. A willingness to learn from the past and share an understanding of orientations according to working in different contexts and what is valuable and what are the limits of those places, is often ignored within the academic hierarchy. Research needs to resonate with experiences and issues in order that they are intelligible, not simply seek to reflect them at a distance and that requires dialogue. That requires a preparedness to enter the terrain of contestability in respect to the content of knowledge and its consequences for different groups and with that comes a questioning of expertise.

There is a need for more sustained and long-term programmes of work that systematically and productively take the knowledge produced by universities for socio-economic and environmental reasons out into communities. That, in turn, means listening and learning and as we have noted before, universities are often not good learning organisations (May and Perry, 2018). If universities are at the heart of the economy and what is termed the knowledge economy is urban, then urban researchers are increasingly implicated as

political actors in, rather than critics of narrow, territorial economic ambitions. Paradoxically, through greater engagement, social scientists may feel that they lose their critical voice. Oscillations occur between engagements by ‘public intellectuals’ who seek to shape debate and the pursuits of the ‘detached intellectual’ who believes they are protected, for the time being at least, by their institutional position in the university as a space of shelter from such pressures. That position varies between institutions and disciplines and the place within the academic hierarchy.

As a result of being at the forefront of these pressures for 15 years with the need to generate external income, working with those in the private and public and voluntary sectors, as well as for universities on their socio-economic engagement strategies, we reflected on our experiences and formulated the idea of ‘active intermediation’ (May and Perry, 2013, 2017b, 2018; Perry and May, 2015, 2021). The idea was to not only capture the content and dynamics of ambiguous spaces in engagement with different groups, but to understand the knowledge then generated, its implications for action and how that challenged the idea of expertise in academia, business and policy making. Here was a space in which both boundary maintenance and crossing was ‘underscored by the multiple ways that problems are defined and objects are treated’ (Klein, 1996: 49). Consensus was not the expected outcome, but more of what has been termed an agonism as recognition of conflict as having productive elements. All too often we worked in situations where the agonism between knowledge and belief, needed for democratic vibrancy, was collapsed as knowledge was instrumentalised and became a means to an end which, if not accepted, was adhered to in the face of the absence of time to consider alternatives. Speed and a refusal to learn from the past and include those normally excluded from consideration, eradicated alternatives in the name of supposed economic necessity.

We were part of a huge displacement effort to avoid the problems of the present. We found ourselves in situations ‘in which power, law and knowledge are exposed to a radical indeterminacy, a society that has become the theatre of an uncontrollable adventure, so that what is instituted never becomes established, the known remains undermined by the unknown, the present proves to be undefinable, covering many different social times which are staggered in relation to one another within simultaneity – or definable only in terms of some fictitious future’ (Lefort, 1986: 305). Knowledge was framed and deployed in contexts where the capacity and capability to act upon the present was unevenly distributed, whilst the future was suspended through the efforts of armies of technicians engaged in prediction for a future whose possibilities were a means of ignoring or denying the reality of present issues. Accountability could then be avoided and recognition of the relations between knowledge and action met a celebration of expertise born of a distance from context which, paradoxically, explained its attributed power as

context is a reminder of the present and that is something not to be confronted, but overcome.

Context cannot speak back as it is structured, at a distance, by the content of knowledge as part of the apparatus of this form of the political. That leaves the ‘how’ through reflections on practice and the process of sensemaking in context to be a residual activity. Indeed, to speak of existing conditions appears as an irresponsible interruption to the dream work of constant reference to imagined futures of possibilities. A consequence is that the content of expertise born at a distance was not challenged and the democratic sphere of deliberation shrunk through technocratic and economic promise: ‘Ideologies are justifications of relations of rule or domination that insulate themselves from critical challenge by distorting the space of reasons and presenting relations of rule or domination as “natural” (unalterable), “God-given”, or in some way falsely, as sufficiently justified’ (Forst, 2014 [2011]: 104).

Situating the special edition

In the face of such forces and the issues discussed, the desire to seek just and sustainable futures through an ethos of working with communities in knowledge formation through co-production, whilst being positioned in universities which themselves are subject to considerable change, produces a rich set of experiences. It is these that inform this special edition. Working *from* and *in* different spaces requires reflexive engagement (May and Perry, 2017b). It requires an adaptiveness and creativity in research practice and a preparedness to see knowledge claims challenged and contested in intentional and unanticipated ways. A range of issues are then brought into our focus: how we think about practices in terms of time, space, positionality and power; what and how we draw upon past experiences and writings to inform our current practices; what are the way in which competing or contesting knowledge claims affect issues associated with justification and application in knowledge production and how do we understand those; how do we conceptualise the spaces where the mediation of these claims take place and what implications does this have for the university as a place of work from which this activity takes place?

We start the special issue by drawing inspiration from past experiences via a problematisation of dichotomies that inform judgements of research practice. In her article, Beth Perry draws upon her reflections in running a research programme called Realising Just Cities. Comprising funding from several sources, along with the need for match funding from partners, this was an international programme which, at the level of the Manchester city-region, required not only engagement with policy officials, but also community groups, with a total of 300 co-researchers and 60 organisations. Taking this work into the university was problematic. A series of predisposing factors in terms of a lack of university support informed the opportunity to change institution

and the catalyst was a single incident: being questioned over the purchase of a cup of coffee for a community co-researcher. There are armies in universities of those for whom such expenditure requires justification, with which one cannot disagree, but a focus upon such matters to the exclusion of wider considerations provides for a peculiar division of labour that easily forgets purpose. Whilst an institutional move reduced the intensity of administrative boundary work within the institution, it still required work to enable the programme to run.

Another form of boundary work is at play in coproduction. This refers to the legitimacy afforded by the academic community. Facing outwards, Beth Perry argues, requires an 'epistemic choreography' in terms of recognising one's position within the university, but also in terms of mobilising that for the benefit of external, local communities. That means seeking to balance the values articulated by communities of the work performed with the attributed value that is attached by institutions, research funders and the cultures of academic professions. A preparedness to seek to inter-mediate such claims may then encounter an epistemological rectitude that informs the judgement of research as being of *worth*. Rather than accept the basis of such judgements, Perry interrogates the idea of robust research in imaginative ways and how coproduction is not, by virtue of its process, antithetical to critique but even, due to its dialogic requirements, an important part of tackling injustice. In recognising that, however, she notes that not only do overblown claims to academic expertise need to be tempered, but so too do the aspirations of those who run universities in what are all often myopic and unimaginative ways. In contrast to business as usual, we need spaces for imaginative engagement with communities to re-value the civic purpose of the university.

The theme of the relations between the critical and pragmatic in methodological reflection continues in the contribution by Dan Silver. It is perfectly possible to hear social scientists speak of past work as 'dated' whilst apparently not engaging with the realities of their written content and the contexts in which they were produced. The freneticism of contemporary academia, coupled with its hierarchies and the idea that we are all producing 'new knowledge' as we 'move forward', can easily lead to a denigration of the work of synthesis and with that, learning from the past. That is certainly not the spirit informing his contribution. As with all of those in this special edition, he brings with him a wealth of experience of research with communities and in his case, being involved in community and voluntary sector networks for 10 years prior to becoming a university academic.

Dan Silver commences with the same ethos for the university that informs Beth Perry's contribution: that is, to produce knowledge that can improve society. Then, more particularly, how to support and develop common platforms across trans-local community networks that enable social transformation. Taking inspiration from the new municipalist

movement and the possibilities that come with trans-local learning, he explores the revelatory elements of critical theory and in so doing, notes the tendency towards an absence of understanding context for the purpose of transformation. Engaging with resistant knowledges and focusing upon context and experience, enables a dialogic relationship to take place that can be built upon for the purpose of collaborative practice. He then draws upon the process of abduction in theory building in order that revisions to explanations in emergent data are part of the dialogue between context, resistant knowledges and practices of transformation aimed at enhancing social justice.

In populating the content of a critical, pragmatic practice he turns to the work of WEB Du Bois and Jane Addams. Du Bois worked at the margins of academia, criticised the ways in which social problems were constructed and focused on the mechanism of inequality in the context of slavery and racialised capitalism. He brought together analysis of structural issues with forms of resistance and in the process was critical of those social scientists who ignored everyday efforts of resistance in myopic displays of what constituted research as being of worth. Jane Addams shared his scepticism of both city officials and academics divorced from contexts of social injustice. Her joint working with communities took the process of experimentation and connected it with the experiences and knowledge of marginalised groups. It is a process of critical, pragmatic work with communities that can re-invigorate the civic purpose of the university and question the hierarchies through which research is recognised and evaluated.

It is by taking the university 'out' into communities of anti-racist practice that forms the basis of the contribution by Will Mason and Patrick Williams. Here we can see the ethos that informed the work of DuBois being translated into contemporary times through the establishment of CiviAct. This work seeks to both resource and partner with organisations involved in community and youth work whose focus is upon education, training, legal representation and anti-racist organisation and resistance. As is the case with the other contributors, they draw upon prior activism and work with communities. In describing what they bring to this, it is in terms of solidarity, respect and love and with that comes a preparedness to make sacrifices for others. That ethic informs negotiations and framing of issues and practices in the 'fields of paradox' which are manifested in the competing priorities, accountabilities and expectations in university-community partnerships.

Fields of paradox do not rule out negotiations, but there is a recognition that there is a limit to what one or two researchers can do when faced with the weight of institutional expectation. For instance, there are the levels of complicity with the government priorities that inform funding criteria which themselves may be in tension with anti-racist outcomes. To tackle this, they purposefully circumvented funding criteria and situated the community activist at the centre of activities.

Indeed, the downplaying of activist priorities may be a pre-requisite for grant capture. Therefore, scholars committed to this work need to be aware of how the field of activity is structured in particular ways. A result being that institutional time is not counted and it is necessary to 'steal' it from personal and professional lives.

Working in institutions implicated in histories of racism which appear to value engagement and yet fail to recognise such activity, provides a justification for activities seeking to redistribute time, energy and resources. Writing in an honest way about their experiences, Will Mason and Patrick Williams note that whilst a commitment to enabling the work of communities from the university is clear, paradoxes play out at different stages and in varying ways in the course of such work. For instance, whilst project evaluation is required, they note how an integrated methodological approach can have little relevance to those working in communities. Although learning is a component of such activity, it is also a means of auditing through limited ways as groups compete for resources. At this point, their methodological expertise and positions in the university system provided credibility and in the process of applying for further funding the university, rather than community, was centred as a legitimate site of knowledge production.

Fields of paradox are sites of new spaces that are opened upon the relations between communities and universities. The requirement of intermediation then places an onus of responsibility upon individuals who may not be able to bear the weight of varying expectations and demands born of structural tensions. To ignore these issues can lead to unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved in the process of coproduction to achieve just urban transformation. This is the starting point of Zarina Patel's contribution. Drawing upon data from a City-University partnership in Cape Town, she critiques the view that such spaces are unproblematic and instead boundary-crossing leads to a sense of 'homelessness' among those who seek to populate them.

For this purpose, Zarina Patel examines the idea of boundary crossing and the roles required to occupy these spaces. A great deal of expectation is placed upon the idea of new spaces created in the process of coproduction as this is seen to challenge traditional hierarchies of knowledge and even reconfigure existing power relations. Engagement, however, requires a degree of continuity to work in the face of what are differences and that leads to ambivalence and absence of a sense of belonging for those individuals occupying this space. To place the onus of neutralisation and even resolution into third spaces is too great a weight to bear. Instead, bringing together the 'what' and 'how' of knowledge, or the propositional with the practical, in order that there is contextual sensitivity and transformational potential, requires an alternative form of engagement. That is better encapsulated in the idea of 'portals' which recognise asymmetric reciprocity in the process of knowledge exchange.

A 'portal' is something into which individuals enter and exit at varying points in time and carries with it an emphasis upon institutional learning. Whilst recognising the learning and opportunities that arose from the City-University partnership, the potential of such work comes from the shifts which are part of moving across boundaries. At the same time, however, the very tensions discussed in the work demonstrate their continued importance in not only shaping, but also containing identity. Therefore, when boundaries are traversed, individuals are left dislocated from their home institutions, limiting their ability to effect change and realise relevant outcomes. Portals, on the other hand, provide a glimpse into alternative ways of conceiving the relations between thought and action. Taking this back into home institutions, such as universities and policy communities, requires a work that is beyond those individuals who are the exceptions to the rule and instead requires embedding through acts of 'dwelling'. These acts have the potential to bridge the missing middle. The result is not seeking to overcome differences, power asymmetries and varying geographies of influence, but to see them as key to a shift that goes beyond mutual learning to harness co-production for social justice.

It is the idea that participatory research offers a vehicle for empowerment and democratisation that Hayley Bennett and Richard Brunner interrogate in their contribution. Drawing on 'What Works Scotland', a large collaborative research and knowledge exchange programme with two universities and multiple national and local public partners, they examine the realities of the work and the issues encountered in its execution. In interactions with the policy world, they note how politics is infused in everyday interactions and that informs how policies themselves are conceptualised and implemented and then made and remade. That means participatory researchers need to understand the complex power relations that shape the practices not only with various organisations and professions, but in terms of their own roles and within their own institutions. That requires an investigation into the varying contexts in which researchers find themselves. For this purpose, they introduce the idea of the 'buffer zone' as a heuristic to conceptualise the dynamics that occur in multi-agency research.

Building upon themes we find throughout the special edition – absence of distance from the subjects of research and the forms of scientific justification and constitution of expertise that then follow – the buffer zone requires effort at three levels in collaborative action research: sustaining the research space to enable collaborative work whilst avoiding instrumentalisation; drawing upon skills and activities to sustain field relations in the face of changing personnel and those who act as gatekeepers for the research and both understanding and acting upon the political work, both internally and externally to the research group, in changing contexts. With these in mind, they draw upon their experiences to illustrate varying institutional processes such as: effects of

changing personnel; differential and time-limited research contracts; the work of engagement with organisations and the significant ethical and political dilemmas encountered during the research. In respect to the latter, they discuss issues relating to benefit sanctions and participatory budgeting as a means of attaining social justice, rather than an administrative device for allocating resources.

Hayley Bennett and Richard Brunner provide the basis for those engaged in such work by noting how a learning community can empower practitioner-researchers. Referring to the labour required for this work, the practitioner cannot be the expert at a distance, but a critical friend and that requires continuous explanation, justification and advocacy alongside a recognition that such work is non-linear. To undertake this in the university context, however, is not easy. Here we find conflicts concerning fixed-term research collaborative projects in relation to ethical procedures and participatory values, accessing mainstream university funding and ambivalence among academics concerning the value of such work. A project mentality can then undercut the trust and power sharing that is necessary for such work to take place. They recognise that the political and organisational geographies in Scotland may not translate to other contexts, but this only serves the need for more shared understanding of the dynamics and possibilities of collaborative research.

Summary

In this special issue we have interrogated methodological issues in collaborative inquiry and asked how universities, as core sites of knowledge production, need to change to better accommodate the work of engagement with communities and organisations. In this journey we examined the forms of knowledge so favoured by those in academia who desire to be 'global' in their distance from the phenomena and people they describe. Alongside this is the knowledge which is derived through engagement and work with those whose lives are given in context and who seek transformation for greater recognition and redistribution. In so doing, narrow ideas of engagement and impact were challenged as were the relations between the critical and pragmatic.

In participatory inquiry, bringing others into the missing middle of knowledge formulation between the 'what' and 'how' of knowledge according to 'why' is a challenge to individuals, communities, policy makers, businesses and universities. None of this means some abandonment of rationality in our practice, merely the inclusivity of consideration of those factors that are all too often constituted as contaminants to social research. We need a better conception that includes an idea of the public good, the reality of our practices and the varying contexts in which we work. We need these to socialise epistemology and render it realistic, not as some final, new court of appeal, but in terms of understanding the strengths and limitations that inform our practices and render social research insightful and relevant to different groups.

This special edition is a contribution to a clarification of these issues. It is a clarification, rather than resolution, as that represents the spirit in which collaborative inquiry conducts itself: not as a legislation over the constitution of social reality in a celebration of abstract theoreticism or empiricism, nor a relativist interpretive free-for-all, but as work needed in situations of dialogue with others to reach understanding. Here are the spaces in which credibility and applicability and excellence and relevance interact. As we pursue this line of inquiry the university, as a core site of knowledge production, comes under scrutiny. This, after all, concerns the value of learning as seen by a range of voices so often excluded from their hallowed grounds. It means not simply transmitting, commodifying and accumulating for market advantage and evaluating staff through narrow criteria, but more imaginative approaches. To that extent, it is a real challenge not only to universities, but also those who cling onto a myopic methodology to justify their practices.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Alexander JC (2019) *What Makes a Social Crisis? The Socialization of Social Problems*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Apel K-O (1995 [1967]) *Charles S. Peirce: From Pragmatism to Pragmaticism*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.
- Arvidsson A (2012) General sentiment: How value and affect converge in the information economy. In: Adkins L and Lury C (eds) *Measure and Value*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, pp.39–59.
- Bernstein H (1987) Idols of modern science and the reconstruction of knowledge. In: Raskin MG and Bernstein HJ (eds) *New Ways of Knowing: The Sciences, Society and Reconstructive Knowledge*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, pp.37–68.
- Bourdieu P (2020 [2015]) *Habitus and Field: General Sociology, Volume 2. Lectures at the Collège de France (1982-83)*. Translated by P. Collier. Edition established by Champagne P, Duval J, Poupeau F, et al. Cambridge: Polity.
- Canguilhem G (2008 [1965]) *Knowledge of Life*. Translated by Geroulanos and D. Ginsburg. Edited by Paola M and Meyers T. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.
- Cooper M (2008) *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Couldry N (2010) *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics and Neoliberalism*. London: SAGE.
- Cruikshank J (2017) Anti-authority: Comparing Popper and Rorty on the dialogic development of beliefs and practices. In: Cruikshank J and Sassower R (eds) *Democratic Problem-Solving: Dialogues in Social Epistemology*. London: Rowman and Littlefield, pp.73–94.

- Daston L and Galison P (2010 [2007]) *Objectivity*. New York, NY: Zone Books.
- Davies W (2020) *This is Not Normal: The Collapse of Liberal Britain*. London: Verso.
- Forst R (2014 [2011]) *Justification and Critique: Towards and Critical Theory of Politics*. Translated by C. Cronin. Cambridge: Polity.
- Fuller S (2018) *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game*. London: Anthem Press.
- Gieryn T (1999) *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Greenwood D and Levin M (eds) (2007) *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*, 2nd edn. London: SAGE.
- Heron J (1996) *Co-Operative Inquiry: Research Into the Human Condition*. London: SAGE.
- Janaway C (1989) *Self and World in Schopenhauer's Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jasanoff S (2004) The idiom of coproduction. In: Jasanoff S (ed.) *States of Knowledge: The Co-production of Science and Social Order*. London: Routledge, pp.1–12.
- Jasanoff S (2012) *Science and Public Reason*. London: Earthscan, Routledge.
- Klein TJ (1996) *Crossing Boundaries: Knowledge, Disciplinarity, and Interdisciplinarity*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia.
- Knorr-Cetina K (1999) *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kuhn T (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edn. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lefort C (1986) *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*. Edited and Introduced by Thompson JB. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Letherby G, Scott J and Williams M (2013) *Objectivity and Subjectivity in Social Research*. London: SAGE.
- Longino H (1990) *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- May T (2018) Evidence and insight: In search of the distinctiveness of the university as a site of knowledge production. *Insights* 10: 2–15.
- May T (2021) The English government hits limits: Knowledge politics and Covid-19. *Frontiers in Sociology* 6: 1–11.
- May T and Perry B (eds) (2011) Building knowledge cities: The roles of universities. *Built Environment* 37(3). Special edition.
- May T and Perry B (2013) Reflexivity and data analysis. With Beth Perry. In: Flick U (ed.) *Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*. London: SAGE, pp.109–122.
- May T and Perry B (2016) Cities, experiments and the logics of the knowledge economy? In: Evans J, Karvonen A and Raven R (eds) *The Experimental City*. London: Routledge, pp.32–46.
- May T and Perry B (2017a) Knowledge for just urban sustainability. *Local Environment* 22: 23–35.
- May T and Perry B (2017b) *Reflexivity: The Essential Guide*. London: SAGE.
- May T and Perry B (2018) *Cities and the Knowledge Economy: Promise, Politics and Possibilities*. Oxford: Routledge.
- May T and Perry B (2022) *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*, 5th edn. London: McGraw-Hill.
- May T and Williams M (eds) (1998) *Knowing the Social World*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- May T with Perry B (2011) *Social Research and Reflexivity: Content, Consequences and Context*. London: SAGE.
- Mounce HO (1997) *The Two Pragmatisms: From Peirce to Rorty*. London: Routledge.
- Norris C (2014) What strong sociologists can learn from critical realism: Bloor on the history of aerodynamics. *Journal of Critical Realism* 13(1): 3–37.
- Perry B and May T (2010) Urban knowledge exchange: Devilish dichotomies and active intermediation. *International Journal of Knowledge-Based Development* 1(1–2): 6–24.
- Perry B and May T (2015) Lessons on the research-practice relationship: From critique to co-production in Greater Manchester. As second author with Beth Perry. In: Polk M (ed.) *Co-Producing Knowledge for Sustainable Cities: Joining Forces for Change*. London: Routledge, pp.98–122.
- Perry B and May T (2021) Active intermediation. With Beth Perry. In: Hemström K, Simon D, Palmer H, et al. (eds) *Transdisciplinary Knowledge Co-Production*. Rugby: Practical Action, pp.31–33.
- Pfeffer J and Sutton RI (2000) *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge Into Action*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Popper KR (1968 [1959]) *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. Revised Edition. London: Hutchinson.
- Putnam R (2017) Taking pragmatism seriously. In: Putnam H and Putnam RA (eds) *Pragmatism as a Way of Life: The Lasting Legacy of William James and John Dewey*. Edited by Macarthur, D. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp.13–20.
- Schön D (1991 [1983]) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Stehr N (ed.) (2008) *Knowledge and Democracy: A 21st Century Perspective*. London: Routledge.
- Wood L (2020) *Participatory Action Learning and Action Research: Theory, Learning and Process*. London: Routledge.

Author biography

Tim May is an Honorary Distinguished Professor at Cardiff University. He has worked collaboratively with the public, private and voluntary sectors and with universities on socio-economic engagement strategies. He has written and edited eighteen books, including new editions, edited an international book series and produced journal articles, book chapters, research reports and articles in other media.