



Down and out at the British Library and other dens of co-production

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Abstract

As part of a searching for scholarly relevance, there is growing interest in how academics and practitioners might work together to produce knowledge. We offer reflections on our experiences as an academic and a practitioner co-creating a research project about leadership in UK public sector organizations. Using an autoethnographic approach we explore how we have engaged in becoming co-researchers, interactive processes which entail a multiplicity of identities and struggles with organizational and professional pressures. We suggest a way of thinking about academic-practitioner research interactions which emphasizes that, rather than forming a communion accomplished in a space beyond politics, they remain as situated and unsettling interactions. Our contribution is to offer a counterpoint to accounts of co-production which present collaborative research as a process of fusion; instead we portray it as involving relations between protagonists which are mutually constituting and uplifting but also at times disturbing and debilitating.

Keywords

Autoethnography, co-production, dialogue, identity, Levinas, politics

Introduction

4 July 2011, Central London, 2 a.m. Co-production hits the skids.

Kevin sat in the hotel bar. The room was spinning. He had already lost his phone and jacket, though wouldn't make this discovery until nursing himself through the hangover next morning. Mike sat across from him, now asleep, miles from home, dead to the world except for a rattling snore. In a month's time Mike is to quit his job for love and relocate to France. Their project was coming to a close. They had met that day to have a tilt at making revisions to the Management Learning paper. The meeting came on the back of weeks of telephone conversations in which they had struggled to imagine a way forward. The deadline was bearing down on them yet they had long felt themselves

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running out of steam. Across the evening their intended dialogues of copro had become drinking to forget. They started out on burgundy but soon hit the harder stuff. Like a badly-scrawled parabola, the conversation might have briefly got off the ground (they could never quite recall the details) but then seized up, crashed and burned. Copro had attacked their brains and was now hell-bent on other organs, their livers bearing the brunt of this fresh assault. It had long since dispatched their spirits and self-esteem. Mike was jolted from his restless slumber as security unleashed the white glare of the house lights. Smarting, he lurched for his bearings. From the edge of the room, the night porters – the bar staff long gone – made their move, closing in on the sad tableau of academic-practitioner disorientation. Kevin felt his stomach heave. This was not going to be pretty. How had it come to this? More worryingly, how would it end?

In this article we explore identity and politics in coproducing research, based on reflection on our own practice. Drawing on Levinas' image of communicative action as involving actors who are 'not at home' with themselves, we emphasize the unsettling force of our interactions. Our contribution is to offer a counterpoint to accounts of co-production which present collaborative research as a more or less happy process of fusion, complementarity and union (Grace, 2006; Ospina and Dodge, 2005; Rynes et al., 2001); instead we portray it as involving relations between protagonists which are mutually constituting and uplifting but also at times disturbing and debilitating. We attempt to explore the ways in which these dynamics are related to the situated nature of the practices of co-production; and more especially to how the political landscape matters to the presentation of self and other, and to the ways in which our identities have formed, informed and deformed each other through our endeavours. Drawing on elements of an autoethnographic approach and focusing on dialogues we have had along the way, we try to analyze the practices, and to evoke our experience of, working together. We focus on a series of encounters during two particular days, both in London a year or so apart, and present fragments of our dialogues within a wider sense of the unfolding action of our longer term engagement. Our dens of coproduction involve our offices, research interview rooms, academic conferences, bars, and as we recount in some detail, the British Library and a networking event at the House of Commons.

In the last four years we have been doing collaborative research on leadership practices in UK public sector organizations. We offer our experience as an example of joint academic-practitioner research. In describing it as such we make a number of acknowledgements – we recognize the significance of our different organizational and sectoral settings, and within these our different career structures, ethical responsibilities, incentives and constraints. Furthermore, we inhabit two different identity groups (Beech, 2008). We are both practitioners, but ones who carry different (and multiple) labels. In the last 20 years we have both oriented our professional lives to engaging with practices in the UK public sector. Kevin is an academic, Mike a policy maker. We are managers. We are researchers. We are learners. We are of the same city, culture and social class. We are friends. But we are also two individuals facing specific contexts and engaged in distinctive identity projects. We have been engaged in a process of becoming learners and co-researchers, an interactive process which entails tussles with a multiplicity of identities and, indivisible from these processes of identity work, political struggles with institutional and professional pressures.

Towards dialogues of theory and practice

How to foster dialogues of theory and practice is frequently presented as one of the major questions confronting the academy, challenging researchers to translate their bright ideas into pay offs for other organizational (non academic) actors (British Academy, 2008; Pettigrew, 2001; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006). The literature valorizes the importance of dialogue between academics and

practitioners, with communication presented as a prime practical imperative. Such dialogue has been presented variously as a means of generating impact (Armstrong and Alsop, 2010; HEFCE, 2010) or of increasing levels of knowledge utilization (Caplan, 1979; Oh and Rich, 1996); of showing relevance as well as rigor (Starkey and Madan, 2001; Starkey and Tempest, 2005); of achieving connectedness (British Academy, 2008; Warry Report, 2006) or inclusion (Bartunek and Trullen, 2007; Evered and Louis, 1981; Yanow, 2004); and as means of creative experimentation (Antonacopoulou et al., 2010) or of uniting around a common language (Dunn, 1980; Walker, 2010).

The emphasis on dialogue retains a focus on the existence of two separate identity groups. However, taking just one of these groups, beneath the shorthand label academics lies a profusion of identity projects, each of which reflects particular assumptions about the purpose of research scholarship. Decades ago Waldo (1968) described public administration, our own area, as facing a crisis of identity. The field has seen struggles between groups including scientists pursuing a public administration science of rigorous methods (for example McCurdy and Cleary, 1984; Mainzer, 1994; Stallings and Ferris, 1988; White and McSwain, 1990); scholars positioning themselves as servants of the practitioner community (Frederickson, 1980; Marini, 1971; Perry and Kraemer, 1986; Waldo, 1952; Wamsley and Wolf, 1996); and the creation of further groups involving the melding of identities such as pracademics (Ospina and Dodge, 2005; Posner, 2009; Zody, 1977), or indeed practitioners with different foci (Antonacopoulou et al., 2010). These identity projects are imbued with political and personal as well as theoretical dilemmas. There is a growing interest in the particular implications that these ongoing struggles and debates have for individuals engaged in their own identity works (Ford and Harding, 2008; Keenoy and Seijo, 2010; Kempster and Stewart, 2010; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2011). Our article therefore seeks to make a contribution by accounting for individual actors within this milieu.

We offer a different way of thinking about academic-practitioner research interactions and emphasize that, rather than forming a communion which takes place in a space beyond politics, they remain as situated, relational and ongoing interactions enlivened by collisions and dilemmas. In what follows we examine the dialogical aspects of our joint research practices. We critically examine the purposes of our work and suggest the articulations of these cannot be removed from the wider sectoral pressures and politics which we each navigate. We present different modes of collaboration, critically revisit some dialogues which we had with each other as co-researchers and consider the political dynamics that these suggest. Moving on from our opening vignette, we will also discuss the impact that our joint practising has had on each other. We will explore how our dialogical practices – whether in designing the research, performing in the field, or reflexively making sense of our joint working – are ongoing accomplishments between self and other. We suggest that the interplay of complex and interacting identities give vigour to the enterprise and resources to the researchers, but also generate abrasions and dilemmas. The potential benefits of co-producing research knowledge stem as much from the rich moments of alterity as they do from any sense that co-production entails unification.

Identity and alterity

Identity has become a prominent theme in studies of organizational life (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1163). Emerging from this literature is the idea that 'identity work' is an exercise in construction involving acts of forming, strengthening and revising, and thus incorporates dialogical, performative and interactive processes (Ashforth, 1998; Beech and Huxham, 2003; Gioia et al., 2000). For Alvesson et al. (2008: 6) identity refers to subjective experience and meanings and 'to our ongoing efforts to address the twin questions, "Who am I?" and – by implication – "how should I act?"'.

Beech (2008: 52) emphasizes that in our performative interactions ‘there is the shadow of encounters past and the foreshadow of encounters yet to come and so identity work may be a melange of different identity projects, co-present within the self but distinct and potentially conflicting’.

Building on these images of messiness and conflict, we draw upon a political view of identity work, which sees the performative processes of shaping, reviewing and re-shaping of identities as interactions between multiple aspects of self and others. In doing so, we engage with the work of Levinas who explores communication and alterity, a mode of being and saying where self is ‘endlessly obligated to the Other’ (Hand, 1989: 1), and we contribute to an emerging conversation among management scholars who have engaged with Levinas’ work to generate insights into ethical practices, organization studies, identity and management learning (Beech et al., 2010; Cunliffe, 2008; Linstead and Linstead, 2005; McMurray et al., 2011; Rhodes, 2009; Stokes and Gabriel, 2010; Thanem, 2006). Levinas (1987: 48) writes that:

the Other is what I myself are not. The Other is this, not because of the Other’s character, or physiognomy, or psychology, but because of the Other’s very alterity. The Other is, for example, the weak, the poor, ‘the widow and the orphan’, whereas I am the rich or the powerful.

In other words, intersubjective space (for example, the research interview room, the academic-practitioner space, or the space negotiated by author and reviewer) is not symmetrical. Levinas signals the difficult and disharmonious nature of communicative action, of actors who are not within themselves – ‘not at home’ with themselves – and of acts in which the subject, or the speaker, is ‘bending back on itself’ or ‘turning inside out’ (Levinas, 1987: 49). Communication therefore involves painful acts of disclosure and exposure. Rather than resulting in a merger, he portrays communication as an unsettling. He emphasizes the struggles, pain and wounds of interactions. Levinas therefore suggests that in the face of otherness unification through human communication is a reductionist and illusory goal:

If communication bears the mark of failure or inauthenticity in this way, it is because it is sought as a fusion. One begins with the idea that duality must be transformed into unity, and that social relations must culminate in communion. This is the last vestige of ... idealism. (Levinas, 1989: 164)

These ideas suggest an alternative way of understanding of academic-practitioner interactions. Rather than unification as either the conceptual lens or the normative goal of collaboration, we might see the self/other dialectic as the dynamic motor of learning between academics and practitioners. This Hegelian notion frames co-producing as a political relation in which each party recognizes the insufficiency of themselves and the part the other can play in their development. As Bernstein (1984: 18) puts it: ‘They will have to set themselves in some kind of *intentional* relation with others; they will have to accept that their consciousness of themselves is mediated in one way or another, by how others regard them’. The dialectical idea that self’s development and realization are dependent on other captures the generative tension between purposeful parties motivated by distinct as well as overlapping interests. Co-producing research therefore entails recognizing difference alongside an ambition that academics and practitioners may be able to work together on areas of mutual concern. This notion of co-production – as intersubjectivity – describes both self and other in reflexive relation. Both parties become mutually constituting and mutually unsettling rather than either separated in a distrusting standoff or fused in an eternally harmonious unity. As the next vignette illustrates, collaborative research involves thinking and practising in the face of the other, whether the others are our backstage selves, editors and their deadlines, or referees and their expectations.

4 July 2011, Mike's office, Westminster, 3 p.m. Kevin and Mike have been discussing how to revise this paper in line with the referees' comments.

- Kevin: So Referee 2 would like us to account more for how and why we've chosen Levinas. To show the 'thought-throughness' of this decision.
- Mike: To show our working.
- Kevin: Well, how did we?
- Mike: Because we were already heavily committed to it and we were up against a deadline. It was too late to do anything else.
- Kevin: We can't say that.
- Mike: It's the structure of co-production. It involves deadlines and constraints.
- Kevin: Yes that's true. That's one of the reasons why, we've said this before, we like the term 'co-production', rather than 'co-creation' or 'collaboration'. It captures something important about the process.
- Mike: Its Marxist overtones.
- Kevin: Yes ... But we also looked at Derrida didn't we? We spent a long time in the café that afternoon reading and discussing it. We looked at Derrida on friendship and gift giving.
- Mike: Yes, the limits of friendship and the instrumentalities of gift giving.
- Kevin: Yes, so that had a certain resonance for us as friends, who are also conscious of our own professional instrumentalities in doing this work together. But we kind of pulled back from him didn't we?
- Mike: Yes, because of time.
- Kevin: Hmm. Again, we can't say that. Yes, we had also used Levinas at the St Andrews seminar to frame our work. We got good feedback from that – it seemed to work as a frame. And Nic Beech has used him as well to talk about copro.
- Mike: Yes, we should be sure to cite him.
- Kevin: You're really getting the hang of this.

Methodology

Mindful of the 'costs in taking too localized a focus in the empirical analyses of the personal-social relation in identity studies' (Alvesson et al., 2008: 11) we try to develop an appreciation that our projects and understandings are shaped by wider cultural formations, and aspects of our professional contexts, and to explore 'the emerging nature of learning as part of the process of becoming' (GNOSIS, 2010: 9) while remaining alive to its social complexity. Our reiterative process of critical reflection has been enabled by written exchanges dealing with questions or issues we were struggling with or which we wanted the other's perspective upon; discussion of field notes and of transcriptions from times when we had recorded our conversations discussing the politics of our practices; and a review of email exchanges over a four-year period. We have conducted countless hours of conversations about our work and our discussions about the development of this particular article have generated further data on the process of co-production. Our text has been co-produced through repeated exchange and comments on drafts. This process became particularly fraught during the periods where we were meeting the initial deadline for the special issue and then again, even more so, during the period when we were thinking through our responses to the referees' comments on the first draft. Part of our strategy resulted in the ill-starred July 4 meeting in London, and its aftermath, during which we examined anew what we had learned about co-production, our relations and identity projects.

In constructing this text we have faced a number of stylistic as well as intellectual choices. Within autoethnographic writing, there is an interesting tradition of composing more or less entire articles as a dialogue or as stories (Ellis et al., 2008; Frenzt and Hocker, 2010; Santoro and Boylorn, 2008; Wyatt, 2005). Elements of our approach experiment with this mode, and stand as autoethnographic pieces of the whole. Our purposively chosen examples provide glimpses of our dialogues in the moment and in particular contexts (our dens of co-production). We pull back from an unqualified commitment to an entirely dialogical format, as we are not comfortable with the extent to which it might suggest that we are somehow presenting an authentic portrayal of native voices unhindered, or unpolluted, by the conventional infrastructure of an academic article. We prefer to represent our work by providing pieces of text where, driven by a shared curiosity, we have co-authored a review of academic literatures, or have stood back from the heat of the action and provided another perspective on our practices and dialogues and their context. We are therefore seeking to both evoke and analyse our practices (Anderson, 2006; Buzard, 2003). We supplement our vignettes with discursive frames which seek to articulate our contribution to the special issue and the wider debates on academic-practitioner interactions. This results in a polyphonic and multifaceted text, even if reflexivity demands that we admit it is one over whose voices we exercise some editorial control.

One source of data which we draw on most extensively is taken from a particular extended face-to-face conversation. The other, which we have already begun to introduce, provides glimpses of our interactions across 4 July 2011. In June 2010 we sat together in the British Library and recorded a conversation in which we discussed our joint working in relation to our interests, our careers, our colleagues and how we made sense of our work together. In that encounter we discussed the politics of sustaining our work, what we had got from the experience, what we had found to be enriching and what frustrations or anxieties we had felt. (We subsequently transcribed the conversation and filed it as the ironically grandiose British Library Tapes.) We use the British Library Tapes as one key source of data. We also utilize notes on our time together at various London locations on July 4 as a basis for thinking about aspects of our practices. We interlace our text with strands of our dialogue drawn from across the course of that day. We also look at the themes of these interactions within the context of other discussions and exchanges we have had about the project and the dynamics of our joint working.

What follows is not itself perhaps a 'story that moves with a purpose' but it has elements of drama, pathos, humour and reflection, we hope enough to convey some sense of the dynamics of our identity work and relationship as well as the basis for a deeper exploration of how we have accomplished, and sometimes been undone by, our practices of co-production. These are not dialogues which show us buttressing each other's self-esteem or in which we present a coherent self-narrative. Instead we can see ourselves straining under the precariousness of sustaining the project, of reflecting on the antagonisms of balancing the competing demands on our time, of foregrounding different possible versions of ourselves and sustaining identities which are acceptable to actors with diverging interests and priorities, colleagues, bosses, objectified performance management regimes, friends and co-researchers. We recognize dialogues as our attempts to construct and negotiate meaning but also as part of the very organizing of our collaboration (Humphreys and Brown, 2002).

Showing our working

Our personal relationship has influenced our research. We have known each other for 20 years. After working together in a UK university in the 1990s, our careers diverged. Mike moved out of academia to work for a high-profile professional association representing UK public sector managers (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives) – before Kevin took up a new academic role in

another business school. Mike's roles involve leading SOLACE's policy development and government and stakeholder relations. He has engaged in research both when he was employed in a university and subsequently. Mike has continued to write on areas related to public administration, and work with practitioners in different learning and research settings. In beginning the project, part of our motivation was to create an opportunity to work together again. One of Mike's motivations was to generate some insights for colleagues in his network, based on an optimism that collaborating would boost his resources. At other points we have reflected that the project itself contributed to our 'projects of the self' (Grey, 1994: 482) – for Kevin the chance to show he is connected with practitioners and for Mike demonstrating an ongoing research track record.

Commodifying otherness

14 July 2011, 3 p.m. Extract from a telephone conversation between Kevin and Mike, discussing revisions to this paper.

- Mike: We should say that copro extends beyond writing stuff. We co-produce research interviews. We co-produce our way round networking events. I introduce you to people, open doors.
- Kevin: Yes I stumble my way in, tripping over the doormat. Or they close it in my face.
- Mike: Yes maybe we should talk about the range of reactions from people I introduced you to at the House of Commons reception.
- Kevin: Getting completely blanked you mean.
- Mike: Not always. But some of it was very funny.
- Kevin: Thanks. Hmm. Let's think about that.
- Mike: The one with Bloggs [a medium-sized cheese] was particularly amusing.
- Kevin: What was that about do you think? Was he blanking me or was he really blanking you by blanking me, your friend?
- Mike: It's because you introduced yourself. You should have let me say that you were a professor – that would have made a difference.

When securing access to our interviewees – members of a hard-to-access elite – we presented our profile as a team of researchers with different identities coming together, implying that we would combine to be more than the sum of our parts. This did not prevent one sceptical chief executive asking whether our research was to be 'mere pop sociology', perhaps implying that he saw the composition of the team as representing a dilution of academic rigour. Nonetheless, generally it was the framing of the idea that combining our separate skills and backgrounds – the invocation of separate identities – that helped us persuade respondents to meet with us for a research interview and to support our project. We actively drew upon our respective professional and organizationally situated identities as resources of legitimation. In subsequent journal articles we have also played up these different identities as part of selling the novelty value – or contribution – of our joint writing. Funnily enough, we have done so again earlier in this text. We have been able to invoke the idea of dual perspectives being brought to bear, in ways which echo arguments about the benefits of co-production (O'Hare et al., 2010; Ospina and Dodge, 2005; Yanow, 2004). In both cases, whether negotiating access or presenting and commodifying our work in journals we were taking advantage of otherness, of difference, as a resource.

These are examples of when we knowingly played up the idea of otherness. At other points the sense of alterity involved in the work has threatened other identity projects, our own or those the respective organizations in which we are involved. The project had an ambiguous role in Mike's working life. It was not exactly the research that dare not speak its name but nor was it front and

centre of Mike's activities or of how he accounted to his colleagues for his time. Peters and Austin (1994) remind us that what gets measured gets done. But this is perhaps an example of something that might still get done but which, in order to do so, Mike has deliberately made sure does not get measured:

If I put this project to Jan [Mike's line manager] as a performance target Jan might point to four others instead and say 'prioritize these four and ignore the rest'. That would be death [of the project]. The lack of formalization has protected the life force of the work.

Reflecting on this in the British Library, leaning back on the sofa, Kevin asks whether more formality and structure – such as deadlines – would have helped.

Mike: I don't know. Deadlines might have made us stop what we were doing ... I'm being performance managed on so many things, but not on this and therefore this is one of the things that I can enjoy doing, or do in a different way.

The informal nature of the pact therefore has necessitated Mike salvaging some involvement in the project in the face of competing demands. This is partly true of Kevin as well but, in contrast to Mike's organization, Kevin's business school has a performance management system which makes Kevin prioritize time on the project and fret about producing measurable outputs in the form of journal articles. On the other hand, Kevin identifies some constraints. Kevin wrote to Mike that 'the politics of Business Schools present me with a number of inhibiting factors, such as the pressure to do work which generates cash rather than spending time on some experimental whimsy'.

Abrasions and antagonisms

Later, at the British Library, reflecting what Levinas (1987) calls the wounds of communicative action, Kevin asked Mike to help him understand the role of the research study within Mike's environment:

Kevin: I'm trying to get at how this work sits in your organization, you know? If you were to describe to an outsider... If we take your organization as one structure. Where does this work sit structurally within SOLACE? From what you're saying, it doesn't really sit anywhere. It's in the attic or something ... It might escape one night.

Mike: Or the basement.

Kevin: But it's not part of polite conversation in the living room.

Mike: No but, to understand something else about SOLACE ... I'm the only person who talks about policy stuff cos everyone else, it'll be events or it'll be finance, or about membership numbers, marketing campaigns ... So. It's not just this which is in the basement ... Don't feel bad about *this* being in the basement.

Mike describes an organization with multiple and contested identities, most of which do not interface with an academic research study of leadership. These differences and contestations play out in the formalities of what gets measured and reported on and therefore what gets resourced, but are also present in the quieter and sometimes playful exchanges of organizational life. In the same conversation, Mike mentions an example of his research endeavours being a source of baffled amusement for a colleague:

- Mike: Someone who works for me. He calls me the professor.
Kevin: In a ...?
Mike: In an ironic way.
Kevin: The way your dad calls his dog Boffin?
Mike: I don't ever lick his hand. I class him as a friend ... [but] he's pretty satirical about the idea of research.

In this exchange we see Mike's point about the peripheral position of the project within his organizational setting – it is 'other than' core. We see that how time is spent, what are the legitimate tasks and priorities of employees are contested or political questions, even if this contestation is sometimes gentle or humorous. We also see his identity project – as a practitioner who engages with academic scholarship – being subverted and gently, if affectionately, mocked. It is a subtle form of identity regulation, albeit one that Mike continues to resist quietly. The overall feeling is that, in a Levinasian sense, Mike and the research are 'not at home' in this setting.

We have also experienced certain kinds of dissonance between identity groups when interacting with members of each other's community, suggesting the embeddedness of the idea of there being two distinctive identity groups, each of which is, in part, defined against the other. We have found academics being defined as being 'other than practical' or 'other than of this world', the reasonable plane of commonsensical action. This distinction enables practitioners to present themselves to academics as the latter. We have also experienced many academics projecting themselves as having superior insights and a focus on higher-order questions, in contrast to blinkered practitioners who pursue advancement and enrichment in more prosaic ways. In the British Library Tapes we reflect on examples from across the last three years when we experienced painful acts of disclosure and exposure:

- Mike: You remember we were interviewing all those chief executives ... I remember you being quite offended by how these people talked about academics as having their head in the clouds. And then I remember going to the [academic] conference in the States and getting vaguely offended by the way in which I was patronized for being a practice monkey, by professors.
Kevin: Definitely. Remember the one who talked about practitioners being the people who 'quit school early to earn elephant money'? And I've heard loads of it subsequently as well. We're smarter. We have the secrets, the secret knowledge. Does it benefit practitioners to have a jaundiced view of academics?
Mike: In terms of self esteem and status, yes. Cos you guys spend all your time studying things that don't matter, 'writing tomes'.
Kevin: 'Pop sociology' ...
Mike: That's if you try not to write tomes!

As well as suggesting Levinasian notes of the disharmonious nature of communicative action, these exchanges suggest how mutually antagonistic identity projections (Clarke et al., 2009) provide part of the political landscape to be navigated by co-producers of research. They suggest that it is difficult to dissolve or even to disregard these abrasive projections while accomplishing joint research. Moreover, we suggest that suppressing awareness of these antagonisms may be unhelpful to developing strategies to operate in the face of these discourses and projections, and will lessen the capacity of situated researchers to negotiate their interactions in the field.

4 July 2011, 7.03 p.m. House of Commons, London.

Kevin and Mike are standing together in the middle of the reception. The summer sun is warming the terrace balcony overlooking the Thames. The doors are open providing a welcome breeze. It is idyllic. The

buzz of conversation fills the room. The thick of the action. The centre of power. Free wine. Kevin is up close to a key network. This will be great for his research. It's all down to Mike who wangled the invitation. This will really help his ethnography. He'll get to meet all kinds of people. Co-production is great, isn't it? Sure enough, they are soon joined by a Council leader who approaches Mike. After a brief exchange Mike skilfully essays Kevin's introduction.

Mike: Gavin. I'd like you to meet a friend and colleague of mine. Professor Kevin Orr of Hull Business School.

Gavin: [clutching Mike by the bicep and turning them away]: So Mike, have you heard about my new chief executive?

Kevin, suddenly and irretrievably at the periphery, studies his wine glass intently.

The politics of friendship and the consolations of co-production

Our identities as friends have been a particularly important aspect of our interactions. The theme of friendship has run through the duration of the project. It has played through our interactions in both the public and private spheres of our work. For example, we have surfaced it in written research accounts and it is something we have reflected on in very many of our research conversations with each other. However, the friendship piece of our identities is sometimes suppressed because at times we feel that it is in conflict with our professional personas. Kevin notes that the friendship identity threatens to undermine his other presentations of the project to academic colleagues – most especially his claims to be participating in a cutting edge research project bridging town and gown (the kind of presentation of purpose that he prefers to give within the business school and in job interviews). Kevin expresses this anxiety to Mike:

How would colleagues view what we're doing? There's a sense in which there's something about friendship which casts a cloud over the project ... I can't give the impression that's it's just about that [friendship] ... there has to be some pretence of a wider respectable purpose of us getting together drinking and spending a long time together on the phone.

The ties of friendship and personal loyalty – in particular the desire to support the other professionally through the project – can be experienced as burdensome. In one email exchange, Mike replied to Kevin's question 'What's been frustrating?' by writing 'That I have not established it as a priority and therefore have too often seen it as something which I am not doing properly. Feelings of guilt about letting you down (wail wail) etc.' In September 2010, when asked about the prospect of working on this article, Mike said: 'I'm worried if I say yes let's do it, it will just add to the range of things I'll let you down on'. These reflections suggest the strain of meeting multiple commitments and enacting and reconciling the different identity projects as friends, SOLACE manager, co-researcher, and co-author. More cuttingly, especially while trying to develop reflexive piece to our conversation for this article, Mike has started to taunt Kevin with the phrase 'I'm just data to you'. In this well-chosen (and deliberately stinging) remark, Mike satirizes Kevin's motivations and imperatives, and alludes to pre-existing critiques of academics as journal-obsessed drones driven by instrumental obsessions. This remark is not particularly hurtful – it has been a co-constructed line of humour – but its recurrent, knowing use acts as a reminder to them both of the subversions involved in co-production. From time to time Kevin has appropriated the phrase in email subject lines when writing to Mike asking him to respond to some questions about the article using the heading 'more data please'. Late in the process, having been taking notes on Mike's responses to some questions, designed to elicit reflections on our experience, Kevin remarks:

It's pretty absurd that I've got to pick up a pen every time you speak. I'm the Johnson to your Boswell. The Norman Mailer to your serial killer ... Hmm. Though I suppose that's a problem for the French police now.

4 July 2011, *The terrace of the House of Commons, Westminster, 8.24 p.m.*

Kevin has been talking to Digby a Director of a public policy think tank. Both our working relationship and Mike's upcoming departure for France have come up in the conversation.

Digby: So when Mike goes you'll be losing a co-author and collaborator then?
 Mike [interrupting]: Oh no, my contribution stopped a long time ago.
 Kevin: Yes, wilful neglect.
 Digby [awkwardly]: Oh, sorry.
 Kevin: Reckless abandonment. It's messy, the subject of complex legal proceedings.
 Mike [breezily]: More wine?

Back in the British Library, we recall ourselves struggling to make sense of the shift and flux inherent in our relational interactions, of our attempts at generating ideas, and of our interacting identities. We attempt to articulate what our dialogues and, more widely, changes in personal circumstances have meant for our relationship. We note (and satirize) our different identities and interactions, but recognize how our work together has brought an extra closeness between us and that we are more relaxed, less hesitant and cagey with each other. If we could have called it to mind at the time, we might have used Fine's (1994: 72) phrase about 'working the hyphen' by which she suggests that 'researchers probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study and with our informants, understanding that we are all multiple in those relations'. Or we might have said that we are a parliament of selves (Mead, 1934). Instead, the exchange shows us staggering our way along, searching for a language to represent our experience and frame some reflections. Again, the safety net of self-effacement is apparent.

Mike: Are there different me's? Or is me a changeable thing? And whatever multiple me's there are they're all ongoing accomplishments ... Accomplishments – that's in inverted commas obviously.
 Kevin: It's like when you phone or meet me off the train, I've no idea who's going to turn up. 'It's Pathological Grumpy Mike'... So we are not two fixed, unchanging people interacting ... Cos things have changed in real life. You're not the same person now as when we started. And I'm not. So what does all that mean? My initial email to you [inviting participation] wouldn't have been as formal. Compared to how we've learned to interact with each other it was quite formal ...
 Mike: Well we've had a lot more interaction since then.
 Kevin: We're a lot closer I'd say, three years hence. As well as the fact our lives have changed.
 Mike: I think there's more to it than it just being about how we behave differently, in different contexts; or we change over time. It'd be something more about the possibility ... that there is no fixed definition of you.
 Kevin: The other shifts as the self shifts. It's never the same self and never the same other. And the thing about it being a dynamic is that they are not two static positions, but they are changing as a result of this interaction with each other.

The developing nature of our friendship and greater intimacy as a result of our joint work has fed into our practices as learners and researchers. Partly they have benefited our practices by their removal of social barriers and allowing authenticity of responding and re-searching. We put each other down and put ourselves down. We construct a dialogical space in which it is permissible, even routine, to say stupid or unformed things. The friendship identity gives us licence to think and

is a safer, liberating context for dialogue. At the British Library, we discussed our identity work and its dynamics. Kevin had just conjured up an imagined co-producer, a ‘civil servant’, and suggested that he would find such a relationship – one which was solely professional and had no basis in friendship – much more constraining.

Mike: Do our multiple identities have an impact on the work that we’re doing? Or is it just that you range between the foolish, the childish, the incompetent on the phone for my amusement. Or at certain time when you’re not on the phone you do actually do some work? What’s the research angle on that?

Kevin: Is there something about who you allow me to be? Cos the civil servant we talked about wouldn’t allow me to be this range of different things. Maybe I can operate in the moment better.

Our dialogue highlights that the intimacy of our social ties enable dialogue and the generation of ideas. We can further illustrate this claim through a final fragment in which we see ourselves struggling towards achieving some insight about how to use theory to frame the relationships involved in co-production. We are discussing a relational and dialogical view and comparing it to conceptions which we think imply that somehow a fusion of academics and practitioners is possible. We are critical of the latter view as it does not seem to sit well with how we have experienced the flux of our interactions, or with what we see as the inevitable variation of practices, identities and orientations of situated actors in any given relationship of co-production. We see the process as consistent with ‘identity as a temporary, context-sensitive and evolving set of constructions, rather than a fixed and abiding essence’ (Alvesson et al., 2008: 6). In our conversation we are uncomfortable with an idea that joint researching can be engineered into the sector – that somehow there is a template that can become a model across the academy (British Academy, 2008). Instead we point to contingency and variation. Second, we see that whilst we can sustain a scholarly discussion for a few sentences, it quickly develops into self-satirization. We routinely demonstrate what Levinas (1987: 4) called ‘irony with regard to oneself’ perhaps as ego defences, or perhaps as to construct a space in which we can struggle, and fall, but where the tumble is not from a great height – there had been no claims to intellectualism which could become embarrassing in the face of saying something dumb.

Kevin: If it’s relationality, then one dynamic is between the two parties. But the other bit of flux and becoming ... the other dynamic there is the one that is ongoing anyway. Will it be useful for us to elaborate on that? Because it is a sort of a fusion model isn’t it – ‘complementarity’ – bringing two things together as though in a scientific way they are going to react the same. But they’re not – there’s a spectrum of academics, a spectrum of practitioners, specificities and variation ... at any one point in time there’s going to be variation in terms of how individuals in that relationship will act and interact.

Mike: It’s a bit like – a kind of industrial Adam Smith model they’re describing isn’t it? Division of labour – bringing skills together, get a better product.

Kevin: I think that’s absolutely right – a Tayloristic, mass production thing – how do you roll that out. What are we then – basket weavers?

Mike: Hunter-gatherers, hand-to-mouth.

Kevin: Hand misses mouth. Hand reaches for pint glass and knocks it over.

Mike: Starving somewhere. Unlikely to reproduce. The dodo was unique.

Kevin: So, we are Easter Island mate.

Mike: You’ve got a face like Easter Island.

Implications

Sims (2003: 119) reminds us that we may choose to tell a story that ridicules us when we are feeling bad about ourselves. We have tried to write 'without a safety net' (Vickers, 2002: 608) and the resulting story of our joint working may lack a narrative coherence in ways which reflect the complexity of our wider contexts. We have shown a range of presentations and representations of ourselves (Mike's self, Kevin's self) being constructed and deconstructed through dialogical interactions. This process of deconstruction contributed to the scene portrayed in the opening of this article. Our vignettes problematize both the 'co' and the 'pro' of co-production practices.

One reader of an earlier draft encouraged us to provide evidence of a-ha moments during our interactions. One conclusion we draw is that we have not experienced dramatic a-ha moments after which we see the world in radically different ways; rather we have experienced collaboration as an enriching but also an exhausting process. We have been struck by the cumulative influence of a lot of small things that influence our practices, or as Kevin expresses it 'The long slow grind of coproduction', and Mike the 'steady wearing down of my character'. When we washed up in the hotel bar, after a long day struggling to focus on changes to the article, and in the teeth of the fast-approaching deadline, and having, perhaps foolishly, co-navigated a networking event, we confronted not an a-ha moment so much as an ah-aargh one. And that feeling not only extended for several days but has probably recurred across the lifetime of our project. Co-production, it seems to us, involves coming together and falling apart, attitude and lassitude, the resolute and the dissolute. As our vignettes evoke, sometimes we provide each other with buoyancy and sometimes we puncture each other, inflicting, as for Levinas, wounds of interaction.

We offer our article as one response to the increasing interest in this mode of research. This kind of reflexive account is open to the charge of narcissism (Lynch, 2000) or bragging (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2011) against which we cannot think of a defence which would not further fuel such accusations. Furthermore, other readings of our data are certainly possible. We may yet one day return to the resonances of Derrida (2005) on friendship as an alternative way of making sense of our (mis-)adventures. For now, we have found it helpful to engage with Levinas as his work reinforces our own feeling that the tantalizing power of co-production stems from its capacity to unsettle as much as its potential to result in a merging of identities, purpose and practices. We have shown examples of the range of settings of our research interactions, and how in each of these, for different reasons, we have felt ourselves 'not at home' and, at times, down and out. The purpose of undertaking the exercise has been to surface the politics of co-producing research and to illustrate the unsettling interplay of identities involved in this mode of researching. We argue against the search for an incorporation of knowing and practising that implies a move towards eternal harmony. As a counterpoint we offer fragments of our own story which suggest a ragged and jagged conversation between shifting selves and others. Our conclusions include that:

- The practices of co-production are situated amidst, rather than beyond, politics or social relations.
- We cannot move 'from politics to purpose' by leaving politics behind: politics and purpose are intermeshed.
- The identities of those involved in co-production practices are not stable but emergent, bringing into play an array of issues in the personal and political arenas that help shape how the research is accomplished.
- The dynamic relationships between the personal and professional, between theory and practice and between theorists and practitioners are fluid, playful, painful and generative rather than fixed, instrumental, harmonious and transactional.

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