

**UNIVERSITIES, REFLEXIVITY AND CRITIQUE:
CULTURES AND CONTEXTS OF RESEARCH PRODUCTION**

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Introduction

The contexts and cultures of knowledge production often work to create and prevent a practice that is aimed towards positive transformation in socio-economic conditions (May with Perry 2011). Yet in discussions of reflexivity and critique these can be neglected in favour of a focus upon cultures separate from institutional contexts (Woolgar 1988. Knorr Cetina 1999). At the same time we are seeing shifts in the political economy of knowledge relating to the justification, production and application of knowledge across disciplines and institutional settings (Nowotny et al 2001. Perry and May 2010).

Universities are the major site for the production of critical management studies (Harding et al 2007). This is not to suggest that other sites of activity do not exist. However, universities act as institutions to mediate external pressures and so have profound effects upon degrees of relative autonomy (Burtscher et al 2006). Whilst inter- and intra-institutional variability persists, a generic tendency can be seen in how universities structurally and culturally act to magnify ambiguities in external environments concerning demands for work that is relevant. Yet to whom and for what purpose? Equally, peer review can be seen as a source of

resistance to this encroachment, but may exhibit patterns of dynamic conservatism that is nothing more than the re-production of the status quo.

With so many different expectations in play, greater attention to the question of whether universities mediate or amplify external pressures is required and if so, with what consequences for their contexts and cultures of inquiry (Amit 2000. Delanty 2001. Graham 2002. Lohmann 2004. May and Perry 2006). Without due consideration of what is different about the knowledge produced in universities from other sites of activity, what forms of justification exist for them to persist into the future?

The aim of this presentation is to set out the aims and objectives of the Stream. Through discussion of the issues raised, we hope to inform not only a critical, but more reflexive, engaged and confident social research practice in search of clarification and illumination. In this initial presentation, the Stream Convenors will bring together historical writings and insights on the relationship between social research and social life in an examination of works on reflexivity, positioning and belonging and an understanding of the contexts and cultures of knowledge production in the contemporary era that inform and shape the practices of research. In so doing, we chart the lineage of debates on the relationship between research and practice and their resonance for this and the next generation of researchers.

The discussions are intended to have implications for the actual practices of social research, as well as engaging in debates over its future role in the study of social life. In the process, we seek to open up alternative possibilities between scientism and relativism, capitulation and withdrawal, excellence and relevance and expose a series of issues relating to how knowledge production relates to an understanding of and makes a contribution to contemporary social relations and issues. The organisation of this Stream as part of the CMS07 represents the culmination of work over the past few years, the main arguments of which are contained

within May with Perry 2011, 'Social Research and Reflexivity: Content, Consequences and Context' (Sage: London).

Structure of Presentation

The journey starts with a critical examination of existing accounts of reflexivity and the role and place of social research in relation to social life. Rather than cowering from a recognition of no-truth, Weber gives us the need to learn from mediating between different cultures of enquiry. From Schutz, Garfinkel and Gouldner can be taken a refusal to posit a polarity between common sense and social scientific understandings and the need to not only link knowledge production to an investigator's position in the world through a 'radical project', but also acknowledge the transformative potential of knowledge. A more 'robust reflexivity' emerges through examination of feminist writers, from Harding, Smith and Butler, who have sought not only to comment upon but actively transform the world as a result, the emphasis here on reconstruction as well as deconstruction. Such writings act as a defense of social research and illustrate how reflexive thinking has always been part of a healthy and ongoing debate within the social sciences. Yet what is also highlighted is the need to guard against hypodermic realism and avoid collapse into self-referentiality or relativism, as well as the absence in such accounts of the need to consider contexts and cultures of knowledge production in informing the nature of reflexivity.

We then turn to examine the work of those concerned with mediation between social research and social life, particularly Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu. Here we see an emphasis on the need for a two-way relationship between the knower and the known, between lay and technical languages and for work that is both relational and transformational. Giddens' double hermeneutic comes into play, overcoming a dichotomous subject-object positioning and initiating a critique of the role of the 'expert'. This is followed by Bourdieu's recognition of the need to reflect upon the social conditions and contexts that enable a scholastic point of view to emerge. Here we see concern for context, missing from earlier accounts, and a call

for a 'genuine epistemology' that is based on knowledge of the social conditions under which scientific schemata actually function. Critically, a critique is offered here of individualistic cultures and the cult of the expert, which reduces exceptionality to character without due consideration of contexts and cultures. It is in the relationship between disposition and position, informed by conditions of knowledge production, that the potential to transcend dichotomous understandings of reflexivity lies.

These issues are further elaborated through an examination of modes of representation themselves. Michel Foucault's work on critical practice is the starting point for insights in relation to capabilities and capacities for action, as well as the need to create conditions of possibility, rather than make pronouncements that lead to closure. Here, as with the work of Zygmunt Bauman, we see a refusal to accept a legislative role for the social sciences, preferencing the 'authority of the interpretative' and a spirit of enquiry that is about knowing the human condition better. Such knowledge only comes with a more nuanced formulation of the self. What emerges is the need to translate, or actively mediate, between frames of meaning which see an engaged social science as being a self-fulfilling practice or as purely legislative.

These issues are then taken forward via an examination of epistemic permeability and different forms of reflexivity. The consequences of concerns with reflexivity, research and social life tend to be a separation between production and other elements of the knowledge process. To move away from a romanticized ideal, degrees of epistemic permeability need to be considered, based on an understanding of endogenous and referential reflexivity. Bringing these dimensions of reflexivity together is essential in developing a context-sensitivity that is also context-revising. Taking insights from Derrida, Latour and Gouldner, the emphasis is on the role of social research as a facilitator between traditions of legislation and interpretation, but with attention to the rigours of translation and a critical hermeneutic. A layering upon previous arguments can be seen here, as further understanding of the relations between

reflexivity in social research communities (endogenous) and within the lifeworld (referential) is needed to bring content and consequences together. The meeting of these forms of reflexivity, dependent on differences in epistemic permeability between disciplines, is also where cultures of knowledge production and knowledge reception come together.

We can characterize the oscillations between the two dimensions of reflexivity as relating to the tensions between positioning and belonging and the abilities and capabilities of researchers to act. Identity and power come into play here, in terms of Ricoeur's sense of selfhood, Goffman's distinction between roles and positions and acknowledgement of the different kinds of capital that can be mobilized for action in different contexts. The chapter acts to bring to awareness the context in which aspirations are constrained or enabled and how the practice of the social sciences should be the systematization of links between personal and self identity and the enacted environment.

What is then needed is to examine the very contexts and cultures that create, or indeed, prevent, the conditions for a more active engagement. Here we shall move through an understanding of the macro, meso and micro issues within cultures of knowledge production and reception that influence the consolidation of a more reflexive and critically engaged practice. First, we chart changes in the overall political economy of knowledge relating to the justification, production and application of knowledge across disciplines and institutional settings. Through an examination of theoretical developments, policy frameworks and urban and regional practices, issues around excellence, relevance and reflexivity are examined.

With increased demands for relevance, referential reflexivity is surely implied, yet instead we see a mirroring of debates on reflexivity in which relevance quickly turns to relativism. The result is a backlash of a narrow excellence-driven paradigm, preferencing endogenous over referential concerns. It is the 'contamination' between the inside and the outside that is at stake, with external validation and value attribution framing the daily realities of knowledge production.

Universities act to mediate external changes in the conceptualizations of different knowledges and their relationship to society. Inter- and intra-institutional variability persists.

Nevertheless, a generic tendency can be seen in how universities structurally and culturally act to magnify ambiguities in external environments concerning demands for work that require both referential and endogenous reflexivity, relevance and excellence. Shifting values in relation to a market-driven instrumentality and attributed value to particular forms of knowledge lead to differential levels of expectations of and support for different disciplines with varying consequences for the practice of social research. Importantly, it is the gap between expectations, structures and practices that emerges here, as well as the need to give greater attention to questions of whether universities are indeed best placed to mediate between research and the lifeworld and what is gained and lost in the process.

In moving from contexts to cultures, we return to issues concerning the relationship between structure and agency, character and context and position and disposition, informed by an understanding of the cultural inhibitors to different forms of reflexivity. Entrepreneurialism reaches into the university as a 'new' imperative, born in and mediated through the contexts and structures of knowledge production, working around and through academic culture to create more uncertainty. Academic reactions to the political economy of knowledge and the perceived strangle of entrepreneurialism include mobilizations of discourses of academic freedom and autonomy, without consideration of what conditions and contexts enable such positions to be held, coupled with retreats to orthodoxy, disciplinary entrenchment and specialization and enormous variability in reflexive understandings between individuals, their practices and institutional positions. It is the bounded nature of professional knowledge production that appears here, working to reinforce distinctions, polarizations and dichotomies that critical thinkers have sought to expose and break down. In other words, an absence of reflexivity in relation to cultural presentations of practice, as well as conditions of knowledge production, may explain why some practices in particular contexts are able to ignore these

insights and so enable exogenous factors to remain at endogenous levels within knowledge communities. The limits to reflexivity therefore inhere in knowing how far to go in questioning the premises of one's own discipline or that of others.

Summary

Through examination of the above issues, we move through an understanding of contents, consequences, contexts and cultures. This initial presentation will provide a set of socio-historical interrogations of the works of those who have been concerned with reflexivity and the role of the social sciences; examine the consequences of these discussions in terms of epistemic permeability, positioning and belonging and, finally, turn to an understanding of the contexts and cultures within the university as a site of knowledge production, which shape the extent to which different forms of reflexivity and practices of social research can emerge.

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