

Research for Social Impact: Purposes, Connections and Tensions of Engaged Research

Event report June 11, 2018

The event entitled *Research for social impact: purposes, connections and tension of engaged research* was held on 11th June 2018 in the University of Southampton as part of the wide range of activities that the [Social Impact Lab](#) (University of Southampton) offers. The [Social Impact Lab](#) organised and supported this workshop as part of its mission to nurture leadership for social impact amongst students and staff.

The workshop brought together consolidated academics and early career scholars to present and discuss their understanding of research for social impact. Impact and engagement are at the core of research projects conducted by social scientists. However, the challenges, tensions and benefits of engagement are rarely discussed. The goal of the workshop was to gather practical evidence and reflections on engagement with social scientists at different levels.

The event drew insights from a wide range of engagement experiences with local communities, stakeholders and practitioners. Presentations both of theoretical and empirical findings facilitated discussions about the nature of engaged research and its transformational capacity.



[Dr Lambros Fatsis](#) (University of Southampton), [Prof Monder Ram](#) (University of Birmingham), [Prof Julia Rouse](#) (Manchester Metropolitan University) and [Dr Pamela Ugwudike](#) (University of Southampton) presented different perspectives on the nature and role of engagement in research for social impact. The event concluded with a panel discussion facilitated by [Dr Bindi Shah](#) (University of Southampton) about the opportunities and challenges of engaged research, with a special focus on the experiences of postgraduate students, with the contributions of [Dr Harry Annison](#), [Dana Thomson](#) and [Dr Steve Dorney](#) (University of Southampton).

Public intellectuals, 'public characters' and the value of 'knowledge'

The event kicked off with the presentation of Lambros Fatsis on public intellectuals, which provided the theoretical framework underpinning the role of scholars in the realm of public sociology. Lambros' presentation

discussed who the intellectuals are and what their roles are, and whether these paradigms are inclusive or exclusive. Lambros advocates shifting the focus on public intellectuals to [public characters](#), in order to overcome biases towards privileged forms of knowledge. This proposal promotes a decolonisation of our thinking to include, value and recognise positions that might be excluded from mainstream scholarship.

This presentation was followed by Monder Ram's contribution on the kind of engaged research practices of The Centre for Ethnic Minority Entrepreneur-ship (CREME) for the



past 25 years. He presented how engagement with non-academic regional agencies, acted as a legitimising process for activities which

were already happening before. The presentation was a reflexive account of the Centre's work. Engagement is understood here as a partnership between academia and practice in the neglected area of migrant and ethnic minority entrepreneurship. Ram argued that their contribution has taken place in three areas:

- Generation of knowledge, which is what differentiates academics from activists. This is done from a scholarly critical social science perspective. Amongst its contributions, CREME has shifted the debates from a discourse that perpetuated the 'othering' of migrant

business

owners to a more inclusive narrative where the role of structural factors and racialised discrimination is scrutinised.

- Engagement with non-academic stakeholders, from large corporations, to bankers to civil society groups, such as their current work with [Citizens UK](#).
- On-going engagement with small business owners from the migrant and ethnic minority community.

This presentation highlighted the importance of reflecting on the theoretical approaches towards the nature of engagement and impact on organisations (e.g. critical performativity, critical race theory); and to develop more work about how this engagement is actually enacted.

From engagement to transformation: engaged-activism and democratic models for stakeholder participation

In her presentation, Julia Rouse proposed a new paradigm for engaged research from an ['activist engaged perspective'](#). This new proposition departs from an engaged scholarship paradigm which argues for co-creation of knowledge between scholars and stakeholders to a Critical Realist understanding of engagement and transformation. Within this proposed paradigm, scholars should map the underlying Theory of Change to fulfil the transformational potential of their research. This approach departs from a rigorous research design and its accountability is to the marginalised. This increases the transformational potential if collectives can disrupt power holders. In summary, this proposition provides rigorous research from a

position of what Rouse labelled as ‘tempered radicalism’.

Our final presentation of the day by Pamela Ugwudike also provided a proposition for improving engagement with stakeholders by signalling how a ‘Deliberative Democratic Model’ would increase the quality of the communication between researchers and stakeholders. Drawing on her experiences with a wide range of stakeholders in the criminal justice system, Pam reflected on the challenges involved in engaged research and developing innovative research methodology



for impact driven research. Her proposition of a ‘Deliberative Democratic Model’ by which key stakeholders of the research find a voice and

participate in the decision making process of policy makers which will affect them. This model offers a pathway for more egalitarian relations, to improve the sense of ownership of the research by stakeholders, improve knowledge co-production, and to improve the transformational potential of the research.

Challenges and opportunities of engaged research for impact

The on-going discussions during the day as well as the conversations emerging from the contributions by Dr Harry Annison, Dana Thomson and Dr Steve Dorney highlighted

some of the opportunities and challenges of developing a research programme conducive of change. Amongst the main opportunities, participants highlighted that engaged research can provide:

- Opportunities to ‘democratise’ knowledge.
- Opportunities for meaningful work for scholars, since researchers are deliberately trying to ‘make a difference’.
- Access to gatekeepers and alternative sources of information.

Some of the challenges related to:

- The necessary time to invest in the research/engagement process: the timing of research projects, constrained PhD research timeline, and impact measurement metrics might not map onto the processes of engagement.
- Having impact as the only goal might go in detriment of long term engagement.
- Responsibilities of engaging/disengaging the field, the emotional investment and consequences for our research partners and academics.
- Unintended consequences, such as the co-optation of your research focus and findings.



Next steps

This event was useful to kick off the discussion about the challenges and opportunities of engaged research. The panel discussion and feedback from attendees highlighted the need for:

- Facilitating more practical events on how to implement participatory methods.
- Understanding the process and nature of co-design strategies with stakeholders in our research.
- Training on how to measure the impact of our research.

These events should target postgraduate students and early career scholars as well as those who are mentoring them.



For more information about this event contact Dr María Villares-Varela [here](#)

For further details about the Social Impact Lab (SIL):

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Our programmes combine intensive skills development and real-world problem solving opportunities to give you the skills to make positive change and the confidence to apply these skills across networks, sectors and global contexts.

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