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Connecting Epistemologies and the Early Career Researcher.

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Introduction

Early Career Researchers (ECRs) are a vital part of the Higher Education landscape. However, their experiences are often underrepresented in discussions of Higher Education, for example the UK's recent Stern Review (2016). ECRs occupy an uncertain position: not securely settled into an academic position, nor having completed their academic training, while being essential to the on-going success of the UK Higher Education system of teaching and research. They are especially important to one-off, competitively funded, research projects, such as those supported by national research councils and are at the forefront of the delivery of a new era of academic research projects shaped by the Impact agenda.

The context for considering the ECR experience is set out by Enright and Facer (2017). They identify three key trends radically reshaping the situation for the ECR community, which manifest in three interlinked ways. The nature of collaborations between universities and external partners, whether communities, businesses, organisations, or the state, has been altered by policy interventions and changes in academic disciplinary norms. This is particularly because of the new requirement for academic research to demonstrate its impact on the wider world. In turn, disciplines themselves have seen changes in the orientations towards knowledge production, particularly with the rise of co-production as a mode of making knowledge that is seen as legitimate within academic disciplines (Flinders et al 2016; Vanderhoven & Campbell, 2016). In addition there is the shift in patterns of employment, from the tenured and secure route for academics, to a more precarious pattern of shorter-term contracts (Enright and Facer 2017).

With these broader trends in mind, this chapter considers the experience of one group of ECRs, funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council's (AHRC) *Connected Communities* programme. Here we draw on one project within this programme, *Connecting Epistemologies*. This project sought to explore both the methods and the experiences of ECRs within *Connected Communities*. The programme itself is rooted in the impact agenda and therefore the experiences of ECRs working within *Connected Communities* are fundamentally shaped by the requirement for generating provable benefits of research in beyond the academy. The chapter presents findings from the project, showing how ECRs understand their working conditions; their research practices; and their sense of themselves as academics, in the context of a new, emerging, form of academic identity in the context of a changing academy that is repositioning itself in relation to other institutions and society.

Note: as a group of committed collaborative researchers who are all experienced either in applied research or in the co-production of research working with people rather than doing research on people, making a distinction between the "University" and the "Real World" is uncomfortable. We are all part of the real world (Mrs Kinpaisy, 2008). However the language of Impact implies a separation between someone creating impact, and someone being impacted upon. In order to be succinct in our analysis we have distinguished in our writing between the university or academy and others, the wider world, society, the real world. In the projects that we are drawing from this distinction was often blurred, and we want the reader to be mindful that where we have written about the university and the 'other', however we have described them, it is an uncomfortable separation for us because breaking down that separation is at the heart of what we do.

Background: Connected Communities

Connected Communities was a British research council funded programme ‘designed to help us understand the changing nature of communities in their historical and cultural contexts and the role of communities in sustaining and enhancing our quality of life’ (AHRC 2017). This understanding ranged across seven themes, including health and wellbeing; the creative economy; community heritage; and work, occupation and enterprise¹. The nature of the themes and focus on communities created a close and natural fit for research impact – easily identifiable beneficiaries beyond the University and beyond disciplinary academic debates.

At its start *Connected Communities* was embroiled in wider debates about education policy and the financing of universities. The first iteration of the programme was controversial due to references to the UK Government’s policies of localism and ‘the big society’ in AHRC’s Strategic Plan. This linked *Connected Communities* to these policies which were associated with the austerity and public sector cuts begun by the UK Coalition government in 2010. Whilst there had been little opposition to references to government policy in previous UK research council strategies, such as the Economic and Social Research Council’s focus on social exclusion, or the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council’s funding of work on the digital economy, *Connected Communities* raised issues of policy and public relevance in a way that was uncomfortable for many arts and humanities scholars. There was a cynicism about the programme because it was linked to the introduction of measuring research impact on the wider world and there was an anxiety about proving the worth of the arts and humanities in a way that had not previously been required (O’Brien 2015).

This broader controversy regarding the instrumental push for higher education institutions to support government policy (Slater, 2012), provides a broad framing for our discussion of the experience of ECRs (Enright and Facer 2017). Debates about the plight of ECRs have often been articulated through anxieties about how the academy is organised and academic subjects are appropriated for that organisation. Yet the political trajectories articulated by *Connected Communities* are much more complex than a simplistic critique suggest. The programme was, in its most straightforward articulation, interested in supporting research conducted ‘with’ (rather than ‘about’ or ‘on’) communities. In using this language, *Connected Communities* drew on 30 years of participatory research that sought to see knowledge as best produced equitably and collaboratively, often with radical political change as an aim (O’Brien and Matthews, 2015, Enright and Facer, 2017). The focus on work ‘with’ communities raises questions about the relationship between the academy and society. As such *Connected Communities* was both a product of the introduction of the requirement to evidence impact, and at the same time an opportunity to critique the nature of the fundamental relationship between the academy and society. These questions manifested themselves in debates around the appropriate methods for delivering the aims of *Connected Communities*. Research methods are the key mechanism for brokering the relationship between researcher and research subject (a distinction which itself becomes blurred within co-produced research). Because of this, attention needs to be given to the nature of the academic who will employ such methods. Thus *Connected Communities* was about what it means to be an academic, as much as it was about community research.

These questions of what it means to be an academic working in the arts and humanities through *Connected Communities* can be linked to more general on-going crises in the arts and humanities around their public role, as compared with the social or hard sciences (Bate 2010). The shifts towards ‘research impact’ and linking the value of arts and humanities not solely to contribute to disciplinary debates but to ‘wider society’, coupled with increasing pressure to deliver employment skills to

¹ The range and scope of the project is well illustrated by a visualization available from <https://connected-communities.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Nov-2014-Coggle-new-layout-1.pdf>

students, has substantially challenged the ways universities have previously operated. Far from being wholly negative, this pulling apart has also made other kinds of spaces, to rethink knowledge, research and teaching, possible (Pain, Kesby and Askins, 2011).

There have been **two** critical tendencies in theorizing of institutions that have persisted in the debates that surround academic careers and the contemporary university. Drawing on theories of power associated with the Frankfurt school, the first is to see institutions as sites for top-down flows of hegemonic power, always carrying the potential to co-opt any radical initiative. The second is its mirror, to see the academic practice as constantly needing to battle so it might be a site of unbound critique that speaks truth to power, something Bourdieu (2000:41) has termed the 'unrealistic radicality' of academics.

Yet *Connected Communities*, as with most day-to-day life in UK universities today, demands a more careful and nuanced reading of power and change. *Connected Communities* opened up spaces for collaborative research within universities as those methods and those approaches have been accompanied with research council funding.

Connecting Epistemologies: project background and methods

Connecting Epistemologies was funded as part of the middle rounds of *Connected Communities*, following a research development workshop in Edinburgh during the summer of 2013. The project had **three** main aims: firstly, to raise awareness of the differing methods and methodological traditions within the *Connected Communities* programme; secondly, to understand the experiences of ECRs' use of these different methods and methodological traditions; and lastly, to critically explore how these experiences and traditions intersect.

These aims and objectives reflected **three** core areas of inquiry that are linked to the broader structures and debates above. In the first instance they sought to explore the *Connected Communities* programme's aims 'to understand the changing nature of communities' and to 'inform the development of more effective ways to support and catalyse community cultures and behaviours'. Second the use of participatory methods and their potential limits were explored, albeit in a limited manner. This happened in the way participants shaped their role in the data collection. It was also attempted in a workshop on data analysis by the core research team. Lastly, they sought to open out and unsettle the presumptions and the critiques of the 'impact' agenda.

The rationale for a focus on methods and methodologies within the project came from the recognition that that the *Connected Communities* programme was designed to be methodologically eclectic and innovative, reflecting both the range of approaches found in the various disciplines constituting the arts and humanities, as well as the interdisciplinary, cross research-council basis for the funded projects. Importantly, focusing on methods allowed us to focus on the impact the programme was aiming to produce with a shift from research *on* communities to research *with* communities. Methodological eclecticism can be an obvious strength, offering the possibility of synthesising a range of approaches, generating diverse forms of data and answering complex questions which cut across traditional academic disciplines. However, there are risks with this approach for researchers (Flinders, Wood & Cunningham, 2016); risks that are grounded in the uneven distribution of power and expertise within academic research projects. *Connecting Epistemologies* explored these risks in **two** ways, in co-operation with a specific community, that of ECRs.

ECRs are a community defined and created by the funding council(s) and universities, giving the research a clearly bounded group to work with that has **two** important characteristics. They make up a quasi-elite community in the sense that ECRs are qualified and skilled but also – due to short term contracts – peripheral and precarious. Second, ECRs working on *Connected Communities* projects were

often at the front line of trying to navigate the different disciplinary logics within community collaboration. The peripheral, but quasi-elite nature of the ECR community offered an opportunity to explore and to challenge the assumptions underpinning the *Connected Communities* programme. The programme was designed to be co-produced, and this project raised questions about both co-production and collaboration, as it focused on and was developed with an elite community, academics, who are embedded in methodological traditions that give greater or lesser status to collaboration.

The research team of five early career researchers (three men and two women) comprised of four researchers in full time academic posts at universities, two of which were fixed term, and one community partner whose portfolio career included part time employment within universities as well as independent research and community work through third sector organisations. Three of the team had completed PhDs and two were working on PhDs at the time. All of the research team had worked on multiple *Connected Communities* projects, with various ongoing working relationships within the team. The community partnership represents a recognition that contemporary ECR career paths are increasingly complex and ECRs from the CC programme have roles outside of traditional academic institutions. This point was important in how participants in *Connecting Epistemologies* understood their academic identities as part of the *Connected Communities* programme.

Connecting Epistemologies began with an event for ECRs in May 2014. In advance of this workshop, a call for participants was circulated prior to the event, where the purpose of the project was explained. The workshop provided an opportunity for the participants to network, share experiences of their working lives, and hear from presenters on issues of the precariousness of contemporary labour. Participants, and non-participants who had expressed an interest, were then invited to submit an expression of interest. From these a group of eleven ECRs were recruited to take part in a three-month reflective data collection exercise. The sample size was such that each researcher was paired with two to three ECRs.

The eleven participants were chosen to represent a broad spread of discipline, tenure, geographical location and professional role. The range of disciplines was identified by the hosting department or institution. A broad range across arts and humanities subjects was chosen. It should be noted that several participants stated in their applications that they were working on multidisciplinary projects or that they had worked across different disciplines. There was a mix of full time and part time employment and studentships, and all were on, or had been on, fixed term contracts. Participants were located across the UK. Some participants had worked on several research projects, while others had more limited experience. Most members of the group were women, reflecting the gender balance of the applications received.

Co-production of the research happened over the summer and autumn. Participants were invited to make three further contributions, and were open to decide upon an appropriate format for completing the reflexive data collection exercise that fitted with their own research practice. The researchers met with the ECRs to discuss each of their contributions and further reflect on what their contributions meant. At the end of this period, the various contributions were analysed and pulled together into a final report. The original workshop participants were invited back to a further workshop where the report was presented and there was further opportunity for reflection, discussion and networking.

Recognising the ethical implications of doing co-produced research, participants were provided with stipends to cover their time, and workshop participants could ask for their travel to be reimbursed (Banks and Manners, 2012; Beebeejaun et al., 2015). For many, the paying of participants is a vital part of coproduced research, especially as it can enable low-income groups to participate when otherwise they would be excluded. We do recognise that this can be ethically problematic in the way it puts research participants into a contractual agreement with the researchers (Banks et al., 2017). However, given the precarious situation of the ECRs participating in the project – and why we wished

to engage them as participants – it was felt that providing compensation for time spent on the project was appropriate.

The participants' contributions were then analysed by the Connecting Epistemologies team at a workshop in September 2014. The analysis also drew on the team's reflections of their roles on the project, including conversations with participants and their struggles over data collection, as well as their own experiences as ECRs. These reflections gave clues to the larger issues analysed by this chapter. For example, unfinished contributions, deadlines moved and meetings missed or rescheduled due to other work commitments were common occurrences in the data collection period.

Setting the scene: little Habermasians?

Much of the writing on the position of early career academics is positioned within a broader field of critiques of global neoliberalism. This body of research sees early career researchers as being at the whim and mercy of the modern, global multiversity (Shore 2010). The "empowerment" through flexibility that early career researchers "enjoy" through short term project working recreates them as subjects of neoliberal power (Cruikshank 1999). In this understanding, their desire to create portfolio careers with a range of skills is actually misrecognition of their exploitation in insecure employment without the terms and conditions of a permanent employee.

However, looking across the contributions of our participants we can see a much more nuanced subjectivity – an honest and open excitement about the opportunities brought by working on *Connected Communities* projects, tempered with a concern that they are in an insecure position. While our participants could be considered the 'reflexive subjects' of modernity in a Giddens' tradition, more accurately they could be described as 'little Habermasians' (Barnett, Clarke et al. 2008). The participants have a number of moral truth claims with which they are engaging: that *Connected Communities* projects are doing positive work with diverse communities; that the skills they require for a successful career and self-fulfilment are varied; that they are disempowered by the short-term contracts and poor terms and conditions of their employment; that they recognise the moral and intellectual value of research produced by the academy for wider society; and that the academy is increasingly being debased by global neoliberalism.

In their submissions, our participants play these moral judgements off each other. In one case, this took the form of an actual report of a Habermasian-style discourse – an edited account of a number of discussions with colleagues on these issues. As with all Habermasian discussion, the morality is ambivalent 'in the gray areas in between' (Habermas 1996: 120). This is not just a work on the self, as suggested in Foucauldian critiques of subjectivities of neoliberalism, this is clearly our subjects working to understand society and thus the morality of their actions and the actions of others, including complicit institutions such as universities.

The role of the university is related to the role of the academic disciplines that frame the ECR participants' working lives. As universities and funding councils look for research to become trans- or inter-disciplinary, their internal organisation is still based around a disciplinary perspective. The work of Abbott (2001), although drawn from the American experience, is useful for situating the discussion of ECRs and questions of trans, cross or interdisciplinary work. It also helps to contextualise many of the anxieties and forms of precariousness that are manifest in the discussion of the themes raised in the data provided by the ECRs. For Abbott (2001) 'fractal distinctions' are one of the key ways in which differences emerge and develop within disciplines, nonetheless reinforcing distinctions between them. The relevance of the fractal in fractal distinctions is that, at each stage of development, the same internal struggles are taking place. That this situation came to pass is partly a consequence of how disciplines work, itself a function of how higher education and universities themselves work. The kinds of departments that exist in the social sciences and humanities in a university now are more or less the same as 100 years ago. Part of this is down to administrative

reasons, both pedagogical and professional. This leads to a path dependency where interdisciplinarity is more highly regarded in principle than in execution. This is a vitally important contextual idea for Connected Communities researchers that do not have established, or in the case of ECRs, permanent and secure academic positions. Challenging the path dependency of academic organisation thus presents significant challenges and risks (Barry, Born & Weszkalnys, 2008; Flinders et.al., 2016).

Precariousness

One such risk is captured by the experience of precarity in academic labour. This precariousness is related to wider social and economic changes in both the professions and also in work itself. For some it is part of a change to more fluid and flexible labour markets, with more choice over aspects of career. For others it reflects deskilling and the decline of associated forms of work security, such as pensions.

For some participants this continued previous experiences of precariousness from previous sectors they had worked in – the creative and cultural industries that the *Connected Communities* programme are aligned to are notoriously precarious. One participant spoke of someone they had met in their professional sector who was approaching retirement and had never had an employment contract lasting more than six months. Another participant found themselves in a *Connected Communities* programme after being made redundant from previous arts-based employment following cuts in local government spending. However, it is vital to stress that the root of precariousness for all of the participants was the issue of whether and how they would get a full time, permanent job. Even for those participants who did not desire this traditional academic career, the fear that this might be closed to them was an important way of structuring their experience as an ECR.

Our participants experienced and framed precariousness in differing ways, stressing the reality of the uncertainty generated by not having a permanent job, whilst also describing the forms of freedom they encountered. This freedom could come in the manner of their working practices:

'I work on trains quite a bit (which I think most people do) but it also keeps things interesting. I don't get stuck in a rut and it's hard to get bored, which I like.'

or in project work, the most common form of ECR contract. These working practices gave them the freedom and autonomy they wanted. Already it was felt that 'the odd range of skills that I'd collected through a range of short term contracts ... made me suitable for this job' and a particular project 'gives me enormous freedom, allowing me breaks for personal or professional development.' Indeed, one participant, from a design background, did not use the language of precariousness, and in conversations around the matter framed work in keeping with a discipline that is project, rather than permanent contract, based. The insecurity offered by project working was framed very positively. The 'positives of precariousness' were seen as a 'lifestyle choice' that 'gives me freedom and I don't feel tied down'. However, this was tempered with awareness that 'we're all on short term contracts, we're all looking for the next job within three months of starting the new one'.

Getting the jobs was the core site for the expression of precariousness, with many of the participants identifying their presence on *Connected Communities* projects as random or lucky, see in the repetition of the phrase 'right place at the right time':

'The first appointment was, it must be admitted, largely a question of being in the right place at the right time. The result, however, has been to initiate an unplanned but so far

successful career path that utilises my unusual skills, and which fits the department's current research enthusiasms.'

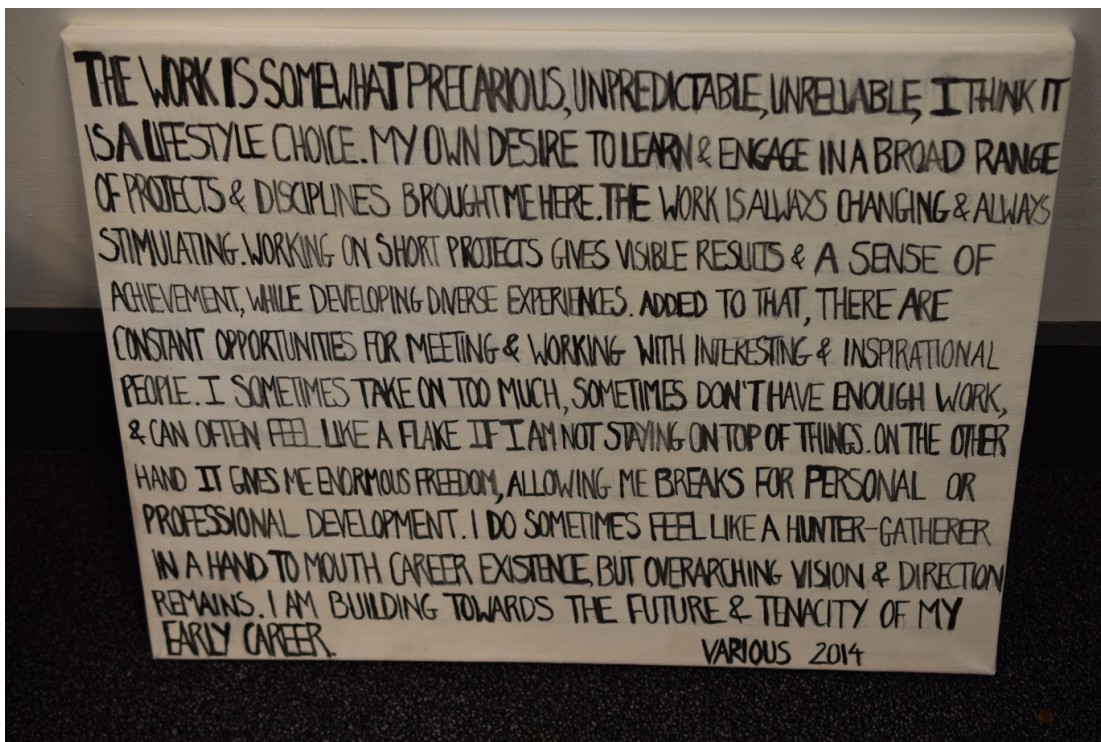
The element of precariousness underpinning their current roles came through very strongly for those working across more than one project, especially where the participant had a peripheral relationship to a specific department:

'I have a building I go to each day but no actual desk, or computer, or phone. There's something a little unsettling about not having a proper workspace of your own.'

Even for the full time, longer term, post doctoral or doctoral researchers ECRs who participated in the research there were experiences that were profoundly negative, tied to the lack of permanence of their positions:

'I don't want a job which makes me feel stressed or consumed when I am away from work.'

However, even within the nuanced recognition of the ECR position, there was still a residual core uncertainty. This uncertainty was usefully solicited through visual and material culture methods, including discussions of visual representations of ECR activities during the data-gathering period. These visual representations crystallised in ECRs' production of cultural artefacts to represent these issues, such as the image below:



This 'cultural' production was an aspect encouraged by the research team as a way of reflecting the intersection of visual methods, such as GIS mapping or social network analysis employed by the ECRs in their research work, along with the art and design background of several of the participants. These cultural products, of which the above was one, say alongside a discussion of specific objects as metaphors for the ECR experience:

'This is my wheelie case which gets dragged around with me, each week. I bought it less than six months ago but it's already falling apart from the amount of travelling I do for work, as well as delivering papers based on my own research. It's also a bit of a cheesy metaphor for what it's like as an ECR; it looks perfectly fine on the outside but underneath it's knackered.'

These types of metaphors were linked to broader questions of how to balance work and life. This was especially important for those of the participants with families:

'My personal circumstances (I have a family and live an hour from the university) result in me popping into the office to see everyone but I have not invested enough time to develop any relationships beyond the office.'

Networks were seen as important markers of quality of working life and for developing a career. However questions of work/life balance were clear for all eleven contributors, whether in comments about balancing moving house, responding to a partners' expectations or just in terms of not having enough time to live and complete the tasks expected in work. One participant was blunt about where the experience had left them:

'it came from a desire to have more time at home, with family and less time working, or thinking about work when at home. It also came from a political belief that... we shouldn't be working at the expense of our families, our health or our community.'

And another spoke openly about the perception that compromising over family life or leisure time would be necessary to succeed in an academic career:

'survival in academia...requires making sacrifices to be able to make any meaningful progression'.

A final aspect of precariousness is tied to career development, which is intimately linked with getting a permanent job. This is explored in more detail in the sections below, but it is worth picking up on one ECRs comment that stands as a useful aggregation for many of the discussions with the project participant. This focuses on how career development works for an ECR:

'Career development is apparently a significant part of my role as an ECR at...The phrase, however, cannot be found in my contract of employment, and a clear idea of what constitutes career development is hard to ascertain. Helpfully, perhaps, the AHRC are vague about what constitutes 'leadership and/or career development support', meaning that I and my PI can make it up as we go along.'

The issue raised by this comment indicates that although the framework for the ECR is one that recognises their need for support and career development it is often unstructured. In many ways this reflects the impossibility of creating a detailed framework for dealing with individuals and disciplines that are so diverse, even within the broader umbrella of arts and humanities. However it also points to the individualisation of the risks associated with building an academic identity, particularly with

regard to getting a 'good' manager or supervisor of a project. One important question for research is the extent to which this happens – all of the eleven contributors spoke of how they had predominantly (although not entirely) good experiences of support on their projects. But there is no way, without a more systematic approach to this issue, to know if this reflects a well-functioning academy or simply luck on the part of the participants in *Connecting Epistemologies*.

Academic Identity

The discussion of precariousness concluded with a comment on career development. This is as much to do with the socialisation of the academic personality, as it is to do with having the right CV for a job. In previous years the academic identity had a close relationship to discourses of academic freedom, tied to permanence of tenure. As has been touched upon above, this has been eroded in several ways in the UK, but it has gone hand in hand with other changes within the academy and the growth of roles such as delivering impact through one's research (see, for example: Bastow, Dunleavy & Tinkler, 2014). The following discussion role of academic identity, develops this idea, exploring both the specific identities of the participants, as well as interrogating the potential emergence of a new form of academic identity, formed by the *Connected Communities* programme and its specific alignment to 'impact' agendas.

The peculiarities and contradictions of academic identity were common to those participants who discussed it:

'The long working hours but continued suggestion that we have so much autonomy and flexibility.'

Along with

'The pressure individuals put on themselves in academia and how it appeared a very individualised career – you have to make sure you write your own papers and develop your own portfolio if you want to stay in academia and move up the career ladder.'

This individualisation was often at odds with the researchers' status as part of project teams:

'It is interesting working within a multi-disciplinary team with a range of methodology, this can be good experience at this stage of my academic career but I'm not sure where this will take me in the future.'

The emergence of a new form of academic identity came through much of the discussions and the submissions because of the difference (and distance) between researchers' practices on projects and their perceptions of academic identity. This is linked to the final section's discussions of research practices, but in the context of academic identity it is worth noting how the abilities that were most valuable to the research work they were conducting were often not those they associated with traditional academia. Those skills were specifically those we might perceive as being vital to delivering 'impactful' research: organising meetings; translating between academics and communities; hanging out with participants in a range of situations; or other mundane activities that were essential to the projects' successes but were hard to characterise as 'academic'. This was contrasted with formal 'academic' practices such as writing papers, which was seen as a core activity by many participants. For example:

'In my current academic role I use some of these skills but others I have had to develop (somewhat reluctantly). These include writing - I have never been bad at writing but I struggle with the language and format required for an academic journal. I find I am not able to be as creative as I would like in these situations. I also lack confidence in my knowledge and ability to argue a point feeling perhaps that I don't have the necessary academic context and rigor.'

But these varied 'non-academic' practices also:

'Challenge me in many ways that more traditional academic work does not.'

The potential tension between writing and other aspects of academic work reflected the emergence of newer forms of identity is discussed in more detail below. At this point it is worth focusing on the perception, voiced by many of the participants, about the relationship between being an academic and the activity of writing. This was important both to postdocs and doctoral researchers questioning their suitability for an academic career:

'I'm proud to be a Dr but not sure if sitting in a university office writing every day is me'

And also to how descriptions of time were narrated by participants. The issue of time, linked to precariousness, meant ECRs were often doing two jobs: working on delivering projects, as well as struggling with the process of academic writing.

'I will need evidence of publications to continue as funding for this post comes to an end in two years I will need something on my CV beyond a thesis to apply for other posts.'

For post-doctoral participants there was a clear need to balance their new projects with the more academic (in their view) expertise they had developed as part of their PhDs:

'I am currently revising two manuscripts from my PhD that have been invited for resubmission. These are not related to my current work and I feel that this needs to be done in my own time. I would like to get these and one other paper from my PhD published so that I can focus on publications within my current role. It feels as if I need to shed this skin to enable developing a new identity within my current role.'

Changing identities was closely related to participants' narratives of hopefulness for careers, which was in turn part of an emerging role for universities as public institutions with the need to deliver impact as part of their core mission:

'it's not to say I don't have a career plan...but what I'm seeing more and more is the type of person universities are looking for is someone quite interdisciplinary and creative and I think people with portfolio CVs is maybe more...but that could be misguided. I don't know. I'll find out.'

The type of academic described above is at the core of much of the methodological and practice-based innovation within the *Connected Communities* programme. However, in keeping with the ambivalence of the discussion of precariousness and the interdisciplinary status of their roles as researchers, reflected in one of the earlier quotes, gave rise to fears for future employment and the extent to which they were really fulfilling the purpose of *Connected Communities*;

'Is the pursuit of the interdisciplinary really working? Maybe the question should be: is the pursuit of the interdisciplinary within the academy really working? I ask this because I can see that my CV...looks intriguing, and it ticks that interdisciplinary box. But will it forward my career?I'm not so sure. The fact is that the majority of academic positions demand a specialist in one field or another, not a Jack-of-all-trades. The impression therefore is that I am using an ECR's unique and flexible position to achieve a CV and skill set for employment outside the academy – and that feels like something of a betrayal of the AHRC's support, primarily financial, but also ideological'

Yet others took an approach that embraced the fluidity of where academic research fits within their lives and careers:

'I think I am keeping my options open about what to do after this PhD experience. I love the interdisciplinarity of Connected Communities but I have no idea how I would slot into a discipline afterwards! I think I would enjoy teaching and intend to investigate whether I could get involved in this in my 3rd year, I also enjoy my work outside of academia in events and festivals, so would be reluctant to give that up completely.'

It is perhaps for those people who have a strong sense of their own political or creative trajectory, which might criss-cross inside and outside academia, which *Connected Communities* has most effectively supported.

The role of the academy

A fear of creating a 'non-academic' CV, or having skills that were undervalued by a wider performance management regime focusing on writing papers or individual academic achievements provides a bridge to the consideration of the specificity of *Connected Communities* work. *Connected Communities* research projects were about finding ways to develop research with communities in a context that commonly had either not been subject to academic consideration, or working on issues that had seen potential partners alienated from universities and academics. The discussion of *Connected Communities* at the beginning of this chapter gives a flavour of the context for these issues. How did they play out for *Connecting Epistemologies* participants?

Ideas about new forms of academic identity and practice were emerging within *Connected Communities* projects, particularly as the link between community and university:

'I feel like the link between 'the academics' and the community. It is really important that I establish good relationships with partners who have been working in the community before we offer the groups as they can open doors by raising awareness and sharing information. Once that I had established good partnerships with community partners the referrals came in and this can only be achieved by gaining their trust and being present as a reminder of what we are trying to achieve.'

However, the role of broker was a difficult one and not just because of well-rehearsed ethical challenges with participatory research (Banks & Manners, 2012). In the case of one participant's narrative, represented in the form of email communications, the community participants put 'community' literally in inverted commas and concluded that 'it just doesn't seem worth spending 2-3 more days taking part in the [research] project to answer the sort of research questions you are asking'. A great deal of the contribution of another participant focused on this process of relationship forming and developing, with events recorded such as an intimate conversation with a community partner in a car after an event where the community partner revealed a momentous career decision.

The role of broker was also that of translator, moving between different forms of academic expertise on large projects, or between languages of community and university (see also: Connelly et.al. 2015). This was experienced as a useful skill that might lead to employment:

'I am fortunate that the CC project I am on provides the flexibility of activities and diversity of connections to allow this experience to appeal to a much wider group of people when I begin to apply for other jobs'

And also, in the case of another participants' narrative, as a form of moral responsibility that adds another layer to the identity of the *Connected Communities* academic:

'I feel a great sense of duty towards communicating and disseminating our work to a wide range of audiences, and in particular community groups who I feel could benefit from the different things we are learning from the research.'

This was clearly aligned to many of the broader challenges identified in delivering impact through research in an ethical, engaged way, rather than viewing it as a broadcast activity (Vanderhoven & Campbell, 2016; Beebejaun et.al. 2015).

There was also a sense of *Connected Communities* transforming individual ECRs' approaches to research in a fundamental way. This sense of new identity was not unproblematic. Previous sections have touched on the issues of establishing oneself in a disciplinary or departmental context. Participants also described having difficulty in drawing *Connected Communities* ways of working into other academic contexts:

'For me, it illustrates the sharp edge that you run into when the sensibility that is supported by the programme carries over into other contexts. This sharp edge was deeply embodied, anger, fear, threat arising throughout the day. It divided me from colleagues that I like a great deal and have a lot of respect for. And has made me wonder how much I have changed and what other situations I'll find myself not fitting in to.'

While in some cases this shift was expressed positively as underpinning a political and epistemic challenge to the academy, in others there was the sense of a threat to expertise and professional status that is potentially expressed in co-production or participatory forms of research, whereby new methods may 'devalue the professional skills and training that we have.' This echoes the experiences of other *Connected Communities* projects, where the varying engagement with "applied" research

associated with academics' disciplinary identities effected their relationship to doing this type of research (Matthews et.al. 2017).

There may be, then, the emergence of an academic identity shaped by participants' experiences of *Connected Communities*, one that is at the locus of a complex intersection of interdisciplinary research practices and new ways of "doing" academic research through co-produced methods to deliver wider impact. However it is one that, like the more traditional academic identity and the position of the ECR within the academy, requires support if it not to be merely precarious and then fleeting.

What is research for the new academic?

Connecting Epistemologies was keen to understand how research methods were being developed and how methods were related to personal academic identity, and particular methodological approaches. These questions were captured in the analysis under the umbrella question of "what is research?" This question allowed the analysis to link together questions of identity, precariousness and the experience of being involved in *Connected Communities*.

It is worth repeating, as a caveat to these points, the sheer diversity of methods and approaches captured by the arts and humanities. This is not just a matter of the disciplines to which participants were related, but also of what counts as knowledge. For example, one participant, when doing qualitative analysis of interview data, approached this spatially and visually, as opposed to working just on the text or using software. This diversity, even for standard research practices, was typical of the eleven participants.

There are, of course, commonalities. The most notable of these is the way research is not the research of the scholar, but is rather a set of practices that are as much to do with professional project support, development and management as to do with the ideal type of the scholar. Much of the working life of the participants was fairly routine, reflected in the nature of the contributions themselves: notes of meetings and email chains both featured. This is similar to research project management and similar level roles with the economy more broadly – supporting larger tasks and activities through providing administrative support. Indeed it was part of the identity as a researcher:

'It is difficult to identify these events and the process of organising them, documenting them and building on the findings and discussion from them as a methodology. However, they do form a key part of the project and they produce insight which we will theorise, analyse, build on and write about.'

Albeit one that needed to be negotiated as it disconnected them from their academic background:

'My academic background is quite different from the literature I use today and I don't have experience working within Arts and Humanities, I have very little practice working with communities'

That notwithstanding, some were able to adapt their disciplinary approach to the administrative tasks of their research project:

'I have also been very involved in the organisation of the final events, but mainly from a practice point of view in terms of how everything is presented. For me it is very important to have something to show at the end of a project that is concrete and exists'

in the real world rather than remaining an abstract notion or a list of recommendations (which so often is the case).'

For some this experience was disconcerting and made them feel they had moved away from how their doctoral research had trained and developed their expertise, leading them to describe their research roles as a 'hybrid of life experience rather than training'. Even where there was continuity between doctoral and post-doctoral research, the difference was that participants felt that only a tiny proportion of their time was spent doing 'research' and that most time was spent managing relationships with community partners, taking part in meetings, and organising events. Again, these are activities that can clearly be seen as those which deliver wider impact from research activities. Yet while some ECRs did interpret these types of activities as 'not research', others were clear that it was in these type of activities – how the tea was to be made, who made the cakes, building relationships – that productive 'knowing' and 'insight' took place. For some this was clearly different from 'doing research':

'I moved from a desk based researcher more interested in theory to doing fieldwork, it was unexpected, I felt lost as a person'

But also is part of the emerging form of academic identity discussed previously:

'The revelation for me has been that project management and research 'proper' are not necessarily two unrelated things.'

The positive space for reshaping academic identities – becoming known for pioneering new forms of academic meetings or for specific projects – was perhaps most clear for those ECRs taking higher-status roles as project leaders and Principal Investigators (PI).

Yet as one ECR PI notes that following the flurries of bids in the wake of two annual *Connected Communities* summits came the experience of juggling being PI and CI on multiple projects and a certain amount of project-fatigue:

*'Around the time that the applications for this year's projects were due I was having a conversation with a colleague who wondered why I was **thinking** of applying when I had recently received a [prestigious Fellowship]. She had to remind me that I was already being funded to do almost 100% research, so why was I applying for more? It was really strange that I hadn't actually noticed this myself, I was so caught up in the CC world I couldn't see where I actually was. So that shift in perspective was also really critical to my current involvement (or drastically reduced involvement).'*

It's worth closing with two of the more pessimistic, but revealing quotes. Ultimately ECRs face many challenges, even as they love the work they do and are utterly committed to it, on the level of their sense of identity through to their methodological practices. However this is tempered by the reality of struggling with university systems, academic disciplines and the assumptions of what an academic is:

'I'd love to have my own, consistent space to work in, which came with some equipment. It would make me feel like I actually had a 'proper' job. It can be embarrassing admitting to family and friends outside of academia that I don't have these things. It's not what they imagine working at a University to be like'

The challenges ECRs face are alleviated by some elements of *Connected Communities*, but as that programme itself has faced criticism, it can be hard for an individual ECR to have problems of interdisciplinarity, new methods, or the struggle for legitimation of academic practices added to their quest for an academic post:

'It's difficult to maintain confidence when you are challenging the way that things are being done'.

Conclusion

Connecting Epistemologies aimed to explore the ECR experience of *Connected Communities*, along with questions of methods and methodologies. In doing so it has raised a range of issues, both from the data presented above and from the experiences of the five members of the Connecting Epistemologies project team. The ECR experience is diverse, even within a sample of only eleven! For those who have a clear disciplinary home and desire for an academic career *Connected Communities* causes anxieties, as Facer and Enright (2017) have also argued, given the methods, practices and identities best suited to the forms of research foregrounded in the programme. For those who have a reflexive sense of personal trajectory or sense of political purpose, which might flow in and out of a traditional academic trajectory, the programme has created a relatively high-status, funded space for collaborative research and broader collaborative work.

The above point is especially pronounced in those cases where an ECR had taken a leadership role. In particular, the explicit support for ECRs as principal investigators and project leads enabled some people to become recognised for their work through fellowships and through gaining positions in prestigious institutions. Yet this is not a universal experience and feelings of being cut adrift without a clear 'home' were expressed especially by those in research assistant and doctoral positions who did not have a professional or practice background to inform their work.

In relation to this concern is the emerging picture of an interdisciplinary, multi-skilled professional that draws on more than a doctoral or postdoctoral path, underpinned by experiences from beyond the academy. This professional is essential to the new world of the impact agenda and for a university's connection to communities. However it is clear that the usual form of academic training, the PhD, is not providing fully the necessary skills to fulfil this role. Equally the training available to staff at most HEI's is not yet supporting these new skill sets. Training in community engagement, communication and project management should become as common as training in literature searching and teaching skills.

The new identity described in contributions shows a tension between the traditional individualised researcher and the connected, communicative, research broker emerging in *Connected Communities* roles. For some, their roles on projects were about forging new modes of knowing and they welcomed the challenges to academic ways of being that attended it. Yet beneath the theoretical questions raised lurked a practical problem of what the career path looks like for this type of researcher. And whether working towards a transformed academy was likely to fit with a permanent job with the associated support and benefits, such as a pension. This paralleled the growth of the 'impact' agenda within research, and the related tensions between doing research using traditional methodologies and working with communities, or research end-users, to drive methodological innovation (Pain et.al. 2011; Slater, 2012; Flinders, et.al. 2016).

Here our case study returns to the broader questions of this book, not only around how best to support and nurture ECRs, but also how best to win the struggle for more progressive political

academic interventions in the contemporary university. If research funders and universities want to take impact seriously then they need to look at how they can attract and keep professionals with this new academic identity and the varied skills it requires. *Connected Communities* has been an ideal training ground for people who want to build and maintain links between the university and other organisations. If career opportunities are not provided by institutions, then this expertise will dissipate. One of the benefits of more varied career paths where people move in and out of university employment is that there is more understanding of the academic world embedded in other organisations, but the danger is in the current environment of funding cuts, wage stagnation, erosion of employment rights and managerialism that more people will leave academia in favour of a working environment where these skills are more highly valued.

This chapter has presented our research findings and a narrative about change in higher education driven by impact through four themes: 'Precariousness', 'Academic Identity', 'The role of the Academy', and 'What is research for the new academic?'. Here are our recommendations on these themes for how to move forwards the opportunities for ECRs to thrive in an impact focussed HEI landscape:

Precariousness: Very obviously projects like those funded through *Connected Communities* are about doing research that has direct impact in the wider world, but the current funding structure for those projects promotes precarious employment practices. Universities are not alone in having high levels of short-term part-time contracts, it is common in other sectors too. However, we can see from our participants that the tensions are created by the juxtaposition of temporary contracts and very secure permanent contracts which creates a power imbalance. The risk is that as a sector we develop this new expertise but don't have the infrastructure in place to keep and nurture it. This is a sector-wide issue that needs a strategic intervention and also needs individual institutions and project leaders to take action. The next three themes are suggestions for how universities can better support the career development of people on the front line of real world connections between the universities and other institutions.

Academic identity: This research evidences the emergence of a significantly different set of skills to those traditionally associated with 'the academic' that are being developed through this project based collaborative research work. Demand for these skills is starting to appear in job descriptions: this needs to happen more, but also needs to be embedded in the development of new researchers through research training and the PhD. It then needs to be recognised in the grading of academic posts with equivalence to other skills in job descriptions (i.e. don't just make posts that require community engagement skills a lower grade, therefore lower paid).

The role of the Academy: This programme was shaped by the introduction of the impact agenda into the academy. It can be viewed positively as underpinning a political and epistemic challenge to the academy in a way that supports rigour in rethinking the relationships between the university and others, and prompting the demonstration of value to society. On the other hand, it can generate a sense of a threat to expertise and professional status whereby new methods may 'devalue the professional skills and training that we have.' Going back to theories of power and change, the debates around these types of projects and impact can make an important contribution to the nuanced understanding of power and change both within the Academy and between the Academy and those on the other side of 'impact'. This debate needs to continue.

What is research for the new academic?: This research documents a fundamental shift in the practice of research, in what a researcher does and therefore what we can understand research to be. As this programme is born out of a strategic response in arts and humanities to the requirement to demonstrate impact, we argue that this shift in understanding of 'what is research' is also fundamental to achieving impact. Research practice progresses through the documentation of

precedents for new approaches to research, the publication of descriptions of research methods, and the development of methodologies and their philosophical underpinnings. This calls for individual researchers to document and publish this new research practice to create the literature that can enable new researchers to adopt these approaches in their PhD research. The academy can then formalise this way of working through inclusion of these skills and competencies in job descriptions and training opportunities and therefore improve the career opportunities for ECRs working in this way.

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