

Making research work as a public good requires a mutually reinforcing process of engagement

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Research and public engagement operate in a wider social environment. More information or better dissemination will not simply make social problems go away. Leah Bassel suggests embedding research into mutually reinforcing partnerships with communities facing inequality and misrepresentation as an invigorating approach to engagement. Research can be made to work for the public good by working with – and not speaking in the place of – these groups.



I find myself in a strange position writing this piece, which is perhaps shared by other readers of this blog. Activities that had a self-evident importance to me as a result of my own convictions, and that I have been doing all along, are suddenly relabeled and read through the lens of 'impact'...

The [Research, Square Mile and the Public Good Conference](#) is a welcome opportunity for exchange and debate on this relabeling process and will address the vexed question of the relationship between research and 'the public good'. De Montfort University's Square Mile project itself is an impressive example of a clear, direct link between the two: a partnership where academic research is shared with local city residents. Yet not all research demonstrates this linear trajectory. In my research and through my public engagement I question some of the terms of the broader debate the conference addresses. I ask: Whose public? Whose good?

I have conducted research about migrant and refugee women in France and Canada; media representations of young people and communities affected by the 2011 riots in England; young people in Leicester engaging with issues of multiculturalism in the city; and minority women and third sector actors considering the impacts of austerity measures on their work and activism in France and the UK. These projects all make visible the persistence of inequalities and social divisions. But the shared conceptual thread combines normative and empirical concerns: I focus on the inequalities in terms of who defines 'social problems' and who can contest dominant definitions.

As a result, when considering research as a public good my experience is that more information and 'better understanding' will not simply make 'the problem' go away when research is disseminated and goes public. Whose problem? Whose definition? And who speaks, who listens?

For example, instead of asking, as political scientist [Susan Okin](#) did, 'is multiculturalism bad for women' leading to abuse of women's rights in the name of 'culture' I ask 'who decides what is bad for women?' The experiences of a specific group of Muslim women, Somali refugees, demonstrate the gap between public portrayals of Muslim women as vulnerable to men in their communities (who as a result of racist portrayals are presented as 'barbarians at the gates') on the one hand, and complex lived experiences in which women are in fact active agents who negotiate and challenge hierarchies of race, class, and legal status, on the other hand.

Here we see the questioning of the terms of the debate through a combination of empirical and normative work, and of who speaks and who listens. But what, then, is the alchemy of research and public engagement from which the public good emerges?

In my practice, research can be 'made to work', by working *with* – and not speaking in the place of – these groups, or adopting the position of enlightening them about their own circumstances from the lofty heights of the ivory tower. 'Making it work' for me means that the process of engagement creates resources and public space for groups who are often unheard or misrepresented, to further contribute to their and my critical citizenship.

But how? Therein lies the rub. Institutional frameworks and priorities shape our current thinking and modes of engagement. Inevitably, they provide space but also constraints and challenges that are well documented in this

blog series. I do not wish to dismiss the need for this debate and critique or imply that my own work takes place in a vacuum. But my concern, in the midst of this vital questioning and uncertainty, is to act.

How to establish the conditions for a mutually reinforcing process that addresses my concerns about voice and participation and the priorities of the groups I work with? This requires innovation and experimentation, not least in terms of *when* in the research process this mutuality is enacted. I have tried to do this at different stages:

- ‘after the fact’: through an ESRC Festival of Social Science event co-organized with colleagues in the [Leicester Migration Network](#) that I co-convene which resulted in sixth form students from colleges that are part of the University of Leicester’s Realising Opportunities network for widening participation presenting the deputy mayor of Leicester with their Youth Manifesto for a successful multicultural city that they developed through workshops based on our university research.
- co-construction: in the *Media and the Riots: A Call for Action* report that I wrote in collaboration with [The-Latest.com](#) and the [Citizen Journalism Educational Trust](#). The report revealed what can be learned from the riots and the reactions of young people and members of riot-affected communities as well as members of the public to mainstream media coverage. The findings aimed to check and guide the practices of journalists in future, to inform policy (it was submitted as evidence to the [Leveson Enquiry](#)) but also aimed to create the spaces for new voices and new forms of critical citizenship: both within mainstream media coverage, to represent young people differently, but also in generating new media representations, particularly through citizen journalism and encouraging diversity in the profession.
- blended approach: such as in a [co-investigated project](#) with [Dr Akwugo Emejulu](#) in which we examine the impact of austerity measures on the work and activism of minority women and third sector actors. We are inviting knowledge exchange during the course of the project.

The challenge of when to ‘impact’ is not unique to my approach. But here embedding impact into the research process does not assume a linear trajectory in which the research will solve ‘the problem’.

Instead, for me, ‘making it work’ means that in this mutually reinforcing process I explore my normative and empirical concerns about voice and participation in unequal societies with people who will have a greater possibility, as result of this process, to define the problems they face, participate in public debates and for all of us to challenge their terms as critical citizens.

Leah will be speaking at the [Research, Square Mile and the Public Good Conference](#) at DeMontfort University on the 6 June, 2013.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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