



(Re-)negotiating access: The politics of researching skills and knowledge for ‘sustainable communities’

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ABSTRACT

The last decade has witnessed a surge of interest in ‘sustainable communities’ within the UK. This has stimulated a plethora of research aimed at acquiring a better understanding of what ‘sustainable communities’ might look like and how they can be achieved. However, this has not been accompanied by a reflection and interrogation of the actual processes, challenges and politics of *doing* ‘sustainable communities’ research. This paper addresses this gap by highlighting the importance of paying attention to the on-going process of negotiating access when carrying out sustainability research at the community level. We draw on a recent study of skills and knowledge for ‘sustainable communities’ in Stroud Gloucestershire, UK, to illustrate the importance of sensitivity to social relationships throughout and beyond the research trajectory within sustainability research. Our experience raises important questions about the politics of research practices when doing sustainability research ‘with’ communities and the challenges associated with participatory approaches as a means to demonstrate research impact. We argue that in developing a fuller understanding of why and how different types of community level initiatives can contribute to the ‘sustainable communities’ agenda, greater consideration needs to be given to how these community practices can be better supported through the process of doing academic research.

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1. Introduction

‘Sustainable communities’ are framed within UK policy as “places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer quality of opportunity and good services for all” (ODPM, 2005). Despite the potential of academic research for informing and impacting upon ‘sustainable communities’ policy, the term ‘sustainable communities’ itself remains contested. Central here is the problematic of working with a fixed definition as if it were an end point or replicable model. Also contentious is the extent to which the current policy interest in ‘sustainable communities’ extends beyond socio-political concerns of urban regeneration, community safety and affordable housing supply. Certainly, far less attention is given within policy to the ecological dimensions of sustainability and the need for more sustainable forms of resource production and consumption (Seyfang, 2009). Consequently,

although there is an expansive range of research that engages with various dimensions of community level sustainability practices, seldom is it collectively referred to as ‘sustainable communities’ research.

The fact that ‘sustainable communities’ remains first and foremost a policy term that cannot straightforwardly be translated into a research context is not unexpected. However, in preparing for and undertaking related empirical studies that involve this type of community based research, it is important that this issue is clearly acknowledged; particularly where the research is policy driven as it has been in the context of ‘sustainable communities’ within the UK. An omission to do so is all too often accompanied by insufficient engagement with, or subsequent reflection of, the potential barriers that have to be addressed and overcome during the actual process of *doing* community level based research and acknowledging that ‘community’ itself is a contested term. Significantly, not only can this be problematic for the ‘researcher’, but also for the ‘researched’. Whilst the challenges and ethical dilemmas of ‘doing research’ at the community level are well rehearsed within other disciplines and subfields (feminist geography, development studies and development geography), they have thus far been largely neglected in explorations of community level sustainability practices (Rose, 1997; Katz, 1994; Nast, 1994; Valentine, 2002; Kobayashi, 2001; Madge, 1994; Madge et al., 1997; Ley

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and Mountz, 2001; Mohan, 1999; Gibson-Graham, 2008). With the rapidly growing number of journal papers and books including the term 'sustainable communities'¹ in their titles, there is a more pressing need to engage with the politics of research practice in communities where community level sustainability initiatives are taking place. For example, a recent special issue on 'sustainable communities' in *Local Economy* 23:3 (2008) made no reference to research methods. This on-going lack of engagement with the politics of research practice within the context of 'sustainable communities' policy research has significant repercussions when it comes to informing either community practice or government policy (Jupp, 2007, 2008). The increasing emphasis now being placed on research impact by UK Research Councils (RCUK) as well as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) as distinct from research output, makes this omission all the more significant.

This paper draws directly on the reflections of a team of four researchers who have recently completed an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)/Academy for Sustainable Communities (ASC)² funded research project which responded to current policy interest in skills and knowledge for 'sustainable communities'. Loosely informed by a case study methodology (Yin, 2003), the project involved distinct phases of desk-based research 'on' 'sustainable communities', and field based research 'in' a 'sustainable community'. It is the actual experience of undertaking the fieldwork and subsequent process of reflecting on this experience and the ethical dilemmas it raises, which we focus upon here. Thus, the aim is not to prioritise discussion of the research findings, but rather, "the process and experience of 'finding'" (Neal and Walters, 2006, p. 178). We make the case that a reflection upon the process of undertaking research deserves attention in its own right (Neal and Walters, 2006; Blake, 2007; Bailey et al., 2009). Not least because in developing a fuller understanding of why and how different types of community level sustainability initiatives can contribute to the 'sustainable communities' agenda, greater consideration also needs to be given to how these practices can better be supported through the process of *doing* academic research. That is, exploring the inter-relationship between research processes and research findings in the context of explicitly engaging with the broader societal impact of academic research.

The ESRC defines research impact as the "demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy. It embraces all the extremely diverse ways in which research-related knowledge and skills benefit individuals, organisations and nations".³ This has resulted in the requirement for funding proposals to RCUK to include an impact summary and plan. There is an increasing interest in involving communities collaboratively in the actual preparation of research bids (see for example 'Connected Communities'⁴: a cross-disciplinary, cross-Research Council programme and the recent Energies and Communities Collaborative Venture between the ESRC and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)). There is also an opportunity to apply for 'Follow-on funding' to undertake additional knowledge transfer and impact generation activities. Whilst the emphasis on engagement strategies with the communities under investigation is promising, it raises important issues about how communities will then be included and engaged; particularly in a way that recognises the plurality within communities

and ensures communities are not involved in a tokenistic manner or exploited for instrumentalist target driven research. This is particularly relevant in the context of 'sustainable communities' research because of a wider critique of the 'sustainable communities' agenda as a neo-liberal policy instrument designed to justify the rolling back of state welfare as a means of promoting community self-sufficiency (Raco, 2005). Whilst we agree this critique is well founded, we believe that the 'sustainable communities' agenda also offers an opportunity to raise awareness amongst policy makers about the importance of community level sustainability initiatives. However, as we argue in this paper, any research aimed at gaining an understanding of what a 'sustainable community' looks like needs to be sensitive to the politics of research practice at the community level. Throughout the paper we use the terms 'community level' and 'community' with reference to the community groups who participated in the research. We also recognise multiple communities with an emphasis on 'communities' (as opposed to 'community') throughout our discussion.

The impact agenda has caused a mixed response within UK academia; there is growing concern that the weighting given to 'impact' may place restrictions on the nature of research by widening the gap between theory and practice and reduce the rigour of scientific enquiry. It has also caused much concern about how 'impact' is defined and how the growing 'marketisation of knowledge' may lead towards a more instrumentalist specific target driven research (Pain et al., 2011). Whilst these tensions are well recognised in the context of community based research more generally; particularly in relation to plurality of communit(ies) and the adoption of participatory methods to engage communit(ies) within research, we argue that they have not been sufficiently addressed in community level sustainability research under the banner of 'sustainable communities'.

In this paper we further explore the potential for research impact and community engagement to be mutually reinforcing, as well as its implications for the process of 'doing' community level sustainability research. We do so by focusing on our own experience of (re-)negotiating access and how this affected the research process. Taking as our starting point the argument that access is not a discreet one-off event (Pitts and Miller-Day, 2007), we discuss the process of negotiating access as an activity that has to be constantly attended to, particularly when engaging with sustainability community activists; a process that needs to be understood in the context of initiating, managing and maintaining social relationships. In particular, we highlight the ethical dilemmas of negotiating multiple and shifting researcher identities, which we argue are not sufficiently addressed within more formal ethical review processes. We begin with a brief introduction to current policy and academic approaches to the promotion of skills and knowledge for 'sustainable communities' and how this informed our research. Then, drawing directly on illustrations from field research, the main body of the paper focuses on the actual process of (re-) negotiating access at different stages of the research trajectory. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our experience for research 'on', 'in' and 'with' communities.

2. Skills and knowledge for 'sustainable communities'

Within the UK, much of the interest in 'sustainable communities' originated from the Sustainable Communities Plan (ODPM, 2003) which was introduced as a key instrument of New Labour's agenda to tackle regional deprivation and promote the regeneration of urban areas informed by principles of sustainable development (Raco, 2005). Although its original focus was grounded in stimulating a sustainable housing market, it made headway in providing the first attempt to define a 'sustainable community' and focusing attention on the role of skills and knowledge in sustainability (Newton et al., 2008). It also sought to reinvigorate the

¹ See for example the special issue of *Local Economy* (23:3) and special issue of *Local Environment* (16:8) which were both focused on 'sustainable communities'.

² The Academy for Sustainable Communities (ASC) was incorporated within the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) in December 2008. It has now been renamed as the HCA Academy and is responsible for the skills arm of the Government's housing and regeneration agency.

³ <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/tools-and-resources/impact-tool-kit/what-how-and-why/what-is-research-impact.aspx> [last accessed 29 December, 2011].

⁴ <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx> [last accessed 13 August, 2011].

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