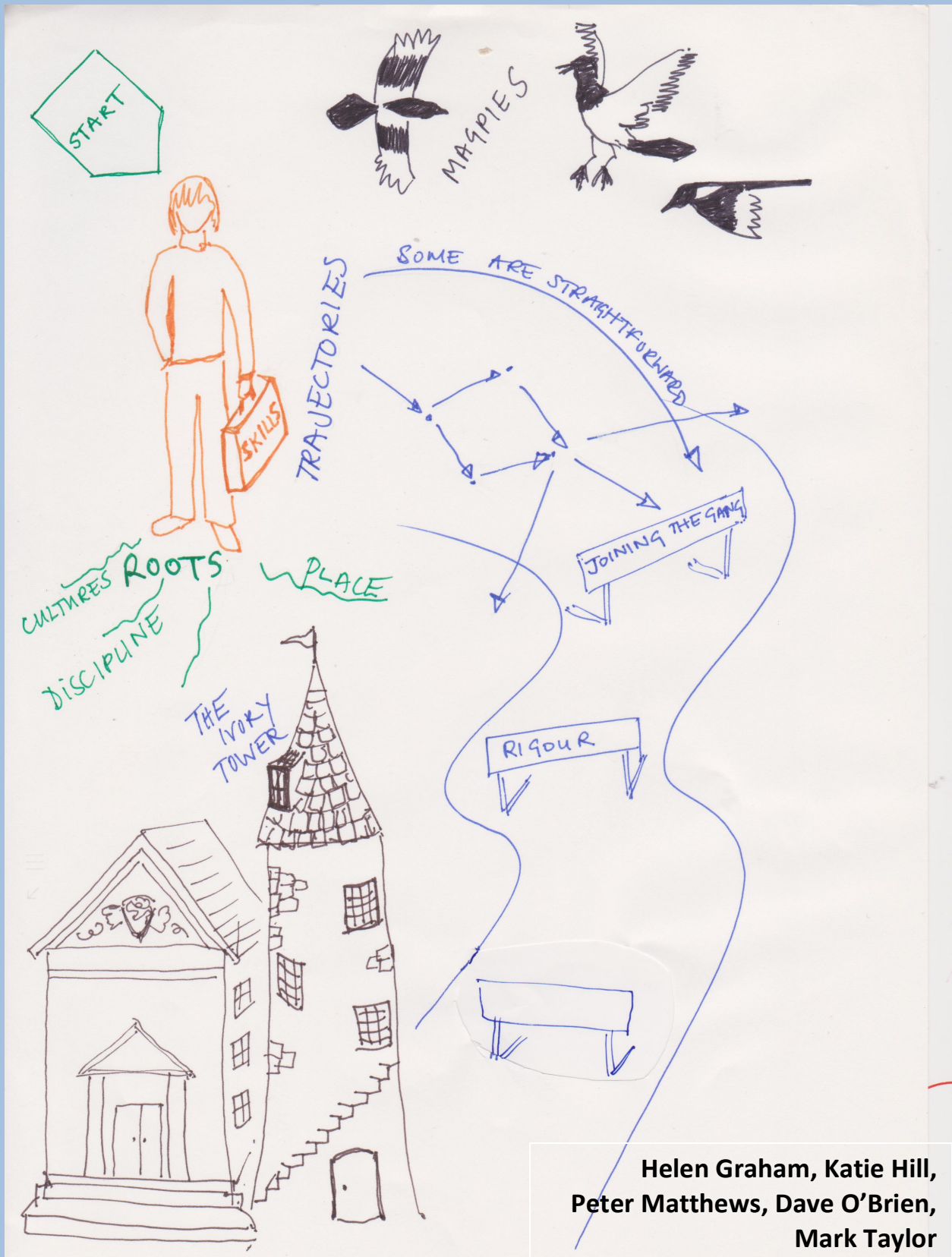


Connecting Epistemologies

Methods and Early Career Researchers in the *Connected Communities Programme*



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Summary

Early career researchers (ECRs) are a vital part of the higher education landscape. However their experiences are often underrepresented in discussions about higher education. They occupy an uncertain position, often not securely settled into permanent academic jobs nor having fully completed their academic training. They are, however, essential to the on-going success of research in the UK, as part of Research Council funded projects.

This report contributes to recent attempts to rectify the under representation of the ECR in academic and media discussions. It focuses on a specific group of ECRs, those working on projects funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's *Connected Communities* programme. *Connected Communities* has funded over 280 projects, with over 400 community partners. The programme aims 'to understand the changing nature of communities' and to 'inform the development of more effective ways to support and catalyse community cultures and behaviours'. The programme has been especially interested in funding methodologically innovative approaches, in particular those drawn from the arts and humanities.

Given this context *Connecting Epistemologies* sought to explore both the methods and the experiences of ECRs within *Connected Communities*. The project consisted of a research team who were themselves all ECRs (based on the RCUK definition) and reflected the variety of academic practice captured by the term. They also represented a range of methodological approaches, from quantitative studies of culture through to participatory work with communities.

The research took place between May and October 2014, with an initial workshop and later the involvement of eleven ECRs who were at a variety of career stages. The ECRs all worked with a member of the project team to record their experiences based on questions they developed and using methods with which they were comfortable.

The findings of the report are captured by four themes that paint a picture of the ambivalence of the ECR experience as part of the *Connected Communities* programme:

- The precariousness of ECR life
- Academic identity
- The role of the *Connected Communities* programme
- The ECRs' research methods

All of the participants described their commitment to their work as academics. For some, *Connected Communities* was seen to have provided a space to very productively bring together different aspects of their lives as researchers, educators, professionals, practitioners or activists.

Others had experienced sacrifices as part of this commitment. For this group, questions were raised as to the suitability of many of their methods for an academic career within the rigid disciplinary frameworks of the university. This could be especially problematic for some ECRs working with participatory or co-creation methods as part of an RA role on a bigger project, in contrast to those that had consciously chosen these approaches.

The uncertainty around the ECRs' academic lives is connected to the emergence of a new kind of academic and a new version of the meaning and practice of research. This practitioner is no longer the individualised researcher, but is rather a connected and communicative knowledge broker, translating between different worlds of academy, community and often also policy or general public. This identity is shaped as much by *Connected Communities* as it is by the ECRs' recognition of the importance of academic impact and the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

The *Connected Communities* project had offered the ECRs the support and the space to develop both this new identity and their methodological innovations. As a result, the *Connected Communities* programme was seen in a positive light by all of the participants. However, the ambivalence displayed in the other areas of some of the ECRs' contributions to the project was present in their understanding of the programme. This ambivalence stemmed from their uncertainty as to whether being part of this specific research programme would contribute to job security over the longer term, whether as an academic or not. This was more of an issue for those who had experienced a straightforward academic trajectory, had a clear disciplinary affiliation and traditional ideas of 'career'. In contrast, those who had a professional background, activist motivations, or who were more relaxed about the different forms their future work might take, saw *Connected Communities* as providing a relatively secure and high status space to develop their practices.

Ultimately the question for research councils, universities and policy makers is how best to offer sustained support within institutional and funding frameworks for the passion and commitment of ECRs identified in this report.

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Connected Communities: Understanding the Context

The first iteration of the *Connected Communities* programme was controversial. This was mainly as a result of references to localism and 'the big society' in AHRC's plans for *Connected Communities*. Whilst there had been little opposition to references to social exclusion in ESRC's work under New Labour, *Connected Communities* raised issues of policy and public relevance in a way that was uncomfortable for many AHRC scholars.

Connected Communities was, therefore, embroiled in wider debates about shifts in the policy and financing of Universities. Indeed the debates about Early Career Researchers (ECRs) work have often been articulated through anxieties about the neoliberal academy and neoliberal subject. Yet the political trajectories articulated by *Connected Communities* are much more complex than the 2011 flurry of critique and contest suggest. *Connected Communities* is, in its most straightforward articulation, interested in supporting research conducted 'with' (rather than 'about' or 'on') communities. In using this language, *Connected Communities* has drawn on 30 years of participatory research that had sought to see knowledge as best produced equitably and collaboratively, often with radical political change as an aim.

The focus on work 'with' communities raises questions about the relationship between the academy and society. These questions manifest themselves in debates around the appropriate methods for delivering the aims of *Connected Communities*. The questions also require attention be given to the nature of the academic that will employ such methods. Thus *Connected Communities* is about what it means to be an academic, as much as it is about community research.

These questions can be especially troubling for Arts and Humanities scholars, who have found it most difficult to articulate their public role, as compared with the social or hard sciences (Bate 2010). The shifts towards 'research impact' and linking the value of arts and humanities not solely to contribute to disciplinary debates but to 'wider society', coupled with increasing pressure to deliver employment skills to students, has substantially challenged the ways universities have previously operated. Far from being wholly negative, this pulling apart has also made other kinds of spaces, to rethink knowledge, research and teaching, possible.

The different spaces and pockets created through *Connected Communities* require careful theorization. There have been two critical tendencies in theorizing of institutions that have persisted in the debates that surround academic careers and the contemporary university. Drawing on theories of power associated with the Frankfurt school, the first is to see institutions as sites for top-down flows of hegemonic power, always carrying the potential to co-opt any radical initiative. The second is its mirror, to see the academic practice as constantly needing to battle so it might be a site of unbound critique that speaks truth to power, something Pierre Bourdieu (2000:41) has termed the 'unrealistic radicality' of academics.

Yet *Connected Communities*, as with most day-to-day life in UK universities today, demands a very careful and nuanced reading of power and change. *Connected Communities* has opened up spaces for collaborative research within universities as those methods and those approaches have been accompanied with research council funding. What is crucial is to track the specificities of what has been enabled and constrained by the opening up of these spaces.

Connecting Epistemologies

The project discussed in this report responds directly to the concerns raised in the previous section. *Connecting Epistemologies* was conceived at a research development workshop in Edinburgh during summer 2013. The project had three main aims: to raise awareness of the differing methods and methodological traditions within the *Connected Communities* programme; to understand the experiences of ECRs' use of these different methods and methodological traditions; and to critically explore how these experiences and traditions intersect.

These aims and objectives reflected three core areas of inquiry that are linked to broader structures and debates. In the first instance they sought to explore to the *Connected Communities* programme's aims 'to understand the changing nature of communities' and to 'inform the development of more effective ways to support and catalyse community cultures and behaviours'.

Second the use of participatory methods and their potential limits was explored, albeit in a limited manner. This happened in the way participants shaped their role in the data collection. It was also attempted in a workshop on data analysis that, for timing and location reasons, was only able to involve the core research team.

The rationale for a focus on methods and methodologies within the project came from the recognition that that the *Connected Communities* programme was designed to be methodologically eclectic, reflecting both the range of approaches found in the various disciplines constituting the arts and humanities, as well as the cross-research council basis for the funded projects. This was the basis for the third aim of the project. Methodological eclecticism can be an obvious strength, offering the possibility of synthesising a range of approaches, generating diverse forms of data and answering complex questions which cut across traditional academic disciplines. However, there are risks with this approach, risks that are grounded in the uneven distribution of power and expertise within academic research projects. *Connecting Epistemologies* explored these risks in two ways, in co-operation with a specific community, that of ECRs.

ECRs are a community defined and created by the funding council, giving the research a clearly bounded group to work with that has two important characteristics. They are make up a quasi-elite community (skilled but peripheral and precarious). Elite communities were not made a substantive focus of *Connected Communities* and this project aimed to contribute to this gap. Second, ECRs working on *Connected Communities* projects are often at the front line of trying to navigate the different disciplinary logics within community collaboration. The peripheral but elite nature of the ECR community offered an opportunity to explore and to challenge the assumptions underpinning the *Connected Communities* programme. The programme was designed to be collaborative. This project raised questions about collaboration, as it focused on an elite community who are embedded in methodological traditions that give greater or lesser status to collaboration.

The project proposal sought to reframe ECRs as a discrete community and as such develop the blurring of boundaries between academic and community encouraged by *Connected Communities*. One concrete example of this comes in the form of the research team delivering *Connecting Epistemologies*. The research team were all ECRs, but one member, Katie Hill, was also a 'community partner' in her role as director of Leeds Love It Share It CIC. LLISI is an independent organisation that serves Leeds as a community research centre. It was set up by a group of residents from business, universities and third sector organisations who identified that a new type of organisation and approach to research, thinking and action was needed to meet the needs of the Leeds community in facing complex challenges of climate, energy and economic crises. Early projects were funded through local regeneration and enterprise funding,

and recently Hill has been working through LLISI on *Connected Communities* projects. The LLISI partnership represents recognition that contemporary ECR career paths are increasingly complex and ECRs from the CC programme have roles outside of traditional academic institutions. This point was important in how participants in *Connecting Epistemologies* understood their academic identities as part of the *Connected Communities* programme.

Who participated in Connecting Epistemologies?

Connecting Epistemologies began with an event for ECRs in May 2014 that included presentations from Dr Jude Fransman and Prof Ros Gill and round table discussions. The workshop shaped the subsequent research questions and practices, as well as producing the image used on the cover of this report. Following on from this event a group of eleven ECRs were recruited to take part in a three-month reflective data collection exercise. The participants were either attendees at the workshop, or had expressed an interest in the workshop and had been unable to attend City University London on the day the workshop took place. Recruitment took place via an expression of interest submitted by email. Each participant was invited to write a starting piece that told the story of how they arrived at working on *Connected Communities* projects. They were then invited to make three further contributions, and were open to decide upon an appropriate format that fitted with their own research practice.

In order to recruit participants, an invitation to submit expressions of interest to participate in the research was circulated via *Connected Communities* mailing lists and other ECR lists. The eleven participants were chosen from the group of applicants to represent a broad spread of discipline, tenure, geographical location and professional role. The range of disciplines was identified by the hosting department or institution. A broad range across arts and humanities subjects was chosen. It should be noted that several participants stated in their applications that they were working on multidisciplinary projects or that they had worked across different disciplines. There was a mix of full time and part time employment and studentships, and all were on, or had been on, fixed term contracts. Participants were located across the UK. Current professional roles included doctoral researchers, research assistants, research fellows, co-investigators and principal investigators, showing that ECRs inhabit a full spectrum of roles within CC projects. Some participants had worked on several CC projects, and others were working on their first CC project. Most members of the group were female, reflecting the gender balance of the applications received.

The participants' contributions were then analysed by the *Connecting Epistemologies* team at a workshop in September 2014. The analysis also drew on the team's reflections of their roles on the project, including conversations with participants and their struggles over data collection, as well as their own experiences as ECRs. These reflections gave clues to the larger issues presented in the thematic analysis section of this report. For example, unfinished contributions, deadlines moved and meetings missed or rescheduled due to other work commitments were common occurrences in the data collection period.

Situating the ECR experience

Before narrating the findings of the eleven participants' data collection and reflections on their experiences as ECRs, there are several general points that have come from the research. Much of the writing, whether academic or more open commentary, on the position of early career academics is positioned within a broader field of critiques of global neoliberalism. This body of research sees early career researchers as being at the whim and mercy of the modern, global multiversity (Shore 2010). The "empowerment" through flexibility that early career researchers "enjoy" through short term project working recreates them as subjects of neoliberal power (Cruikshank 1999). In this understanding, their desire to create portfolio careers with a range of skills is actually misrecognition of their exploitation in insecure employment without the terms and conditions of a permanent employee.

However, looking across the contributions of our participants we can see a much more nuanced subjectivity – an honest and open excitement about the opportunities brought by working on *Connected Communities* projects, tempered with a concern that they are in an insecure position.

While our participants could be considered the 'reflexive subjects' of modernity in a Giddens' tradition, more accurately they could be described as 'little Habermasians' (Barnett, Clarke et al. 2008). The participants have a number of moral truth claims with which they are engaging: that *Connected Communities* projects are doing positive work with diverse communities; that the skills they require for a successful career and self-fulfilment are varied; that they are disempowered by the short-term contracts and poor terms and conditions of their employment; that they recognise the moral and intellectual value of research produced by the academy for wider society; and that the academy is increasingly being debased by global neoliberalism..

In their submissions, our participants play these moral judgements off each other. In one case, this takes the form of an actual report of a Habermasian-style discourse – an edited account of a number of discussions with colleagues on these issues (see image below). As with all Habermasian discussion, the morality is ambivalent 'in the gray areas in between' (Habermas 1996: 120). This is not just a work on the self, as suggested in Foucauldian critiques of subjectivities of neoliberalism, this is clearly our subjects working to understand society and thus the morality of their actions and the actions of others, including complicit institutions such as universities.

The role of the university is related to the role of the academic disciplines that frame the ECR participants working lives. As universities and funding councils look for research to become trans or interdisciplinary, their internal organisation is still based around a disciplinary perspective. The work of Abbott (2001), although drawn from the American experience, is useful for situating the discussion of ECRs and questions of trans, cross or interdisciplinary work. It also helps to contextualise many of the anxieties and forms of precariousness that are manifest in the discussion of the themes raised in the data provided by the ECRs.

For Abbott (2001) 'fractal distinctions' are one of the key ways in which differences emerge and develop *within* disciplines, nonetheless reinforcing distinctions *between* them. The relevance of the *fractal* in fractal distinctions is that, at each stage of development, the same internal struggles are taking place.

That this situation came to pass is partly a consequence of how disciplines work, itself a function of how higher education and universities themselves work. The kinds of departments that exist in the social sciences and humanities in a university now are more or less the same as 100 years ago. Part of this is down to administrative reasons, both pedagogical and professional. This leads to a path dependency where interdisciplinarity is more highly regarded in principle than in execution. This is a vitally important contextual idea for *Connected Communities* researchers that do not have established, or in the case of

ECRs, permanent and secure academic positions. Challenging the path dependency of academic organisation thus presents significant challenges and risks.

Thematic analysis 1: Precariousness

There is a well-established concern, across policy, media and academic discussions, of the precariousness facing academics at the beginning of their careers. This precariousness is related to wider social and economic changes in both the professions and also work itself. For some it is part of a change to more fluid and flexible labour markets, with more choice over aspects of career. For others it reflects deskilling and the decline of associated forms of work security, such as pensions. For some participants this continued previous experiences of precariousness from previous sectors they had worked in – the creative and cultural industries that the *Connected Communities* programme are aligned to are notoriously precarious. One participant spoke of someone they had met in their professional sector who was approaching retirement and had never had an employment contract lasting more than six months. Another participant found themselves in a *Connected Communities* programme after being made redundant from previous arts-based employment following cuts in local government spending. However, it is vital to stress that the root of precariousness for all of the participants was the issue of whether and how they would get a full time, permanent job. Even for those participants who did not desire this traditional academic career, the fear that this might be closed to them was an important way of structuring their experience as an ECR.

Our participants experienced and framed precariousness in differing ways, stressing the reality of the uncertainty generated by not having a permanent job, whilst also describing the forms of freedom they encountered. This freedom could come in the manner of their working practices:

'I work on trains quite a bit (which I think most people do) but it also keeps things interesting. I don't get stuck in a rut and it's hard to get bored, which I like.'

or in project work, the most common form of ECR contract. These working practices gave them the freedom and autonomy they wanted. Already it was felt that *'the odd range of skills that I'd collected through a range of short term contracts ... made me suitable for this job'* and a particular project *'gives me enormous freedom, allowing me breaks for personal or professional development.'* Indeed, one participant, from a design background, did not use the language of precariousness, and in conversations around the matter framed work in keeping with a discipline that is project, rather than permanent contract, based. The insecurity offered by project working was framed very positively. The *'positives of precariousness'* were seen as a *'lifestyle choice'* that *'gives me freedom and I don't feel tied down'*. However, this was tempered with awareness that *'we're all on short term contracts, we're all looking for the next job within three months of starting the new one'*.

Getting the jobs was the core site for the expression of precarity, with many of the participants identifying their presence on *Connected Communities* projects as random or lucky, see in the repetition of the phrase *'right place at the right time'*:

'The first appointment was, it must be admitted, largely a question of being in the right place at the right time. The result, however, has been to initiate an unplanned but so far successful career path that utilises my unusual skills, and which fits the department's current research enthusiasms.'

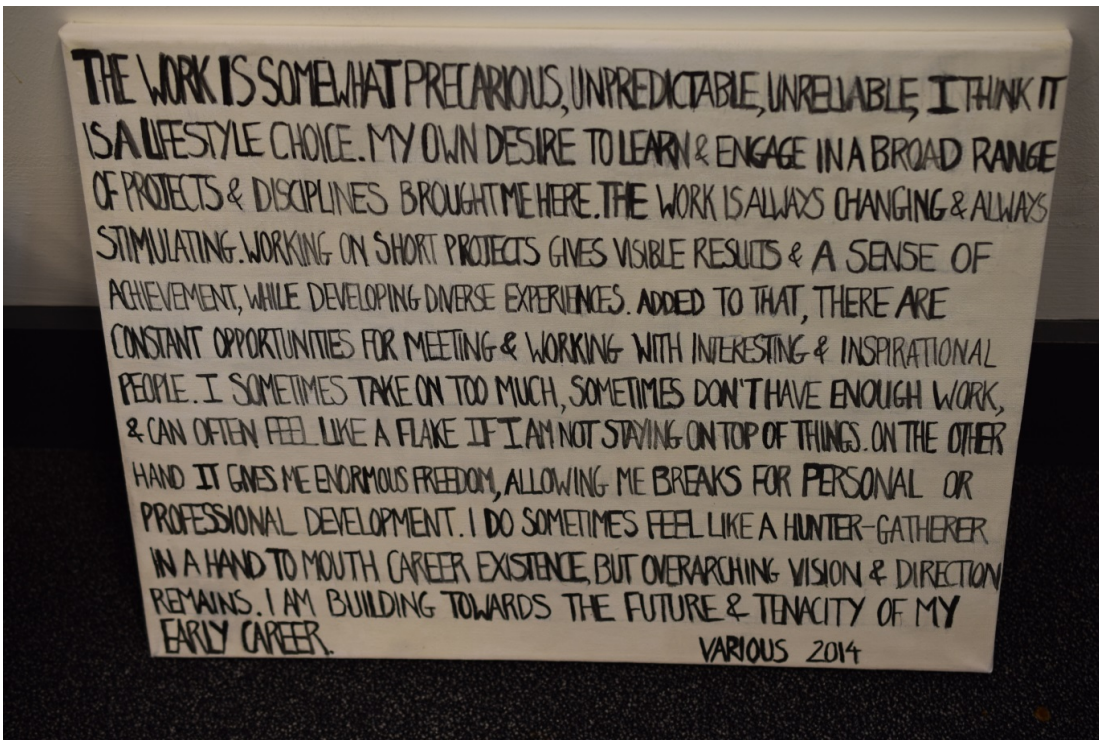
The element of precariousness underpinning their current roles came through very strongly for those working across more than one project, especially where the participant had a peripheral relationship to a specific department:

'I have a building I go to each day but no actual desk, or computer, or phone. There's something a little unsettling about not having a proper workspace of your own.'

Even for the full time, longer term, post doctoral or doctoral researchers ECRs who participated in the research there were experiences that were profoundly negative, tied to the lack of permanence of their positions:

'I don't want a job which makes me feel stressed or consumed when I am away from work.'

However, even within the nuanced recognition of the ECR position, there was still a residual core uncertainty. This uncertainty was usefully solicited through visual and material culture methods, including discussions of visual representations of ECR activities during the data-gathering period. These visual representations crystallised in ECRs' production of cultural artefacts to represent these issues, such as the image below:



This 'cultural' production was an aspect encouraged by the research team as a way of reflecting the intersection of visual methods, such as GIS mapping or social network analysis employed by the ECRs in their research work, along with the art and design background of several of the participants. These cultural products, of which the above was one, say alongside a discussion of specific objects as metaphors for the ECR experience:

'This is my wheelie case which gets dragged around with me, each week. I bought it less than six months ago but it's already falling apart from the amount of travelling I do for work, as well as delivering papers based on my own research. It's also a bit of a cheesy metaphor for what it's like as an ECR; it looks perfectly fine on the outside but underneath it's knackered.'

These types of metaphors were linked to broader questions of how to balance work and life. This was especially important for those of the participants with families:

'My personal circumstances (I have a family and live an hour from the university) result in me popping into the office to see everyone but I have not invested enough time to develop any relationships beyond the office.'

Whereby networks were seen as important markers of quality of working life and for developing a career. However questions of work/life balance were clear for all eleven contributors, whether in comments about balancing moving house, responding to a partners' expectations or just in terms of not having enough time to live and complete the tasks expected in work. One participant was blunt about where the experience had left them:

'it came from a desire to have more time at home, with family and less time working, or thinking about work when at home. It also came from a political belief that... we shouldn't be working at the expense of our families, our health or our community.'

And another spoke openly about the perception that compromising over family life or leisure time would be necessary to succeed in an academic career:

'survival in academia...requires making sacrifices to be able to make any meaningful progression'.

A final aspect of precariousness is tied to career development, which is intimately linked with getting a permanent job. This is explored in more detail in the sections below, but it is worth picking up on one ECRs comment that stands as a useful aggregation for many of the discussions with the project participant. This focuses on how career development works for an ECR:

'Career development is apparently a significant part of my role as an ECR at...The phrase, however, cannot be found in my contract of employment, and a clear idea of what constitutes career development is hard to ascertain. Helpfully, perhaps, the AHRC are vague about what constitutes 'leadership and/or career development support', meaning that I and my PI can make it up as we go along.'

The issue raised by this comment indicates that although the framework for the ECR is one that recognises their need for support and career development it is unstructured. In many ways this reflects the impossibility of creating a detailed framework for dealing with individuals and disciplines that are so diverse, even within the broader umbrella of arts and humanities. However it also points to the individualisation of the risks associated with building an academic identity, particularly with regard to getting a 'good' manager or supervisor of a project. One important question for research is the extent to which this happens – all of the eleven contributors spoke of how they had predominantly (although not entirely) good experiences of support on their projects. But there is no way, without a more systematic approach to this issue, to know if this reflects a well functioning academy or simply luck on the part of the participants in *Connecting Epistemologies*.

The role of *Connected Communities* in this context has been to offer status to the kinds of work that is usually precarious and undervalued in British economy and society:

'But maybe this points to [another] reason for [conducting research within existing networks], too, which has something to do with the precarity of real, paid work in the cultural sector and the need for an affiliation to a permanent organisation to lever credibility in networks of practice - now and in the future.'

Finally *Connected Communities* has supported previously low status or marginalised modes of work is through is actively supporting ECRs as PIs. This has been the case for three of the research team and a small number of the project's participants. This has created space for ECRs to set research agendas and – through the prestige that comes with holding RCUK grants – has clearly led to some recognition within appointment, probation and promotion structures. It has also allowed them to develop skills in person-

management and team leadership bringing projects together and managing ECRs appointed to their projects, including exploring new forms of management, such as community development supervision, reflecting the broader ethos of the *Connected Communities* programme.

Thematic analysis 2: Academic Identity

The discussion of precariousness concluded with a comment on career development. This is as much to do with the socialisation of the academic personality, as it is to do with having the right CV for a job. In previous years the academic identity had a close relationship to discourses of academic freedom, tied to permanence of tenure. This has been eroded in several ways in the UK, but it has gone hand in hand with other changes within the academy (as subsequent sections on research explore). The following discussion, of the role of academic identity, develops this idea, exploring both the specific identities of the participants, as well as interrogating the potential emergence of a new form of academic identity, formed by the *Connected Communities* programme.

The peculiarities and contradictions of academic identity were common to those participants who discussed it:

'The long working hours but continued suggestion that we have so much autonomy and flexibility.'

Along with

'The pressure individuals put on themselves in academia and how it appeared a very individualised career – you have to make sure you write your own papers and develop your own portfolio if you want to stay in academia and move up the career ladder.'

This individualisation was often at odds with the researchers' status as part of project teams:

'It is interesting working within a multi-disciplinary team with a range of methodology, this can be good experience at this stage of my academic career but I'm not sure where this will take me in the future.'

The emergence of a new form of academic identity came through much of the discussions and the submissions because of the difference (and distance) between researchers practices on projects and their perceptions of academic identity. This is linked to the final section's discussions of research practices, but in the context of academic identity it is worth noting how the abilities that were most valuable to the research work they were conducting were often not those they associated with traditional academia. Those skills included organising meetings, translating between academics and communities, hanging out with participants in a range of situations, or mundane activities that were essential to the project successes but were hard to characterise as 'academic' in the sense of writing papers, which was seen as a core activity by many participants. For example:

'In my current academic role I use some of these skills but others I have had to develop (somewhat reluctantly). These include writing - I have never been bad at writing but I struggle with the language and format required for an academic journal. I find I am not able to be as creative as I would like in these situations. I also lack confidence in my knowledge and ability to argue a point feeling perhaps that I don't have the necessary academic context and rigor.'

But these practices also

'Challenge me in many ways that more traditional academic work does not.'

The potential tension between writing and other aspects of academic work reflected the emergence of newer forms of identity discussed in more detail in the following sections. At this point it's worth picking up on the perception, voiced by many of the participants, about the relationship between being an

academic and the activity of writing. This was important both to postdocs and doctoral researchers questioning their suitability for an academic career:

'I'm proud to be a Dr but not sure if sitting in a university office writing every day is me'

And also to how descriptions of time were narrated by participants. The issue of time, linked to precariousness, meant ECRs were often doing two jobs –working on delivering projects, as well as struggling with the process of academic writing.

'I will need evidence of publications to continue as funding for this post comes to an end in 2 years I will need something on my CV beyond a thesis to apply for other posts.'

For post-doctoral participants there was a clear need to balance their new projects with the more academic (in their view) expertise they had developed as part of their PhDs:

'I am currently revising two manuscripts from my PhD that have been invited for resubmission. These are not related to my current work and I feel that this needs to be done in my own time. I would like to get these and one other paper from my PhD published so that I can focus on publications within my current role. It feels as if I need to shed this skin to enable developing a new identity within my current role.'

Changing identities was closely related to participants' narratives of hopefulness for careers, which was in turn part of an emerging role for universities as public institutions:

'it's not to say I don't have a career plan...but what I'm seeing more and more is the type of person universities are looking for is someone quite interdisciplinary and creative and I think people with portfolio CVs is maybe more...but that could be misguided. I don't know. I'll find out.'

The type of academic described above is at the core of much of the methodological and practice-based innovation within the *Connected Communities* programme. However, in keeping with the ambivalence of the discussion of precariousness and the interdisciplinary status of their roles as researchers, reflected in one of the earlier quotes, gave rise to fears for future employment and the extent to which they were really fulfilling the purpose of *Connected Communities*;

'Is the pursuit of the interdisciplinary really working? Maybe the question should be: is the pursuit of the interdisciplinary within the academy really working? I ask this because I can see that my CV...looks intriguing, and it ticks that interdisciplinary box. But will it forward my career?I'm not so sure. The fact is that the majority of academic positions demand a specialist in one field or another, not a Jack-of-all-trades. The impression therefore is that I am using an ECR's unique and flexible position to achieve a CV and skill set for employment outside the academy – and that feels like something of a betrayal of the AHRC's support, primarily financial, but also ideological'

Yet others took an approach which embraced the fluidity of where academic research fits within their lives and careers:

'I think I am keeping my options open about what to do after this PhD experience. I love the interdisciplinarity of Connected Communities but I have no idea how I would slot into a discipline afterwards! I think I would enjoy teaching and intend to investigate whether I could get involved in this in my 3rd year, I also enjoy my work outside of academia in events and festivals, so would be reluctant to give that up completely.'

It is perhaps for those people who have a strong sense of their own political or creative trajectory, which might criss-cross inside and outside academia, which *Connected Communities* has most effectively supported.

Thematic analysis 3: Connected Communities

A fear of creating a 'non-academic' CV, or having skills that were undervalued by the wider regime focusing on writing papers or individual academic achievements provides a bridge to the consideration of the specificity of *Connected Communities* work. The previous section touched on the way projects were about finding ways to develop research with communities in a context that commonly had either not been subject to academic consideration, or working on issues that had seen potential partners alienated from universities and academics. The discussion of *Connected Communities* at the beginning of this report gives a flavour of the context for these issues. How did they play out for *Connecting Epistemologies* participants?

Ideas about new forms of academic identity and practice were emerging within *Connected Communities* project, particularly as the link between community and university:

'I feel like the link between 'the academics' and the community. It is really important that I establish good relationships with partners who have been working in the community before we offer the groups as they can open doors by raising awareness and sharing information. Once that I had established good partnerships with community partners the referrals came in and this can only be achieved by gaining their trust and being present as a reminder of what we are trying to achieve.'

However, the role of broker was a difficult one. In the case of one participant's narrative, represented in the form of email communications, the community participants put 'community' literally in inverted commas and concluded that 'it just doesn't seem worth spending 2-3 more days taking part in the [research] project to answer the sort of research questions you are asking'. A great deal of the contribution of another participant focused on this process of relationship forming and developing, with events recorded such as an intimate conversation with a community partner in a car after an event where the community partner revealed a momentous career decision.

The role of broker was also that of translator, moving between different forms of academic expertise on large projects, or between languages of community and university. This was experienced as a useful skill that might lead to employment:

'I am fortunate that the CC project I am on provides the flexibility of activities and diversity of connections to allow this experience to appeal to a much wider group of people when I begin to apply for other jobs'

And also, in the case of another participants' narrative, as a form of moral responsibility that adds another layer to the identity of the *Connected Communities* academic:

'I feel a great sense of duty towards communicating and disseminating our work to a wide range of audiences, and in particular community groups who I feel could benefit from the different things we are learning from the research.'

There was also a sense of *Connected Communities* transforming individual ECRs' approaches to research in a fundamental way. This sense of new identity was not unproblematic. Previous sections have touched on the issues of establishing oneself in a disciplinary or departmental context. Participants also described having difficulty in drawing *Connected Communities* ways of working into other academic contexts:

'For me, it illustrates the sharp edge that you run into when the sensibility that is supported by the programme carries over into other contexts. This sharp edge was deeply embodied, anger, fear, threat arising throughout the day. It divided me from colleagues that I like a great deal and have a lot

of respect for. And has made me wonder how much I have changed and what other situations I'll find myself not fitting in to.'

While in some cases this shift was expressed positively as underpinning a political and epistemic challenge to the academy, in others there was the sense of a threat to expertise and professional status that is potentially expressed in co-production or participatory forms of research, whereby new methods may *'devalue the professional skills and training that we have.'*

There maybe, then, the emergence of an academic identity shaped by participants' experiences of *Connected Communities*. However it is one that, like the more traditional academic identity and the position of the ECR within the academy, requires support if it not to be merely precarious and then fleeting.

In some ways this support has been provided by *Connected Communities*. Although specific interactions with other projects were not a dominant feature of participants' narratives (indeed opportunities for networking were requested by participants in *Connecting Epistemologies*) the reflexive elements of the *Connected Communities* programme were important. In part this is in keeping with many of the forms of practice and the methods encouraged by the programme. That notwithstanding, there is something of an irony that a programme so firmly focused on public and policy engagement seemed also to be facing inward to the academy. For some researchers this prompted the concern that *Connected Communities* maybe an exclusive programme, with many of the participants having done several projects:

'I felt like an outsider coming into the CC programme and I think I was lucky to get the job. This reflection is reinforced in hindsight having talked to many ECRs who 'get in' to CC by being written into bids, knowing a PI who was previously a PhD supervisor or having worked with a PI/Co-I on a previous project.'

In a more benign fashion, *Connected Communities* was seen to raise important questions about *'why this research is important to society'*, which was seen as unusual for Humanities work.

Thematic analysis 4: What is research?

The final theme came from an interest in research methods. *Connecting Epistemologies* was keen to understand how research methods were being developed, how methods were related to identity, and the relationship between the other core themes discussed previously and particular methodological approaches. These questions were captured in the analysis under the umbrella question of “what is research?” This question allowed the analysis to link together questions of identity, precariousness and the *Connected Communities* experience.

It is worth repeating, as a caveat to these points, the sheer diversity of methods and approaches captured by the arts and humanities. This is not just a matter of the disciplines to which participants were related, but also of approaches and ultimately what counts as knowledge. For example, one participant, when doing qualitative analysis of interview data, approached this spatially and visually, as opposed to working just on the text or using software. This diversity, even for standard research practices, was typical of the eleven participants.

There are, of course, commonalities. The most notable of these is the way research is not the research of the scholar, but is rather a set of practices that are as much to do with professional project support, development and management as to do with the ideal type of the scholar. Much of the working life of the participants was fairly routine, reflected in the nature of the contributions themselves: notes of meetings and email chains both featured. This is similar to research project management and similar level roles with the economy more broadly – supporting larger tasks and activities through providing administrative support. Indeed it was part of the identity as a researcher:

‘It is difficult to identify these events and the process of organising them, documenting them and building on the findings and discussion from them as a methodology. However, they do form a key part of the project and they produce insight which we will theorise, analyse, build on and write about.’

albeit one that needed to be negotiated as it disconnected them from their academic background:

‘My academic background is quite different from the literature I use today and I don’t have experience working within Arts and Humanities, I have very little practice working with communities’

That notwithstanding, some were able to adapt their disciplinary approach to the administrative tasks of their research project:

‘I have also been very involved in the organisation of the final events, but mainly from a practice point of view in terms of how everything is presented. For me it is very important to have something to show at the end of a project that is concrete and exists in the real world rather than remaining an abstract notion or a list of recommendations (which so often is the case).’

For some this experience was disconcerting and made them feel they had moved away from how their doctoral research had trained and developed their expertise, leading them to describe their research roles as a *‘hybrid of life experience rather than training’*. Even where there was continuity between doctoral and post-doctoral research, the difference was that participants felt that only a tiny proportion of their time was spent doing ‘research’ and that most time was spent managing relationships with community partners, taking part in meetings, and organising events. Yet while some ECRs did interpret these types of activities as ‘not research’, others were clear that it was in these type of activities – how the tea was to be made, who made the cakes, building relationships – that productive ‘knowing’ and ‘insight’ took place.

For some this was clearly different from 'doing research':

'I moved from a desk based researcher more interested in theory to doing fieldwork, it was unexpected, I felt lost as a person'

But also is part of the emerging form of academic identity discussed previously:

'The revelation for me has been that project management and research 'proper' are not necessarily two unrelated things.'

The positive space for reshaping academic identities – becoming known for pioneering new forms of academic meetings or for specific projects – was perhaps most clear for those ECRs taking higher status roles as PIs.

Yet as one ECR PI notes that following the flurries of bids in the wake of the Glasgow, Manchester and Edinburgh *Connected Communities* summits came the experience of juggling being PI and CI on multiple projects and a certain amount of project-fatigue:

'Around the time that the applications for this year's projects were due I was having a conversation with a colleague who wondered why I was thinking of applying when I had recently received a [prestigious Fellowship]. She had to remind me that I was already being funded to do almost 100% research, so why was I applying for more? It was really strange that I hadn't actually noticed this myself, I was so caught up in the CC world I couldn't see where I actually was. So that shift in perspective was also really critical to my current involvement (or drastically reduced involvement).'

It's worth closing with two of the more pessimistic, but revealing quotes. Ultimately ECRs face many challenges, even as they love the work they do and are utterly committed to it, on the level of their sense of identity through to their methodological practices. However this is tempered by the reality of struggling with university systems, academic disciplines and the assumptions of what an academic is:

'I'd love to have my own, consistent space to work in, which came with some equipment. It would make me feel like I actually had a 'proper' job. It can be embarrassing admitting to family and friends outside of academia that I don't have these things. It's not what they imagine working at a University to be like'

The challenges ECRs face are alleviated by some elements of *Connected Communities*, but as that programme itself has faced criticism, it can be hard for an individual ECR to have problems of interdisciplinarity, new methods, or the struggle for legitimation of academic practices added to their quest for an academic post:

'It's difficult to maintain confidence when you are challenging the way that things are being done'.

Conclusion

Connecting Epistemologies aimed to explore the ECR experience of *Connected Communities*, along with questions of methods and methodologies. In doing so it has raised a range of issues, both from the data presented above and from the experiences of the five members of the *Connecting Epistemologies* project team.

First the ECR experience within *Connected Communities* is diverse, even within a sample of only eleven [plus us]?. Much depends on their role and how this role fits within the project they are part of. This in turn shapes their perception of their career trajectory and *Connected Communities*.

For those who have a clear disciplinary home and desire for an academic career *Connected Communities* causes anxieties. For those who have a sense of personal trajectory that might flow in and out of a traditional academic trajectory, the programme has created a relatively high status and funded space for collaborative research and broader collaborative work.

The above point is especially pronounced in those cases where the ECR has taken a leadership role. In particular, the explicit support for ECRs as PIs has enabled some people to become recognised for their work through fellowships and through gaining positions in prestigious institutions. Yet this is not a universal experience and feelings of being cut adrift without a clear 'home' were expressed especially by those in research assistant and doctoral positions who did not have a professional or practice background to inform their work.

In relation to this concern is the emerging picture of an interdisciplinary, multi-skilled professional that draws on more than a doctoral or postdoctoral path, underpinned by experiences from beyond the academy. This professional is essential to the new world of the impact agenda and for a university's connection to communities.

However it is clear that the usual form of academic training, the PhD, is not providing fully the necessary skills to fulfil this role. Both AHRC, and RCUK more broadly, need to give the reality of the new academic attention within the next round of funding for Doctoral Training Centres and Partnerships.

The new identity described in contributions shows a tension between the traditional individualised researcher and the connected, communicative, research broker emerging in *Connected Communities* roles. Beyond the theoretical questions this raises there is a practical problem of, what does the career path look like for this type of researcher? And will this fit with a permanent job with the associated support and benefits, such as a pension?

Finally it is important to reflect on the conditions within the academy during the period in which *Connecting Epistemologies* took place. At the beginning of the project British universities were experiencing disputes between the major union, UCU, and employers over pay. As the project ends more industrial action is on the horizon, this time over a threat to academic pensions. In her contribution to the event that was part of recruiting the eleven participants, Ros Gill noted there is a danger that academic life, for those at the early stages of a career, is beginning to resemble other types of creative occupation. Here there is little security of employment, endless project work (albeit over a longer term within the academy) and ultimately an exploitation of the passion and commitment that drives the ECRs to be part of university research. It is here that *Connecting Epistemologies* aims to connect to future research projects asking these same questions about the rest of ECRs across the academy.

About the *Connecting Epistemologies* team:

Katie Hill is a Director of Leeds Love It Share It CIC and also holds part time academic posts. After training as a designer she found opportunities for creative work in facilitating community consultation in regeneration projects, and from this has developed a practice led research career focussed on using creative practice as a tool for community engagement. She has worked for universities, charities and consultancies, and over the last three years has worked on several Connected Communities as a research associate, consultant and community partner, alongside working on her own research and being in a band.

Helen Graham is Research Fellow in Heritage and Director, MA in Art Gallery and Museum Studies and of the Centre for Critical Studies in Museums, Galleries and Heritage, University of Leeds. Helen's background is in working in learning, access and participatory projects in museums and her current research explores specific sites of museum and heritage practice in the context of democratic theory. Helen has been involved in a number of *Connected Communities* projects as an Early Career Researcher, including 'Ways of Knowing: Exploring the different registers, values and subjectivities of collaborative research' and 'How should decisions about heritage be made?'

Peter Matthews is a Lecturer in Social Policy at the School of Applied Social Science, University of Stirling. Peter's background is in urban planning, urban studies and policy analysis. His research explores the various dimensions of urban inequality and how these interrelate to policy and practice. He has been involved in a number of *Connected Communities* projects including leading one of the seven legacy projects.

Dave O'Brien is a Lecturer in Cultural and Creative Industries at City University London. He is an internationally recognised expert in urban cultural policy and cultural value, both topics that are explored in his most recent book *Cultural Value*. He is currently working on projects about the creative economy in Birmingham and Manchester; Dementia and visual arts; and cultural value and inequality. From November 2014 he will be a senior lecturer in cultural policy at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

Mark Taylor is a lecturer in Quantitative Methods at the Sheffield Methods Institute, University of Sheffield, and before that was a full-time researcher on the *Understanding Everyday Participation: Articulating Cultural Values* project (funded by Connected Communities). His background is in quantitative sociology, and he works on the relationships between cultural processes and social inequality, using large secondary survey datasets as well as geographic information systems and social network analysis.

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