

Embedding Impact in Engaged Research: Developing Socially Useful Knowledge through Dialogical Sensemaking

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This paper explores how we can embed impact in research to generate socially useful knowledge. Our contribution lies in proposing a form of engaged research that draws upon situated knowledge and encompasses dialogical sensemaking as a way of making experience sensible in collaborative researcher–practitioner conversations. We draw attention to the intricacies of doing socially useful research and illustrate how five conversational resources can be used within dialogical sensemaking through an example of a research project in which impact and relevance were embedded and where researchers and practitioners worked together to resolve an important social and organizational issue.

Discussion around the relationship between theory and practice, rigour and relevance is not new, but has taken on a sharper focus through the impact debate. The challenges of making our work matter have been addressed in the British and US Academies of Management (e.g. George, 2014; Hodgkinson and Starkey, 2011; Tsui, 2013), driven by the emphasis placed on impact by UK funding bodies such as the Economic and Social Research Council and the Research Excellence Framework. This has stimulated debate around what impact means, its contested nature, and how to do impactful research (e.g. Brewer, 2013; Latusek and Vlaar, 2015; Learmonth, Lockett and Dowd, 2012; Pettigrew, 2011). Impact is often viewed from the traditional logic of an add-on to research in terms of knowledge transfer after the fact via impact pathways: of how to translate academic theory into business practice. But if, as Willmott (2012, p. 600) notes, we redefine impact as ‘social usefulness’, then ‘a radical change in what is studied, and [...] how it is studied’ and a shift in institutional and scholarly practices is needed. This means exploring what impactful knowledge is

and how we might juxtapose theory and practice, production and consumption, rigour and relevance, researcher and practitioner relationships in multiple and unique ways. We suggest that Haraway’s (1988) conceptualization of ‘situated knowledges’ offers one start point.

Drawing on Willmott’s observations and the Special Issue call to ‘challenge the idea that knowledge flows from research towards impact on practice’ (Call for Papers) we suggest that ‘social usefulness’ can be achieved through a form of engaged research where impact and relevance are embedded *in* the process of generating knowledge. We propose a form of engaged research that utilizes *dialogical sensemaking*, a way of making the lived experience of research participants sensible in collaborative researcher–practitioner conversations by surfacing, questioning and exploring multiple meanings and imagining new possibilities for moving on. We draw attention to the intricacies of doing socially useful research and illustrate five conversational resources used within dialogical sensemaking through an example of an ‘engaged research’ project where impact and relevance were

embedded and where researchers and practitioners worked together to resolve important social and organizational issues. This complements and builds on recent literature on impact through engaged and collaborative research (e.g. Greig *et al.*, 2013; MacIntosh *et al.*, 2012; Marcos and Denyer, 2012; Philips *et al.*, 2013; Van de Ven, 2007). We conclude by evaluating the impact and challenges of this approach, how it enables the development of socially useful knowledge that is shareable across contexts and academically rigorous.

‘Impact in’: situated knowledge and engaged research

Our intention is not to revisit the impact/relevance debate but to ‘reimagine relevance’ (Willmott, 2012) by exploring a way of making a difference by doing research that builds social usefulness into the research itself: a form of engaged research that encompasses situated knowledge, dialogical sensemaking and shared reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2014; Haraway, 1988; Shotter, 2010a). This entails creating a dialogue between conceptual and practical forms of expertise and knowledge (MacIntosh *et al.* 2012); paying attention to people’s contextualized work experiences; and developing an ability to create knowledge in uncertain and fluid situations that acknowledge the complexities of lived experience.

The start point lies in exploring more embedded forms of knowledge, and we turn to situated knowledge as one possibility. Situated knowledge can be broadly defined as knowledge embedded within a social, historical, cultural and political time and place that reflects contextual features and lived experiences. It is based on the premise that we (both academics and practitioners) possess expertise, tacit and explicit knowledge about our lived contextualized experience that needs to be surfaced and understood (Polanyi, 1966), and encompasses a ‘knowing-from-within’ that is continually (re)formed as we experience and deal with situations (Shotter, 2010a). Situated knowledge can be associated with social usefulness because it encompasses research that is problem oriented, action based and/or co-produced. But while this form of research is concerned with impact on complex practical problems, it is not always about acting *in* the world *with* practitioners to collaboratively generate knowledge. It is this

aspect we wish to explore: how to generate socially useful knowledge through engaged research that foregrounds making sense of experience ‘from within’ lived collaborative conversations.

We begin by tracing the roots of situated knowledge, highlighting its relevance to developing an impact-in approach to research and elaborating its nature through two features that researchers need to keep in play in their research: movement and opacity.

Situated knowledge: an openness to movement and opacity

Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor or agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource [...] where the agency of people studied itself transforms the entire project of producing social theory. (Haraway, 1988, p. 592)

Situated knowledge has been taken up in a number of disciplines and research communities including health, feminist studies, education and geography (Camarota and Fine, 2010; Ford, 2007; Genat, 2009; Harding, 2004; Lawson, 2014). And while various forms of situated knowledge have been adapted in organization studies by practice-based scholars (e.g. Engeström, 2016; Hotho, Saka-Helmhout and Becker-Ritterspach, 2014; Nicolini, 2011; Sole and Edmondson, 2002), the origin of the term is attributed to Donna Haraway’s 1988 essay ‘Situated knowledges’ where she offers an emancipatory feminist alternative to traditional scientific objectivity. We do not have space to address the emancipatory aspect of her work; rather we examine her emphasis on the need to take responsibility for the impact of our knowledge claims to ‘build meanings [...] that have a chance for life’ (p. 580). Specifically, we focus on how her idea of situated knowledges can provide a backdrop for developing impact-in engaged research that offers ‘a more adequate, richer, better account of a world, in order to live in it well and in a critical, reflexive relation to our own and others’ practices of domination...’ (p. 579). Her conceptualization draws attention to key epistemological considerations that influence engaged research practice.

Underpinning situated knowledges is an *epistemology of location*, which calls upon researchers to address the historical, cultural, economic, social

and other embedded perspectives of the field. Haraway criticizes both totalizing (positivist science) and relativizing (radical constructionism) forms of knowledge, preferring instead ‘partiality’ (p. 583), which assumes that no one person has full knowledge and that researchers therefore need to understand situations from others’ multiple viewpoints. We do so through ‘shared conversation’ (p. 584), in which ‘tensions, resonances, transformations, resistances, and complicities’ of the situation (p. 588) are considered, similarities and differences are discussed, deliberated and connections made. In this way, contextualized and embodied understandings emerge that focus on *particularities* and build salient practical knowledge that can also be translated among different communities (pp. 580–583). It is an epistemology that foregrounds the agency of *all* research participants in creating socially useful knowledge.

We build on Haraway’s ideas¹ to propose a form of engaged research based around the collaborative generation of knowledge with practitioners that embeds relevance and impact by integrating shared conversation. We develop *dialogical sensemaking* as a way of doing engaged research that encompasses *movement* and *opacity*. This requires a fundamental ontological and epistemological shift in the assumptions underpinning the way we carry out our research and how we interact with other research participants: from objectivist notions of an external reality with pre-formed patterns, behaviours, institutions and categories, to a more subjectivist and possibly intersubjective ontology in which people constantly shape situations, meanings and lives through conversations, actions and interpretations around what they and others are doing (Cunliffe, 2011).

We propose that by considering movement and opacity as features of engaged research, we can begin to embed Haraway’s ideas around situated knowledge into our research practice. By *movement*, we mean the constant crossing of boundaries and surfacing the interplay of context, people, relationships, inter(actions) and actions when making sense of situations. By *opacity*, we wish to convey a sense of a veil that hides: seemingly an obstacle to vision rather than an opportunity

for it. These two apparently counter-intuitive features are at odds with standard conceptions of research as revealing (dis-veiling) already formed meanings and actions. Instead they require an openness to the unfolding of meanings between research participants as they address issues and problems in shared conversation. We elaborate below.

1. Movement. Haraway’s (1988) ‘epistemology of location’ shifts attention from atomistic elements, boundaries and cause–effect variables to a more social, emergent and relational approach to knowledge generation – to knowledge emerging within a flow of activities and conversation as researchers and practitioners try to articulate and make sense of what is happening by connecting past and present experiences with future possibilities (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014). Movement requires researchers to be simultaneously engaged, vulnerable (in terms of not controlling the process and not having answers), and resistant to simplification, closure and the temptation to draw boundaries around objects of knowledge (Haraway, 1988, p. 590). Rather we need to be open to, and reflexive about, (in)visible boundaries, moving amongst multiple positionings, temporal and contextual meanings and relationships in our shared conversations with research participants. It also means being sensitive to the movement of power in conversations – who may be dominating discussion, imposing meanings, claiming status etc. Movement involves engaging with a plurality of aspects, spaces and interconnections; questioning binary distinctions; embracing partiality – complex and contradictory views from people who may be emotionally involved; and bridging boundaries to produce ways of mobilizing involvement and interested gazes.

2. Opacity. Opacity foregrounds the notion that much of what we do is not immediately transparent to us and can be perplexing if we are asked to articulate why and what we are doing in the moment of doing it. Polanyi’s (1966, p. 4) observation that ‘we can know more than we can tell’ is apposite, especially his example of how we recognize a familiar face amongst a crowd and yet cannot immediately articulate why we know the face. We are knowledgeable about our own work in the same way, making sense of events and occurrences, of tasks and demands by drawing on interpretations fuelled by webs of meanings that

¹While Haraway’s term is situated *knowledges*, which embodies its pluralistic nature, for ease of reading we shall use the term situated knowledge.

constitute a sort of ‘silent organization’ (Romano, 2006) that both guides and is created by actions and conversations that weave us together. We suggest this ‘silent organization’ is opaque in that it has no observable structure and is always being re-made in the interplay of meanings attributed by people.

Opacity is experienced in *indexical* ways in ‘socially standardizing, “seen but unnoticed”, expected, background features of everyday scenes’ (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 36). As such, opacity can encompass both a ‘confusion of voice and sight’ and ‘connections and unexpected openings’ (Haraway, 1988, p. 590) as research participants try to make sense of issues. They express different views, question taken for granted practices, challenge each other, and try to deal with opacity by connecting incidents, ideas and turning-points. This largely implicit and taken for granted sensemaking involves recognizing and pursuing issues that may be seen as compatible, intelligible and ordinary in regard to our experience.

We argue that generating situated knowledge requires us to hold movement and opacity in play rather than searching for clear and bounded ideas, i.e. incorporating Haraway’s notion of ‘self-critical partiality’, recognizing that there is no one transcendent view and that we need to seek multiple and partial perspectives that ‘can never be known in advance’ (p. 585). Therefore opacity both hides and entails possibilities for seeing differently – seeing others, seeing anew and seeing novelty. We suggest that shared reflexivity can facilitate this, as participants question what is taken for granted as ordinary; accept that circumstances are ‘open to being specified by those involved in it’ (Shotter, 2010a, p. 277); and move towards alternative ways of seeing. We explore the notion of shared reflexivity in the following section.

To summarize, situated knowledge

- is strongly anchored in contexts of people who live/work in them;
- keeps movement and opacity in play as researchers/researched participate in shared conversations;
- is based on the exercise of shared reflexivity to help participants question and articulate what is meaningful and decide how to move on;
- oriented towards a collaborative researcher/practitioner elaboration of socially useful knowledge.

Creating socially useful knowledge through dialogical sensemaking

Accounts of a ‘real’ world do not, then, depend on a logic of ‘discovery’ but on a power-charged social relation of ‘conversation’. (Haraway, 1988, p. 593)

Instead of turning immediately, as we have in the past, to a study of how individuals come to know the objects and entities in the world around them, we must begin in quite a different way: we must study how, by interweaving our talk with our other actions and activities, we can first develop and sustain between us different, particular *ways* of relating ourselves to each other. (Shotter, 1996, p. 299)

Haraway does not specify how her ideas translate into research practice. What, then, are the practicalities of creating socially useful knowledge? What conversational resources can we draw upon? We have argued that situated knowledge involves the engagement of all research participants in making sense around what is ‘real’ and ‘do-able’, and alluded to the importance of shared conversations and shared reflexivity in doing so. We now elaborate, by proposing that dialogical sensemaking offers a way in which research participants can engage in meaningful conversations that keep in play movement and opacity and generate impactful knowledge that makes a difference.

Dialogical sensemaking

We bring together Haraway’s articulation of situated knowledge and Shotter’s notions of dialogue and knowing-from-within to offer a form of dialogical sensemaking that research participants can draw upon in the moment of shared conversation as a way of generating situated and impactful knowledge. Dialogical sensemaking helps capture “‘fact production’ in flight’ (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 79).

Shotter (2008) conceives knowledge as unbounded and continually constructed in conversations; contextualized and immanent because it is located in talk ‘in-the-moment’; and collaborative because meanings are created as people give ‘shared *significance(s)* to shared *feelings* in an *already shared* circumstance’ (p. 56). He called this form of knowledge ‘knowing-from-within’, constituted, argumentatively, through interaction in which we are morally obliged to treat

people as participants. Knowing-from-within involves not after-the-fact representational knowledge but an embodied practical knowing held with others. Conversation is therefore crucial in constructing shared significances and a practical understanding of our circumstances. These conversations are not about fact-finding but about creating meaning through an interweaving of talk as people are spontaneously and embodiedly responsive to each other and to the circumstances in which they find themselves. True to Bakhtin's (1984, p. 293) notion of the dialogic fabric of human life, dialogue is our whole being into which we invest our 'eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, [...] whole body and deeds'.

There are connections and tensions between Shotter's and Haraway's positions, which offer generative possibilities for the concept and practice of dialogical sensemaking. We explain these briefly before elaborating dialogical sensemaking and offering five conversational resources that can be used in this form of engaged research. Figure 1 offers an overview.

While both authors acknowledge the contextual and contingent nature of knowledge/knowing and are concerned with challenging the transcendent view of science, Shotter works from a broadly social constructionist and Haraway from a critical feminist stance. Haraway's interest lies in the 'real world' and the inequalities people face. She criticizes radical constructivism for ignoring very real issues of power, advocating instead 'embodied objectivity' (p. 581), in which partial perspectives are each 'objective'. For Shotter, being (ontology) and knowing (epistemology) are entwined, not in an embodied objectivity but in our lived intersubjective experience of the world (Cunliffe, 2016). In contrast to Haraway's emancipatory agenda, Shotter's concern is for a social ecology and participatory forms of life – power plays a less central role. Finally, as seen in the two quotes at the beginning of this section, both authors foreground conversation in knowledge generation, but whilst Haraway notes the importance of conversation, she does not really elaborate its nature. Over the years, Shotter (e.g. 1993, 1996, 2010a) has explored the nature and crucial role dialogue plays in understanding our world.

Connecting dialogue with sensemaking means going to Weick's (1988) argument that sensemaking and organizing are embedded in the context in which they occur as actors respond to what they

think is going on. In constructing and enacting an image of what they think is 'real', actors give meanings that both generate and constrain action. Weickian views of sensemaking highlight a number of tensions relating to movement and opacity, two of which we address below. If sensemaking in the moment is 'ongoing, instrumental, subtle, swift, social, and easily taken for granted' (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409), then:

1. It embraces both movement and inertia: sensemaking is emergent but also involves committed interpretations that introduce 'stability into an equivocal flow of events by means of justifications that increase social order' (Weick, 2001, p. 15). While commitment provides a basis for action, overcommitment can lead to fixed boundaries and inappropriate acquiescence as practitioners and researchers become too focused on one problem definition, one (right) course of action, or the application of a specific theory or model regardless of circumstances.
2. What we 'take for granted' is often paradoxically both eminently visible and consciously opaque, accepted as a generalized 'truth' rather than partial and open.

Dialogical sensemaking addresses the play of these tensions within the shared conversations of research participants.

Dialogical sensemaking juxtaposes situated knowledge, knowing-from-within and sensemaking to draw attention to how research participants together make sense within conversation, to ways in which we may understand and find some agreement about the circumstances in which we find ourselves. It is not a theory, but a *poetic philosophy* (Shotter, 2016²) – an interpretive strategy for noticing unfolding meanings (fact production in flight), questioning and exploring multiple interpretations. In doing so, we

'give form' to our circumstances in ways which have not been 'seen' before, providing novel understandings 'making new connections'. (Shotter, 2008, p. 69)

Methodologically, this means engaging with participants and with many sources of 'data': conversational, artifactual, descriptions/video recordings of working practices etc., as expressed by the voices

²Personal communication, 23 August 2016.

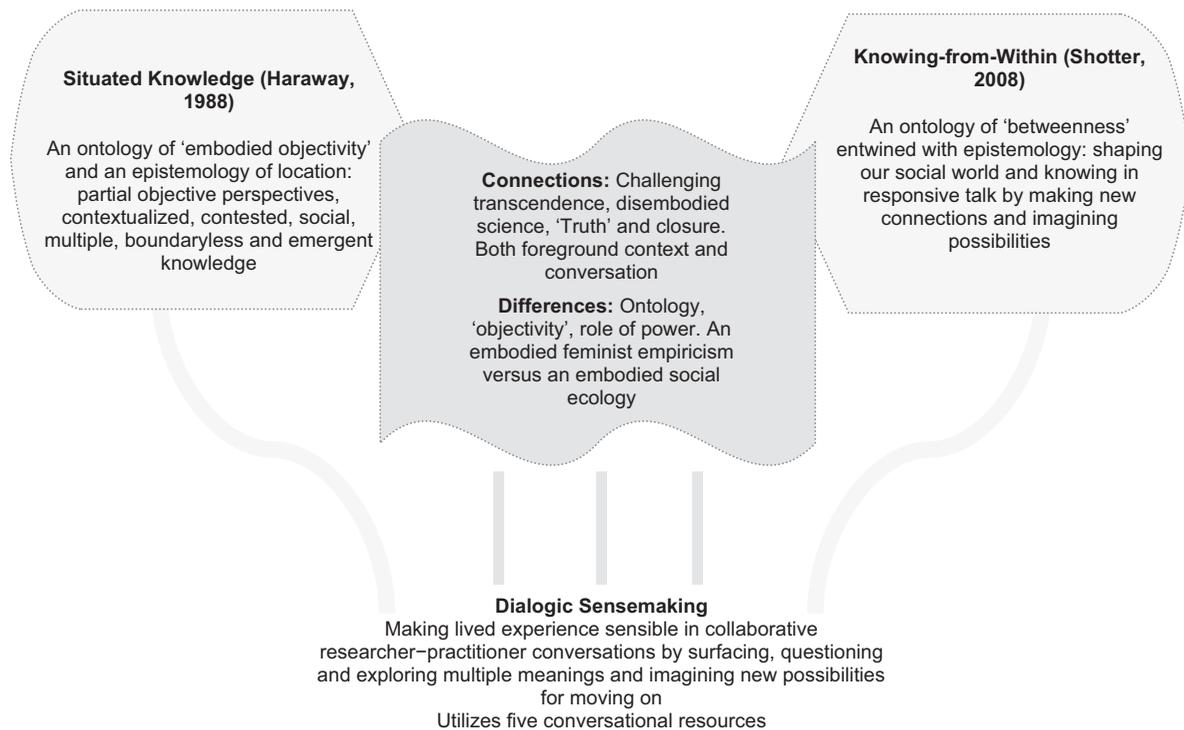


Figure 1. Connecting situated knowledge, knowing-from-within and dialogic sensemaking

of people as they negotiate, reinterpret and reconfigure their practical knowledge.

Conversational resources

We now offer five conversational resources that we argue are integral to dialogical sensemaking:

1. *being attuned to relationally responsive dialogue*, which is based on the notion that meanings are created in the moment between people as they are actively responsive to each other's comments. Such dialogue means that we are not exchanging already decided views, but keeping *movement* in play by being open to others and exploring multiple and possible meanings.
2. *engaging in shared reflexivity* within conversations to recognize and interrogate *opacity* and avoid overcommitment. This involves questioning taken for granted or 'veiled' assumptions and actions, power relations and knowledge claims (made by all research participants). Shared reflexivity also means exploring how language and talk may mediate meaning and action.
3. *recognizing and building on arresting moments* in which we are struck, oriented or moved to respond to each other or our surroundings in different ways. Such moments may relate to a comment, question or to past/present events that 'strike' us, interrupt the spontaneous flow of conversation, and may lead us to see, think and/or act differently. Arresting moments can be disruptive, emotional (Greig *et al.*, 2013), generative (Mason, 2012) and lead to *movement*.
4. *surfacing the play of tensions, contradictions, binaries and boundaries* within dialogue (Haraway, 1988). By exploring tensions and subtle variations in meanings – moments of *chiaroscuro* of contrasting lightness and darkness, colours and shadows – opportunities for re-seeing, re-viewing and re-imagining lives, identities and actions may help participants 'move on' (Shotter, 1997).
5. *creating action guiding anticipatory understandings*. Dialogical sensemaking requires us to see 'theory' as action guiding anticipatory understandings, practical theories generated from 'meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt' (Shotter, 2010b, p. 140) that help

sensitize practitioners to their situation, to anticipate what matters, and to figure out how to live our lives ‘moment by moment, from within the midst of complexity ...’ (p. 138).

We explore how these resources may be used to embed social usefulness through two illustrations from an engaged research project carried out by one of the authors (Scaratti).

Dialogical sensemaking in engaged research: two illustrations

The following case is an example of engaged research producing social change. The research project was problem oriented, based on a request to university researchers from an organization to help manage a particular issue.

The context

Centro Ambrosiano di Solidarietà (CeAS) is a non-profit organization dealing with social problems, including drug addiction, mental disorders and different forms of abuse. Founded in 1986, the Centre is located in a typical Lombard farmstead in the heart of Milan, with various buildings hosting three therapeutic communities in which professionals (psychologists and social workers) target the problems above. They share a large courtyard where people meet and relationships develop. A triggering event broke these habits and routines, causing unexpected turmoil.

Around 60 Romanians were evicted from their encampment. CeAS decided to use their community resources to offer assistance. They erected a marquee containing camp beds, toilet facilities and a field kitchen at the courtyard entry. A long column of people overloaded with personal possessions and equipment (including musical instruments) entered the courtyard. A police cordon was mobilized to defend the Romanians and the social workers from attacks by local political groups.

Initially, the relationship between CeAS residents and the new arrivals was characterized by uncertainty and suspicion. Over the following two years, turbulence emerged and the courtyard became an arena of prejudice, encounters, problems and conflicts. The site of the problem was the misuse of the veranda – previously the farmhouse cattle shed – a long narrow glassed-in building with vending machines, where different

community members meet. The residents of one of the three communities, whose bedrooms are right above the veranda, had for some time complained that they could not sleep because of the noise made by Roma boys who played cards and listened to music there late into the evening. In the morning, the disorder and dirt left by the boys was visible. The CeAS Board decided, following a number of acts of vandalism, to temporarily close the veranda at weekends and at night. They developed a set of rules to address the problem and decided to make the boys responsible by asking them to take an active role in managing opening/closing times and cleaning. However, these actions led to further tensions.

In 2010, the Board requested an academic research unit to intervene, with the aim of understanding how to cope with the conflict and better host the Romanian families.

Methodology

The research was led by Scaratti, lasted one year, and drew on social constructionist commitments. The methodology was a form of participatory action research focusing on the collaborative construction of knowledge in dialogue with CeAS members. The idea of dialogic sensemaking and the five conversational resources emerged inductively from this experience. Given the complexity and uniqueness of the situation, an ‘epistemology of location’ was important in surfacing history, contextual tensions and the multiple meanings embedded in the field. Twelve half-day meetings were held during the year, comprising the researchers, the social workers dealing directly with the Roma people and representatives of the three therapeutic communities. While the Board might have invited the researchers in as ‘experts’, the researchers were keen to renegotiate that power relationship by acknowledging the expertise and situated knowledge of all participants. Consequently, at the first two meetings (audio and video recorded), participants negotiated key research issues such as the focus, methods and roles of participants. Agreement was reached that a better understanding was needed around what was happening in the courtyard and why, and that both researchers and community members would be involved in producing knowledge in a collaborative way. While the researchers were responsible for collecting the material and facilitating dialogue, the community practitioners

agreed to recount their experience with the Roma people, produce accounts of concrete episodes of their work, and to work with audio and video recordings of meetings and discussions. In this way an array of material was gathered and made available (through transcriptions and selected cases) for discussion by all participants. ‘Data’ were collected and analysed in a rigorous way and knowledge and solutions were produced collaboratively.

As MacIntosh *et al.* (2012) argue, a dialogic approach to research involves both bridge-building between researcher and practitioner where the interests of each are negotiated and where the stories of the many participants come together to acknowledge and reframe identities, knowledge and practice. At the beginning of the project, to achieve this bridge-building, community members wrote individual stories of their experience around the issue at hand. These stories offered a method for surfacing various interpretations of everyday practices and facilitated sensemaking through a temporal weaving of past, present and future events – of how they approached and tried to resolve critical incidents and the impact. The stories also facilitated dialogue around re-finding and re-launching the purpose of their work and meanings around the courtyard, the potentials, limits and resources of being a solidarist village. The group decided to address potential opacities by examining situations through the metaphor of a magnifying glass, a ‘prism to see’: a stance of listening and reciprocal understanding that we suggest embraces Haraway’s notion of self-critical partiality.

The second method involved the 12 meetings of researchers and community members in which shared conversation, initially around the stories, aimed to bring to notice the ways in which meanings and interpretations occurred around events, community artifacts and spaces: a ‘knowing-from-within’ (Shotter, 2008). During these conversations, the researchers – and then the community members themselves – encouraged shared reflexivity as a means of eliciting initially opaque and indexical meanings, and of exploring unexpected openings for connection, further discussion and solutions. As the months went by, research participants identified new ways of dealing with the issues. For the community members this meant creating a two-year scheme of semi-autonomy aimed at moving families into integrated home/work situations. Specifically, they developed a vision of the courtyard as a social space

in which a new citizenship that acknowledged and respected differences could be shaped and shared.

Movement between boundaries

CeAS’s decision to invite university researchers to help re-read and improve the situation was not taken lightly. The challenge was to see whether an apparent ‘folly’ could be remedied, boundaries between the original and new community members could be crossed, and the situation dealt with in a respectful and sensitive way. The research focus therefore lay on surfacing differences and connections, which required the academic researchers to cross boundaries and ‘listen’ to an experiential field. This meant facilitating and collaboratively interpreting multi-voiced stories; creating movement between personal, cultural, theoretical and practice experiences; and addressing intricate problems of interaction, conflict and social mediation.

While generating situated socially relevant knowledge depends on creating spaces where dialogical sensemaking may take place, it cannot be taken for granted that participants will be willing to share accounts of their experience. Nor can it be taken for granted that researchers will be open and receptive to multiple forms of knowing, and willing to engage in politically sensitive conversations (Haraway, 1988). Collaboration around making sense of what is happening, exploring differences, constructing shared understandings and re-imagining how to ‘move on’ (Shotter, 2010a) can be especially difficult if the research hinges around deeply felt problems. In this situation, participants needed to engage in shared reflexivity around the opacity created by an overcommitment to particular positions, prejudices, fears and contrasting expectations. Historical and cultural boundaries, tensions and resonances – the opaque yet keenly felt ‘silent organization’ – needed to be understood and addressed.

We go on to illustrate how this occurred through dialogic sensemaking. We focus on two excerpts of shared conversation from the study to highlight such a social process of joint knowledge production.

Illustration

We offer the following excerpt from the fourth meeting to illustrate the conversational resources

that can be used in dialogic sensemaking. The meeting was held on the veranda, which offered a familiar communal space in which cultural and relational differences could be addressed and different voices could speak and be heard. To get a sense of the problem and the multiple meanings and positions, the researchers asked participants to discuss the meanings of the rules they had created to manage the problem, which included the following.

1. Use proper and inoffensive language.
2. Respect objects/items, common and other spaces.
3. Keep spaces clean and tidy; separate waste into appropriate containers.
4. Exchanges of goods, money and services with other CeAS guests have to be notified to staff.
5. From 22.30 it is asked not to disturb, play or listen to music – to respect everyone's rest.
6. Any non-resident access to CeAS is to be arranged with the staff.
7. Guests are asked to respect all regulations.

The following conversation around these rules illustrates dialogic sensemaking based on knowing-from-within: how movement and opacity are kept in play and differences worked with. The meeting includes the researcher (Researcher), four social workers (Social Worker S, P, C, F), an administrator (Administrator), the coordinator (Coordinator A) of the unit handling the Romanian families, and the coordinators of the three therapeutic communities (Coordinator Gr, Ca, Be). Participants were asked to share their individual stories on the evolution of the courtyard and the existing rules, as a means of elucidating the historical and cultural context and tensions.

Relationally responsive dialogue and the play of tensions and binaries

Along with a number of issues a number of tensions emerge in the shared conversation below, which we highlight in grey. It is also important to note the relationally responsive nature of the dialogue as participants respond to each other's comments and build on or reorient them as Social Worker C responds to Social Worker F's call for closer control by agreeing and then noting that 'we can't push control ...'.

Social Worker S: There should be a guarantor that really complies with these rules, and it is clear to all users that the violation of a rule leads to measures not perceived as ambiguous, that no one knows whether to respect or not and to what extent.

Social Worker F: Right ... Especially regarding rule no. 3. There should be closer control, especially during the weekend so that the transgressor is punished.

Social Worker C: Yes of course ... and I know a lot of similar situations ... Many times food bank gifts were resold to others. For example, salami has been resold. Another incident was when they stole vodka at a party ... but ... we can't push control to the point of paranoia, because you cannot always control everything.

Coordinator Gr: We have to distinguish between paranoid control and flexible binaries. The difficulty is prohibition in private places as opposed to public ones.

Coordinator A: We should do more work on welcoming, by using it as an opportunity for detailed presentation of the entire courtyard and not as a simple sharing of regulation.

Social Worker C: Rule no. 4 should change slightly: 'Contacts or communication with guests of other parts of CeAS are to be agreed with the staff' ... Users will take a strict view and they will not understand why they should notify staff whenever they say 'hello' or have a quick exchange of words with some other member of the village.

Coordinator A: Well, this entails how we conceive and consider the Romanian families inside our context ... Gypsies are often the cause of problems for everyone (they break things, make noise, dirt ...).

Administrator: Sometimes it happens that also small episodes are magnified because the 'system' is not immune to racism. Take every 'complaint' seriously, but be careful to reconnect things to reality.

Coordinator Be: And here we come with the nice aspect!!! ... Maybe in a presumptuous way. We consider ourselves a 'solidarity village', but

often you meet people that do not even say ‘hi’ and unfortunately, in most cases, they are not guests ... but colleagues – relationship experts! Though the situation is getting better.

Researcher: My feeling is that, like any young team, it is in continuous evolution, searching for a balance between relationship and control dynamics ...

Social Worker F: Anyway, if you see a gypsy woman throwing away rubbish in the wrong dustbin – intervene! Please, without expressing anger, but firmness. If he/she is one of the community, be a little ironic! Read the label on the dustbin like a child would do, but be careful not to make the other person feel silly.

Researcher: I think your goal is not to change the cultural values of the Roma people, but if anything to facilitate and encourage curiosity and willingness to listen to each of them?

Coordinator Gr: I represent one of those people in the courtyard where professionals should give – but have given few – instructions on how to behave with the guests over the years. A small precaution to keep in mind is that over time I have tried to improve my presence in the courtyard.

Social Worker P: ... which often means limiting the damage.

Coordinator Ca: Yeah ... but ... the team is faced with a double difficulty: on the one hand, it has to deal with the system of values that adults convey to young people (often conflicting with the new situation) and, on the other hand, they must often mediate conflicts and differences that arise between generations.

Coordinator A: This reflection is not abstract or theoretical; it has important ramifications for daily practice and life inside the courtyard.

The excerpt shows how the rules of the courtyard offer a focus for dialogic sensemaking around conflicting interpretations, binaries and tensions relating to how rules should be applied – where in a ‘confusion of voice and sight’ (Haraway, 1988, p. 590) expectations of a safe and ordered landscape conflict with lived values and practices. The sometimes taken for granted tensions and

binaries that pervade our thinking are surfaced by all participants: the flexibility and paranoia of control, welcoming and regulating, Romanian and local values, and mediating generational differences. The role of the researcher in this conversation is not to control or offer solutions, but to listen and comment only when appropriate – to facilitate shared reflexivity around a sensitivity to cultural stereotyping (‘Gypsies are often the cause of problems’) and by mediating (not giving) meaning by nudging participants into a more open attitude as a means of moving on. He does so by being sensitive to the possibly opaque power dynamics in which others are disappeared or treated as lesser (‘be ironic ... read like a child’) by suggesting that the goal is not changing others but responding to them by facilitating ‘curiosity’. There are also examples of shared reflexivity around contradictions – that even the relationship experts do not say ‘hi’! By being relationally responsive to the comments and feelings of others, dialogical sensemaking helps surface and interrogate the binaries that Haraway cautions us against – binaries such as balancing control and flexibility that need to be explored.

One core issue in this excerpt is the need to bridge the boundaries of practical felt circumstances (the historical, contextual and felt features of the situation) with those of ‘management’ control. Not by the application of theory or expert academic opinion, but by helping participants imagine and develop different relationships with each other (Shotter, 1996). The meeting continues as the researcher encourages participants to pay attention to the features within dialogical sensemaking: the play and contestation of binaries, overcommitment to bounded views; noticing shared and conflicting significances; and understanding the subtleties and unexpected possibilities in the conversation.

Shared reflexivity

To offer another glimpse of dialogical sensemaking, this time to emphasize its responsive and reflexive nature, we show an excerpt from the eighth meeting in which the same participants discuss an extreme situation – the expelling of a Romanian family from the community. This challenged not only the usual practice of CeAS but also its original mission and identity. The purpose of the meeting was to learn from the situation and

anticipate how it could be avoided in the future, i.e. to make a difference. The conversation illustrates movement and opacity, multiple meanings and arresting moments. In this case we highlight in grey an arresting moment (silence) and a number of action guiding anticipatory understandings that emerge.

Coordinator A: I ask C who directly lived the situation to tell us the story.

Social Worker C: Well sure. Briefly, in accordance with institutional references, the team decided to remove one of the families that were here. The communication was that their path here ended because the head of the household found paid work and his wife, at our proposal, refused a job exchange. The family was asked to find a new place. When it was decided that they had to leave, a striking incident occurred. There was a weekly meeting of the team and the Roma families, during which it was stressed that this was the last meeting this family would participate in. At one point, her husband entered the meeting shirtless holding a gas can saying he would set us on fire and threatening to burn me and all the CeAS. He poured gasoline on the ground. Later we found out that it wasn't gasoline ...

Coordinator Gr: We called the public security forces. Three fire trucks arrived.

Social Worker C: But the family were expelled because they were not part of the project. I think it was difficult for us – a whole family leaving.

Coordinator A: The problem is not so much the operational management of the thing ... It is upstream ... but since we welcomed them here voluntarily, we cannot move them away ...

Researcher: A question of an apparent contradiction between the mandate of inclusion and an act that is apparently exclusive ... telling a Roma family to leave?

Coordinator Ca: I'm thinking what the image of 'solidarity' that 'solidarity-based courtyard' evokes or should evoke in this case ...

(Silence)

Coordinator Be: In my case [community for addiction] I speak about a courtyard 'of the hospital' more than a solidarity-based courtyard. We usually refer to the problems of 'toxic

dependency/addiction' ... a negative, critical term ... 'addiction' means slavery ... The 'addicted' as the slaves of their dependencies.

Researcher: So I'm wondering if all people we deal with, including Romanian, are persons to be taken care of?

Administrator: This is critical. The presence of Roma people can expand our understanding of diverse experiences.

Coordinator Ca: We can underline two possible configurations of the courtyard: as a set with its own structure or as a chaotic reality ... well ... sometimes it happens ... But I can state that not everything is left to chance; there is an internal organization in the courtyard. Proof of this is that not all people are accepted into different Centres, especially in the psychiatric field. The environment is complex because of the dual presence of pathology and normality.

Coordinator A: Yes, no one is normal and we need to spread a culture of care understood as control and relationship. Each Centre has its peculiarities reflected in the courtyard.

Researcher: I agree, but we have to ask ourselves what meaning is given to relationships.

Coordinator Gr: For me working on relationships means to intensify and improve relations between teams and users to enable more personalized therapies. This can be achieved through group and individual work and, most importantly, building increasingly more planned projects that can extend the benefits of data from the courtyard.

Coordinator Be: I am sure that (maybe it is also our responsibility because we haven't communicated properly) our colleagues have missed the sense of the process of integration that we are building. That means that in uneasy situations [...] in some circumstances it seems that the gypsies weren't different, but very similar in their difficulties.

Coordinator A: That's right. I noticed in some cases the Roma project is seen as only intervening through sanctions without going in depth into difficulties, as if the focus of the relationship with them is only to control and manage difficult situations.

Social Worker F: I would like to remember that we could improve relations of care right through meetings: places of communication that should not be only in the event of emergency management.

The excerpt illustrates relationally responsive conversation as each builds on the other's comment and multiple interpretations emerge, again through shared reflexivity around binaries. In re-reading the event, the participants begin to acknowledge the interplay of meanings, to show an awareness of their place, and different ways of relating to others (Shotter, 2008). This may be seen as they recognize tensions and complicities (Haraway, 1988) and their implications for the felt sensitivities of the situation – the difficulties in welcoming families whilst expelling one, their voluntary invitation for Roma families to live in the community but then mandating expulsion. Critical partiality (Haraway, 1988) may also be seen in the different interpretations of the courtyard and its 'normality' (solidarity, hospital, slaves, structure, chaos), with tensions of pathology and normality leading to an insight about there being no one 'normality' and a need to 're-imagine' a diverse community of care (i.e. a way of moving on). Coordinator Ca's question and the ensuing silence indicate an 'arresting moment', a window in which opacity offers a possibility for seeing differently. Indeed, the next comment challenges the image of solidarity by posing the metaphor of slavery as an alternative way of positioning the courtyard.

The dialogue also illustrates movement towards 'theorizing' as action guiding anticipatory understandings (Shotter, 2010a). Throughout, the Researcher works with words as they are spoken to encourage shared reflexivity by questioning 'significances'. In his second comment, he points out the possible power implications embedded in the concept of 'slavery', which leads to the Administrator's insight that the Roma people can expand their understanding of diverse experiences. When he asks 'what meaning is given to relationships?', he is attempting to draw attention to the need to consider how relationships are envisaged, and indeed the discussion moves on to community relationships being more personalized and as both group and individual. Using insights from the discussion, CeAS practitioners go on to develop socially relevant knowledge and open possibilities for action by recognizing particularities: the need for

more planned projects, better communication, and being more caring. Stemming from this unfolding conversation, a common idea grew of the courtyard as a place for a new sense of citizenship, a 'relation of care': of dignity, respect and openness to all (not the controlling of some).

The excerpts show that socially useful knowledge and change can be generated not as intervention, direction and theoretical application, but in the shared conversations of people who can better and more deeply understand their experience as they talk around and within it. This requires an engaged researcher to listen, to notice sometimes unnoticed background features of the situation, and to facilitate the agency and reflexivity of all participants in creating understanding, knowledge and change. Both practitioners and academics are 'researchers'. As such, they need to move constantly in the stream of experience/setting as active co-constructors of knowing/knowledge and be sensitive to the complex and entwined evolution of understandings, events, actions and practices.

To summarize, dialogic sensemaking draws on social constructionist commitments to focus on how researchers and research participants' co-construct meanings around lived experiences, relationships and events and create some sense of order and intelligibility. This order does not mean consensus, but a degree of agreement that keeps differences in play – as seen in the two illustrations. It requires a shared reflexivity that problematizes binary distinctions, objectifications, boundaries and exclusions (Haraway, 1988).

Discussion

We now go on to discuss the contribution, challenges and potential impact of this form of engaged research.

Contribution

Our contribution is threefold.

1. We bring together the work of two authors (Haraway and Shotter) that is ontologically disparate and epistemologically similar to re-imagine relevance as a form of engaged impact-in research. Together, their ideas supplement each other to provide rich possibilities for socially useful research.

It is important to understand the implications of these theoretical underpinnings for how we carry out our research, because they form the basis not just for another methodology but for a different realm of inquiry: a different way of relating with research participants that focuses on their lived experience within historical, cultural and social contexts. Research is repositioned as situated, collaborative, interpretive and fluid – requiring an ethical responsiveness on the part of the researcher in seeking multiple, embodied and agentic accounts of all involved (Haraway, 1988) and envisaging multiple forms of relevant situated knowledge. ‘Expert/academic’ knowledge is de-monopolized, as the active participation of people with direct experience is sought in all stages of the research.

2. We develop dialogical sensemaking as a poetic philosophy – or an interpretive strategy – a way of doing research that emphasizes how multiple meanings unfold in dialogue between all participants. Our research conversations are not about making theoretical connections or gathering and analysing data to develop models that may be applied to practice, they are about surfacing knowing-from-within by paying attention to words in their saying (Shotter, 2016) and by keeping opacity and movement between boundaries (linguistic, personal, cultural, theoretical, practical) in play.

3. We offer five conversational resources that may be used within dialogical sensemaking. Shared reflexivity lies at the core, surfacing taken for granted meanings and relationships; overcommitments and expectations that can create boundaries and stereotypes; arresting moments, and implicit tensions and contradictions in ways of speaking and doing.

Together, these three elements offer a way of doing socially useful research that makes a difference.

Challenges

The challenges of creating knowledge in this way cannot be ignored. A question arises in terms of whether this is ‘rigorous research’. The CeAS research study was both socially useful and rigorous: it utilized methods and forms of data collection and interpretation (by researchers and practitioners) consistent with situated knowledge and social constructionist commitments (Cunliffe, 2011); it also involved sharing practical and theoretical

forms of knowledge to gain deep insights into the situation; and importantly, ‘protocols’ were developed to maintain the integrity of the research in the first two meetings.

Conventional research presumes that the researcher has privileged access to ‘reality’ and can appropriate the meanings and lives of those being researched by creating generalizable models and theories of their practice. Dialogical sensemaking requires a shift in these assumptions, in research practice, researcher roles and skills. One challenge lies in resisting overcommitment. Rather than applying preconceived hypotheses, academic theories and models and being in control of data collection etc., researchers need to be open to moment-by-moment interpretations and possibilities. It is also important for researchers to resist the temptation to generalize specific felt and contextualized experiences; to impose closure by privileging a binary opposition; and to discover ‘pre-existing’ boundary objects (categories, models, frameworks), which is what we are trained to do. This means being sensitive to the impact of both practitioner and academic language on shutting down or opening up conversation around multiple interpretations. It also requires an ability to keep movement and opacity in play by being sensitive to and understanding ‘changing, moment-by-moment links and relations [...] as they unfold’ (Shotter and Katz, 1996, p. 216) in dialogue. Relevance of this kind (Nicolai and Seidl, 2010) comes not from simplifying and abstracting generalizable constructs but is generated from knowing-from-within and, as we have seen in the illustrations, from recognizing the ongoing, fluid, mutable experiences of people living within fields of complexity and tension.

Situated knowledge requires researchers to be attentive to the ability of people to act as authors in reconfiguring and transforming their own organizational lives (Kaneklin, Piccardo and Scaratti, 2010). This shift in focus creates challenges as the role of the researcher changes from neutral expert observer to engaged interpreter and facilitator. In creating open and symmetrical relationships with practitioners, researchers may find themselves (re)negotiating researcher-researched boundaries, positions and relationships (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013) as they encounter varying situations. This requires a degree of self-reflexivity on the researcher’s part in terms of recognizing how our own assumptions and vulnerabilities may

play into the situation. In CeAS, the researchers found themselves balancing the need to maintain a degree of analytical/reflexive distance with sensitivity to the expectations, emotional investments and power relations of participants – including their own.

Impact

The goal of the CeAS research project was to develop not academic representational forms of knowledge but socially useful knowledge to help the organization address a critical problem. CeAS members utilized the skills of critical analysis and reflexivity developed throughout the research to resolve the immediate problem and to develop new organizational policies and practices: developing weekly meetings of all residents (including Roma representatives) to discuss and improve the situation; improving the nature of dialogue/conversation to be more open and inquiring within and between the three services; creating operational strategies and practices to share and disseminate information more effectively; and assigning a specific role to facilitate communication and coordination within the CeAS community. A number of researcher/CeAS meetings were held over the following year to transfer findings more generally. Researchers and CeAS members presented together at national and international academic and practitioner conferences, e.g. a conference on ‘Citizenship, Multiculturality and Migration’. They collaborated in organizing two national and three local public events, which included private, non-profit and public service organizations, addressing topics including dealing with the social problem of migration and diversity, and improving dialogue and collaboration across different services. Thus, the project had not only organizational but also a societal impact, offering wider insights for policy and practice around displaced people, migration, professional practices and norms, cultural and generational diversity, working with social change etc.

For the academic researchers there are practical, theoretical and methodological outcomes. The study provides an impetus for the development of researcher skills, refashioning researcher identities in relation to the shift in researcher roles, and for theory-building around sensemaking, social mediation and professional cultures, practices and norms (e.g. Scaratti, 2014). This form of

engaged research also offers opportunities for developing methodologies and methods for generating socially useful knowledge and enhancing critical communicative (Gómez, Puigvert and Flecha, 2011; Munté, Serradell and Sordé, 2011) and participative action research methodologies (Ivaldi, Scaratti and Nuti, 2015; Ripamonti *et al.*, 2016). These methods can be incorporated in postgraduate training programmes as a way of building impact into research. Researchers and CeAS members have also collaborated on a journal article and a book chapter.

The validation of socially useful engaged research lies in its practical impact on the organization and in drawing out ‘significances’ that are shareable across contexts, at societal and policy levels – as in the CeAS case. This challenges mainstream research, which is often based on academic goals and occupational demands that limit impact to the application of academic theories/models – almost as an afterthought. Engaged research embeds multiple forms of impact in the research itself, co-generating knowledge that impacts organizations, work, lives and selves immediately and in the longer term. The skills and conversational resources involved in dialogical sensemaking are transferable across the many contexts we find ourselves in as academics, practitioners and people. We also believe that impact-in engaged research builds accounts of lived contextualized experiences that resonate with others outside the situation in ways in which abstract knowledge does not. Future engaged research may explore methods and conversational resources that refine impact-in approaches, and further challenge narrow academic norms around what ‘good’ research looks like.

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