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Academic practitioner collaborations can tackle persistent knowledge inequalities, but they need recognition

Why do academics engage in practitioner collaborations and how does this shape their research and its wider impact? Armine Ishkanian assesses the impact of a major academic practitioner project and suggests greater recognition is needed for the different types of knowledge and outcomes they produce.

Over the past two decades research collaborations between academics and practitioners have become more common. In the UK, research collaborations have increased in response to the government's impact agenda that has sought to support research that is solutions focused. At the global level, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals have bolstered support for solutions-focused, 'impactful' research.

Assumptions about the value of academic-practitioner collaborations, include that research produced in this manner can lead to more effective and impactful research outputs that help inform policy and practice. Collaborations can help to make research less extractive and also lead to the recognition of the value of different forms of knowledge (e.g., experiential), thus addressing persistent knowledge hierarchies. But, not everyone agrees. Critics argue that research produced through collaboration involves a **trade-off between relevance and rigour** and that it produces research that lacks objectivity and is influenced by "ideology, philosophy, myth, bias, beliefs and 'group think'".

In January 2022, Tahnee Ooms and I launched the *Exploring the Potential for Academic Practitioner Collaborations for Social Change (AcPrac)* to understand why some academics and practitioners working on inequalities choose to engage in collaborative research.

Given the focus and aims of the interdisciplinary field of inequalities studies, "**to healing the wounds of the past, generating social solidarity and rebuilding a more just society**", and because

communities and movements fighting inequality are also asking questions about the purpose of academic research and challenging extractive research practices, we thought it was important to understand why some academics and practitioners choose to engage in collaborative research. Furthermore, as we were focusing on collaborative research in the interdisciplinary field of inequalities studies, we sought to understand whether it is possible to research inequalities without reproducing knowledge inequalities in the research process.

Taking the [Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity](#) (AFSEE) programme as our case study, which is based at the International Inequalities Institute (III) at LSE, we conducted research, [a systematic literature review](#), and invited AFSEE Fellows to write case studies about their experiences of collaboration, highlighting positive and negative experiences alike. Thirteen [case studies](#) written by Fellows have now been published on the project website (the first of which was featured on this [blog](#)).

Why collaborate?

We identified three interconnected factors driving academic practitioner collaborations:

1. Funding requirements
2. A desire to create solutions-oriented research
3. Viewing research as a way of advancing social justice

The mere act of collaboration does not inherently lead to the tackling of knowledge inequalities and the motivations for collaboration matter. While the greater availability of funding was a motivating factor for both academics and practitioners, the least equitable collaborations were those that were initiated by either academics or practitioners in an instrumental manner to satisfy donor requirements. The collaborations motivated by Drivers 2 and 3, tended to create more equitable collaborations. In short, intrinsic motivation and intentionality are key.

Hierarchies of knowers and knowledge

In single collaborations partners can work to create equitable relationships where the voices and knowledge of both academic and practitioner partners are considered and valued. Transforming the dominant hierarchies of knowledge within academia and policymaking, which govern what and whose knowledge counts as credible and legitimate, is a more complex process.



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Research collaborations aimed at developing solutions-oriented research are not yet widely incentivised or rewarded in academia. Some scholars argue that what is considered “proper” research and what counts as “**scientific knowledge**” has not greatly shifted over the past three decades. The experience of the research collaborations in our study confirms this view and highlights how some researchers continue to perceive this work as a trade-off between relevance and rigour or between ‘objective’ research and doing research that is politically motivated.

Early career researchers we interviewed spoke candidly of how building and maintaining collaborations came with costs, including taking time away from producing measurable outputs (i.e., articles, grants) needed for career advancement. As one participant plainly stated:

“The problem is that having practitioners involved can steer you away from those sorts of objectives...[collaboration] might make for a better piece of research from the point of view of having impact, but that isn’t something that top five economics journals care about for its own sake.”

This was corroborated by several respondents, who explained they were able to engage actively in collaborations *because* they are more senior in their careers.

Thus, while academic practitioner collaborations go some way in visibilising and addressing knowledge inequalities in research, we need to be cautious in making normative claims about the emancipatory and transformative potential of AcPrac collaborations in addressing knowledge inequalities. The latter will require structural changes in how universities as well as policymakers view, value, and reward different types of research and forms of knowledge (e.g., experiential).

Although achieving wider structural changes will not be easy and will take time, several recent developments offer hope that change is possible. These include the growing critique of and rejection by communities of **extractive research practices** that has prompted academics to reconsider how they conduct research; increased recognition by policymakers of the value of lived or experiential knowledge for tackling problems; support for equitable collaborations by **funders**; and commitment to collaborative research by **early career researchers**.

*This post draws on the author's article, [Hierarchies of knowers and knowledges: exploring the potential of academic practitioner collaborations in tackling knowledge inequalities](#), published in the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*.*

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