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Margaret Post

Morgan Ruelle

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INTRODUCTION

Guest Editorial: Power in Engaged Scholarship: Dimensions and Dynamics of Knowledge Co-Creation

Margaret A. Post¹ and Morgan L. Ruelle¹

¹International Development, Community, and Environment, Clark University, Worcester, MA, USA

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Abstract

Collaboratively engaged research is shaped by dynamic power relationships among individuals, institutions and communities. Where some disciplines have explored the theoretical and methodological implications of power relations, the engagement movement writ large has suffered from a lack of explicit conceptual models and in-depth analyses of the role of power in the process of knowledge co-creation. Over the last 30 years, considerable attention has been paid to how resources and expertise within academic institutions can be brought to bear on the intractable social and economic problems of local communities. A necessary, yet under-theorised aspect of these dynamics is the extent to which the positionality and interpersonal relationships between actors impact the outcomes and durability of these processes. In this introductory article, we describe our effort to cultivate a conversation about power in engaged research. We organised an Author Collective for scholars and practitioners with a wide range of perspectives to expand our theoretical understanding of power's role in university-community engagement. By reflecting on identities, approaches and experiences, the authors in this issue explore power as a vehicle for understanding the impact of positionality and interpersonal relationships on the process and outcomes of collaborative research.

Keywords

Engaged Scholarship; Power; Collaborative Research; Knowledge Co-creation

Introduction

This special issue will be published as the world turns the corner into 2022. Over the two years since the COVID-19 pandemic gripped communities across the globe, we have witnessed a rapid transformation of higher education. Civil society and government have likewise been transformed as community organisations and public institutions face urgent public health, economic and social challenges. We have been plunged into new ways of being teachers, scholars and practitioners, responding to the dramatic crises in health, education and socio-economic wellbeing. Adapting to the circumstances of this new reality has catalysed many of us to re-examine our commitments, the focus of our work and the legacies we hope to leave for future generations.

Three decades ago, [Boyer \(1990\)](#) wrote of the University's call to civic action in the world. While Boyer was writing specifically about the context of higher education in the United States, he and his counterparts across the globe were at the forefront of the international modern engagement movement. Boyer, and later [Lynton \(1994\)](#), offered a compelling vision for how universities, especially faculty, could be positioned to use their resources and capacities to contribute to the public good and to the renewal of cities and communities in which they were located. Following the geo-political upheaval and widening income inequality of the 1980s, along with rising neoliberalism around the globe, their work invited scholars and university leaders into a new and exciting process of outward-facing knowledge creation and action just as rampant disparities in income and wealth, social and political change, and the global climate crisis were coming into sharper view ([Saltmarsh & Hartley 2016](#)). These early decades of the modern university-community engagement movement pointed the way for higher education to reorient its position and power in response to the pressing challenges of the time. The experiences of the COVID pandemic have once again highlighted the need for deeper engagement between universities and communities to co-generate knowledge and action strategies that are relevant to the intersectional challenges of our time. The necessity for engaged scholarship has never been greater.

Examining Power in Engaged Scholarship

Collaboratively engaged research is shaped by dynamic power relationships among individuals, institutions and communities. While some disciplines have explored the theoretical and methodological implications of power relations, the engagement movement writ large has suffered from a lack of explicit conceptual models and in-depth analyses of the role of power in the process of knowledge co-creation. Over the last 30 years, considerable attention has been paid to the institutional question: how can resources and expertise within academic institutions be brought to bear, in partnership with communities, on the intractable social and economic problems of local communities? A necessary, yet under-theorised aspect of these dynamics is the extent to which the positionality and interpersonal relationships between actors also impact the outcomes and durability of these processes. For example, Loh et al. (herein) 'centre relationships as intrinsically valuable' to university engagement and partnerships. They further suggest that engaging with a relational view of power allows for individual, institutional and community transformation. This themed volume examines the intertwined relationships in collaborative research through a multidimensional lens that considers the dynamic processes of individual and collective power. Using this approach, we argue, it is possible to see more clearly the ways in which institutional hierarchies, authority and control intersect with individual agency and community transformation.

DEFINING OUR TERMS

American Civil Rights' leader, [Martin Luther King \(1967\)](#), defined power as: 'the ability to achieve purpose'. The genius of this definition lies in the idea that power extends beyond position, strength of resources and

limits of capacity by orienting its potential equally across entities and individuals. King's visionary belief in equality and in individual and collective power as its point of origin catalysed radical institutional shifts as well as cultural transformation. Policy change alone could not transform racial justice. Following King's definition, advancements towards justice require transformation of power in individuals, communities *and* institutions. The source of power is neither static nor finite. Power in this vein is dynamic and expansive.

To understand power in engaged scholarship, we begin with [Jacquez, Ward and Gogeun's \(2016, p. 81\)](#) definition of collaborative engagement research, which is similarly dynamic and expansive. They argue that collaborative engagement research is grounded in four elements: (1) community driven priorities; (2) shared equitable decision-making; (3) co-creation of knowledge; and (4) social and cultural change. Echoing Dr. King in 1967, their definition centres power and equity in the conceptualisation of engaged scholarship. [Jacquez, Ward and Gogeun \(2016\)](#) build on the traditions of [Boyer \(1990\)](#), Lynton (2004) and other engagement pioneers from around the world and they also include the rich traditions of feminist, Indigenous, activist, and action research methodologies ([Greenwood & Levin 2006](#); [Kimmerer 2013](#); [Simpson 2017](#); [Smith 1999](#); [Zavala 2013](#)). They offer scholars a multi-disciplinary lens through which they can view and consider how their work is responsive and of benefit to broader publics and communities anchored in a transformative and dynamic process of expansive power.

As we developed this issue, we were guided by the perspective that power is a critical dimension of collaborative and community-based teaching and scholarship, and that addressing positionality and the relationality of power is a necessary aspect of these endeavours. When knowledge is authentically co-created, researcher and practitioner alike can experience power through and within relationships of solidarity, reciprocity and respect. This kind of collective power and democratic knowledge production contributes to the joys and mutual benefits of engaged scholarship. We intentionally anchored our exploration of power in engaged scholarship in these propositions. We thus view and investigate power not as a negative, constraining force, but as a dynamic process of action, reaction, capacity and intention that can facilitate self-efficacy, wider participation and more sustainable change. As Piñeros-Shields argues in this volume, power is not a problem to be solved, but an access point to liberation and transformation.

This special issue is an effort to cultivate a conversation about these dynamic processes of power in engaged research. We have created space for scholars and practitioners with a wide range of perspectives to advance a more expansive theoretical understanding of power's role in university-community engagement by reflecting on our identities, approaches and experiences. While many of the authors in this issue pay critical attention to institutional relationships, they also explore power dynamics between individuals as a vehicle for understanding the often unrecognised impact of interpersonal relationships and positionality on the outcomes of collaborative research.

Our partnership as guest editors was born from a shared interest in exploring how power operates in our own scholarly work. Margaret was trained first as a community practitioner, instructed in how to develop direct action by analysing who holds positional power and authority, building shared power with others, and using that power through collective action to challenge unjust structures. This early career experience guided her approach to researching grassroots organisations, whereby she aims to understand how power materialises through community change strategies and results in concrete progress. As an engaged scholar, she strives to understand the theoretical underpinnings of how power operates in research, the classroom and communities, and the higher education context. This project has been one space where these interests converged.

Morgan is an ethnobotanist who studies how biodiversity contributes to food sovereignty, specifically how human relations with plants facilitate adaptation to climate change. He is particularly interested in how diversities of knowledge within communities contribute to collective power to transform food systems. Although he was trained in participatory action research methodologies, this is his first experience working within the engagement movement. Collaboration with Margaret and the other authors has provided an

important opportunity for him to reflect on past projects and consider how to assess and address power dynamics in ongoing and future research.

By bringing together scholars and practitioners who work in various academic disciplines and contexts and are at different stages in their careers, we fostered dialogue around how power operates within efforts to co-generate knowledge and action. We were particularly interested in constructs and frameworks that enabled scholars and practitioners to assess and address power dynamics when diverse entities come together for collective work. Ultimately, we sought to understand the outcomes and impacts of collaborative engagements when power is acknowledged and addressed.

Our call for articles raised four questions:

- What are the benefits, joys, tensions and challenges of the collaborative research process?
- In what ways is power revealed in the process of co-creating knowledge?
- How can power be recognised and addressed in collaborative research processes?
- When power is explicit and central, what are the lasting results for individuals, institutions and communities?

These questions were examined using a mix of conceptual ideas, analytic frameworks and in-depth case analyses to illuminate the dynamics of co-created knowledge and practice. The authors reflected on opportunities and challenges in their work, not only by describing their projects and experiences, but also by exploring their experiences of and with power. In this context, the authors considered how their engaged research disrupts traditional notions of power, such as power as domination or power as a finite resource. We also wanted to anchor the authors' work within the engagement field, recognising it is a diffuse transdisciplinary movement. In our efforts to build an author community, we sought to identify opportunities that strengthened connections across established boundaries among academic disciplines and communities, while also facilitating communication of ideas and examples across networks. In this way, the authors supported fresh imaginings of the role of universities and faculty members in society. Finally, plural knowledges are a fundamental element of the articles in this issue. Many authors identify risks associated with the pursuit of consensus, the value of engaging multiple ways of knowing in practice, and the outcomes and multi-layered benefits of co-created knowledge.

To address the framing questions, it was important for us, as engaged researchers, to situate ourselves and understand our work in broader ideological frameworks and institutional and historical contexts of power. The articles in this issue have been guided by diverse theorists of power (i.e. [Dahl 1957](#); [Fals-Borda 1988](#); [Fals-Borda & Rahman 1991](#); [Foucault 1980](#); [Freire 1970](#); [Gaventa 1980](#); [Gaventa & Cornwall 2008](#); [Lukes 1974](#)) who offer alternative lenses through which power can be analysed. Utilising the diversity of these frames, the authors theorise new ways power can be revealed during the collaborative research process. They articulate concepts and practices that explain power relations within engaged scholarship and thereby enhance its value for multiple publics. For example, the framing of boundary spanners, brokers and shakers by Ross et al. offers a unique lens for situating individuals within the intersecting systems of the collaborative research process. Sousa envisions community facilitators moving 'beyond a place of marginality' (p. 2) and disrupting their subjection in academic-community partnerships. Loh et al. conceptualise transformative power through a relational approach that examines both interpersonal and institutional relationships. These conceptualisations reflect the integration of well-known theories of power with the lived realities of the engaged research process.

The Author Collective

In the Autumn of 2020, we convened a community of scholars and practitioners who are experienced in various forms of engaged scholarship, including Participatory Action Research and Community-Based

Research, initiated by academic researchers and community members. As with any call for articles, we invited individual authors and author teams to submit their ideas in the form of an abstract or article proposal. Unlike a typical call, we asked authors to commit to meeting virtually several times over the course of a year to discuss each other's work as we developed our manuscripts. Through what we came to call an 'Author Collective', our aim was to share our diverse experiences and to develop and refine frameworks to understand how power relations impact and influence community-engaged projects. This issue of *Gateways* is one outcome of the Author Collective's continuing work. It includes the voices of faculty members, community researchers and community practitioners, although some members of the Author Collective move between these roles and defy easy categorisation.

In our roles as guest editors, we followed a process of *collaborative accompaniment*, akin to walking alongside one another, visioning together and sharing the rewards of a mutual endeavour. Our collaborative accompaniment approach prioritised relationship and process, along with outcomes. This approach was intended to foster spaces in which 'learning through discourse' occurs (Fear et al. 2006). According to Fear et al., p. 109), this space of critical engagement, examination and reflection facilitates 'significant, deep, and structural learning that leads to new understandings; new ways of thinking about organizational or community life; and new ways of conceptualizing and enacting solutions'. In our communications and meetings with authors, our grounding principle was to edit with care by offering feedback that would challenge and support authors' creative process. During our meetings, we organised the members of the Author Collective into peer-review groups to share their work-in-progress before and after they received editorial and peer reviews from the journal. We were struck by our colleagues' appreciation of this process, revealing a need to develop community around the writing and publishing process. Our work with the Author Collective was only the beginning of a larger conversation, and we are excited to continue hosting the Collective through our university in the years to come.

Themes on Power in Engaged Scholarship

The articles included in this issue tackle questions of power in engaged scholarship from as many different perspectives as there were participants. The authors draw on multi-disciplinary theoretical frames as well as diverse experiences and positionalities in their reflecting on and writing about power. Multiple ways of knowing were evident among the author teams and in how they addressed the topics. This diversity of perspective was the source of the many insights that emerged from the articles. In summary, the articles align around both diffusion and disruption: diffusion across the disparate domains of action and research, while also disrupting traditional boundaries of individual, organisational and community relationships. Power is revealed in the disruption of boundaries, hierarchies and norms of traditional academic scholarship, as well as in the diffusion of ideas, examples and relationships explored.

With an emphasis on co-creation of action-oriented knowledge, the articles examine how engaged research endeavours to disrupt traditional academic scholarship, and what the implications of this are when an analysis of power is at the centre. A key proposition surfaced here: that power operates within (1) the development of the scholarly identity (how does one see oneself as a powerful actor with the capacity to act and mobilise change?); (2) the research process (how does the researcher co-create the design, implementation and products of the research endeavour? Who catalyses and drives the process?); and (3) the outcomes of the scholarship (what are the lasting effects? Who controls the findings and their use?). [Figure 1](#) illustrates this proposition with attention to the nexus of power – within the interconnected shaded spaces one can view and analyse the dynamics of power at play within collaboratively engaged research and university-community partnerships. While not all the articles are located at the centre point of the image, each author or author team explores power from the intersecting points.

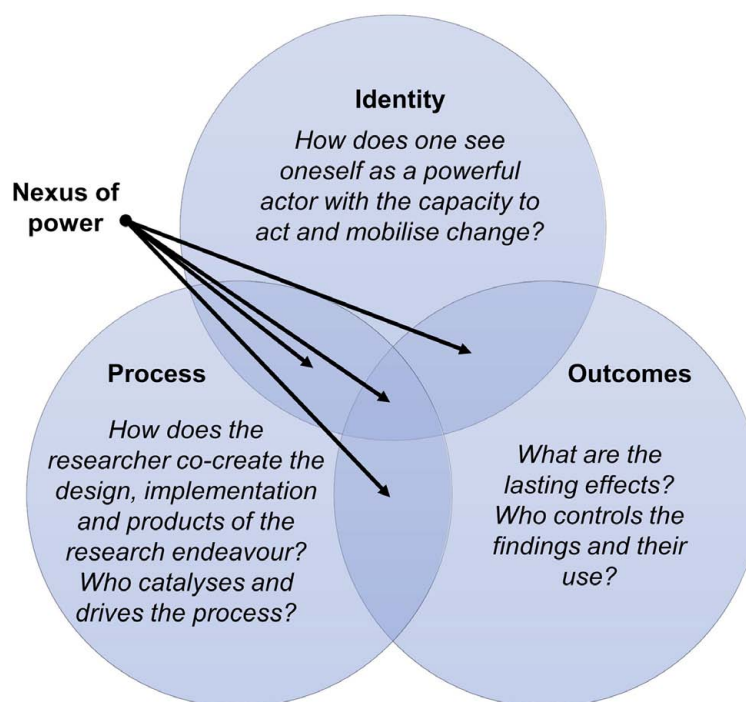


Figure 1. Power in Engaged Scholarship

This collection includes new insights on familiar discussions of engaged scholarship. Four themes emerge across the articles. Most authors explored power through examples, striving to elucidate broader themes of co-creation, relationships and boundaries, institutional responsibilities, and the mutual benefits of collaborative research. It was through this exploration that each article shaped a new conversation about power in engaged scholarship.

1. *Incorporating feminist and Indigenous theories of power*

Several of the authors draw on feminist and Indigenous theories of power. Haverkamp proposes that recentring Participatory Action Research (PAR) on Indigenous and feminist notions of relationality is essential to reinvigorate the roots of PAR as a radical methodology of liberation. Sousa draws on feminist theory to critique construction of communities as marginal in Community-Based Research. Drawing on the diversity within feminism, Piñeros-Shields develops a community organising model she calls ‘Midwife to Power’, which aims to encourage leaders to ‘birth’ their own collective power. Wong also builds on decolonial and feminist theories of power in her call for ‘promiscuous care’, which pushes back against capitalist productivity and prioritises taking time for rest and relationship-building in collaborative research.

2. *Unpacking relationality: Interpersonal power through care, trust, vulnerability and safety*

Several authors address the interpersonal dynamics of power within their research experience, focusing on elements of care, trust, vulnerability and safety. Through his encounter with Nasma, DeMeulenaere invites readers into the complex emotional and epistemological vulnerability of youth participatory action research. His reflection reveals the persistence of vertical power relationships, even in projects intended to disrupt hierarchy, and highlights a tension between care and trust. Wong, in fostering an ethic of promiscuous care, proposes that ‘care infrastructures’ create opportunities for more inclusive and sustainable methods, practices and outcomes. Haverkamp shows how working in the ‘rupture of crisis’ requires renewed attention to relationships, and advances the notion of *cariño*, or love-care-response, as a way to transform power dynamics within research processes. Fabos et al. use a critical reflexive dialogue to investigate

power imbalances between scholar and practitioner partners. They unveil how experiences of belonging, representation and emergent trust can be exposed when power dynamics are explicitly named and explored.

3. *Uplifting perspectives of practitioners on power*

A key feature of this special issue is the many contributions by community practitioners. In her role as an organisational leader, Alexandra Piñeros-Shields is uniquely positioned to tell the story of 'Midwife to Power', an emergent *mujerista*/womanist community organising model that has been used to hold law enforcement accountable to local communities. In the article by Fabos et al., the practitioner authors (Ramirez and Mortley) highlight the need for practitioners like themselves to code switch, i.e. speak the language of academia within their collaborations. Loh et al. likewise challenge the dichotomies of academic-practitioner relationships in their investigation of power asymmetries, belonging and transformation. The article by Lowery et al. weaves together the stories shared by practitioner co-authors to challenge assumptions and disrupt prevailing narratives about communities in rural Newfoundland.

4. *Addressing power among different ways of knowing*

Several of the articles emphasise the value of diverse ways of knowing in collaborative research, and how to address power relations that reinforce the dominance of any one epistemological approach. Loh et al. reflect on how hierarchies of knowledge often result in research outputs centring university knowledge rather than the lived experiences of community participants. Osinski examines a 'Merging of Knowledges' project to consider how power shapes the intellectual contributions of academics, practitioners, and persons with experience of poverty. Fabos et al. reflect on their own positionalities and power relations and find ways to resist consensus, adopting a process of 'braiding' their voices to honour the diversity of knowledge among their author team. Ross et al. theorise power in the 'boundary zone' where boundary workers enact different roles as they navigate multiple objectives, norms, forms of action and degrees of influence. These articles also illustrate what Haarman and Green prioritise in their approach to teaching Community-Based Research methods, the centrality of eliciting the concerns and priorities of community members within public spaces versus only within the boundaries of institutions and organisations.

Conclusion

In our exploration of power in engaged scholarship, we invited authors to explore topics related to positionality and influence; inequality; risk and uncertainty; and the creative tensions and opportunities for transformation in collaborative research and engagement. We encouraged authors to reflect on their experiences of power in terms of solidarity, reciprocity and respect. This was an invitation to be vulnerable. To generate discussion of these issues beyond the primacy of the written word, we used an iterative process of writing, dialogue and reflection to develop the articles. We wanted to allow for spaciousness, emergence and reflection, while adhering to the customary timelines and processes of peer-review publishing. We worked to develop trust in and respect for each other, something that came naturally to our co-editing partnership. Despite the different disciplines we come from, we found remarkable synergies in how we each address (and avoid!) power dynamics in our work.

For some of the authors, participation in the Author Collective was their first exposure to the global ecosystem of boundary spanning scholars and practitioners who make up the engagement movement. For this volume, we deliberately incorporated a multi-voice conversation about how power operates in engaged scholarship in order to represent the many dimensions and shades of collective inquiry, elevating especially participatory, critical, feminist and Indigenous methodologies. This approach was an important aspect of our work, aimed at centring power analysis as a crucial element of the scholarly experience and moving historically marginalised voices to the centre.

In their closing commentary, Ward and Lortan forge the path before us, reflecting on the implications of the special issue and the Author Collective for the engagement field and suggesting where we should go from here. From our perspective, the articles in this special issue, taken together, explore the hidden dynamics and complex relationships at the boundaries of university-community partnerships. Their nuanced, in-depth and multi-vocal considerations of these spaces help us see new ways to co-create knowledge within communities and to use that knowledge for actionable change. The authors provide new conceptual lenses through which engaged scholars may find strategies for reflecting on and transforming power dynamics in their work so as to enhance the public benefits of their collaborations.

A Final Note of Thanks

Bringing this special issue to fruition would not have been possible without the time, talent and wisdom of our many contributors and reviewers. To our colleagues, Elaine Ward and Darren Lortan, we thank you for your visionary collaboration in supporting the Author Collective and sharing your insightful commentary. The pages of this issue reflect the richness of our conversations and the spirit of hope born through our dialogue together. To editors Margaret Malone, Paul Ashton, and the other members of the *Gateways* editorial committee, thank you for your willingness to traverse new terrain with us in service to our field. We are grateful for your openness to a different approach and your tireless, diligent efforts to bring us all across the finish line. We are indebted to the many reviewers who shared their valuable time and insights with us. Your feedback and ideas contributed to the strength of the articles in this issue. Finally, we are profoundly grateful to all the members of our Author Collective, including those whose work does not appear in this special issue, but who nonetheless made critical contributions to our discussions. As we have wrestled with the dynamics of power in engaged scholarship, our work together has sparked joy, inspired optimism and given each of us new hope in our collective work to democratise knowledge.

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