Impact as Odyssey

Deirdre Conlon[1]
Saint Peter's University, USA
drdconlon@gmail.com

Nicholas Gill
University of Exeter, UK

Imogen Tyler
University of Lancaster, UK

Ceri Oeppen
University of Sussex, UK

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Within the context of the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF), academic labor is being tagged to 'impact': to demonstrable outputs that go beyond academia and benefit "the wider economy and society" (HEFCE, 2009, 13; see also Rogers et al., this issue). This move is certainly not new, nor is it unique to institutions of higher education in the UK. 'Impact statements' have been standard in funding proposals for quite a while, grant funded projects have long required evidence of application within the communities where research occurs and, in the US, 'service' to institutional, professional, and broader communities is well-established as one of the metrics used in governing promotion and tenure processes. Indeed, scholars observe that the current 'impact agenda' is a phenomenon wherein the model of US universities of the 1970's has been

transposed to the UK, where, to some, its current ubiquity indicates the "stunningly explicit" (Smith, 2010, np) corporatization of academia (see also Hannah, 2010).

In this intervention, we reflect on our experience working on an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project where questions of impact – understood as efforts to engage participants and to produce applied results – were an ongoing concern. We offer a vision that recognizes that producing impact in research is a complicated process where alternatives to what some describe as the "wholesale neoliberalization of knowledge production" (Jazeel, 2010, np) might potentially be realized. More specifically, we offer an allegorical rendering of impact as odyssey. In many ways, doing, thinking, and delivering research that has an impact entails a voyage of sorts. It is a socio-spatial journey that is replete with adventure and struggle. While there are no heroes involved, impact as odyssey is epic in that it has become substantial to the substance of our research, and also in the sense that the potential and implications for the research we engage in are immense. In this intervention we recount some of the "twists and turns [of being] driven time and again off course" (Fagles, 1996, 77) that our research group confronted in developing engagements and demonstrating impact, then we suggest some possible outcomes of understanding impact as odyssey.

An Irony of Impact-Led Research

Our ESRC-funded project examined challenges, dilemmas, and mitigating strategies developed by migrant and asylum seeker support groups in the UK and in the US (see Gill et al., 2012). Our perspective was that support groups primarily work at the local level and in relative isolation from each other. By documenting the common challenges faced by support groups, our project aimed to stimulate an exchange that could potentially impact migrant support organizations' practices.

Without doubt, this objective was shaped by the ESRC's remit to support "research [that] makes a difference" (www.esrc.ac.uk). For some members of our research group who had trained or been immersed in community-focused and participatory action research (PAR), this statement seemed to present a seductive opportunity, one that can be understood allegorically as akin to the challenges that characterize Homer's epic *Odyssey*.[2] This is because the impact agenda would appear to segue usefully with the longer history of participatory research, as scholars have recently pointed out (Pain, Kesby and Askins, 2011). Yet, two emerging trends suggest that realizing the potential of impact-led research is more challenging and problematic than first appears. For example, Pratt (2007) argues that the impact agenda has led to superficial gestures of engagement and

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[2] It is beyond the scope of this intervention to give a full account of Homer's epic poem; it will suffice to note that The *Odyssey*, recognized as one of the oldest existing examples of Western literature, presents an account of the character Odysseus' voyage home at the conclusion of the Trojan War. The journey lasted ten years and was replete with challenges, which Odysseus managed to navigate successfully by employing artful and skillful means. As an allegory, Odysseus' journey, the trials, mishaps, and successes encountered along the way offer useful parallels to PAR practices, which, in turn might usefully inform the impact agenda.

accountability, or what she refers to as faux-PAR. Another trend is that those who are swayed by PAR must deploy commitments to the co-production of knowledge in increasingly calculated ways. As Fine (2012, 37-38) notes, in doing this kind of work researchers must ask: "what variations within civic engagement are appealing, and what could constitute an unacceptable dilution of civic ethics and commitments?" It strikes us as ironic that while the essence of participatory research is social transformation at various levels and in multiple ways, this commitment is underplayed, or worse, undermined, so that researchers can gain access to funding and engage in 'research that makes a difference'.

Twists and Turns

Aware of these critical questions about 'impact' we began our research project with a process of critical reflection upon our own orientations to research, our political views, and positionalities within academia so that we might "produce academic knowledge which isn't simply 'feeding off' [asylum support] groups" (Research Journal, 2010).[3] From these exchanges we decided it was imperative to ask migrant support groups for input and feedback at every stage of the research process.

To this end, we established an advisory group of representatives of asylum support organizations and sympathetic academic colleagues. We circulated a draft of a survey we had developed and invited frank comments on what works, what doesn't, and what additional questions should be included. In response, we waited, then we nudged, and then we prodded. After several weeks we had received few responses. Although the tenor of the feedback received was positive, the message was quite clear as indicated by one group's telegraphic response, "very busy so could only give a quick scan … suggest that the best way to see if the survey questions work is to try it out" (Research Journal, 2010). Similarly, when we ran workshops to present and get feedback on preliminary survey or interview findings, participation involved considerable coaxing and usually only a small number of individuals from support organizations would attend. Of course, this should not have been a surprise given that many migrant support groups are strapped for time, staff, and other resources.

We had numerous other twists and turns along the way. There were emotional hurdles – personal, relational, and institutional – that caused us to veer off course, yet also where "deep and important tensions were lifted up" (Fine, 2012, 36) and it was these tears and toil that 'made a difference' to how we engaged, affected, and were influenced by our project participants.[4] There were differences of opinion in workshops – with participants and among our research

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[3] When the project started we created a shared online journal, intended to provide "a no rules document for our voices, thoughts, quandaries, and ideas to emerge on an ongoing basis" (Research Journal, 2010). The ideas presented here are a reflection of this journal's content.

[4] See also Askins (2009) for discussion of the significance of emotion in research.

team – about matters such as whether to focus exclusively on issues that were most salient to organizations or whether to challenge and push for "new ways of seeing [and] new ways of understanding social and power relations within which people live and work" as Mitchell (2004, 26) argues. Additionally, with an externally imposed project timeframe, the push to disseminate a report of our findings meant postponing opportunities to dwell at length in the intricacy of the research findings.

An Epic Impact?

From these twists and turns it would be all too easy to defer to models of impact where active engagement is minimized and where final outputs are all that counts. However, we want to argue that there are parallels between our experience and some of the lessons that Homer's *Odyssey* bestows, and these might prove useful in efforts to make more of impact. On his voyage Odysseus toiled and trekked for ten years before his journey brought him home to Ithaca. Thus making time for interaction and exchange, for pitfalls as well as climbing out of them, are crucial to producing meaningful research relationships as well as to both critical and relevant impacts. This is not a new argument; it simply reiterates Fuller and Askins' (2007, 599) plea for "slower, more engaged, and passionate geographies".

A second lesson is that unlike *The Illiad*, where brute force and battle achieved success, for Odysseus it was prudence and cunning that reaped rewards. Applying this to impact, we suggest that to produce meaningful impacts, it is not the magnitude or multitude of end results that matter but astute judgment of the contexts and particularities in which we, along with research participants, are embedded. Writing about public sociology, Taylor and Addison (2011, 2.1) note that the impact agenda assumes that "all 'users' are interested, willing to hear and can appear as equal members of a 'community." However, as Pain (2003) observes, there is a continuum along which activities such as public participation, engagement, and activism can occur. Becoming attuned to the differentiated positioning, desires, and needs of research partners, and traveling skillfully and strategically along these 'routes' would make research impacts all the more meaningful.

Finally, we wish to gesture to the broader importance of these observations. Recently, commenting on doing public policy research, Bell (2012, 216) called for "the storying of relevance". By this he means there is a need to "tell the truth of our experiences", to talk about the "frustrations and satisfactions, compromises and victories" (2012, 216) that accompany research. That more and more of this storytelling is taking place does not represent a slide toward "academic misery memoirs" (Bell, 2012, 216) as some suggest. Instead, we propose that a conception of impact as odyssey along with the chronicles that accompany this approach manifest a counter-public (Fraser, 1990; Sziarto and Leitner, 2010). In other words, what is materialized is a political space that exists alongside now dominant renderings of the public sphere, and with this, what has come to be understood as engagement and impact in this sphere. In this counter-public space – where impact

as odyssey can be voiced – the uneasy oddities and ordinarily private scenes of research issue a jolt to accepted ideas and practices of impact and may, eventually, alter now prevalent views. From where we stand, arriving at this place would represent an epic homecoming for impact.

Acknowledgements

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