

Understanding the impact of impactful research on early career researchers' wellbeing: a case for support

Sanja Djerasimovic, Jenny Barke

University of Exeter, Exeter, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

As the landscape of academic research is being variously altered by the strengthening of the 'impact agenda', we are witnessing an increase in instances of research conducted in different degrees of collaboration with non-academic partners. While potentially harmful effects of research conducted in this vein on – the usually more vulnerable – non-academic participants have been extensively studied, comparatively less is known about the impact of such work on researchers, especially those early on in their careers and lacking adequate training and mentorship. Using a social identity perspective, we want to explore the relationship between engaged research, identities, and wellbeing among early career researchers in social sciences and humanities. The paper reports on work-in-progress, as we present our conceptual framework and use it as a springboard for discussion and furthering of the research agenda, with the ultimate goal of developing a framework for researcher wellbeing assessment and support.

Full paper

The rising relevance of the 'impact agenda' and university third mission has brought increased attention to and calls for, forms of research involving engagement, collaboration, and co-production with research 'users' or 'beneficiaries' (Facer and Enright 2016; Darby 2017; Oliver et al. 2019; UKRI; European Commission). This increased attention shines a light on ethical issues around representation, ownership, expertise, power dynamics, and treatment of sensitive issues, not unfamiliar for, e.g. practitioners of participatory and action research, but now conducted on a much larger scale with the impetus of generating socially impactful research, and often in the context of insufficient training and safeguarding.

While the ethics of what we broadly refer to as engaged research – to include various forms and degrees of collaboration and coproduction with, and participation from, non-academic partners – has often been addressed from the perspective of its effect on non-academic participants (Thomas-Hughes 2018; Banks et al. 2016), less has been done to investigate the impact on researchers' identities and wellbeing produced by work of this nature. In our attempt to expand research and practice in this area, we aim to develop a comprehensive, interdisciplinary research-based framework for assessing and safeguarding researchers' wellbeing in the context of producing engaged, participatory, or otherwise 'impactful' research. We are especially concerned with doctoral and early career researchers (ECRs) who are already at increased risk of mental ill-health (Hazell et al. 2020; 2021; Mackie and Bates 2019; Levecque et al. 2017) and for whom guidance around these issues is at risk of falling through the institutional gaps

between research and career development, and wellbeing support. Our focus is on social sciences and humanities research as these disciplines are more often host to socially engaged work.

This work-in-progress builds on our respective research in ECRs' social identities and PGR wellbeing, and the methodology and ethics of participatory research. We have found, for example, that participatory research often involves adopting a relational approach to work, (Manchester and Barke 2020) drawing on ethics of care (Tronto 1998) often while working on potentially sensitive subject areas with communities. This approach to research involves engaging on a personal level which can be ethically 'messy' (Thomas-Hughes 2018). Research has found that working on emotionally challenging material puts researchers at risk of poor mental health and wellbeing (Hammett et al 2022)

Meanwhile, research on PGR social identities and wellbeing has suggested that the closer the research topic is to the researcher's key social identities, and the more overlap there is between their professional and other identities, more risk is there of overwhelm, with detrimental effects on mental health (Djerasimovic and Alder 2022; Hazell et al. 2020). Even in research that is not exceptionally sensitive and/or activist and politically charged, the question of multiple – sometimes competing – allegiances, expectations and responsibilities has the potential for multiplying work-place stressors (Marck et al. 2024) and affecting mental and physical health of an already at-risk population.

In this context, we are asking what effect the engaged work has on identities and wellbeing of ECRs in social sciences and humanities. We view social identities as the collectively developed and relationally enacted attitudes, feelings, norms, and behaviours which, when validated by the identified-with group, provide meaning, protection and a sense of belonging (Djerasimovic and Alder 2022). We further draw from research suggesting more risk to wellbeing in cases of incompatibility between social identities (Iyer et al. 2009) and we ask about the consequences of incoherence between professional (academic) and other social identities (including some central ones) shared with the non-academic collaborators (Hazell et al. 2020).

As institutions continue to encourage, and seek to capitalise on, impactful work, it is of paramount importance that some of the negative effects – akin to the 'grimpact' project (see Derrick et al. 2018) – of these incentives, are documented and addressed. This is additionally relevant for any commendable – but potentially problematic – EDI-driven developments in research policy e.g. in the UK, where we are witnessing calls for celebration of 'impact' that is generated by ECRs and academics from minority backgrounds (REF 2023), who share a common tendency towards precariousness of professional identity and at-risk wellbeing (Arday 2021; 2022).

With this paper, we want to open a conversation and examine the robustness of our conceptual model built on the social identity/relational research/wellbeing nexus, before designing a methodological approach to unearth lived experiences and help eventually develop a framework for individual and institutional assessment and protection of (early career) researcher wellbeing in the conduct of socially engaged research.

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