

## Concluding remarks

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The purposes of this collection has been to use the reflective analyses of the contributors in order to explore the ways in which embedded research has been conceptualized, theorized, realized and problematized in different research settings. This is not to make a claim that such accounts are exhaustive of the types of experiences that doctoral students who find themselves in embedded research arrangements will encounter; rather the collection has been put together to illustrate some of the dominant themes apparent in embedded research arrangements experienced by ourselves and our doctoral colleagues. Our interest in embedded research was borne from a shared realization that a number of studentships at the University of Manchester Schools of Social Science and Education, were developed in collaboration with external organizations. In such arrangements doctoral students were appointed to undertake research projects that would both form the basis for an accredited thesis as well as contribute to the organization, whether through evaluation of existing policies and practices, or collaborative agenda setting. Our collective interest in this approach to doctoral research developed over time, as we spent more time delving into the methodology text books in our first year, searching for answers to the conceptual and practical questions we had regarding the embedded aspect of our research projects. We were neither fully in nor out of the organizations we were researching, rather, as Gunter and Thomson conceptualize (2011) and Harriet Rowley deploys, we were ‘liquid researchers’ moving fluidly in and between different organizations with different roles and purposes. It was the ‘realpolitik’ of undertaking research in such a way that bought us together as a community, looking to support each other through the vagaries of conducting research in an organization that we were simultaneously part of and from (Helen Gunter, in this collection).

As such this collection has covered a range of positions experienced by embedded researchers, in the search for ‘relevant knowledge’ at a time of a rapid modernizing reform project in the public sector. This concluding article considers the communal themes predicated in each of the articles, and in doing so considers the challenges and potential that such themes offer to understanding embedded research as a viable and significant pathway for developing relationships between academia and public and third sector organizations. In the first instance the article considers

three main themes identifiable in these articles: those of funding and impact, ethics and organizational change.

### Funding and impact: Charting the terrain

One of the common principals that existed between the organizations described in the main articles in this collection was their nominal commitment to research for localized capacity building and the potential offered for the purpose of collaborative agenda setting. From the outset all three organizations described by Baars, Duggan and Rowley agreed to the partial funding of the embedded researchers, and so, as Baars points out, the potential for, and indeed responsibility to, contributing to ‘current activities’ within the organization were part and parcel of the initial agreement between the university, the researchers and the partnership organizations. For all three embedded researchers it was the desire for tangibility within such a contribution that occupied the space for philosophical soul searching regarding their roles and responsibilities as a result of their embeddedness.

What is interesting about all three experiences is that despite the nominal commitment to the research process and potential outcomes from their partnership organisations, it was the embedded researchers who took responsibility for developing project(s) that they hoped were to be of some tangible use to the organization. This was rather than a process that developed organically and witnessed the contribution of key actors within the organisations taking an active role in the development of the research project(s). This is a pertinent point, because from one aspect, the embedded researcher’s role had been predicated on the basis of a ‘development and research partnership’ (James Duggan in this collection), yet the development and enactment of the research partnership in all three cases seemed to fall squarely in the court of the embedded researchers themselves. Thus the potential available for collaborative agenda setting as a result of such arrangements appeared limited to the personal, philosophical and political

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positioning of the researcher in how they chose to conceptualize and realize their responsibilities within such a 'partnership'.

We posited in the introductory article to this collection that embedded research is a dynamic act that takes place in dynamic contexts. As Sam Baars points out, when contextualized within the modernizing reform projects of both New Labour and the Conservative-led coalition, underpinned by a cycle of moving between a boom and bust economic period leading to austerity measures in the development and delivery of public services such as education, the potential model of partnership working for collaborative research outcomes were squeezed by these powerful socio-political influences. The experiences of James Duggan in particular, act as an apt reminder that however hard the embedded researcher works to develop relationships that maintain at the locus the commitment to the development of an equitable and mutually beneficial research relationship (as reflected from the partnership organization's nominal commitment to research as a means to inform policy and/or practice), the reality is far more complex than this. Whether, as Duggan experienced, 'it's just not a good time' the development of each of the research relationships described in this collection were affected by the wider socio-political context in which the research was taking place. This is good; it shows that research in the social sciences is, and should be, fundamentally anchored to the complex realities of the socio-political and economic structures and social organizations within society itself. What is required of the embedded researcher is to square these important realizations with the business of developing viable and useful research projects, for the partnership organization specifically, and the field of social sciences more widely. It was these meta concerns that concerned Sam Baars in his contribution in the collection, and that remind us that research takes place in contested terrains (Ozga: 2000) that are neither fixed, static or stable (Thomson and Gunter: 2011). In this respect the 'realpolitik' of undertaking embedded research in partner organizations rests with the ability of the researcher to demonstrate capacity for reflexivity that takes into account the wider socio-political and economic policy contexts in which the partner organizations, (and the university) operate. It also requires the researcher to use this positioning reflexively, in order to develop a research approach that produces outcomes that legitimate research activities undertaken.

### **Ethical reflexivity: A natural state of being?**

As such it is clear from the contributions within this collection that doctoral students pursuing embedded research are likely to undertake an approach to research which critically analyses the development of societal structures and processes which impact upon the formation of organizational policies and practices at the local level. In all three articles the wider context in which the organization was operating had a direct impact on the way in which the embedded researcher developed and conducted their research. As a result, as Harriet Rowley pointed out, taking a critical

standpoint does throw up a set of ethical dilemmas for the embedded researcher. In her article, Rowley guided the reader through the complex web of 'being' ethical and 'doing' ethics in a way which addressed the competing and sometimes contradictory roles required from an embedded researcher working within and across the institutional borders of the university, the academy and a housing trust at a time of rapid reform and economic austerity. For Rowley, the 'realpolitik' occurred away from the homes of her research participants and was in fact located back within the walls of the university, around the table of the university ethics committee. Negotiating her role between the university, the school and the housing trust was an on-going issue for Rowley, and she found it helpful to operationalize the concept of a 'liquid researcher' as a way of understanding the multiple roles she was expected to hold as a result of her embeddedness. These roles often contradicted each other, and required trust that had been built up in one environment to be potentially threatened by processes and procedures developed in altogether different, and alien contexts. As a result Rowley argues that university ethics committees need to consider the implications of having one centralized administrative procedure for all doctoral students, as this has turned out problematic for those conducting embedded research.

Undertaking research in a partner organization is an innately political process, and as such raises important ethical questions for those doing embedded research. Embedded researchers often spend extended and intensive periods of time embedded in partner organizations, building relationships with a diverse range of individuals, often asking questions which participants may find potentially exposing with regards to their own roles within the organization. This is by no means a process which is only associative of those undertaking embedded research, however it is a core element of embedded research and as such needs to be engaged with.

Conducting research in an organization, such as a school or a Local Authority that, by its nature, is in an on-going process of actively (re)positioning itself within a wider socio-political and economic policy context, brings to bear a set of ethical challenges which are not always addressed in the ethics sections of the methodology handbooks. It was sharing concerns such as these that brought together the embedded researchers in this collection as a way of offering both support and guidance to each other in navigating the practical, ethical dilemmas that occurred, before, during and after data collection.

One of the particularly privileged aspects of being an embedded researcher is the relative ease of access enjoyed by a researcher who wears a badge affiliating them to the partner organization. All three authors had unfettered access to their partner organizations, developing research project(s), identifying participants, and conducting the research, and as this process took place over an extended period of time relationships developed and with this, as Harriet Rowley points out, loyalties towards participants were also developed. How to handle these conflicting and sometimes contradictory demands of relationships built as

a result of research is addressed in many methodological texts, particularly those dealing with ethnographies, and it was here that, as Rowley posited, that there is significant cross over with embedded research. However we are clear that embedded research is not tied to just one methodological approach. As James Duggan points out, approaches to conducting the research may take on a number of different guises over time, often as a result of shifting circumstances of the partner organization. As such, taken with the privilege of access it is necessary for those conducting embedded research to be ethically reflexive in considering how to manage such changes, especially when approval that will have been gained by an ethical review board may not cover the shifts in approach as a result of organizational change.

### **Managing organisational change: Power and politics**

In all three experiences of embedded research shared within this collection, is an acknowledgement that the contexts of the partner organizations are dynamic and vibrant institutional spaces in which multiple, overlapping and interconnected structures and processes exist as a result of the wider socio-political environment of which they are apart. This very fact underlies the reason why embedded research offers such significant opportunities to investigate how these complex and dynamic organizations operate. In addition, embedded research also provides a way of contributing to wider knowledge production processes regarding public and third sector organizations. That the organizations operate within dynamic and complex policy contexts does of course mean that organizational change will be an on-going and iterative process of which the researcher must flexibility engage.

As mentioned before, the access afforded to the embedded researcher presents a set of opportunities to produce knowledge that explore tensions between policies and practices at a localized level. Yet as James Duggan's piece in particular demonstrates, difficulties of doing so prevails when an organization is undergoing extensive reform and re-structuring in politically-charged circumstances. The context in which the partner organization may have agreed to fund an embedded researcher may change, as was the case for Duggan, and how this is managed by the researcher is significant, not just for the impact this will have on the data collection itself, but also for the relationship between the partner organization, the researcher and the university.

Both Duggan, as well as Gunter discussed the complexities financial arrangements bring to an embedded research relationship. Gunter points out that, university based academics are increasingly expected to pull in an income, and consultancy fees are high for the level of 'expertise' that, for instance, James Duggan's supervisors offered. Helen Gunter also pointed out that a doctoral student is relatively inexperienced, and as such more financially reasonable prospect as the amount of money contributed to the embedded researcher is 'small change' for an organisation

such as a school or a Local Authority. So the partner organization has effectively contributed to having a doctoral student to undertake the research, but by proxy also has access to the supervisors, who in their own capacities would be charging far higher rates, for potentially a lot less time. This is a complex, nuanced arrangement in many ways, as, Duggan pointed out, he was treated according to his comparatively low status; for example, when it came to offering him work space that would not have been offered to his supervisors if they had been undertaking the research. Yet Duggan was also given wide access to a large number of influential people within the organization, because of his association with the University of Manchester more generally and his supervisors more specifically. How Duggan managed this positionality was a critical element of his embedded research experience, and in many ways it is possible to analyse his position taking, for example, with regards to the successful bid he made but had to ultimately return, the experience of which cemented his 'orphan-ship' analogy. Had he not been a doctoral student but rather a 'critical friend' involved in a lucrative consultancy deal, it is interesting to consider if the same would have been requested from him. The power relationships shifted as did the organizational structures, and as Duggan searched for a viable and legitimate line of enquiry, he did so on his own, without the collaborative potential of key actors within the Local Authority.

This resonates with the thrust of Sam Baars argument, that whilst embedded research has the potential to 'deliver both knowledge and practical benefits to researchers and wider society, and offers an engaging way of exposing the next generation of researchers to the public value of their skills and knowledge' this must be done under the aegis of developing collaborative research agendas that are legitimated through their utility. This is the difficult balancing act of embedded research, as the researcher must simultaneously conduct a piece of research which will meet the requirements of the university for a doctoral thesis, whilst also develop a research project that has public utility. The risk lies in either developing a piece of work that is not rigorous enough in its interrogation of the processes, practices and positioning of the activities of the partner organizations, or has traversed away from the original intentions which the organization had collaboratively identified because of potential conflicts arising from the adoption of critical evaluation. This is why Sam Baars argument, that 'social scientists must adopt a more embedded approach to research which addresses publicly important questions, involves the public in the research process and engages the public with its findings' has particular currency when it comes to both the potential and the challenges offered through embedded research arrangements.

By developing research partnerships which set out to explore issues that are of public concern (such as all three embedded researchers initially considered they were doing) such as the impact of a housing association contributing to local educational provision, has the potential to provide a space in which researchers, professionals and the community can come together to look at the findings and to

collaboratively develop localized responses to the issues uncovered. However, the nature of embedded research as a part of a doctoral programme does seem to make this aim harder to achieve; when the fieldwork is over, first and foremost, the doctoral student must spend the time that is required in analysing, writing and re-writing a thesis that will be examined under rigorous conditions, and while one of the requirements is to consider the implications of the research, other than circulating a report to the partner organization there is no obligation on the researcher to take this any further. The potential to contribute to the discourse of knowledge production, at both a localized and national level is palpable, yet the complex reality is that this is much harder said than done. What is required is more meaningful discussions between the partner organization and the university with regards to a mutual commitment to collaborating, developing and disseminating research in the interests of furthering the discourse of knowledge production within the public sphere.

### Next steps

Although the projects reported in this edited collection have all come to their natural end, our work examining embedded research has only begun. The edited collection at hand has provided us with an opportunity to begin our conceptualization on what we mean with embedded research, as well as to problematize the approach. However, we acknowledge that a small-scale edited collection has its limitations, which is why we would like to briefly outline here some of the future directions we intend to take with our work on embedded research.

All the projects reported here had a specific educational focus. However, as reported in the introductory article, embedded research approach is not solely tied to education research, but may take place in varied types of organization and groups. The embedded research conference organized at the University of Manchester in July 2012 provided an example of this as, in addition to education, the conference presentations reported research from the fields of anthropology, religious studies, urban geography, sociology and criminology. Due to the sheer amount of interesting embedded research we have come across from different disciplines, conducted in different organizations and social settings such a mosque, prison and city council, we have come to realize that there is a need for a more interdisciplinary approach for embedded research.

The work reported in this edited collection, as well as other embedded research we have come across elsewhere has made it also evident that the existing research methods literatures do not fully cater to the needs of embedded researchers. As outlined in the introduction of this edited collection, we understand embedded research to be an approach to research, which is not tied into specific methodology. However, currently there is little literature available through which embedded researchers may conceptualize their approach. Some embedded researchers have addressed this by conceptualizing their research approach through for example ethnographical methodologies (Rowley). However these literatures may not suit all embedded researchers, as they may utilize a variety of methods in their research. Therefore, it seems that currently there is a need for literature that addresses issues that embedded researchers face regardless of the research methodology they have chosen. An embedded approach to research has the potential to engage with and address what Sam Baars describes as a problem of legitimacy within social science research. Our interests in developing a conceptualization of embedded research has led us to talk to many doctoral researchers undertaking funded collaborative projects within a range of organizations, and the feedback we have received, overwhelmingly, is that there is a desire for opportunities to network and share best practice with other researchers undertaking similar research arrangements. These doctoral researchers have highlighted that there is a lack of engagement with the issues of undertaking research in this capacity by the myriad of 'how to' methodology books, and it is this gap that this introductory collection is attempting to engage with as an initial discussion point. As such we would welcome feedback and debate about the conceptualizations we have offered in this edited collection as a means of initiating a dialogue about the utility in further developing our ideas into something that may be of tangible use and advice for doctoral level embedded researchers.

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