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Translating close-up research into action: a critical reflection

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Abstract

This paper argues that simple dissemination models do not work. One of the strengths of close-up research, with its emphasis on depth and understanding, is that it can identify why things are as they are and by extension when we identify wrongs seek to challenge them. The paper suggests, however, that making a difference is fraught with contradictions and that the translation from research to action is far from straight forward. We illustrate these tensions by reflecting on our experiences of conducting four projects for the UK Higher Education Academy. At the same time as exploring the slippages of translation and loss of criticality, however, we want to defend notion of praxis as theoretically informed change for critical social purposes. This involves a view of making a difference and research that moves beyond thinking of research as a discrete act and invokes the significance of corporate agency and the possibilities of acting collectively.

Key words: evidence-based; close-up research; participatory methodology; dissemination; praxis; agency

Introduction

The massification of higher education has led to an increasingly diverse, and globally mobile, student body. In the United Kingdom (UK) this transformation of higher education has both shaped and driven a national policy impetus towards improvements in pedagogy, in order to meet the needs of these new 'consumers' of higher education. The UK Higher Education Academy (HEA) is the national body for enhancing learning and teaching in higher education, 'committed to excellent learning and teaching, supporting UK higher education organisations with an emphasis on improving the student experience' and operating as 'a primary source of expertise and knowledge on UK and international higher education learning, teaching and the student experience' (2014a, no pagination). Furthermore, the HEA undertakes and commissions research which 'inspires and supports effective practice in learning and teaching [and] influences policy, future-thinking and change' (HEA 2014a, no pagination). The HEA is thus positioned as an organisation focused on making a difference through providing practitioners with the wherewithal to change pedagogic practice in the interests of students. The underlying model behind this claim is one of being 'evidence-based':

> The HEA is an authoritative and independent voice, informed by sound evidence. Working with students, staff and external stakeholders, we interpret, challenge and shape HE [higher education] learning and teaching policy across the UK. Through our policy work we stimulate debate and produce evidence-based policy solutions that address the challenges facing the enhancement of learning and teaching. (Higher Education Academy, 2014b, no pagination)

The UK is not unique in this respect. The Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA, nd.), for example, makes similar claims, and funds and

supports research designed to shape higher education policy and practice, as does the Canadian Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE, nd.). For these organisations, therefore, the underlying model of policy initiatives assumes a model of 'evidence-based' research that will have impact ~~on the higher education sector~~ by translating research findings into improvements in practice, so 'making a difference'. In this paper, we reflect ~~in detail at~~on two projects funded by the ~~Higher Education Academy~~HEA to suggest that the idea of 'evidence-based' is significantly more problematic than such organisations would suggest. The paper operates at three levels: first, we offer some philosophical reflections on models of impact and evidence; we then offer up a critical reflection of the inherent contradictions of producing impact even in projects that were explicitly designed to make a difference; finally, we offer an attempt to recoup and re-theorise the conditions under which making a difference might become a reality..

Evidence based practice

The arguments for why evidence-based approaches that rely on simple dissemination models do not work are well rehearsed. Many versions of 'evidence' rely on models derived from medical science and the outcomes from gold-standard randomised-controlled trials that are then disseminated based on a systematic review of the literature (Evans and Benefield, 2001; Clegg, 2005; McLure 2005). The whole point of experimentation, however, is that constant conjunctions are produced in the closed conditions of the laboratory whereas higher education professionals operate in open and messy systems. What really matters is to know why something works. Understanding the nature of explanation requires a more sophisticated ontology and epistemology of science that goes beyond mere Humean regularity (Bhaskar 1978, 1986). Even if one is forgiving of the evidence-based movement in medicine (and there is much to recommend it) the idea of the gold standard as a model for education (and the social sciences more generally) is fatally flawed (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Pawson, 2006;

Clegg, 2005). Non-trivial experimentation in higher education research is virtually impossible on ethical and methodological grounds. Where quasi-experiments have been done they tend to manipulate only very limited variables and the conditions of partial closure mean that the conclusions that are drawn are unlikely to have relevance for other practitioners. As Morrison (2001, p. 79) argues what is missing from debates about the growing use of randomised control trials in formulating 'evidence-based' education policy is 'that 'what works' is a matter of judgement rather than data, and that this judgement is imbued with moral and ethical concerns'. Moreover, Tilley and Pawson (1997) point out, where programme evaluations have been done we find that some things work in some circumstances and not in others. Pawson (2006) has developed a much more sophisticated model of evaluation based on understanding the underlying mechanisms involved, rather than on programme evaluations. The challenge of this work is the theoretical resolution involved in identifying what such mechanisms might be. We have criticised systematic reviews done in higher education for their failure to achieve this (Clegg, 2005). One of the functions of close-up research with its emphasis on depth and understanding is an attempt to explain why things are as they are and, where we identify wrongs, ceteris paribus how we might change them. The underlying impulse for much higher education research and scholarship, particularly that inspired by feminist, post-colonial and other radical frameworks, is to change things for the better (for example, Lather, 2001; Burke, 2007; Burke, 2009; Torres and Noguera, 2009; Tomlison and Lipsitz, 2013; Torres, 2014). Sayer (2011) has convincingly argued (again contra-Hume) that there are good philosophical reasons why we can and should make the move from states of affairs to normative conclusion: in other words derive ought from is.

The problems we face in ~~close-up~~ research making a difference are therefore not primarily philosophical since, as argued above, there are sophisticated accounts of why we can and should make the move from research to practice. The difficulty, as ~~close-up~~ research on

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organisational change so amply demonstrates (Trowler, 2008), is that change is mediated through complex cultural channels and that impact is unlikely to be linear. In higher education these mediations involve disciplinary and departmental cultures and shared memories and stories about how and why innovations have been tried in the past and have or have not worked (Clegg, 2006). ~~Passive dissemination models rarely work and s~~Strategies of involvement and dialogue are a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the implementation of change. Most academic development and change strategies have been developed based on this need for engagement. The ~~Higher Education Academy~~HEA (2014c, no pagination), for example, argues that 'working in partnership with students is a sophisticated and effective way of developing student engagement and enhancing learning and teaching' and the academy has developed a range of frameworks for enhancing student engagement and partnership working, including in research and other forms of scholarly activity. Much academic development work, however, has moved away from an orientation towards the individual teacher to attempting to work at the institutional level and reconfigure rewards and disincentives for good teaching, as our own work has evidenced (Stevenson, Whelan and Burke, 2014), since it is at this level that the contradictions of the system are played out. This has uncomfortable consequences for the identity of those academic developers who would see themselves as critical researchers because institutional and national level priorities have often resulted in managerialist responses and pressures (Stevenson et al., 2014) rather than on the praxis models invoked in some academic development writing (Grant 2007). Academic development is a particular case, but we want to argue that even where research is close-up and designed to yield insights into practice, and even where written and face-to-face dissemination has been designed to engage directly with practitioners or directly with students, problems of translation and loss of criticality remain. The topic shifts as it moves from research writing into guidance for practice if, as is nearly always the case, the

conditions under which efforts at improvement or change are attempted remain essentially the same. In conditions not of our own choosing assessing the scope for real change is difficult, and of course saying 'well I really wouldn't want to start here', while often true, is not likely to either inspire or engage practitioner actors and policy makers.

Making a difference inside a system inevitably involves a compromise whereby a bracket is effectively placed around the things that are not under the control of the particular actors in concrete situation. As Archer (2012) has recently argued in The Reflexive Imperative in Late Modernity, late modernity has not liberated us from structural constraints as some theorists of 'individualised individualism' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) have suggested. Instead, we are confronted with an intensification of morphogenesis, with the rate of change being speeded up at both cultural and structural levels, presenting us with 'contextual incongruity' which, as Archer (2012) contends, predisposes subjects towards meta-reflexivity. This contextual incongruity confronts both us as researchers and those we are researching as we struggle with problems to be solved in everyday life in our attempts to realise projects which matter to us (Archer, 2000). The dilemmas and contradictions of translation into action are both practical and intellectual and making a difference involves consideration of both structure and agency. Ironically our explanations are often better at accounting for why desired changes did not come about rather than being able to make the claim that they did. In the following section we explore the contradictions of practice through an examination of two research projects funded by the Higher Education AcademyHEA.: The tensions and contradictions we wrestled with, and our reflections on them, were ongoing during the conduct of the research. In particular, we struggled with producing materials for our funding body, the HEA, which framed our projects as being evidence-based, whilst at the same time maintaining our more critical take on the tension between theory and practice. These reflections took the form of critical conversations between the researchers and with

participants involved in the research as well as more public reflections when we shared our work with other researchers in the field - both at the time of initial dissemination of the projects and also at subsequent higher education conferences.

Translations and contradictions

Formations of Gender and Higher Education Pedagogies (GaP project)

Much close-up research starts from radical premises and is based on commitments to social justice and, in this tradition, the. A recent example would be the work of Burke and her collaborators on Formations of Gender and Higher Education Pedagogies (GaP) project (Burke, Crozier, Francis, Read, Hall, and Peat, 2012) (Burke et al., 2012) was undertaken in the context of concerns for widening participation and fairer access. The project, based in the Paulo Freire Institute-UK, and inspired by Freirean and feminist concepts of praxis, aimed to engage students and lecturers in critical and reflexive dialogue about the complexities and processes of developing inclusive teaching and learning practices that recognise difference and challenge exclusivity, The project was aligned with the institute's aspiration to 'create transformative spaces of dialogue and imagination across theory, practice and action, aiming to produce interdisciplinary and participatory research methodologies to help challenge social inequalities in and through different pedagogical spaces and frameworks' (nd. University of Roehampton) and the research was conducted across six disciplines (Classics and History, Business Studies and Management, Creative Writing, Dance, Sports Science, and Philosophy). The participatory methodology incorporated 64 student interviews, 20 observations of classroom practice, four focus groups with students and twelve focus groups with staff. In addition the project included a small group of executive student consultants who participated more intensely with the project activities. In order to enhance possibilities for continued participation, the research was based in one case-study higher education institution

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but created opportunities for students and lecturers across the UK to participate through two intensive workshops organised outside of the case-study institution and independently of the core research team. In addition we (Burke with her colleagues) included a small group of executive student consultants who participated more intensely with the project activities. The methodology was, therefore, explicitly designed to involve the participants and with making a difference in mind:

> the project sought to enhance participation in consideration of pedagogical relations, experiences and practices through a range of participatory methods including workshops, forums, seminars and discussions. The research was designed to create dialogic spaces of reflexivity in which HE teachers and students critically discussed and reflected on their pedagogical experiences and practices in a wider social context that explored the relationship between HE pedagogies, complex inequalities and exclusions at the micro-level of classroom experiences and the significance of identity formations in shaping HE pedagogies and spaces. (Burke et al., 2012, pp. 3–4)

As part of the participatory methodology we included a series of intensive workshops for students and academics who discussed and worked with extracts from the (anonymised) data to explore where there might be resonances or disconnections emerging from their pedagogical experiences, identities and practices. In addition to academic outputs, such as journal papers, the projectwe also produced a continuing professional development pack Teaching Inclusively Changing Pedagogical Spaces (Burke and Crozier, 2014) for teachers. The pack used quotes from the GaP data, included scenarios based on the data, suggested further reading and most importantly asked questions that challenge staff to think about their own teaching and notice the ways in which their assumptions and those of their students may

be at variance and also to be aware of the variability of student responses in the classroom (Burke and Crozier, 2014). The pack starts from the position that in order to create inclusive teaching practices:

> conceptual resources are essential for reshaping both understanding and action and this is an iterative and cyclical process—reflection-action and action-reflection. Critical pedagogies understand that inequalities are deeply embedded in historical and institutional structures of exclusion, marginalisation and relations of power. Thus the dismantling of inequalities require pedagogical strategies underpinned by theoretical insights that help shed light on the nature and complexities of inequalities and exclusions. At the same time, critical practices, embedded in a commitment to equity and inclusion, are necessary in order to overcome the subtle processes of exclusion and derision that often take place in pedagogical spaces (Burke et al., 2012, 3–4).

GaP is piece of close-up research explicitly aimed at making a difference. However, it is also an example of the inherent contradictions of such research aims. The following quote from the conclusions to the main GaP report clearly illustrate this:

> Many of the lecturers expressed a deep sense of disempowerment in terms of increasing workloads, high levels of institutional expectation not least connected to the marketisation of HE and the rapid pace of change in HE policy. Widening participation presents rich pedagogical opportunities but also complex challenges. Institutions and policy-makers at the national level must acknowledge these challenges and support lecturers (Burke et al., 2012, 56).

However, whilst we would argue that the need to support lecturers identified in the last sentence is indisputable, there is ample evidence that this support is not happening. Indeed the complexities of pedagogy and widening participation, which the project explores, are being undermined by the policy shift to reframe the agenda as simply one of fair access (Burke,

2012). Even the low level aspiration of fair access is unfilled as Boliver (2013) has demonstrated in her detailed empirical analysis of admissions. There is a slippage, therefore, in the translation of the research findings into practice both at the level of policy, where the conditions for the realisation of the full meaning of widening participation are being undermined, and also at the level of pedagogy. The questions addressed to teachers are ones that they can individually reflexively process but if the conclusions of the report are accepted, it seems that many staff will feel powerless to act on their insights in all but small ways. The real contradictions of the world in which students and staff find themselves constrain and limit the translation of research into practice as teachers do not have control of their conditions of work. This problem of translation is also evident in the resources for teachers, which carefully navigates between outlining the deeply embedded and often structural dynamics of inequalities in the operation of race, gender and class and the questions addressed to the teachers. Even if staff are aware of the complex dynamics they confront in the classroom the individual teacher inevitably confronts the limits of individual reflexivity, and indeed were they to follow up on the suggested readings, which elaborate further on the structural factors underlying inequalities, the limits of individual agency might become even more apparent. This suggests that the connections between even carefully designed and critically theorised close-up research and making a difference is a hard road to navigate and one which requires something beyond individual agency.

There is a further conundrum in relation to making a difference to pedagogic practices and students' lives because in conditions not of our own choosing the emergent strategy for change, at both the individual and institutional level, may stand in direct contradiction with the espoused critical stance of the researchers. Examples of the paradoxes we faced in this

respect was our (Clegg and Stevenson) research project 'Creating Graduates with Impact in Education'.

Understanding the Value of Extra-Curricular Activities in Creating Graduates with Impact in Education (Graduates with Impact)

The Graduates with Impact project (Stevenson, Sealey and Clegg, 2011) was a collaboration between one higher education institution and four further education colleges across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The overall aim was to enhance conceptual and theoretical understandings of the diversity and value of Extra-Curricular Activities (ECA) to students studying on awards designed to lead to careers in education, in its broadest sense, as well as to staff and employers. This included students, staff and employers involved with teacher trainees in primary, secondary, early years and Physical Education, teaching assistants, pre-school/nursery and youth work practitioners and those training to teach in further or higher education, and studying for degrees, foundation degrees and further education qualifications,. Individual and group interviews took place with staff, students and employers. Fifty two students participated in eleven focus groups; twenty interviews took place with individual students and twelve with individual academic members of staff and 21 telephone interviews were conducted with head teachers or other key recruiting staff in teaching or other education-related areas. The project built on our previous work exploring the meaning and valorisation of different forms of ECA (Clegg, Stevenson and Willott, 2010a and b; Clegg and Stevenson, 2011; Stevenson and Clegg, 2012; Stevenson and Clegg, 2013) and was designed to

enhance conceptual and theoretical understandings of the diversity and value

of extra-curricular activities (ECA) to education students, staff and employers

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and to the wider society; and to understand how ECA might be integrated into the education curriculum, developed to enhance employability and, in so doing, to create graduates with impact (Stevenson et al, 2012).

The Graduates with Impact project, like the GaP project above, was framed within a normative commitment to widening participation and was directed at exploring and enhancing the cultural capital of students who come into higher education with different resources than those traditionally valued and associated with high market value. Based on our theoretical orientations we were ~~also~~ wary of the way the idea of cultural capital can be deployed as a deficit model, seeing students as lacking rather than analysing the differential valuation of the capital of dominant groups (Clegg, 2011; Yosso 2005). In previous initial research (Clegg et al, 2010a) looking at extra-curricular activities we had explored what got valued by staff and students and also how students understood the range of activities they undertook outside their formal course. These included paid work, caring and other responsibilities as well as the usual list of activities that can be undertaken by campus-based full-time students such as sporting, cultural, volunteering and other traditionally valorised accomplishments. We found that what was recognised as legitimate extra-curricular activity was highly gendered (care counted for little in the eyes of both staff and students outside particular instances for example in female dominated health professions) and that routine employment, often undertaken by less privileged students, was also down played (Stevenson and Clegg, 2012). Although these findings can be disseminated, this in itself does not disrupt the operation of the dominant discourses which privilege the activities of only some students.

In our Graduates with Impact project we wanted to explore, in more detail, not only what forms of ECA students were participating in but also what they, as well as staff and employers, considered of value in enhancing graduate outcomes. In addition, we wanted to

explore how any staff commitment to such possibilities might be being mobilised within the curriculum. In addition to interviews, therefore, we also examined samples of course or module handbooks to consider where and in what context ECA are referred to (if at all) in relation to the curriculum and to the development of student employability and graduate outcomes. Drawing on these findings, in our interviews with students, we not only explored how they saw and were building towards their futures but also what forms of curriculum intervention they considered most helpful to them in becoming employed. Our strategies of engagement, like the ones employed in the GaP project, therefore included working directly with staff as part of the research process, producing a small colourful booklet aimed at staff and students, incorporating things that might be thought of as constituting good practice and designed in good faith to make a difference (Sealey et al., 2012).

In undertaking this research, however we grappled with the extent to which students, in order to construct a story of themselves into an employable and fulfilling future, could rescript an account of their capabilities and what they had gained through their engagement with activities within and outside their course. Our research was critical of the employability agenda and its framing in the context of neo-liberal understandings of the self. The paradox for us, however, was that in trying to make a difference and help students, we were in effect endorsing the elaboration of the sorts of self envisioned by the neo-liberal supply side economics of which we were critical (Clegg and Stevenson, 2013). So, while at one level we could maintain the critical distance necessary for academic work, contradictions emerged when faced with our commitments to diversity and equity and our desire to help students realise their own life projects.

While there is a clear need for longitudinal work to be undertaken to evaluate whether interventions like ours had any impact the underlying contradiction remains, that is we are exhorting students to become the sorts of subjects we were critiquing. In our booklet, for example, we describe Kenny, a mature learner on a one-year Access to Higher Education course at his local further education college. In our reflections on Kenny's approach to employability (Sealey et al., 2012, no pagination) we argued that:

> Students like Kenny need support and guidance to consider ECA in its broadest context, in order to develop a better awareness of the types of ECA that could be included on a CV. Although Kenny is aware of the transferable skills he has acquired through his participation in ECA he needs further support to identify how he can include evidence from such participation to demonstrate these skills. He then needs further support from his tutors to help him 'sell himself', for example participation in structured opportunities to reflect on his experiences.

In effect, therefore, we were saying to students become a better neo-liberal subject, bring more areas of life under surveillance as part of the narrative of the employable self, so re-enacting the contradictions that we had criticised and deconstructed at the beginning of the research. We were also confronting the dilemma of espousing the notion of valuing activities such the learning from paid work when we know that the actual sorts of work that get valued, such as internships, is often only available to the more privileged students. In contrast, the work available to those students who have to work to live is undervalued, whilst that the hours some students are working are detrimental to their degree achievement. We were not alone in wrestling with these dilemmas. Many of the staff we interviewed expressed their own frustrations at the constant support they were required to give to help students develop an 'employability narrative', including encouraging them to select those forms of ECA which

might have particular value to employers (volunteering with refuges and asylum seekers, gaining coaching qualifications, running a Girl Guide unit and participating in schools-based literacy projects were all cited as examples) rather than being innately enjoyable activities. Students too expressed anxieties about having to make choices about how to spend their non-curricular time with 'leisure' valued by some students as being 'worthless' time.

While in academic writing it is reasonably easy to maintain critical distance and point out nuances and contradictions, in translating this into usable guides this critical voice is more difficult to sustain. The critical parts of the commentary in the booklets are in tension with our exhortations to staff to pay attention to the different stories and modes of reflexivity students exhibited and to help them to articulate the benefits of participation more clearly for, among others, employers. It is not that the texts were uncritical, we consciously tried to make them so, but that much of what we were recommending rested on a level of resource that was not available to most of the staff who were our target audience. For example many of our recommendations involved more intensive interactions with individual students since one of the aspects of interviews that had moved us was that students told us they had never been able to articulate their aspirations in this way before as this was their first experience at university of a one-to-one conversation with an academic. Commenting on ways of supporting students (Sealey et al., 2012) we note that staff need to find time and space to support students, enabling enable them to make their plans more concrete and more achievable. We know, however that this sort of time and space is being squeezed for students (Clegg, 2010) and for staff this sort of being-with time is under pressure from the demands of research productivity and now the requirement that we evidence the impact of our research (Stevenson, et al., 2014, Ylijoki, O.-H. & Mäntylä, H. 2003). This is especially onerous in higher education research since showing impact in relation to our students' lives doesn't count in the British research

selectivity exercise the Research Excellence Framework. We faced the same dilemmas with the GaP project in recommending strategies that research indicates are increasingly difficult to implement because of lack of resource and support. Lacking the ability to change the circumstances of practice we are all too aware that we are in danger of recommending a sort of hyper-performativity to both teachers and students.

Concluding thoughts

The paradoxes we have outlined are not capable of textual resolution. Indeed as we have indicated navigating our way through the world is getting harder not easier if Archer (2012) is correct about the nature of accelerated morphogenesis. Autonomous reflexivity, the rational self-interested reflexivity that underpins social mobility becomes harder to sustain as uncertainty increases. Our conclusions are not simply ones of despair, however, since it seems to us even more important to analyse the contradictions of the systems we find ourselves in and to attempt an honest accounting of the limitations of our own work. Making a difference and even 'research impact' as understood in policy should never become 'just-so stories'. We need to be judicious, therefore, in thinking about agency and in delimiting the possibilities of a situation. While we have been critical of the extent to which teachers can exercise their powers in changing their pedagogic practice this does not mean that they have no scope for practicing in more careful and attentive ways and there is a rich stream of scholarship about the significance of the commitments and actions of teachers (hooks, 1994; Gadotti, 1996; Morrow and Torres, 2002; Darder 2007; Torres, 2014). Students also possess agency and negotiate the employability agenda and the possibilities open to them. Indeed what is remarkable in the projects reported on above is students' abilities to form commitments to their own projects even when they recognise that the adversities they face (Stevenson and Clegg, 2013). Of note in the Graduates with Impact project, for example, is how so many of the mature learners (in particular) have strived for many years to achieve an imagined, desired

future despite the significant exigencies of their circumstances, including managing, variously, displacement, divorce, and unemployment.

The resilience of students and the development of agency is a significant theme in higher education scholarship. Case (2013), for example, is doing important work on conceptualising student agency and she builds on data from students who have faced some of the most difficult backgrounds in the South African context. Much of this work is underpinned by a critical realist understanding of agency and the significance of embodiment and emotion and second order elaborations that are further articulated and expanded through our internal conversations in coming to commitments about the things that matter to us (Archer 2000). As authors we have worked from different perspectives, with Burke working from a poststructuralist feminist perspective, whereas Clegg and Stevenson have drawn on critical realism, nonetheless we and other scholars have drawn similar conclusions from their analyses of data. We are impelled to think about emotion and commitment by virtue of our own commitments to making a difference (Leathwood and Hey, 2009).

Making a difference in the larger sense, however, also depends on the identification and indeed participation in larger networks and the development of what Archer (2000) calls corporate agency; people who gather together to promote particular causes. She suggests that faced with contextual incongruity what we will increasingly see is the rise of meta-reflexivity as 'the dominant mode of internal deliberation':

> The key to its experiential core is that far from the social order being internalized or normalized, it is peculiarly problematized for those who come to practice meta-reflexivity (Archer 2012, p. 207).

This seems to us particularly fertile ground for the articulation of alternative projects not only at the individual level but also in relation to new social movements. We want to defend a notion of praxis as theoretically informed change for critical social purposes and a view of making a difference and research that moves beyond thinking of research projects as discrete acts. In order to do this we need to create and support networks that can sustain possibilities for change. There is reason to think that change can and does happen and that collective action can have an impact. One social justice story that we can point to is that at undergraduate level at least women who had been excluded from higher education for the better part of the first half of the twentieth century now make up over fifty percent of undergraduates in England (Leathwood and Read 2009). Their entry into higher education and the social movements they participated in were in part responsible for transforming knowledge across the social sciences. This is not true everywhere and when we look at the intersections with race and class the picture looks less rosy; nonetheless, quite fundamental shifts have taken place. Projects like the ones we have outlined here could not have taken place without prior feminist scholarship and struggles, and we were also actors in those struggles (Clegg and David 2006; Burke and Jackson, 2007). So change is possible and as well as conceptualising research as close-up we need also to look at connections both intellectual and organisational; making a difference involves collective acts. Inevitably, our attempts to make a difference will fall short of our aspirations but the idea of research that does not aspire to make a difference is, for us, incongruous. As Sayer (2011) pointed out in his study of lay normativity, human beings are essentially evaluative in their relationship to the world and that includes our practice as researchers as much as in the rest of our lives. Making a difference involves evaluation and is about values and ethics:

> We need to go back to basic concepts of value, reason and human being if
>
> we are to make progress across this difficult terrain. If my arguments hold

much water, then they suggest not only a different way of understanding normativity and ethics in life, but a fundamentally different conception of social science (Sayer, 2011, p. 22).

While arguments about the role of values in the social sciences are not new Sayer's intervention drawing on moral philosophy as well as sociology is particularly cogent and timely given the emphasis on 'evidence'. His contribution foregrounds the ethical commitments of researchers themselves and reminds us that things matter not just to our participants but to us too. We would argue that this way of doing social science involves embracing reflexivity and different ways of writing about our practice which is what we have attempted here. This brings us full circle to the introduction because if we are to aspire to making a difference in our research then we need a different understanding of social science and a commitment to praxis as an irreducibly socio-material activity.

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