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Engaging geographies: negotiating positionality and building relevance

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ABSTRACT

As a discipline and field of knowledge, South African geography has been defined in and by critical societal debates, highlighting how, as geographers, we produce knowledge and teach to address societal imperatives. Inspired in our own and others' research practice engaging in collaboration between the university and activist groups and knowledge co-production between universities and local authorities, we reflect on the varied engagements, commitments and movements of scholars and practitioners across South African geography. How do these approaches to research through co-production and collaboration navigate postionality and expertise, enriching the research process? In reworking the process of generating knowledge, what alternate kinds of knowledge(s) are produced? Through exploring these questions in this paper, we reread the 'turn to development' and our commitment to applied geographical work, not as the degeneration of theory production, but as an opportunity to reflect on what is theoretically and empirically rich in the commitment to relevance in contemporary South African geographical work.

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Introduction

South African geographical research is immersed in varied challenges posed by environmental and socio-economic crises, embedded in state and societal imperatives for development. Conscious of the limitations of academic knowledge in responding to these needs, we are inspired by emerging and varied research practices whereby scholars link the academy in productive, yet often unexamined ways, to the state, to social movements, and community groups, for instance. We draw here on the co-production of knowledge and research collaboration as two examples of modes of engaged research that are produced in relationship with everyday policy-making and social and political struggle. We reflect on the theoretically generative opportunities these multiple sites and actors bring into our research, and the processes of negotiating these alternate sites and processes of knowledge production.

Rather than reifying these sites and roles, here we reflect on ways to reference and draw on these spaces and knowledges in and beyond the university. As Chari and Donner

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suggest (2010, p. 76), these categories are analytically suggestive, 'a problem not a social fact'. Building from this provocation, in this paper, we explore the ways in which research and the knowledge produced from it are constituted relationally in practice with practitioners and activists; and, second, conceptually, how to account for this knowledge and practice in geographical theorizing. Although engaged and applied research takes many forms, here, we draw on our own work, framed first in a literature on knowledge co-production and sites of policy-making and, second, in a body of work on collaboration and sites of neighbourhood-based activism.

Inspired in our own and others' research practice engaging in collaboration between the university and activist groups and knowledge co-production between universities and local authorities, we reflect on the varied engagements, commitments and movements of scholars and practitioners across South African geography. How do these approaches to research through knowledge co-production and collaboration navigate postionality and expertise, enriching the research process? In reworking the process of generating knowledge, what alternate kinds of knowledge(s) are produced? Through exploring these questions in this paper, we reread the 'turn to development' and our commitment to applied geographical work, not as the degeneration of theory production, but as an opportunity to reflect on what is theoretically and empirically rich in the commitment to relevance in contemporary South African geographical work.

Debating the state of South African geography

Debate on the nature and the production of geographical knowledge in South Africa is longstanding (see Mather, 2007a). For instance, in 2002, Magi, Maharaj and Fairhurst[1] reiterated Soni's earlier call for South African geographers to support 'more democratic forms of enquiry and more democratic relationships of research to other forms of action', emphasizing that 'people must be involved in the interpretation and solution of their problems', a 'fundamental element in any development of progressive and liberatory geography' (in Magi, Maharaj, & Fairhurst, 2002, p. 1).[2] In examining local dynamics shaping South African geography, Magi et al. suggest we build on our common commitment to 'relevance' across the discipline (2002, p. 1). Ramutsindela extended this debate further, acknowledging the constructed and contested nature of relevance when he argues that it is bound up in shifting notions of 'progress'. In his analysis, 'in the 1990s [human geographers] regained some lost ground …[by] becoming relevant in their research… engaged in the search for appropriate methodologies… [and] in the bridging of physical-technological-human divides and in analyzing policy issues' (2002, p. 8).[3]

Interrogating the politics of knowledge production, Mather and Ramutsindela (2007) argue that too often the non-Anglo American world (including South Africa) is spatialized as 'case study', a source of empirical example from which the Anglo American geographical world builds 'theory'. Whilst in the 1980s some South African geographers were producers of theory read globally, they suggest that to our own denigration, the historical moment of transformation post-apartheid shifted local geographical focus to the national project of reconstruction and to more empirical and policy-oriented questions and practices of development. To overcome this apparent theoretical deficit, Mather (2007b) suggests productively that we engage not only with the spatiality of our writing, where it is published and in what form. He challenges us to reflect as importantly on our 'writing practices', the

ways in which we define our research and shape it epistemologically and empirically as a generative source of theory development. He draws inspiration from Robinson's (2003) assertion that 'scholars from the margins have already developed a range of day-to-day tactics for staging encounters in theory across different contexts'.

Although in this case Robinson (2003, 2008) is imagining the ways in which northern and southern geographers engage together, here we take this provocation to argue for the significance of an engaged research approach in South African geography. We use it to explore the 'day-to-day tactics for staging new/different encounters' that shape our research practice and its positioning in and across the academy and other societal centres of expertise. We suggest that engaged geographies are more than simply 'applied' research. In working with and acknowledging varied expertise in and beyond the academy, engaged research approaches challenge power imbalances institutionalized in the university as a recognized centre of expertise. In embracing knowledge and expertise produced beyond the university, we can produce relevant, situated theoretically rich research.[4]

Practices of engagement – co-production and collaboration

Knowledge co-production and collaboration modes recognize multiple sources of expertise in and beyond the university. Both literatures open up an alternative to the 'elitist scientific model' (Gibbons et al., 1994) that typically invokes the university as expert. Literature on co-production and collaborative approaches, two of a number of bodies of work, can help us reflect on modes of engaged, participatory research increasingly common in South Africa.[5] Oldfield, Mabin and Parnell, for instance, argue that in the apartheid past and in the present post-apartheid era, engaged research shows 'theorising [that] takes place in multiple sites and through multiple processes that are grounded in critically engaged work' (2004, p. 295). And South African geographers have worked in varied ways at the academic–policy (Parnell, 2007) and/or academic–civil society (Oldfield, 2007) interfaces on a sustained basis since 1994 (Pieterse, 2013).

The nature of these types of engagements is dynamic and shifting and not easily categorized. For the purposes of this short paper, we group here researchers using a knowledge co-production approach as engaged primarily in policy arenas (see, for instance, Davison, Patel, & Greyling, 2015; Patel, Greyling, Parnell, & Pirie, 2015; Pieterse, 2013; Swilling, 2014). In contrast, we draw on a literature on activist–academic collaboration to account for researchers working largely with social movements and activists, those on the margins and edges of state power (see, e.g. Oldfield, 2015; Pithouse, 2008; Selmeczi, 2012). Across both framings, there is an increasing recognition that scholars locked in discipline-based, deliberative knowledge engagements miss the full significance of what is going on both in policy formulation (Parnell, 2007; Swilling, 2014) and in understanding the complexity and contradictions of social and political processes.[6]

In our continued commitment to be relevant, scholars (including but not confined to the discipline of geography) have understood intuitively that our 'reflexive practice' (Pieterse, 2013) needs to be responsive to 'shifting notions of progress' and aspirations (Ramutsindela, 2002). Yet, our academic knowledge is often inadequate to understand and respond to the emerging complex and contested issues nationally and globally. This tension and imperative has drawn attention to a variety of engaged approaches to knowledge production, to acknowledge the reality that actions and experiences of a range of stakeholders are necessary

for how we know, think and act on in, and for society (Broto, 2014). These emerging knowledge practices disrupt conceptions of where knowledge resides, how problems are framed and who should be mobilized to influence research. In examining these practices and the literature that shapes them, we reflect here on the ways in which they situate knowledge and research practice, what Mather (2007b) calls the spatiality of writing practice. In the remainder of this paper, we reflect on the questions, entry points and tensions that literature on co-production and collaboration opens up and their resonance with South African engaged geographical scholarship.

Knowledge co-production: producing effective and legitimate knowledge

The popularity of experimentation with knowledge co-production in the urban policy arena is a response to the increasingly complex and uncertain nature of societal challenges (Polk & Kain, 2015). In this mode, the dominant model that defines expertise is challenged, by broadening the scope of who holds expertise. The model proposes there are many sources of expertise, and that knowledge production is a social process built up through social institutions to further strategic societal goals. The research relationship then is one of researching with – rather than for – society to produce socially robust solutions to complex problems that cannot be solved by a single institution or discipline (Swilling, 2014). This shift is described as a move from Mode 1 knowledge production, centred on a singular 'elitist scientific model', to Mode 2 approaches that are socially embedded and focus on problem-solving (Gibbons et al., 1994; Polk & Kain, 2015).

These knowledge co-production approaches challenge power dynamics between the academy and the users of the knowledge (often generated for policy purposes) (Polk & Kain, 2015; Swilling, 2014). Based on experiments in knowledge co-production to address complex urban policy challenges, generating Mode 2, more socially relevant knowledge has required working beyond both institutional and disciplinary boundaries, thus changing the contexts in which engagement happens (Anderson, Brown-Luthango, Cartwright, Farouk, & Smit, 2013; Davison et al., 2015; Patel et al., 2015; Swilling, 2014).[7] In this knowledge co-production mode, scholars tend to start from this basis, moving from real-world issues into the arena of scholarly knowledge (Robinson, 2008), thus inverting the research gaze. The strong focus on partnerships beyond the academy, 'that go beyond treating partners primarily as audiences' (Robinson, 2008, p. 72), involves partners as co-producers of hybrid forms of knowledge. In this mode, the relationship between subject and object is blurred in the dynamic co-construction of knowledge, where all partners share responsibility for the research process by producing both theoretical (academic) and socially generated (not following scientific method) knowledge (Swilling, 2014). The legitimacy and transformation potential of the knowledge produced are therefore enhanced by legitimizing voices, perspectives and knowledges beyond the academy as valuable research inputs.[8] Whilst these new processes of generating knowledge are in themselves sites for generating theory on researching urban and social processes, as importantly, tacit knowledge, technical and tactical 'know-how', rooted in the 'ideals, values and emotions' of individuals (Nonaka & Konno, 1998, p. 42; Rydin, 2006), can be surfaced through these differently staged encounters between the researcher and their research partners (Patel et al., 2015). This new knowledge generated through alternate research encounters allows us to re-bridge the limited analytical and theoretical insights gleaned by researchers previously engaged in a one-way flow of knowledge production.

In providing alternate vantage points and diversifying whose knowledge counts in theorizing urban and social processes, academics working in this mode no longer hold pole position in directing research agendas and findings, in shaping the allocation of public resources directly through consultancy, advisory and think tank mechanisms or indirectly through codifying urban questions in publications and academic outputs (Hajer, 1995; Hamann & April, 2013; Hoogervorst, Hajer, Dietz, Timmerhuis, & Kruitwagen, 2013; Owens, 2005). Instead, this approach encourages a shared responsibility for knowledge production (Broto, 2014; Polk & Kain, 2015). In this configuration, partners work together as equals in defining the research problems, the design and implementation of the research and the interpretation, as well as the use of the results. In more developed configurations, the 'art of co' (Perry, 2014) extends further to include co-governance structures and varied forms of co-funding. And the commitment to effective and relevant outcomes (Cash et al., 2003) expands the notion of effectiveness to include not only the actions or outcomes from the research findings, but also broader impacts such as how issues are framed and considered, as well as defended. In so doing, attention is paid to knowledge production embedded in processes and practices, reflective of norms, values, practices and cultures of different partners (which could be institutional). Cash et al. suggest that these 'result in different expectations regarding what constitutes reliable evidence, convincing argument, procedural fairness, and appropriate characterisation of uncertainty' (2003, p. 8086).[9] Part of a broader global conversation, South African scholars are at the heart of this work, producers of cutting-edge practice and theory that reconfigure notions of relevance and expertise.

Activist–academic collaboration: engaging everyday knowledge and action

Notions of relevance and the question of power and positionality are at the heart of collaborative work in South African geography and social sciences as well. A long tradition of working on research linked to critical issues of the day and to struggles associated against apartheid and its injustices and violence (Lalu, 2012; Parnell & Mabin, 1995; Royston, 2009) has shaped the field and its epistemological foundations – how we know – in fundamental ways.[10] In this context, collaborative research engagements attempt to ground knowledge production and theorizing of everyday social realities in the context of poverty and reconstruction. They tend to do so in relationship with the struggles that people enact everyday, engagement that enables theorizing the nature of the state project and the realization of rights in a democratic society in these everyday urban realities (see Benson, 2016; Oldfield, 2015; among others). We are part of a growing global consensus that scholarship can benefit extensively from engaging with knowledge 'beyond', outside or 'below' the ivory tower (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007; Mitchell, 2008; Mrs Kinpaisby, 2008; Parnell & Mabin, 1995).

A literature on collaboration and on participation offers ways to navigate the potential pitfalls this relational terrain opens up. McFarlane (2011, p. 2) challenges us to consistently ask, 'who we learn from and with; that is, we need to attend to where critical… knowledge comes from how it is learnt'. In doing so, the Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010) critique what they call 'false distinctions', the notion of the academy as separate from or beyond society, a terrain that Fuller and Askins imagine as a fluid continuum, is shaped by academic and activist passions and interests. This positioning asks us to imagine ourselves not as 'experts', but as 'citizens jointly challenging broader social systems' (2010, pp. 250, 251). The Sangin Writers and Nagar (2006) push this agenda further. They ask scholars

to reflect on what kind of struggles and social change research makes possible, and how research can shape the ways in which we make commitments and remain accountable to research partners and collaborators beyond the university. They suggest that in building alliances and partnerships, scholars need to engage carefully with 'complex and contradictory realities of the activists' milieu'. These realities are central to knowledge production and theory building: activist engagements are not only a source of empirical understanding; they are central to epistemological questions of what and how we know. They argue that: 'she [the university-based scholar] must be prepared to acknowledge the limits of discourses that she might be inserted into and to orchestrate shifts in them in ways that can become meaningful for her…critics and collaborators' (2006, p. 149). In other words, immersed in multiple worlds and in multiple commitments (Hale, 2006; Sudbury & Okazawa-Rey, 2009), collaboration, like co-production, shifts our methods and research process and reconfigures and invigorates the critical theoretical questions that we reflect on.

Collaborative and co-production approaches to research are two of a number of ways to frame the practice of engaged scholarship, approaches that make visible the varied partners and actors in these conversations and that enrich and make rigorous empirical-informed theoretical knowledge central to addressing the challenges we face globally and locally.

Conclusion: why engaged geographies matter

Relationally rich and engaged geographies matter. The practices they demand link scholars and the academy in productive, yet often unexamined ways, to the state, to social movements, and community groups. In doing so, they bring varied expertise and knowledge into knowledge production and theory building. These varied engagements help 'reflect on the challenges and new opportunities that arise when geographers reflect what we know against the "other", those who start from a different entry point and bring different perspectives to our field of knowledge' (Larner, 2014).[11] These practices, relational methods and theoretical insights help address complexity emergent at global and local scales.

Engagement is not, however, a panacea.[12] Schon and Lasswell (in Parsons, 2002) and Owens (2005) caution against a too easy assumption that practical and academic knowledge together somehow seamlessly lead to better policy and Walsh (2008), among others, challenges us to pay attention to the 'awkward encounters' that never erase asymmetries of power between, in her case, activists and intellectuals. By its nature, this relational mode is risky, energy intensive and time- and resource consuming.[13] Swilling (2014) argues that engagement will always come at a price. Compromise is part of a relational approach, which raises questions about academic freedom, control of the research agenda, intellectual property rights and reputation. In reality, there is much potential for the 'co-' of co-production and collaboration to straddle the spectrum from coercion to cooperation. Developing reflexive researchers for producing effective knowledge, moreover, can also only happen if our current experimental approaches to knowledge co-production are invested in and supported by the academy, our societal partners and our funders. For these approaches to gain traction and potentially change the way in which research is done – *with* rather than *for* society – experience has shown that the incentive and institutional support systems are in need of rethinking (Robinson, 2008; Swilling, 2014).[14]

Nonetheless, engaged geographies bring to the fore important questions such as *how knowledge is produced*, *what knowledge counts*[15] and, how, as scholars, we produce knowledge

and teach to address societal imperatives in a local and global context where relevance and impact are demanded. In doing so, they can generate more complicated and richer stories about policy-making and everyday struggle. Rooted in broader societal debates and relationships, this positionality can work towards building knowledge that is durable, relevant and theoretically rich (see Davison et al., 2015; Oldfield, 2015). Navigating alternate institutional cultures and languages, necessary to work respectfully together (Robinson, 2008), engaged approaches situate geographical research (and teaching) in relation to questions of power and expertise. These are critical imperatives in our collective work towards sustainability, justice and equality. They are equally important in addressing calls for meaningful transformation and decolonization in this moment, 20 years into democracy, marking 100 years of geographical scholarship in our region.

Notes

1. In a special issue of the *South African Geographical Journal* brought out in conjunction with South Africa's hosting of the International Geographical Union Conference in 2002.
2. Soni suggests that these steps should be taken to produce critical analyses and transformation so that Geography thus would become an exercise in reclaiming stolen humanity and reconstructing the post-apartheid South African society' (1991, p. 12 in Magi et al., 2002).
3. Ramutsindela cautions though that 'the ghost of positivism and racial stereotypes continue to haunt the discipline' and that we will have to conceptually 'continue to search for "meanings of progress"' (2002, p. 8) nationally and globally. This argument resonates with an earlier discussion of South African urban studies, see Parnell and Mabin (1995).
4. Although not the focus of this paper, engaged geographies are part of a broad challenge to Anglo-American geographical hegemony as Mather and Ramutsindela suggest (2007).
5. University-based urban research centres including the African Centre for Cities and the Gauteng City-Region Observatory are increasingly using knowledge co-production methods to gain new insights into policy development and urban processes.
6. In policy work, the one-way flow of knowledge from consultants and consultant academics to public authorities is losing traction (Patel et al., 2015). Although in some instances, academics have been drawn into addressing public and civil society challenges to provide 'legitimacy' and 'objectivity' to policy processes (Pieterse, 2013).
7. An example of a knowledge co-production experiment where the contexts of knowledge production have shifted is the Mistra Urban Futures Knowledge Transfer Programme (KTP) in Cape Town (Smit, Lawhon, & Patel, 2015). The aim of the KTP is to make policy supporting sustainable development goals more defensible and legible. This aim is understood and embraced as both a policy/practice and a scholarly/academic challenge. On the one hand, there is an acknowledgement that for policy to be more robust, multiple knowledges (generated beyond the confines of the City) must be brought to bear on policy development and decision-making processes. This partnership foregrounds the inclusion of academic method and research in generating evidence-based knowledge together with the practice-based knowledge typically informing policy process. Simultaneously, the KTP is committed to increasing the legibility of policy processes, in ways that challenge and shape academic discourses about cities and urban transitions.
8. Again, the KTP has resulted in academic researchers co-producing policy responses with city officials, and city officials co-producing academic publications with academics, thus demonstrating that co-producing knowledge is theoretically generative both through the processes of raising new research questions, and also directly generating academic outputs.
9. In navigating these interfaces and this boundary work, intermediaries play a critical role in the practices of knowledge production. For further discussion, see Hamann and April (2013) and Perry and May (2010).

10. A rich literature argues for engagement. For example, Myers suggests the dynamism that shapes African urban contexts propels researchers to engage 'outwards' (2006). Nyamnjoh (2012) urges scholars to engage with 'popular epistemologies' to ground ourselves in the inspirations and convivialities of African societies. And Sitas (2004) suggests we look back to move forward, that we reengage as we did in the apartheid era with the ways in which ordinary people offer critical theoretical ways to know and understand the challenges in our society.
11. Wendy Larner (University of Bristol), as the IBG-RGS 2014 conference chair, posed this question to launch the conference thematic focused on 'Geographies of Co-Production'.
12. Owens (2005) and Davison et al. (2015) remind us that no amount of knowledge changes the contexts in which decisions are made. The reflexive and engaged researcher therefore must understand the politics of how knowledge is used and its relationships to outcomes. Nonaka and Konno (1998, p. 42) identify the knowledge of the shadow spaces (Leck & Roberts, 2015), emphasizing tacit knowledge, and the centrality of building trust in relationships.
13. There is, of course, a trade-off between time spent working directly with partners and fulfilling new commitments to developing alternate outputs to serve the needs of the engaged partnership and time spent preparing peer-reviewed academic publications.
14. For instance, in the situating of this type of critical work in South African NRF rating and in promotion criteria, the powerful ways in which universities and the South African higher education sector maintain hegemonic and traditional approaches and the project of the university.
15. In the South African context, this debate has most clearly been articulated focused on race, see Ramutsindela (2002), Maharaj and Narsiah (2002), among others, for an analysis of the racialization of South African geography in the apartheid and post-apartheid contexts.

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