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## **Sediment, subversion and suffering: can the project be resisted?**

Katie Collins and Svetlana Cicimil

*"What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing."* (Arendt, 1998, p. 5)

In this paper, we seek to entwine a number of epistemic and practical perspectives around an activity that is increasingly the foundation of knowledge production: the funded research project. Specifically, we have chosen as our example a project commissioned and funded as participatory research, because participatory research in its full, radical, emancipatory glory ought to function as inherently subversive. And yet, to attempt such resistance in practice requires near constant, exhausting and stressful vigilance against the power of reason that resides in the sedimented reality (Butler, 1990) of "selection process and the public good" (Lyotard, in Fredrich, 1999, p. 46), which seem inevitable while the research 'industry' is dominated by positivistic modes of knowledge production that won't legitimise alternative conceptions of knowledge.

Under this dominant regime, with which participatory researchers have a complicated relationship of dependence and rejection, the knowledge produced by research is most frequently (and most legitimately) performed in a particular way. A planned and linear process leads to a contribution to knowledge in the form of a journal article and impact case, in which a logical sequence of events, questions to answers to new questions, unfolds, written in the disembodied, God-like 'scientific' voice of the mythical third person. We argue that as well as the speaking subject (Butler) represented in their articles, academics must necessarily also perform their research projects as embodied subjects (Merleau-Ponty) and critical academics may, depending on how much resistance they are prepared to offer, how willing they are to suffer, also produce what Lyotard calls authentic articulation of knowledge in two ways: refusing to capitulate entirely the organising logic of the project and writing about knowledge in unconventional ways. We will synthesise these philosophically derived musings into three distinct subjects worthy of our analysis: the ways in which organising logic of the project relates to the radicalism of participatory research;

Participatory research as articulated by Fals-Borda (1991) ought to function as a critically performative project. At its core, this is an approach that turns the traditional dynamic of remote researcher and submissive subject on its head by seeking to involve in the process those who are usually 'studied'. This inclusion should equalise access to the research process and ability to benefit from the knowledge created (Fine, 2006; Fine and Torre, 2006). Participatory research is inherently a social process, its aim to transfer as much epistemic and applied power from the researcher to her collaborators as possible (Collins, 2015), and as such it ought to be obvious that many formalised, professionalised project management tools and methodologies, requiring clear goals (or clarifying for others) and monitoring performance by milestones and reporting in specific forms are entirely contrary to the whole

ethos. Except it doesn't seem to work that way; instead the project form, perceived by most managers as the best, perhaps the only, way to optimise performance and minimise risk for funders, becomes a tyranny of target outcomes and deadlines to be resisted, wriggled around and, as a last resort, simply performed as theatre: a web of illusion to be spun around the real work of emancipatory participation.

We will show we performed the 'empowerment' of research subjects with reasonable proficiency, though still within the strict boundaries we were given. Distinct from this subversive performance though, researchers staged another show: a performance of control and perhaps even a performance of legitimacy (exemplified by the need to design a conventional form of evaluation in order to satisfy the need to 'prove' that the project had achieved its 'outcomes'): illusions related to the hegemony of neoliberal managerialist control. We question whether this protective performance of competent project management served to create a 'safe space' in which we could get as close as possible to 'proper' participatory research, or whether it conspired to speak and write us "into existence within neoliberal discourse...vulnerable to it and to its indifference to us and to our thought [a] discourse through which we, not quite out of choice and not quite out of necessity, make judgements, form desires, make the world into a particular kind of (neoliberal) place" (Davies, 2005, p. 1). Or perhaps it achieved both those things. Rather than managing managerialism by playing along, we question whether we are actually merely performing a standard semantic script, and thus making it tangible once again.

What might the alternative be? This becomes increasingly difficult to imagine, as the 'business' of knowledge production becomes ever more performative and projectified as defined by Lyotard (1984). But we think that rehumanising, reembodying and reconceptualising research as something that is done by people, for people, could hold the answer. Rather than conceptualising human knowledge as a complex edifice and our job to fashion neatly shaped brick-projects to be delivered on time and to budget, can we imagine knowledge as a garden that we tend and watch grow, where we dwell (Heidegger) through changing seasons? Care and knowing.

Arendt, H. (1998). *The Human condition* 2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Butler, J. (1990) *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*. *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Ed. Sue-Ellen Case. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.