

## **Exploring the Relationship between Engagement and Research: Insights from the Experience of the Northern Rural Network**

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### **Summary**

Many engagement and outreach projects undertaken in universities face the challenge of addressing multiple objectives to achieve both practical social/economic and academic outcomes. This discussion paper focuses on the challenges associated with generating research through engagement activity. Inspired by a desire to generate academic research from an engagement project undertaken by researchers at the Centre for Rural Economy, Newcastle University, the Northern Rural Network, the paper seeks to examine norms of academic practice in writing up research for publication. It does this through examining the recent content of two of the leading journals in rural sociology. The paper ends with some reflections on how conceptions of what should be included in academic accounts could evolve in order to better recognise the relationships between the activities conventionally labelled 'research' and 'engagement'.

## Introduction

This discussion paper is inspired by reflection on how to productively use engagement<sup>1</sup> in research, how to make the most of being involved with people and projects outside the university, in generating new knowledge and insights in research. Like many rural sociology groupings staff at the Centre for Rural Economy (CRE) at Newcastle University in the north of England help to address the knowledge needs of groups outside the university through direct engagement with business, voluntary organisations and public agencies alongside their more conventional academic activities. In particular the staff at the Centre have been involved in the formation and development of a Network designed to facilitate knowledge exchange and ongoing dialogue between rural development practitioners, businesses, community groups, researchers and graduate students – the Northern Rural Network (NRN).

The CRE sought to establish a strong tradition of engaging with those involved in the practice of rural development in the north of England since its formation in 1992. This was in recognition of the value of the knowledge and expertise of practitioners at a time when the study of the rural economy was emerging as a field of research and comparatively little was known about the non-agrarian economy. From the mid-1990s onwards CRE began to develop a range of engagement activities. These started with a series of workshops on the European Union's regional assistance programmes and on the role of ICT in rural development. These early regional engagement activities sought to help build shared understandings of the rural challenges faced in the North and provide a forum for practitioners, policy-makers and researchers in the region to come together and learn about contemporary issues in a comparatively independent setting. The creation of the Network was driven by a sense that through knowledge sharing the competencies of academics and policy practitioners alike could be enhanced.

The NRN was launched in 2000, and in the years since its launch, it has developed into a learning network of over 1,000 members. Members have been invited to attend up to five day-long seminars held throughout the year and a series of short courses. Events regularly attract over 100 participants. Membership of the NRN is open to anyone interested and is drawn from a wide range of practice and research contexts. Since 2001/02 the NRN has been funded by a combination of the Northern Rock Foundation (a

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<sup>1</sup> I have used the term 'engagement' is used to refer to any relationship outside academia, whether with communities, businesses, interest groups, public agencies, government or any other group or body.

regionally-based independent grant-making body established following the demutualisation of a regional building society, Northern Rock PLC), One North East (the Regional Development Agency for the North East region) and others such as local authorities. This funding means that NRN seminars have been free to attendees. The NRN has five objectives:

- To provide an independent forum to promote learning and understanding of contemporary issues and challenges facing rural development in the north;
- To showcase applied research, from within the north and beyond, to inform analysis of the current state of rural economies and communities in the north;
- To facilitate the exchange of best practice and highlight innovation in rural development;
- To provide a forum for networking amongst rural development practitioners, including public, private and voluntary sector bodies, and postgraduates (graduate students) in rural development;
- To use the dialogue within the NRN to shape new academic and applied research agendas in the north and beyond.

After eight years of running a successful programme for rural development practitioners the Northern Rural Network has just entered into a new phase. For the next three years NRN activity will include:

- A survey of rural businesses in the North East region
- Research based action learning with businesses
- One day conferences on current issues in rural development
- Development activity with communities and businesses
- Short courses
- The development of the NRN web site to encourage membership interaction.

The new activities represent a significant stepping up in NRN activity. The aim is to make the Network more business focused (to reflect the remit of the main funder One North East, the Regional Development Agency for the North East region) and more participative.

It was only in 2007 during the process of applying for more funding that CRE codified this set of objectives for the Network. But this process of defining what the Network was designed to do proved to be relatively easy. There was a high degree of shared understanding amongst those involved in running NRN about what we thought it should be achieving. That stated, the process of reflecting on past experience that we have gone through whilst writing about the formation and history of the Network has demonstrated that some objectives have been more successfully addressed than others. With the first four objectives there is ample evidence of achievement. Feedback surveys, independent evaluation and semi-structured interviews have helped us to understand the value that the membership places on the Network activity, particularly hearing about new research and good practice examples and the opportunity to network. Over the last couple of years this evaluative activity to reflect on the experience of running NRN (Ward *et al*, 2005). However, the writing activity also showed that it was hard to point to examples of ways in which NRN has *directly* shaped new academic and applied research agendas<sup>2</sup>. The question emerged of what action those involved in running the NRN could take to ensure that what we were learning through engagement could directly feed into research activity in CRE. This created an interest in how others in what is already a relatively engaged discipline<sup>3</sup>, rural sociology, write about their ongoing engagements with non-academic groups. In this piece I therefore report on what a content analysis of papers in rural sociology revealed about how engagement is used in the creation of published research outputs.

In the remainder of the paper I draw on an analysis of the way in which engagement is reported in two of rural sociology's leading journals. Drawing inspiration from the recent work of Scott Peters and Carolyn E. Sachs I suggest that articulations of the relationship between the activities conventionally labelled as 'research' and 'engagement' or 'public scholarship' need to be more prominent.

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<sup>2</sup> One clear exception to this observation is the way in which the Network has influenced the dissertation work of CRE's MSc students. A series of students have completed research work through research placements producing work of direct relevance to host organisations/businesses as well as meeting the MSc degree requirements.

<sup>3</sup> Questions of the integration of outreach are relevant across the social science but the long tradition of extension in the US and to a more limited extent in Europe means that we may reasonably expect to detect the influence of close engagement with non academics. As Schulman (2005, 172) states: "Long before ASA organised special forums on "public sociology" basic and applied research on public rural social problems were part of the rural sociology core".

## **The relationship between research and engagement in contemporary rural sociology**

I started analysing the content of research papers in highly ranked journals in recognition that publication in such journals is a significant achievement for an academic at any stage of their career. While 'research' involves many different types of activity and can be written up in wide variety of ways it is commonly acknowledged that publication in prestigious journals is the ultimate goal of most academics and forms the 'currency' of promotion and tenure applications. How engagement was talked about was therefore potentially telling, not only about its relative status but also about the ways in which academics conceptualised what it could bring to research.

I also started with the recognition that there were well established outlets for engagement based research. In the USA there are a series of well respected journals which specifically publish on extension and engagement. These include the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* and the *Journal of Public Service and Outreach*. Action researchers have also long pursued and developed alternative epistemological foundations which to a large extent have entered the research mainstream as 'respectable' forms of academic practice. Such researchers also have their own outlets such as the *Journal of Action Research* and more specifically disciplinary journals such as *Society and Natural Resources*. But research can be grounded in the experience of extension and outreach without necessarily being explicitly part of the action research tradition. Hence the question arose 'was there evidence that the relationship between engagement and research was being articulated in the more traditional journals with remits to publish a range of material from different theoretical and methodological perspectives'? In what ways were the experiences of researchers drawing on the full range of research paradigms reflecting their experiences of engagement in their research? More specifically what evidence is there of the use of outreach and extension activity in conventional research papers in rural sociology?

An analysis of *Rural Sociology*<sup>4</sup> and *Sociologia Ruralis*<sup>5</sup> was therefore undertaken to investigate how rural sociologists report research motivation, methodology and empirical significance. These three areas were chosen as being commonly included in articles and having the potential to draw on different forms of engagement (with communities, businesses, pressure groups, governments etc). Twenty four articles from *Rural Sociology* and twenty four from *Sociologia Ruralis* were analysed. For *Rural Sociology* this was the content of volume 72 (2007) and for *Sociologia Ruralis* it was the content of Volume 47 (2007) plus three articles from volume 46 No.3 (2006).

Analysing the content and structure of the papers in the two journals reveals a remarkable similarity in the ways in which the rationales for pieces are constructed. All papers, whether focusing on empirical research, theoretical or methodological development or policy issues, commenced by introducing the topic through the lens of previously published academic literature. Staking a claim to be of interest seems to require situating the paper first and foremost in an established academic tradition. Hence, it seems that the question of why the paper has been written relies primarily on what another academic has either identified or missed. However, there was some evidence that in European papers the claim of policy interest or relevance could form a secondary rationale for why the paper had been written. Certain papers in *Sociologia Ruralis* included extensive reference to recent policy development in order to explain the papers' interest (Alphandéry and Fortier, 2007; High and Nemes, 2007; Mol, 2007, Tipples, 2007). For example, Arthur Mol in his paper on biofuels discusses global trends and the reasons why they are attracting increasing attention. Mol makes explicit that the research is grounded in emerging policy concerns and makes reference to a range of

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<sup>4</sup> The journal web site states: "Published since 1937, *Rural Sociology* reaches an international audience of social scientists, policy makers, and agency professionals concerned with rural people, places, and problems. It provides a forum for cutting edge research that explores inter-disciplinary approaches to emerging issues, new approaches to older questions and material, and policy relevant discussions of rural development, environmental impacts, the structure of food and agricultural production, and rural-urban linkages. In addition to its long-time interest in sociological approaches to rural policy challenges, *Rural Sociology* also emphasizes a variety of other issues such as community revitalization and rural demographic changes."

<sup>5</sup> The journal web site states: "*Sociologia Ruralis* is a social science journal dedicated to rural studies. The aim of the journal is to reflect the diversity and influence of European social-science research on social, political, economic and cultural aspects of rural areas and related issues. Submitted papers should preferably have a sound sociological basis and should draw upon, and/or contribute to European social science, although we also wish to attract cross-disciplinary contributions. Papers can focus on theoretical developments, new methodological approaches, policy issues, as well as on empirical research. Our intention is to reflect a broad spectrum of problematics and approaches."

policy texts. An argument can be made that such engagement with policy at least indicates a stepping out from the convention of rationalisation only through reference to previous research.

Only one European paper refers to direct work with users, stakeholders or communities in rationalising the choice of topic and research questions. Dessein and Nevans (2007) in their work on farmers' pride offer an explanation for why their paper was written in terms of engagement outside academia (p.275):

"Two arguments motivated this research for conceptualising farmers' pride. Firstly, between 2001 and 2006 strategic policy questions guided the research of the Flemish Policy Research Centre for Sustainable Agriculture (STEDULA). Our centre aimed at the maximum alignment of its policy-relevant research with policy makers' strategic goals and looked for stakeholder advice and consent regarding the relevance of research to policy. When the Flemish minister of agriculture stated in his policy document that raising farmers' pride is an essential condition for revigorating the dwindling position of agriculture in Flanders, he linked farmers' pride with the image of agriculture in society and with farmers' incomes. STEDULA took up the challenge of research for a more elaborated understanding of the concept 'pride'. "

The work of Dessein and Nevans is interesting because it is the only paper in *Sociologia Ruralis* or *Rural Sociology* which makes explicit that the motivation for doing the research and the process through which a research topic was selected relied on close engagement with non-academics. Dessein and Nevans (2007, p.276) also refer to using engagement with non-academics in the development of the methodology:

"Consultation with experts and key informants, along with focus group discussions (such as with farmers and the representatives of farming organisations) revealed the value of farmers' pride as an indicator of 'internal social sustainability', which takes the wellbeing of the farmer and his family as a focal point"

But, despite the rationalisation of the paper in terms of the need to address 'strategic policy questions' and the evident advice taken the methodological tools to be used to investigate the identified issue, the findings and conclusions sections are more

conventional: they contain no recommendations for policy or practice and no account of how the results have been disseminated, utilised or refined by those engaged in research definition.

By contrast, less reference is made to addressing specific policy concerns in papers in *Rural Sociology*. Nonetheless, it is clear from the material in introductions and methodologies that the concerns of policy practitioners, communities and businesses have closely informed research projects. Neumann *et al.* (2007) write about attempts to encourage small farmers to plant small scale forests. They do this through the study of a specific industry scheme which is described in detail. The paper is co-authored by Thomas whose institutional affiliation is cited as the company running the scheme. We are also told that the research has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the company. What is not clear is the genesis of the research. Is the paper the result of an evaluation of the scheme conducted for the company which has also yielded publishable results? Or, was the scheme selected by the research team after they had identified decision making by family farmers with regard to woodland as an interesting topic of research?

The majority of papers in *Rural Sociology* are based on empirical fieldwork which, by its nature, necessitated close engagement with communities and individuals. These papers are based on survey, ethnographic, interview and focus group research, a detailed account of which was always provided in the methodology. However, only one paper seemed to be reporting on a piece of research which was also a piece of 'extension'<sup>6</sup> (although the word extension is not used in the actual paper). Pavey *et al.* (2007) write about a project funded by USDA's Initiative for Future Agriculture and Forest Systems on watershed management in Tennessee. They state in the introduction (p. 92/3):

"We viewed our role as similar to that of a community development practitioner helping people become increasingly able to guide their own destiny"

The normative intent of the researchers, to foster change as well as analyse practice, is reiterated in the conclusions (p. 106):

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<sup>6</sup> Freudenburg and Davidson (2007) also report originally getting involved in their research through an approach to do research and sit on a committee but the actual research reported in the paper does not appear to have been conducted at the request of the affected community.

“The goal of this in-place participatory community research was to build community capacity so community members could more fully govern their lives according to their values and interests. We conclude by commenting on our experience using the ideas found in the community development literature – especially the interactional approach to community development – to guide our efforts. We also consider the degree to which we achieved our initial goal. Finally, we comment on the lessons learned that may be applicable to those considering related efforts.”

While the introduction and the conclusions reflect the close relationship between extension and research in this particular paper the middle sections are more familiar in their content. The paper is primarily a discussion of the utility of interactional theory based on the experience of the Tennessee watershed. It is striking that there is little detail on the development roles and actions of the research team.

There was one paper which was a major exception to the norms of both journals. Carolyn E. Sachs in *Going Public: Networking Globally and Locally* (2007) writes about her public sociology work and its contribution to her research. This was the one example of a paper which addressed the research/engagement relationship head on and provided extensive detail on how working with non-academic groups had contributed to the production of knowledge. In the conclusion, Sachs clearly articulates what research and public scholarship can bring to each other in the creation of high quality scholarship.

While it is possible to publish in *Rural Sociology* on the basis of ‘public’ activity, more conventional academic rationales rooted in past literature and the reporting of results collected through long established social science techniques remain essential co-requisites to be placed in the foreground of the paper. With *Sociologia Ruralis* it is hard to be definitive about how many papers have used engagement activity as part of the research process. This is due to lack of information about funders and the almost universal tendency to base rationales for research on either purely on past academic work or, occasionally, the identification of a policy concern. These trends raise some fundamental questions about the knowledge production process and what academics choose to include and miss out of research accounts. To be clear, I am not advocating that all papers should include something on engagement. There has to be room for a wide variety of approaches and traditions and types of research where engagement is unnecessary or inappropriate. However, given that most papers analysed involved

social interaction of some description in undertaking the research and are on topics of practical relevance to communities, businesses and governments it seems remarkable that interactions outside the university are so infrequently and patchily reported. This under discussion of engagement in research, is an issue of concern because it suggests an acceptance that a reflexive analysis of the wider environment in which research was conducted can be omitted from research accounts. Are we to believe that research largely stems from questions thrown up in the literature combined with a secondary interest in issues of relevance to public policy? Or is there room for a richer and perhaps more intellectually honest account of the process of identifying and executing research projects?

### **The engagement/research relationship and the debate on the twenty-first century university**

The research/engagement relationship is important, not just at the micro level to individual academics trying to put aspiration into practice, but is also implicitly at the heart of the debate on the future of universities. In the UK and USA there has been extensive soul searching on the role of the university in the twenty-first century. In the UK the academic and policy focus has been on the role of higher education in regional development. The result has been an extensive literature on how to use universities to enhance economic competitiveness and a rather less high profile debate on the social, cultural and educational role of the university (Lawton Smith, 2007; Universities UK and Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2001). The quest for economic competitiveness has also been a major theme in the US (Drucker and Goldstein, 2007) but the history of the higher education system in America has also driven sustained interest in the social, cultural, political and educational role of the university (Boyer, 1990; Kellogg Commission, 1999; Walshok, 1995).

Furthermore, the extension system has come under renewed scrutiny by academics, extension professionals and stakeholders from out with the university system. While criticism has been extensive there remain powerful advocates for the extension and Land-Grant systems with an interest in revitalising traditional conceptualisations of the mission of higher education (Acker, 2003; Firebaugh, 2002; Kellogg Commission, 1999; McDowell, 2001). In the UK the situation is rather different as there is no extension system as such rather an extensive series of projects and initiatives aimed at getting the public involved in the work of universities and a lively research community interested in the production and dissemination of academic knowledge. Space precludes a detailed

discussion of the different perspectives on the future of both formal extension (in the US) and public engagement in higher education (in the UK and US). Suffice to say, engagement with non academic groups is consistently argued to be necessary to the social and economic justification for the existence of higher education and its public research function. While there is a very active debate on the forms this engagement should take and which groups should legitimately be engaged the argument that this is necessary seems to be widely accepted.

However, there remain good reasons why it is not in the interests of academics to 'do' engagement. For as long as getting research money and papers in peer reviewed journals remains the primary route to success there is a danger that working with non academic publics will be seen as a second class activity. The accounts of what Peters *et al.* (2005) term 'public scholarship' contained in *Engaging Campus and Community: The Practice of Public Scholarship in the State and Land-Grant University System* reiterate a similar message about 'troubling realities' (p.396) of doing engagement. Developing relationships with groups outside academia is time consuming and often perceived by other academics as a lesser activity or even a waste of time. There is a sense articulated in this book and in other sources (for example, Buraway, 2005, p. 15) that senior academics are reluctant to encourage their juniors to do too much public scholarship in the expectation that the consequent deflection from the production of papers and grants will harm their career prospects. This makes articulating the potentially productive and mutually beneficial relationship between public activity and research like Carolyn E. Sachs has done in her 2007 article in *Rural Sociology* vital to both changing attitudes and developing ways of working which meet both public and academic imperatives.

Such articulations of the positive relationships between engagement and research are being made in certain contexts. As Scott Peter's (2005, p.419) has argued reflecting on the lessons to come out of a series of case studies of public scholarship from across the US:

"the process of engagement can lead to scholarly products of high quality that communicate original, innovative knowledge and theoretical insights that could not have been produced without engagement."

These accounts of public scholarship contained in Peters *et al.'s Engaging Campus and Community* highlight a series of practical examples of what engagement can bring to

research and vice versa. The authors also provide inspiration through providing stories of academic engagements that although often targeted in scope have created new social possibilities *and* high quality scholarship. The book provides evidence that there is an agenda around developing the conversation about the relationship between research and engagement, an agenda that needs to be “continually organized and built and fought for” (p.455). But although through such processes as writing *Engaging Campus and Community* progress has been achieved the case for creating mutually beneficial relationships between engagement and research is not heard often or loudly enough. This prompts the question of how to catalyse the realisation of the promise of public scholarship. There are multiple possibilities for further work but, I want to briefly argue that two issues in particular seem ripe for further action and investigation.

First, while building the intellectual case for the integration of research and engagement is well underway an important task still remains in taking this agenda further into the academic mainstream so that where engagement has been used, or has inspired and motivated research, this talked about as part of the research process. The treatment of ‘research’ and engagement’ (or extension or outreach) as two distinct and largely separate activities in the university system in both the US and the UK creates barriers to an integrated scholarship. Peters *et al.* (2005) have succeeded in articulating and explaining how research norms act as disincentives and why this is based on false premises about what engagement can offer scholarship. The question now remains of how to challenge these norms of academic practice. To re-iterate, this is not a case for turning all rural sociologists into ‘action researchers’ but a questioning of whether much of the work that academics in the discipline are all ready doing can be included in writing and talking about research. It is also fundamentally about making the case that such inclusion will ultimately lead to the creation of more rigorous, reflexive pieces of research writing.

The second issue concerns the question of what we can gain by internationalising the conversation about the relationship between engagement and research. Most of the current case studies of integrative public scholarship are American. However, in the UK higher education system more investment is slowly going into the facilitation of ‘engagement’ and extension. Specifically there is a growing emphasis on the part of the research councils on knowledge transfer and exchange as part of research projects. Will this both create new case studies and the development of intellectual frameworks for thinking through how to engage different publics in research? If it does these UK cases are likely to be different in significant ways from the US examples in Peters *et al.* (2005).

The different institutional histories and systems of university governance/finance create the opportunities for international comparative research on institutional and intellectual support for the study of the research/engagement relationship and its different forms.

## **Conclusions**

The paper was originally inspired by a sense that as a research group we were not taking full advantage of opportunities to develop research outputs and agendas from our Northern Rural Network activity. In an attempt to reflect more deeply on how this might be achieved I have analysed a series of papers written by authors in writing in the geographical and academic contexts of European and North American rural sociology. What this process has revealed is that while there has been a wealth of literature challenging conventional knowledge production and exchange practices (Gibbons et al, 1997; Phillipson and Liddon, 2007) the 'mainstream' rural sociology literature only sporadically includes papers which draw on non-academics as collaborators or possessors of relevant knowledge present in the research framing, execution or dissemination process. Despite the long traditions of engagement and extension in both the US (McDowell, 2001; Peters, 2006; 2007) and, to a lesser extent, the UK (Giles, 1993) there is a wide variability in the degree to which peer reviewed journals in the discipline include material explicitly written through engagement with different 'publics' 'stakeholders' or 'practitioners'. Writing about the role of relationships beyond the university in informing the research process did not seem to figure in conventional notions of rigorous research practice in rural sociology. However, there are increasingly pressing reasons why the productive relationships between research and engagement need to be more effectively articulated. These relate not only to the imperative for intellectual honesty about the research production process but also to the impacts of the status of engagement activity despite the public proclamations of universities on both sides of the Atlantic.

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